Review of “Marginal Groups and Mainstream American Culture”

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Diana Tietjens Meyers' "Marginalized Identities: Individuality, Agency, and Theory" maintains that individuals do not choose race or gender, and that how race and gender affect their identities are not wholly a function of their choice. However, Meyers urges that individuals can exercise some control over how their identities are constructed and perceived by others. When individuals in a marginalized group understand how they are viewed by those outside that group, those individuals can take some ownership of their identities by, Meyers suggests, playing with the stereotypes and expectations held by those outside that group. She further suggests that social identities should be seen as similar to literary texts, which are susceptible to a variety of valid interpretations.

Meyers assumes that it is always wrong to stereotype individuals, and so she fails to see that stereotypes are often accurate. Moreover, the anthology's claim that there is a mainstream American culture is itself the result of stereotyping. This does not mean that all aspects of stereotypes should be applauded. Instead, each stereotype must be examined, on a case-by-case basis. Only then can its negative features be identified and criticized. Meyers also has an inadequate understanding of the role of social recognition in the construction of identity. She asserts that marginalized individuals can "deliberately toy with others' bigoted preconceptions, sometimes masquerading in the stereotype ... but always knowing that the Other cannot tell which is which" (17-18). Meyers provides no arguments to defend her straight foreword equating of stereotypes with "bigoted preconceptions." What is more problematic, however, is her implicit assumptions that the mental content and intentions of individuals are transparent to them and opaque to others, and that the meanings of speech and actions are private rather than public. If "the Other cannot tell which is which," it is likely that "marginalized individuals" cannot tell either. If individuals act according to stereotypes, they reinforce and conform to those stereotypes, regardless of their subjective intentions.

Cristine Overall's "Return to Gender, Address Unknown: Reflections on the Past, Present, and Future of the Concept of Gender in Feminist Theory and Practice" argues that gender is a concept that serves no useful function, and so should be abandoned. Overall claims that gender is the basis of sexism, that it constrains the opportunities and identities of individuals, that it leads to false universalizations about persons, it inhibits differences, and results in the construction of inhabitationary epistemological binaries. Although she concedes that certain individuals might still wish to identify themselves in some gendered way, Overall advocates the repudiation of all
prescriptive gender groupings and classifications.

Overall is correct that the binary male/female distinction inhibits the recognition and expression of different sexualities, and that it also leads to the false assumption that every individual must be either male or female (and that no one gets to be both). Nevertheless, her suggestion that gender be eliminated would make things worse. At least with the male/female binary, there are two sexualities. She would reduce the two to one (or zero, if the elimination of gender distinctions would mean, not that there is only one gender, but that there are none whatsoever). Why not instead multiply gender distinctions, as advocated by Judith Butler in her book, Gender Trouble? In any case, the way to encourage differences is not to eliminate them, as Overall proposes.

Gavin Brown's "The Night They Bombed Old Compton Street: Reflections on the Position of Gay People in Blair's 'New Britain'" discusses the phenomenon whereby marginalized persons can become targets of violence and discrimination as a consequence of their having achieved an identity and gathering together at specific places. He also is concerned to urge that groups who act violently toward marginalized persons - although those acts of violence may be officially repudiated by the dominant groups - nevertheless are frequently symptomatic of the prejudices and attitudes of those dominant groups. Finally, he discusses the ways in which persons within a marginalized group can themselves be marginalized by other members of that group.

Although this essay mainly reports about events that occurred, it has the merit of suggesting that marginalization can occur in many ways and at many levels, and is experienced differently. An explicit discussion of such issues would have been useful.

"Comblement/Fulfillment: Toward an Ontological Ethics of Sex" by Jami Weinstein and Jeffrey Bussolini maintains that the marginalization of sexualities results from conceptualizing desire as a lack rather than as an expression of an identity. In this context, they argue that Sartre's analysis of desire as a nothingness is inadequate, and they instead affirm Spinoza's understanding of desire as itself something positive. "We do not proceed with the view that we desire others simply to fulfill some need, but rather for a way in which we can mutually augment our joy and power through combinations of our ontological rhythms of speeds and slowness" (92).

It is not clear what the authors mean by "ontological rhythms of speeds and slowness," or how this would enable desire to be seen as an expression of an identity. Even if individuals do desire others to augment their joy and power, why would this desire not seek to fulfill their need for such augmentation? Moreover, Spinoza is not the person to turn to here. He believes that all determination is negation. Spinoza does not have a concept of the negation of the negation, as Hegel notes in his criticisms of Spinoza's philosophy. It is a consequence of this philosophy that only substance exists, and that substance's attributes and modes have no real ontological status. There ultimately is no positive element in Spinoza's philosophy. As a result, desire must be a lack for Spinoza.

Patricia Smith's "Persistent Problems, Illusions of Progress, and Mechanisms of Marginalization" introduces what she calls "the wind tunnel effect," which she defines as "a pervasive collection of devices by which any mainstream culture retards deviance and supports the status quo, thereby stunting reform" (96). Some of these "devices" are deliberate policies and actions undertaken by members of a dominant group to resist liberatory charges, others are the results of structural or
unconscious prejudices, and still others arise from the tendency to interpret the new in terms of the old and to not fully comprehend or actualize the full potential of undertaken reforms.

Smith argument assumes that it is always obvious what liberation is, as well as what would promote or impede liberatory change. Within every social movement, however, there are debates about what should be that movement's strategy, tactics, and goals. It is frequently only in retrospect that persons are able to know what needed to be done - and this because people did those things without that knowledge. As a consequence, Smith's "wind tunnel effect" is unable to provide any assistance in understanding social change. It is a sign of this that she misinterprets the Bakke case as calling, not for the abolition of quotes in university admissions, but instead for quotes for whites.

Arnold Lorenzo Farr's "The Smartest Black Man in Union, South Carolina: Complimentary Racism and the Dialectic of Marginalization" discusses the ways in which the construction of identity requires the marginalization or exclusion of some group. As a consequence, the outsider is never fully outside. Farr sees in this a liberatory potential: "The margins possess redemptive and emancipatory potential to the extent that they are conceivably critical spaces wherein society must face its own contradictions. Further, since the values or norms of society must be internalized by the subject in order to have an effect on the subject, these values cannot completely determine the subject" (115).

It would have been useful if Farr had explained why internalizing values means that those values cannot result in a total determinism. It would seem that, to the extent that they are internalized, values restrict and control a subject's thoughts and actions more, not less.

Sandra Bartky's "Story of a Hyphenated-Consciousness" is an autobiographical account of the development of her self-understanding as a Jewish-American.

Rebecca Tsosie's "Marginalization and Political Identity: The Experience of Native Americans" notes that Native Americans have experienced both social and political oppression, and that "marginalization and imperialism are twin faces of the same phenomenon and represent the legacy of colonialism in modern constitutional democracy" (139). She argues that Native Americans have been legally recognized as such only insofar as they have remained marginalized, and that they have lost that recognition when they have assimilated into the dominant culture. She concludes that "citizenship should not be inconsistent with tribalism in a society that is founded upon mutual respect, trust, and recognition" (150).

Tsosie does not discuss how tribalism might be seen as consistent with mutual respect, trust, and recognition of an individual's fellow citizens. It might be objected that tribalism and citizenship are no more consistent that dual citizenships, which are always potentially in conflict. There may be significant differences between these two, but Tsosie does not discuss what those might be.

Patrick D. Hopkins' "God, Us, and the World: Marginalization, the Role of Perception, and Conservative Christianity" claims that conservative Christians have effectively portrayed and come to understand themselves as another marginalized group whose rights are being curtailed by the dominant culture. This shows, according to Hopkins, that powerful groups can be perceived - and perceive themselves - as marginalized, and that persons lacking power can nevertheless be seen - and see themselves - as having power. Hopkins believes that "feeling marginalized and claiming to
be persecuted is not enough," and so he urges that it is appropriate to demand of all groups making such claims: "Prove that you are oppressed. Prove that your rights have been violated. Prove that your beliefs have enough merit to be taken seriously. Prove that your demands do not unreasonably interfere with the lives, resources, and rights of others" (167).

Hopkins demands are not sensible. They assumes that there exists a common discourse which would allow the violation of rights experienced by a marginal group to be expressed so that it can be recognized by the dominant culture. Insofar as a group is oppressed and its rights systematically violated, moreover, it is likely that this group will have also been denied the resources to prove that these wrongs have occurred.

Wallace A. Murphree's "On Evangelizing Children: Breaking the Cycle of Dogmatic Belief Systems" distinguishes between exclusivism and dogmatism. The former makes a claim to the truth which entails that competing claims are false. Dogmatism includes exclusivism, but adds that doubting the truth of ones position, or critically examining the reasons given in support of that position, is morally wrong. Murphree has no brief against exclusivism, but he does object to dogmatism. His aim is to undermine that dogmatism by persuading its adherents to examine it at the metalevel. That is, if individuals believe that it is wrong to question a particular belief, Murphree hopes that they still will be willing to question whether it is wrong to question that belief.

It is difficult to see how Murphree's strategy could succeed. Surely individuals who believe that it is wrong to question some particular belief will recognize that Murphree's invites them to question whether it is wrong to question that belief so that they will eventually directly question that belief. Foreseeing that this would be the consequence of Murphree's strategy, it seems likely that such individuals will respond by maintaining that it is as wrong to question whether it is wrong to question a belief as it is to question that belief.

Yolanda Estes's "Confessions of a Refugee: My Life as a Loner/Rebel/Renegade" is an autobiographical account which argues that individuals who are members of a dominant group may nevertheless experience themselves as marginalized. This raises the question of whether marginalization is an objective fact that obtains independently of the perceptions, interpretations, and experiences of individuals, or whether instead marginalization supervenes on those perceptions, interpretations, and experiences.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's "Toward a Poetics of the Disabled Body" argues that what is disabling is not the body of the so-called disabled person, but rather the response to that body, writing that "we are marked not by our bodies themselves, but by responses to our bodies: by the stares that record our otherness, by the narratives that establish our inadequacy, by the barriers that keep us out, by the norms that render us abnormal" (209). She is especially concerned to analyze how persons are marginalized by the stares of others, and she advocates staring back. She notes that while cosmetic surgery has been critiqued by feminists, reconstructive surgery has not been similarly examined.

Patricia Smith's "Cultural Change and Institutional Entrenchment: Single Mothers, Working Mothers, and the Crisis of Caregiving" maintains that there is a crisis in caregiving, and that this crisis is the result of the marginalization of women. In order to correct this, Smith calls for
restructuring the workplace, rethinking the relation between the public and private, and overcoming the dichotomies caused by stereotypes.

Although Smith's descriptive analyses and prescriptive recommendations regarding are sensible, her notion of a "wind tunnel effect" - discussed above - plays no role. This suggests that she implicitly recognizes that it is not a useful tool for describing or implementing social change.

Sigal R. Benporath's "By Right and Not by Virtue: Rights of Retarded People in a Just Society" maintains that theories of justice, such as that of John Rawls, exclude from consideration the retarded and mentally ill, that principles of justice should be replaced by guiding rules that emphasize the importance of a sense of belonging and a willingness to contribute to society, and that retarded and mentally ill persons should participate in the formulation, articulation, and continual reevaluation of the guiding rules.

Benporath is correct that retarded and mentally ill persons should be allow, and encouraged, to contribute to society to the extent that they are able to do so. However, many such persons are incapable of caring for themselves or of making decisions. This is something that Benporath never discusses. Indeed, her argument implicitly assumes that all retarded and mentally ill persons have the ability to care for themselves and to make decisions about their welfare and best interests. This seriously weakens her essay. Benporath is correct to criticize misplaced parentalism. However, she is wrong to think that Rawls would not agree with her criticisms or that they somehow undermine his theory of justice. Moreover, she fails to discuss how persons should be cared for when they are unable to care for themselves, and how decisions should be made for individuals who are incapable of making decisions for themselves.

Almost all of the essays in this book fail to distinguish between marginalization as a statistical phenomenon - where a group is marginal in the sense that its population or influence is less than that of some other group - and marginalization as a political or ethical phenomenon - where a group is oppressed or its members are illegitimately excluded from offices or functions open to members of other groups. Further, almost none of the essays distinguish between reasons for marginalization. Rather, they assume that all marginalization is wrong. It could be argued, however, that hate groups should be marginalized. The authors of the essays collected in this book might want to disagree - urging instead, perhaps, that marginalization is always wrong - but that needs to be argued for, not assumed.

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