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Post-Identity Politics and the Social Weightlessness of Radical Gender Theory

Introduction

In this paper I examine current forms of post-identity thought within contemporary gender theory. These theories seek to reconfigure accounts of the subject and gendered identity in order to offer radical political projects aimed at moving beyond present inequalities and exclusions. They share the assumption that much of the identity politics associated with 1970s and 1980s feminist and queer theory uncritically installs essentialist, normalising concepts of gender as its foundation, which inevitably tends toward the exclusion and erasure of differences between women or gay and lesbians. Furthermore, this identity politics is seen to assume and reinforce the idea of a unified, coherent and authentic subject that is at odds with a fluid, multiple and fragmented model of the self favoured by many contemporary gender theorists. Accordingly, post-identity thinkers have developed accounts that reject the stability and/or coherence of the subject in favour of a politics founded upon, for example, "nomadic becoming" (Braidotti, 2002), "imperceptibility" (Grosz, 2005) and "incoherence" (Noble, 2006).

Although there are significant differences between post-identity theories, many of them share an anti-recognition stance insofar as they argue that a politics of recognition inevitably (i) entrenches normalising forms of identity that ultimately sustain, rather than challenge and eradicate, social inequality, oppression and domination; and (ii) maintains the problematic idea(l) of authentic, unified and autonomous selfhood. Consequently, post-identity thinkers argue that radical social change can best (or only) be enacted if we move beyond recognition politics through embracing gender identities that are in some sense unrecognisable from the perspective of our current shared conceptual framework. Only in this way can we challenge the oppressive norms that are embedded in normative accounts of sex and gender identity and create a future that diverges significantly from the present. This, in turn, can generate the kind of inclusive, pluralistic democratic sphere that can foster the social acceptance of difference and counteract deeply embedded social inequalities.

Whilst there is much value to post-identity thinking, I argue that it often suffers from what McNay (2014) has labelled "social weightlessness". This term depicts accounts of subjectivity and agency that have become so disconnected from the everyday realities of social subjects that they lose much of their political and theoretical impact. I identify two ways in which this social weightlessness is manifested in certain forms of radical gender theory that endorse a post-identity politics: (i) they

overlook the social and political importance to many individuals of establishing stable, coherent identities; (ii) they are unable to offer a satisfactory account of agency.[1] Both of these issues arise, at least in part, from the anti-recognition stance adopted by many radical gender theorists. I argue that by incorporating a properly nuanced account of recognition back into their theories they can imbue their accounts with a properly grounded model of the subject that is responsive to the inequalities and oppressions that infuse the particular concrete contexts in which we experience and live out our identities. Importantly, this can be achieved without giving up the important critiques of the unified, self-authoring and stable subject upon which post-identity politics is based. The result is that the valuable concepts of becoming, fluidity, indeterminacy, incoherence and imperceptibility are integrated with, rather than set against, an effective recognition politics.

Post-Identity Gender Politics and the Rejection of Recognition

The history of feminism can be read as a series of recognition struggles (McQueen, 2015a). Whether it be early liberal feminism's demand that women be recognised as equal to men, or radical feminism's attempts to recognise the true, inner woman that unites all women, feminists have placed identity as the foundation of their politics. However, following the rise of post-structural feminism, spearheaded by Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, there is an increasingly widespread rejection of any attempt to ground feminist politics on some account of shared identity. This has generated a myriad of different theories that each, in their own way, move away from settled, essentialised notions of gender and the stable subject in favour of a more fluid, complex account of identity and subjectivity (see Lloyd, 2005). A number of these theories share the suspicion that demands for recognition are inextricably wedded to (i) an uncritical identity politics that reinforces rather than reworks established forms of identity and subjectivity that support existing gender inequalities and exclusions; and (ii) the ideal of a unified, coherent, individualised agent. This has caused theorists to challenge the value that recognition politics has for an effective, radical gender politics (e.g. Grosz, 2005; Noble, 2006; cf. McNay, 2008).

The development of post-identity politics draws inspiration from two main sources: Nietzsche and Foucault. On the one hand, Nietzsche's theory of becoming seeks to dissolve the subject into a play of bodily forces, wherein substance and rest are exchanged for pervasive and constant change, and stability is replaced by perpetual overcoming. Instead of seeking recognition, Nietzsche provides

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[1] My critique of certain forms of radical gender theory borrows heavily from the work of McNay (2010; 2014). Where we differ is (a) the theorists that we focus on; and (b) our response to the problem of social weightlessness. Whilst McNay develops Bourdieu's idea of habitus, I turn to Butler's account of recognition.

the imperative of becoming-other or becoming-imperceptible. This idea of becoming is poetically portrayed through Zarathustra's quest for self-realisation, which results in Zarathustra's discovery that the self is that which must be overcome. As Zarathustra declares, 'I love him who wants to create over and beyond himself and thus perishes' (Nietzsche, 2006: 48). Nietzsche thus demands a continual over-coming of ourselves, which generates a restlessness and dissatisfaction with any stable configuration of the self and identity. The result is a model of subjectivity that embraces a constant flux and non-identity in which the struggle for recognition is replaced by a rejection of any stable, intelligible form of selfhood.

On the other hand, Foucault's critique of modern subjectivity and its relation to knowledge and power has produced a deep suspicion of all contemporary forms of identity. His account of the disciplinary techniques in which the modern self is fashioned reveal the normalising, regulatory pressures that imbue in any form of recognisable identity. This led Foucault (1982: 785) to suggest that perhaps 'the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are… We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries'. Consequently, gender theorists inspired by Foucault's argue that current forms of sexuality and gender identity are inextricably bound up with regimes of power that maintain deep structural and institutional inequalities. We must seek to create new forms of identity that can provide a radical challenge to normalised forms of masculinity and femininity.

The result of this Nietzschean-Foucauldian trajectory is that many contemporary gender theorists – whether identified as feminist, queer or trans thinkers – have adopted an anti-recognition stance in which the desire of a stable, recognisable identity is rejected in favour of a continual critique and reconfiguration of the self. Thus, Alan Sinfield predicted that we were entering a post-Gay era in which 'it will not seem so necessary to define, and hence to limit, our sexualities' (Sinfield, 1998: 5). Similarly, Gamson (1995: 397) says of queer theory that the 'ultimate challenge of queerness is not just the questioning of the content of collective identities, but the questioning of the unity, stability, viability, and political utility of sexual identities – even as they are used and assumed'. Consequently, the 'destabilization of collective identity is itself a goal and accomplishment of collective action' (ibid: 403). Insofar as recognition is seen as stabilising, rather than challenging, collective identities it is dismissed as a hindrance to achieving radical social change.

This has led radical gender theorists to exchange a politics of recognition for, *inter alia*, a politics of incoherence (Noble, 2006), nomadic becoming (Braidotti, 2002) and imperceptibility (Grosz,

2005). For example, Grosz (ibid: 88) begins with the assumption that oppression 'cannot simply be resolved into failed, unsuccessful, or unaffirmed identities, identities lagging for want of recognition'. This arises from the recurrent feminist concern over the problems of congealed and essentialised identities that function to normalise individuals into a single, restrictive pattern of thought and behaviour. Consequently, she recommends a more disruptive and fractured politics aimed at 'the unsettling of previous categories, identities, and strategies, challenging the limits of present divisions and conjunctions, and revelling in the uncontainability and unpredictability of the future' (ibid: 260-1). For Grosz, feminism should focus upon 'the mobilization and opening up of identity to an uncontained and unpredictable future. This makes feminism a struggle without an end, a process of endless becoming-other rather than the attainment of recognizable positions and roles that are valued' (ibid: 167). Summarising her position, Grosz (ibid) writes:

> Instead of a politics of recognition, in which subjugated groups and minorities strive for a validated and affirmed place in public life, feminist politics should, I believe, now consider the affirmation of a politics of *imperceptibility*, leaving its traces and effects everywhere but never being able to be identified with a person, group, or organization. It is not a politics of visibility, of recognition and of self-validation, but a process of self-marking that constitutes oneself in the very model of that which oppresses and opposes the subject.

One finds a similar critique of identity and subjectivity in the work of Rosi Braidotti. She develops the figuration of the "nomad" in order to offer a radical reconceptualisation of the subject. The nomad is characterised by processes of becoming, flux and change: 'Nomadic embodied subjects', Braidotti (2002: 70) states, 'are characterized by their mobility, changeability and transitory nature'. As a result, nomadism is the 'vertiginous progression toward deconstructing identity' (Braidotti 1994: 16). Consequently, nomadic consciousness means 'not taking any kind of identity as permanent' (Braidotti, 1994: 33) and hence 'teleological order and fixed identities are relinquished in favour of a flux of multiple becoming' (ibid: 111). Like Grosz, Braidotti draws from Nietzsche's imperative to continually overcome oneself, to create oneself anew, and hence she challenges the value of recognition for feminist politics insofar as it keeps us tied to settled, stable identities. Braidotti is quite clear on this point: 'Becoming nomadic means that one learns to re-invent oneself and one desires the self as a process of transformation. It is about the desire *for* change, for flows and shifts of multiple desires' (Braidotti 2002: 84). There is, then, restlessness at the heart of the nomad, a sense that any kind of stable or static identity is a hindrance to achieving the feminist aim of radical social change.

Finally, Noble (2006) has developed the concept of "incoherence" as an alternative to a politics of recognition. He calls for 'a political deployment of contradiction and incoherence against the intersectional hegemonies of the White supremacist, sex/gender system' (ibid: 3). Noble's argument is developed through the concept of "No Man's Land", which he defines as 'a stretch of contestatory and discursively productive ground that no man nor woman can venture into and remain a coherently ontological and natural subject' (ibid: 4). Signalling his intent to challenge existing identity categories, Noble (ibid: 15) explores how becoming a transsexual man means 'rendering bodies and subject positions as incoherent as possible to refuse to let power work through bodies the way it needs to'. He argues that the transitional process for FtMs is 'one fraught with categorical indeterminacy' and thus being a transsexual man consists in 'occupying the permanent space of incoherent becoming' (ibid: 28).

Not only does this represent a descriptive account of life as a trans individual, it is also posited as desirable: 'What I seek as a trans man is radical modulation and categorical indeterminacy rather than categorical privilege' (ibid: 29). Consequently, in contrast to a politics of recognition premised upon a stable sense of identity, Noble advocates a practice of strategically unmaking the self (ibid: 77). Indeed, he celebrates those individuals who seek forms of embodiment that are 'so incoherent that they fail to register on our gender maps at all' (ibid: 66), which I take to mean identities that are unrecognisable within our current gender norms. This position links his work with Grosz, insofar as both advocate a post-identity politics that is deeply suspicious, even hostile, toward the concept of recognition. They both recommend that we formulate a politics that is premised upon the rejection of recognition and the embrace of that which is incoherent or imperceptible from our present conceptual schema of identity. Only by such a radical reworking of both the norms of identity and our model of the self can we break from entrenched patterns of oppression and inequality and create a future that is more open to difference.

I think that there is value in formulating post-identity theories of becoming that explore ways of rethinking ourselves, and post-identity thinkers are certainly right to be wary of much cultural identity politics. However, as I argue in the following section, the problem with advocating strategies of incoherence, nomadic becoming or imperceptibility is that they can collapse into a social weightlessness that renders them irrelevant or insensitive to the material, embodied realities of those individuals that they are meant to help. Furthermore, they rest upon rarefied models of agency which assign a radical capacity for self-transformation to individuals without specifying how such a capacity emerges and is sustained. One reason for this, I suggest, is that such post-

identity thinkers are too quick to dismiss the concept of recognition, which can be used to ground an account of agency and subjectivity which remains fully attentive to issues of power and inequality that mark the lives of many marginalised and oppressed individuals, as well as the importance that a stable, recognisable identity can have for us as social subjects.

The Social Weightlessness of Radical Gender Theory

In a recent work, Lois McNay (2014) argues that much contemporary radical democratic theory is marked by a social weightlessness that significantly undermines its theoretical and practical effectiveness. Developed from Bordieu's work, McNay (ibid: 40) defines socially weightless thought as 'a type of scholastic reasoning that is so far removed from the practical mundanities and urgencies of the world that ultimately its own descriptive and normative relevance is thrown into question'. Despite its aspiration to ground itself in a concern for issues of power and inequality, McNay (ibid: 39) claims that radical democratic theory 'does not even begin to address possible causes of disempowerment; instead... it assumes the existence of ready-made political subjects and consequently proffers models of political action that are so rarefied that they have little relation to the conditions of oppression they supposedly address'. Her main concern is that thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe and Linda Zerilli end up assuming a notion of agency as an unproblematic given and thus fail to address the conditions necessary for effective social action. This, in turn, leads them to overlook important connections between social power and embodied agency, which renders their accounts inattentive to the concrete obstacles experienced by individuals when it comes to developing and exercising political agency.

Addressing Mouffe's model of identity as undecideable, indeterminate and open-ended, McNay complains that this ontological account of identity is separated from the concrete, social practices that shape one's self. On the basis of its supposed fragility and transience, Mouffe (1994: 110) conceptualises the process of identity formation as one of 'permanent hybridization and nomadization'. Whilst this may be plausible when considered from the abstract perspective of theory, 'when viewed, however, from the perspective of embodied power relations, identities are found to have a phenomenal depth and durability that, whilst not making them inevitable, does not necessarily render them easily amenable to agonist reconfiguration' (McNay, 2014: 81). An uncritical celebration of the essentially contingent and fluid nature of identity overlooks how these contingent norms are 'realized as deeply entrenched, bodily dispositions' that are 'lived and relived as inevitable, natural dispositions' (ibid: 82). Consequently, Mouffe's rarefied account of identity

and her political vision of perpetual agonism fail to appreciate the ways in which entrenched social inequalities and oppression can result in deeply felt experiences of helplessness, disengagement and disempowerment. Simply highlighting the malleable, open-ended nature of identity does little to address this situation and fails to generate the kind of radical political agency necessary to remedy it.

McNay's critique of radical democratic thought is compelling and has important implications for the forms of radical gender politics outlined above. Of particular relevance is McNay's complaint that 'the focus on concepts such as indeterminacy, flux, becoming, contestation, plurality and so forth are often disconnneced from the reality of many people's lives', which means that theories which advocate them can become 'severed from the social conditions of existence experienced by many individuals' (McNay, 2014: 14-5). For example, Braidotti's celebration of the nomad ignores the fact that it might only be possible to be nomadic in one's identity from a position of privilege. She notes that 'nomadism consists not so much in being homeless, as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere' (Braidotti, 1994: 16). Furthermore, the nomad is a 'figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity' (Braidotti, 1994: 22).

However, Braidotti gives little consideration to the conditions which enable one to create a home everywhere one goes; she fails to reflect on what sort of individuals are capable of embracing the continual remaking and fluidity of identity. Such an individual appears to be the kind of dominant subject who has colonised the world according to their own image and for whom social norms are geared in their favour. As Ahmed (1999: 335) asks, 'Is the subject who chooses homelessness and a nomadic lifestyle, or a nomadic way of thinking, one that can do so, *because the world is already constituted as their home*?'. Braidotti (1994: 17) refers to nomadic homelessness as a 'chosen condition', but who would choose homelessness except someone who knew that they were always capable of recreating a home? For those people who find that the world is essentially hostile towards them – for example, the homosexual in a deeply homophobic society or the transsexual prostitute who is systematically excluded from the socio-economic world owing to entrenched gender norms – the sort of nomadism that Braidotti advocates may well appear fanciful at best and insulting at worse.

Braidotti's recommendation of nomadic becoming and homelessness, in which identities are continually recreated, also raises the issue of agency. Braidotti celebrates the concept of temporal

becoming as an essential feature of nomadic subjectivity. However, as McNay (2014: 116) notes of Mouffe's work, it is one thing 'to assert an essential temporal indeterminacy as an abstract condition of possibility of action and interaction, it is another to trace out what this might mean at the level of social realities, which, even at their most informal, are ineluctably embedded in entrenched hierarchies of power'. By positing the nomad as a subject who freely chooses their identity, Braidotti appears to invoke the autonomous, self-creating subject that she is at pains to reject. She simply asserts a radical capacity for nomadic becoming without enquiring into the conditions within which such agency can emerge and, more importantly, the sorts of hindrances that can prevent individuals undertaking the kind of self-transformations she advocates.

Without a clear account of how nomadic subjectivity relates to the lives of individuals struggling with the norms that shape our identities, her post-identity politics of becoming remains untethered from the everyday, material contexts in which the self is shaped. Indeed, the concept of nomadic becoming seems incompatible with our embodied realities. Despite their historical contingency, our social identities are nevertheless so deeply embedded that we generally experience them as spontaneous, natural expressions of the self (McNay, 2014: 82). To quote Ang (2000: 2), 'no matter how convinced we are, theoretically, that identities are constructed not "natural", invented not given, always in process and not fixed, at the level of experience and common sense identities are generally expressed (and mobilized politically) precisely because they *feel* natural and essential'. Indeed, as Butler (1993; 1997), taking her lead from Foucault, is keen to stress, the workings of disciplinary power are effective in large part because they result in one's identity being internalised as an immutable aspect of the self, rather than a contingent, performative effect. Braidotti's account of nomadic becoming is thus disconnected from the workings of power that shape our capacities for self- and social transformation.

A similar problem of social weightlessness can be identified in much queer and transgender theory, including Noble's politics of incoherence. Concerned with the normalising effects of recognisable identities, Noble (2006: 15) argues that permanent incoherence is required 'if the subject is to matter at all'. However, as Elliot (2010: 65) rightly asks, where does this leave trans individuals 'who seek congruity or a sense of shared belonging based on achieving a certain coherence'? Noble shows little concern for those individuals who find that they identify best with a coherent, established identity, or that such an identity is the best means for securing certain legal and social benefits that would otherwise be denied to them. Thus, not only does Noble create a problematic opposition between normatively gendered subjects tethered to oppressive, exclusionary constructions of identity and radical, post-identity subjects who embrace incoherence, in which the

latter are valued above the former, he also offers no consideration of the concrete conditions in which individuals enact efforts at self-transformation and the social context in which such transformations play out. This reflects a wider tendency amongst many queer or trans theorists to advocate a politics based upon the rejection of established patterns of gender identity without addressing the everyday experiences of individuals who struggle with these norms and the relations of inequality and exclusion that shape such experiences.

One theorist who is particularly attentive to this problem is Vivian Namaste (2000; 2011). She criticises much queer and trans theory precisely because it fails to address the everyday lives of transsexual and transgender individuals:

> The presentation of transgendered issues within queer theory does not account for the quotidian living conditions of transgendered people. The political objections to this field are clear: queer theory begins its analysis with little thought of the individuals designated as the objects of study. At best, this perspective is an unfortunate and unacceptable oversight; at worst, it belies a kind of academic inquiry that is contemptuous and dismissive of the social world (Namaste, 2000: 16).

Namaste is particularly critical of the failure of many gender theorists to connect their models of subjectivity and the self with the material conditions in which individual's experience and forge their identities. She (2011: 28) argues that 'transgender discourse is utopian and one profoundly informed by privilege: it assumes that one already has a job, housing, and access to health care'. For example, Noble assigns a radical agentic capacity for self-creation to trans subjects without considering the socio-economic context that shapes, and can greatly undermine, such a capacity. Demanding that we embrace incoherence and reside in the No Man's Land of incoherent identity overlooks the fact that a sense of coherence and stability may be precisely what makes one's life liveable, especially for those individauls struggling with the realities of economic and social inequalities and exclusions. As Namaste notes,

> To state that one is neither a man nor a woman, or that one is a third gender, or that gender is only a social construct so one is, in fact, nothing, ignores the fundamental reality of being in the world. Yes, we can state that we are not men and not women when all is well in the world. But would someone please tell me how to get an apartment when one is neither a man nor a woman? Where does one find a physician to treat neither men nor women? And an employer? (Namaste, 2011: 28).

Focusing exclusively on a theoretical, abstract exploration of the ontological conditions and possibilities of selfhood fails to connect the embodied realities of subjects with the institutions and structural conditions that shape their lives. Consequently, Namaste (ibid) argues that much trans theory and activism 'cannot negotiate the actual world, or at least cannot negotiate the world as experienced by people without housing, employment, or health care'. The focus within post-identity politics on, and its celebration of, indeterminacy, flux, becoming and imperceptibility thus fails to appreciate the seemingly mundane desire to successfully navigate the social world through the construction of a stable, recognisable identity. For those struggling to make a living because they are systematically excluded from employment owing to their identity as a transsexual, being told to embrace incoherence or to celebrate being imperceptible is likely to be met with scepticism at best. Many queer and transgender theorists, Namaste (ibid: 25) concludes, 'just don't get it'.

The same critique can be levelled at Grosz's politics of imperceptibility. She demands that we understand feminism 'as a process of endless becoming-other rather than the attainment of recognizable positions and roles that are valued' (Grosz, 2005: 167), in which we welcome 'the unsettling of previous categories, identities, and strategies' (ibid: 260). However, this discussion gives little consideration to those individuals who have been cast as other and systematically denied a recognisable position in the world. For example, many transsexuals and transgender individuals must confront a world that continuously works to undermine or erase their sense of self owing to the binary, naturalised nature of sex/gender norms. Their daily lives are thus oriented to negotiating a world hostile to their basic sense of self. For these individuals, Namaste (2011: 25) claims, transsexuality is not about 'challenging the binary sex/gender system, it is not about making a critical intervention every waking second of the day, it is not about starting a Gender Revolution'. Rather, it is about 'individuals who change our physical bodies because we want to move through the world on all levels in a sex and gender other than the one assigned to us at birth. Transsexuality is about the banality of buying some bread, of making photocopies, of getting your shoe fixed' (ibid).

Whilst the exploration of alternative modes of being and a critical examination of identity is theoretically and practically important, we must be equally sensitive to the fact that for many individuals a sense of stable, recognisable identity is a daily struggle which should neither be taken for granted and nor dismissed as politically retrogressive. The tendency within post-identity politics to celebrate unintelligiblity over and above recognisability means that it struggles to accommodate the importance that recognition has for those individuals subject to systematic exclusion and

inequality. In the following section I argue that it is only by reclaiming the concept of recognition that radical gender politics can ground its valuable critique of the unified subject and uncritical identity politics.

Reclaiming Recognition

The anti-recognition stance adopted by many post-identity thinkers stems from the valid concern that certain forms of identity politics and their attendant claims for recognition rely upon essentialised, normalising concepts of gender, sexuality, race and the like. This is especially so if recognition struggles rest upon a belief in authentic forms of thought and behaviour that constitute the identity in question, which come to define who counts as a proper member of the group. Such universalising tendencies are evident, for example, in certain forms of radical feminism in which a notion of a true womanness was posited as the foundation and justification of feminist politics (e.g. Daly, 1978). This can also lead to a belief that political claims must stem from the shared interests and experiences of a particular social group, wherein identity is detached from social power and a critical self-reflection on the regulatory nature of collective identity is absent. However, such forms of identity and recognition politics are merely one possibility amongst many. Post-identity thinkers tend to equate recognition theory with something like the culturalism of Charles Taylor (1994) and then assume that this is the only shape that a politics of recognition can take. This leads them to misrepresent recognition and overlook the valuable contribution it can make to their theories. In particular, recognition can provide the ground for an account of agency that is lacking in the forms of gender politics outlined above.

One recognition theorist who distances himself from Taylor's identity politics whilst offering a comprehensive, systematic account of subject formation is Axel Honneth. Honneth identifies three "spheres of interaction" which are connected to the three "patterns of recognition" necessary for an individual to develop a positive relation-to-self. These are love, rights, and solidarity (Honneth, 1995: 92ff; 1995; 2007: 129ff). All three spheres of recognition are crucial to developing a positive attitude towards oneself: 'For it is only due to the cumulative acquisition of basic self-confidence, of self-respect, and of self-esteem... that a person can come to see himself or herself, unconditionally, as both an autonomous and an individuated being and to identify with his or her goals and desires' (Honneth, 2007: 169). Honneth's idea of autonomy is thus tied to a psychological account of personal development in which we progress through each stage of recognition, developing

sufficient self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem to take ourselves as fully individualised, moral and self-determining subjects.

Honneth asserts that humans have an inherent need and desire for recognition, referring to this as the '"quasi-transcendental interests" of the human race' (Honneth 2003: 174). When our need for recognition goes unmet we often experience negative emotional states such as shame, anger or frustration and these, Honneth argues, can reveal to us that an injustice is taking place (specifically, that we are not being given due and appropriate recognition). It is such experiences, arising from thwarted, legitimate expectations for recognition, which form the basis of social struggles and hence political change. Honneth's model could thus provide a grounding to radical gender theory by revealing how autonomous subjects emerge from concrete contexts permeated with relations of recognition, which would go some way to dissolving the charge of social weightlessness insofar as a theory of agency is tied to patterns of disrespect and inequality. It would also help radical gender theorists to acknowledge the value of being recognisable without falling into a problematic uncritical identity politics.

However, there are two reasons why Honneth's theory is unsuitable for incorporation into radical gender theory. First, his theory is inattentive to the issues of power and its relationship to recognition, agency and identity (McNay, 2008; McQueen, 2015b). Specifically, he posits recognition as separate to, rather than co-extensive with, relations of power. This means that his account of recognition does not acknowledge adequately the extent to which recognition is bound up with disciplinary techniques of the self. Indeed, his account often presents recognition as the solution to problems of social inequality and oppression, rather than seeing recognition as also part of the mechanisms that sustain them. In his apparent determination to avoid the charge of being aligned with Taylor's culturalism, Honneth moves too far in the opposite direction by sidestepping questions of how recognition struggles are shaped by the particular identities in question and their intertwinement with power. His focus on individual psychological development is disconnected from the group dimension of subject formation, namely the fact that my self is fashioned from the available social scripts of gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion and such like. Consequently, he ends up with a theory of recognition that is too abstracted from the pressures and effects that particular identities place on the individual and their capacity for effecting social change (McNay, 2014).

Honneth is nevertheless right to highlight the connections between recognition, identity and agency. To be a social agent is to be recognised as such in appropriate ways. Furthermore, one's actions are

rendered meaningful through reference to one's identity. Who I take myself to be, which is reliant on the social interpretations of those around me, allows me to make sense of how I act in the world. This is one major reason why my identity matters to me (Appiah, 2005; Taylor, 1989). It is also why it is hard to see how models of imperceptibility or incoherence can offer adequate accounts of agency. Without a reasonably stable notion of self, it is difficult to understand how we can cultivate the projects and interests that give meaning and value to our lives, which in turn allow us to see ourselves as autonomous actors. This does not mean we must embrace the idea of a "true" or "authentic" self, but it does stress the fact that being recognisable is deeply important to us as social beings. Forms of post-identity politics that reject recognition theory simply cannot account for this and hence remain disconnected from our everyday embodied existence.

Instead of conceiving of recognition, as Honneth does, along the lines of developmental, soft-perfectionist model of the self, we can turn to an alternative Hegelian trajectory that understands recognition in terms of practical reason giving (e.g. Pinkard, 1996; Pippin, 2008; McBride, 2013; Schuppert, 2013). For example, Pinkard (1996) connects recognition with our capacity as agents to orient ourselves in the social world. According to Pinkard, relations of recognition can be understood in terms of our identifying with our goals, desires and projects through giving reasons for our actions and having these reasons recognised as authoritative. Via such recognition we can identify with, or "stand behind", our actions such that we feel ourselves as self-determining and thus free. 'The upshot of this', Pinkard notes, 'is that the agent takes himself to be an independent agent only in taking himself to be *recognized* by another *as* independent' (ibid: 53). We receive the normative reassurance that what we take to be authoritative reasons for action are actually authoritative, and in so receiving such reassurance come to identify with the projects, desire and goals that in large part constitute our identities.

Importantly, this account of recognition must be fully attendant to the intertwinement between recognition and power, something that Honneth's model fails to achieve. This is where the work of Judith Butler (1997; 2004; 2005) is particularly useful. Contra Honneth, Butler begins with the assumption that recognition and power are co-extensive and thus relations of recognition are always, to some degree, relations of power. However, rather than jettison the concept of recognition, as the likes of Grosz and Noble do, Butler fuses a Hegelian account of subjectivity as formed through intersubjective recognition with a Foucauldian model of identity as formed in and through relations of power. Importantly, Butler retains the importance of being recognisable as she simultaneously interrogates the processes by which the category of the human systematically excludes certain types of identity as unviable and unrecognisable. The result is a complex, nuanced

politics that balances the importance of recognition alongside a careful exploration of its normalising, exclusionary effects. Capturing this ambivalence, Butler (2004: 4) observes that 'I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the norms by which I am recognized make life unlivable'. This leads Butler (ibid: 3) to note for some people there are 'advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligible is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing norms'. However, her work is always aimed at exploring how we can rework the norms of recognition in more inclusive ways that offer viability and unintelligibly to those identities previously deemed less than human (Butler, 2004).

The kind of radical gender politics advocated by Butler can avoid the social weightlessness of much post-identity politics insofar as it incorporates a complex model of agency and subject-formation with a concern for opening up the norms of recognition to those previously deemed unviable or unintelligible. It acknowledges the importance that a stable, recognisable identity can have for people – the fundamental need for recognition that we have in virtue of being social beings – whilst exploring radical ways of rethinking the category of the human to establish a more open, inclusive society (McQueen, 2015a). Importantly, all of this is underpinned by a detailed exploration of the connections between power, identity and recognition. It thus overcomes the problems that afflict both Honneth's model of recognition and the radical gender politics of Grosz and Noble, which remain disconnected from the everyday workings of social power. This is not to say that Butler's account of recognition and subjectivity is without its problems.[2] However, she shows how one can balance the importance of recognition for us as social beings with a thorough examination of the problems of identity and its relationship with power. Thus, her work certainly points us in the right direction for thinking about how to formulate a radical gender politics that acknowledges the insights of post-identity thought without uncritically embracing concepts of incoherence, imperceptibility or nomadic becoming.

Of particular value is the way in which Butler's model of the performative subject can alter how we relate to our identities. Post-identity thinkers seem to assume that seeking a coherent, recognisable identity necessarily means that one capitulates to the normalising, exclusionary dynamics that infuse subject formation. Consequently, they posit being unrecognisable as the only means of opposing the problems of, for example, dominant forms of masculinity and femininity that are premised upon problematic stereotypes. However, we can inhabit socially-established identities in self-critical, reflexive ways that allow us to appreciate the complex, contingent and fluid nature of identity, whilst also being open to those identities that challenge the norms which underpin our own

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[2] Useful discussions of this aspect of her theory include Allen (2008) and Chambers and Carver (2008).

sense of self (Connolly, 2002; Butler, 2005). One need not continually seek to cultivate imperceptible, incoherent and unrecognisable identities in order to be a gender radical. Thus Noble's assertion that those seeking coherent, stable identities are necessarily conservative highly dubious. Indeed, transsexuals who desire a stable, recognisable sense of self, rather than one of permanent incoherence, are nevertheless highly attentive to the problems that can attach to this desire. They often demonstrate an impressive critical self-reflexivity with regard to their demands for recognition, the norms that constitute their identities, and the contingent, performative nature of the self (Davy, 2011). What they resist is jettisoning the desire for recognition in favour of abstracted notions of imperceptibility or unintelligibility. They see the value in being recognisable whilst nevertheless remaining alert to the problems of recognition.

The need to balance the value of recognition with a critical self-awareness of how one inhabits identities and the normalising pressures that they exert is explored by Shane Phelan (1989; 1994). She offers an insightful analysis of lesbian identity and politics, with a focus on how to move beyond a problematic identity politics based upon an essentialised notion of lesbianism without overlooking the importance of striving for a recognisable sense of self. Examining the issue of "coming out" in lesbian politics, she (1994: 51) sceptically notes how the phrase "coming out" is 'meant to suggest that the process of declaring one's lesbianism is a revelation, an acknowledgement of a previously hidden truth. By implication, coming out is a process of discovery or admission rather than one of construction or choice'. This is precisely the kind of recognition politics that post-identity thinkers are concerned with. However, against this, Phelan offers a model of "becoming out" in which identity is understood as a continual process of construction. Rejecting the idea of the closet as a space in which one's self is clearly known to oneself but kept hidden, Phelan (ibid: 52) argues that 'Leaving the closet is not a matter of simple visibility, but is a reconfiguration of the self. It is a project rather than an event… Furthermore, this project is never complete. One is never "finally", "truly" a lesbian, but becomes lesbian or not with the choices one makes'.

Importantly, to occupy an identity such as "lesbian" on Phelan's account is not to stake out an authentic, unchanging truth about oneself, but rather to occupy a provisional subject position in heterosexual society from which various political and personal claims can be made (ibid: 140; cf. Lloyd, 2005). Contra Noble and Grosz, she does not resist from taking up a recognisable identity, but she insists on seeing all identities as open-ended and in-process. She thus resists enforcing the kind of closure on identities that results in their becoming too tightly-scripted, essentialising and balkanising. The result of Phelan's analysis is a radical form of politics premised upon intersectional

coalition building that remains firmly camped within, rather than beyond, the crucible of recognisable identities. This means that she does not idealise concepts of incoherence and imperceptibility, whose advocates can ignore or, worse, dismiss the importance to social agents of coherent, socially intelligible identities. Accordingly, it retains the best insights of post-identity politics whilst avoiding the collapse into social weightlessness.

Conclusion

Despite offering important critiques of existing models of subjectivity and identity politics, radical gender theorists who embrace a form of post-identity politics often produce accounts that suffer from a social weightlessness, which renders them insensitive to the lives of those individuals they purport to address. At a theoretical level, radical gender theory can still produce impoverished models of agency that are inattentive to the specific material and symbolic conditions that shape one's capacity for effective socio-political action. On a practical level, many radical gender theorists overlook the importance of stable, recognisable identities to marginalised social subjects. Both of these issues arise, at least in part, from a rejection of recognition theory. Accordingly, they can be rectified through reincorporating a sufficiently complex and nuanced account of recognition into current radical gender theory. This does not mean that must one relinquish important concepts central to post-identity thinking, such as becoming, nomadism and incoherence. However, they must be tethered to a satisfactory model of agency that has recognition placed at its centre. Much work is required to establish the precise contours of this approach, but hopefully it is clear why this is a more promising one than forms of radical gender politics based upon a post-identity rejection of recognition.

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