

## Research Project

# The Future of Minority Studies: Redefining Identity Politics

2001-2002

Stanford/Binghamton/Cornell

### Organizers

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### Background: Identity, Theory, Minority Scholarship

At this moment in the evolution of progressive social theory, activists and academics have arrived at a critical juncture. Postmodernist deconstructions of such key concepts as identity, experience, and knowledge, which proved initially productive, have brought us to a theoretical standstill. We can now agree that identities are not fixed essences, but this insight, by itself, does not take us far enough either politically or theoretically. Identities still matter enormously, both inside and outside the academy, and they crucially affect the ways in which scholarly work is judged both within and across disciplines. Moreover, the indiscriminate critique of all forms of identity politics has colluded with the traditional valorization of "important" theory to obscure the vital contributions being made by ethnic and other minority scholars. As a result, scholarly and theoretical developments in ethnic/minority studies have been largely ignored by scholars outside these fields. Without a serious reconsideration of the significance of identity for our knowledge-generating practices, we risk returning the academy to the halcyon days when whiteness was not a field of study but a ticket of entry. What is needed now is not deconstruction, but patient and imaginative reconstruction.

### Proposal

In the spirit of such reconstruction, we are proposing a bicoastal research project (including a major conference, a follow-up conference, and several related symposia) on "The Future of Minority Studies: Redefining Identity Politics" over the 2001-02 academic year. (We use the term *minority* in a broad way to refer to members of social groups that have been subordinated

on the basis of ethnicity, race, sexuality and/or gender.) During the past few years, several progressive scholars have participated in a joint research project that has culminated in the publication of the anthology *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (University of California Press, October 2000). This interdisciplinary volume, which grew out of many years of collaborative research at various universities (most centrally at Cornell and Stanford), develops and defends a “postpositivist realist” alternative to the dominant views in the humanities about such crucial topics as social identity, the status of experience, and the nature of (objective) knowledge. The postpositivist realist theory of identity argues that respect for minority identity (and hence for some forms of cultural pluralism) complements and deepens the kind of moral universalism which most people implicitly accept and live by today; such universalism is evident most clearly in the commitment to equality or basic human rights on which many modern constitutions and international legal documents, as well as progressive traditions of moral and political dissent, are based. Cultural pluralism and moral universalism can be complementary notions, postpositivist realists argue, in part because social identities are often sources of objective knowledge about our world, and acknowledging the epistemic implications of identity and multiculturalism does not preclude the possibility of objective knowledge or of achieving understanding across difference. The Future of Minority Studies Project is an attempt to open the conversation to an intellectually diverse group of progressive scholars and to incorporate a broader set of issues. This Project focuses on “identity” and “minority studies” in order to stimulate discussion about issues that are simultaneously theoretical and practical, ranging from ethics and epistemology to political theory and pedagogical practice.

The organizers of this project have been motivated in part by the fact that the past decade or so has seen increasing attacks on race and minority studies programs from the right, on the grounds that these programs produce merely “psychological identity affirmations” rather than sound scholarship. They are also troubled by the tendency among some progressive scholars within the humanities to use the critique of identity-based politics as a litmus test for theoretical competence and political responsibility. The combination of these two developments has contributed to an uncertainty almost everywhere in the humanities about the status of social identity and of scholarship that takes it as an object of research. For some minority studies programs such attacks and critiques have led to a loss of clarity about a common intellectual project and a shared vision of multicultural democracy. This loss has been compounded by the unnecessary conflation, in some quarters, of the articulation of concrete normative proposals and goals with a politically pernicious authoritarianism. What was once a growing mandate to correct the political and intellectual exclusions of the academy has become a pervasive uncertainty about key questions concerning the legitimacy of identity as an analytical category and, indeed, of normative judgments and visions more generally; underlying the uncertainty is a host of questions about the relationship between cultural autonomy and moral universalism.

A major goal of the Project is to move the discussion away from the debates over essentialism vs. constructivism in discussions about identity in order to foreground the role of minority education in a multicultural democracy. In order to accomplish this goal, the Future of Minority Studies Project will create a year-long, bicoastal “think tank.” To facilitate a focused and productive discussion across our various disciplines, we are asking participants to address a clearly defined set of questions (see below) and also suggesting that they engage with those

particular theses in *Reclaiming Identity* which are relevant to their own assumptions or conclusions. The three theoretical questions we specify below about identity, knowledge, and social justice are framed by two more specific contextual questions; the latter emphasize both the changing role of the university in our times and the need for an adequate vision of education as the basis for progressive social change.

## **The Focus: Questions and Issues**

By addressing the following questions, project participants will engage in an exploration of the significance of the minority scholarship currently being pursued in existing programs in ethnic studies, women's studies, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual studies, as well as within traditional departments like English, Comparative Literature, History, Philosophy, and Anthropology. These questions are of central import to the humanities today.

### **THREE THEORETICAL QUESTIONS**

- 1) What is the epistemic and political significance of identity?**
- 2) What role, if any, should a non-positivist notion of objectivity play in our intellectual and political endeavors?**
- 3) What is the place of moral universalism in struggles for social justice? (Is a focus on identity-based struggles compatible with moral universalism?)**

### **CONTEXTUAL QUESTIONS: THE CHANGING UNIVERSITY**

As several recent studies have shown (see, e.g., *Academic Capitalism*, by Slaughter & Leslie, and *Universities and Globalization*, edited by Currie and Newson), the very nature of the university is changing. Scholars in minority studies programs and departments may need to be clearer about the ethical and political vision that informs their work as well as their pedagogy. We urge project participants to think about the three questions mentioned above in light of two important questions about the context for minority studies in our times:

- I) How do economic globalization and, in particular, the privatization of institutions of higher education, affect ethnic and minority studies and what is the best response to these developments?**
- II) What conceptions of transformative social politics can provide a guiding vision for scholars in minority studies?**

## **Events and Dates**

**Symposia at Binghamton** in May, July, and September of 2001, with presentations by invited speakers.

**Conference at Stanford** on October 19-20 2001, with 12 speakers, 4 respondents, and 4 chairs, in addition to presentations by the 4 organizers.

**Follow up conference at Cornell** on November 14-17 2001.

**Book:** *Redefining Identity Politics* edited by the 4 organizers, forthcoming from Palgrave-Macmillan.