

From the Flap of a Butterfly's Wing in Brazil to a Tornado in Texas?: Approaching the Field of Identity Politics and Its Fractal Topography¹

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Resumen

El creciente impacto social y cultural de las políticas de identidad en procesos de integración transnacional es de gran interés para una vasta gama de disciplinas académicas, incluyendo, entre otras, la sociología, la antropología, la geografía, los estudios literarios, de cine, de comunicación social. Con fines de establecer un diálogo interdisciplinario sobre este tema, desarrollamos en este artículo el concepto del “campo de políticas de identidad.” Este modelo heurístico se basa tanto en la teoría de campo de Pierre Bourdieu como en enfoques constructivistas y relacionados con el reciente *complexity turn* en los estudios sociales.

El modelo posibilita analizar de qué manera una amplia gama de actores interviene en las (re-)negociaciones y (re-)construcciones de identidades culturales en los actuales procesos de transnacionalización. En este contexto pretendemos mostrar la interrelación de políticas de identidad de las élites políticas y culturales, los movimientos sociales, los medios masivos, las instituciones políticas y actores de la vida cotidiana. Para ello tomamos en cuenta los variados horizontes de interacción local, regional, nacional y transnacional que marcan las intervenciones de estos actores en el campo. El objetivo principal es entender las lógicas de expansión y de diferenciación que regulan la extensión del campo de políticas de identidad, así como la topografía fractal del mismo que da cabida al análisis de fenómenos como la pluralidad de posicionamientos identitarios y la intersección de discursos de identidad.

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1. Introduction

It is characteristic of the growing transnational interdependence of the Americas that even the identity politics of a small group of Amazonian Indians can cause havoc for the economic interests of the American oil industry. This was the case in 1993 when a handful of tribal peoples from the Amazonian lowlands filed a billion-dollar lawsuit against Texaco because of massive ecological pollution of their environment. Although this demand was not decided in international courts, it forced Texaco to enter the game of identity politics and to invest in massive media campaigns and expertises in order to avert damages from the corporate identity of the (Lone) “Star of the American Road.” Edward N. Lorenz clearly did not envision these hemispheric socio-political turbulences caused by identity politics when he created the provocative simile of the flap of a butterfly’s wing in Brazil that sets off a tornado in Texas in his groundbreaking text on Chaos Theory from the early 1970s, and we do not want to suggest too close a methodological homology between Chaos Theory and Inter-American Cultural Studies either. Nonetheless, Lorenz’s description of causality in the over-complex non-linear dynamic system of hemispheric weather conditions, where minute changes in initial conditions can lead to distant effects that seem absurdly disproportionate, is relevant in a variety of ways for the model of identity politics in processes of transnationalization we propose to sketch in the following article.

First, constellations of identity politics have to be conceived as interconnecting all social sectors, from that of political elites down to everyday culture. We all speak and act from specific ethnic and gendered positionings and, like the butterfly’s flap, these microscopic individual positionings can under certain conditions cause landslide processes on a macroscopic scale and force corporate or institutional actors to intervene through changes in official politics. Second, the metaphor of the butterfly effect accounts for the fact that identity politics is expanding its dominion into a transnational and hemispheric scope. Mass migration in the Americas, the free circulation of economic capital threatening the cultural heritage of formerly isolated communities, mass media and communication technology with their instant hemispheric coverage, as well as supranational political integration all create an ever-growing interconnectivity in the area of identity politics.² Third, although the dominant political stratagems of good governance link democratization to the institutionalization of minority rights, the social impact of identity politics cannot be conceived in the form of linear or orderly progress.³ Instead, there has to be both a focus

² This does not mean that identity politics within the American hemisphere constitute a closed system in a globalizing world. But the postcolonial constitution of the American societies, with their common legacy of racially or ethnically determined social classes, gives specific hemispheric resonance to claims for minority rights and to the politics of compensation.

³ Identity politics show rapidly changing conjunctures and are highly dependent on specific political constellations, as is shown in the current ethnicization of politics (cf. Büschges /Pfaff; Postero/Zamosc) and the gender mainstreaming of political movements (cf.

on the existent patterns of interaction as well as on the seemingly chaotic contingencies and disruptions in identity politics that result from interferences with other fields of social interaction (economy, politics, cultural production, academia).

In order to explain the non-linear causality by which these processes are regulated, a comprehensive methodological and theoretical model for analyzing identity politics is required, one which can account for the whole range of actors, from individuals to institutions, as well as for their local, translocal, national, and transnational horizons of interaction. This article will propose such a model, using as its starting point the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu. The core idea is to adapt Bourdieu's concept of the field in a way that allows us to explain the extraordinary socio-political and cultural impact that identity politics has had in the postmodern age, when fixed categories are challenged and identity formation is described as a strategic, situationally flexible, and inconsistent process. The advantage of the field concept for such an endeavor is that Bourdieu describes social, political, or cultural conflicts in terms of relational positions and positionings characterized by the access to different types of capital, whether economic, cultural, social, or symbolic. In the case of the field of identity politics the actors struggle over the distribution, valuation, and accumulation of what we like to call "identitarian capital" – a concept that will be elaborated further in the following chapter.

The field can account for both strategic forms of behavior and the way they are informed by the structures of social space incorporated in the habitus. The concept of *habitus* is a way to explain long term trends bearing on questions of class, gender, race or ethnicity in postcolonial contexts. It does not imply a determinist view on identity politics, as Bourdieu himself questions rigid homologies between habitus and position in social space in regard to certain moments of social and political crisis or when the heterogeneity of urban life generated by clashing identities (cf. Gregory 147). When different life styles can easily be observed and imitated the reproductive practices of habitualization are undermined and the concept of *habitus* has to be broadened in order to explain the "liquified" belongings to cultural groups (cf. Bauman, *Liquid*). Thus, when looking for a comprehensive model of analysis for identity politics in processes of transnationalization, the challenge is to strike a balance between the socially determining factors within Bourdieu's field model and the relativism of radical constructivism. The latter approach has been prominent in academic discussions about collective identities since, on the one hand, Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" and Hobsbawm and Ranger's publication on *The Invention of Tradition*, and, on the other hand, the development of French poststructuralism by theorists like Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, of gender theory by Judith Butler, as well as of postcolonial theory by Edward W. Said, Gayatri C. Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. While we share the notion that collective identities constitute social constructions that need constant performative re-articu-

Wichterich). The social impact of identity politics is especially manifested in phases of heightened conflict or political repression – a fact which may undermine identity politics' democratizing effects.

lations so as to gain validity in specific social contexts, several problems arise from radical constructivism when it is applied to identity politics.

First, the post-structuralist deconstruction of the subject has wide implications when it comes to redefining agency as a source of social transformation, as has been amply discussed in postcolonial and gender theory (cf. Bhabha, *Location* 171-97; Haraway). Radical constructivism ultimately tends to delegitimize as fictions political claims of social “minorities” based on group identification and essentialist conceptions of identity. Although constructivism and deconstructivism constitute a highly subversive academic response to national and patriarchal essentialisms, their ahistorical approach to the issue of identity paradoxically makes them a powerful tool of hegemonic liberalism. This becomes manifest, for example, in the myth of the “freedom of choice” in regard to ethnicity as put forward by authors like Werner Sollors in *The Invention of Ethnicity* and David A. Hollinger in *Post-Ethnic America*. “Freedom of choice” implies the liberal imaginary of a level playing ground for all individuals within the framework of civil rights set by the nation, and it presupposes that race does not determine one’s prospects in life.

Second, there is a notable discrepancy between the deconstruction of identitarian binary logics by radical post-structuralism and the increasing social and political importance of cultural identities in the context of postmodernism. Post-structuralism has had an important role in the demystification of the ideological *grands récits* of modernity such as the emancipative benefits of science and technology postulated by capitalist liberalism, the teleology of historic materialism, the “civilizing” impact of European imperialism, and the pedagogy of “narrations of nation” (Bhabha, *Location* 139-70). Notwithstanding the social fragmentation, individualization, and plurality that have been triggered by these processes, identity politics and conflicts based on cultural identities have played an important role in this deconstruction and continue to account for the current “power of identity” (cf. Castells). Although hegemonic, ethnicist, and patriarchal discourses have had to adapt to the new epistemologies of multiculturalism and postcolonialism, they seem still as potent as they did decades ago. As post-structuralism alone cannot supply an explanation for these phenomena, this article proposes a different framework for considering the problem, drawing on Bourdieu’s field theory, as well as on poststructuralist and postcolonial concepts, taking into account the recent “complexity turn” in cultural sociology as well (cf. Urry).

2. Logics of Expansion and Difference

The field of identity politics explains the inter-connectivity and self-organization, as well as power dynamics in specific constellations of actors. Fields are defined by specific logics, rules, and capitals that determine internal negotiations and struggles for power and resources. Generally, there exists a “logic of scarcity” which divides the field into those who dispose of capital and are initiated in the rules of the game, and those who are excluded from the interactions and negotiations. Applicable to most fields (cf. Bourdieu, *Field*), this idea is related to the trend of autonomization

as manifested in the formation not only of specific rules of engagement but also of groups of specialists or professionals with specific functions in the field.

Rather than a logic of closure as described above, we observe in the field of identity politics a *logic of expansion*. One must acknowledge that there is a manifest trend of professionalization for old and new elites in the field, as is exemplified by leaders of social movements, administrative apparatuses of political parties, transnational NGOs, and renowned cultural producers. Although this trend implies the formation of professional practical logics and thus a certain degree of autonomy, professionalization in this context cannot lead to closure. According to the underlying logics of the field, identity politics can have an appreciable impact on politics and everyday life only if the field continually involves new actors in the struggle for privileged positions in the field.

In this logic of expansion, the mass media play a decisive role. Following Stuart Hall's concept of "regimes of representation," the media not only regulate the access of actors to forms of self-representations. The practical logic of medial information itself leads to an expansion of identity politics: the paradigm of cultural identity allows the media to explain over-complex social conflicts for its national and cosmopolitan audiences with little insight into local constellations. For this goal, the media reproduce racial, religious, gender, and other stereotypes that are deeply rooted in consumer's everyday lives. Thus the use of the conflictive potential of cultural identities can be explained, à la Franck, as part of the attention economy of mass media. This phenomenon is complemented by the commodification of identities, as manifested in the invention and creation of new, mostly short-term consumer identities (cf. García Canclini; Bauman, *Consuming*). Thus the media can be shown to be highly expansive and productive in regard to new institutions, artifacts, spaces and actors in the field, while existing elements are over-coded and colonized.

Besides the logic of expansion, there is a logic of difference at work in the field which is to a certain degree antagonistic to expansion. The theory of alterity postulates differentiation to be a necessary basis of the constitution of identity, the self being shaped by this process of "othering" (cf. Fabian). Within the larger context of identity politics, this differentiation leads to a proliferation and progressive division of social groups and formations along cleavages following collective or cultural identities. In relation to the ethnic-regional question, Bourdieu asserts a tendency toward the infinite division of nations (cf. Bourdieu, "La identidad" 182) – a tendency that can be applied to other identity politics like those based on gender, age, consumption or class. If the logic of difference is taken to its extreme and markets of attention become over-saturated, the consequent social fragmentation may result in an "inflation" of identitarian capital. When the number of actors demanding social and political recognition in the field is largely out of balance, this inflation or entropy of identity politics necessarily leads to the reorganization and articulation of actors in the field. To a certain degree the logic of difference can thus constitute a regulating principle of the field's expansionist logic.

The struggles triggered by the field's logics of difference and expansion can be described in terms of distribution of 'identitarian capital,' a form of capital that merges together aspects of Bourdieu's concepts of cultural, social and symbolic cap-

ital. Cultural identities comprise habitualized manners, language, education, and emotional belonging, all related to cultural capital as an incorporated form of knowledge about social distinction. Social capital bears on social networks, institutional belonging and political organization. Contrary to economic capital, identitarian capital does not obey a *logic of scarcity*, but serves as a sort of credit by means of which a certain actor receives recognition and power from his social environment. In this way, it resembles the characteristics of symbolic capital.

The use of identity as capital is based on the assumption that religious, ethnic, gender, consumer, and other cultural identities can be deployed strategically in the struggles within the field. Although social constructivism relativizes to a certain extent the specific practical logics related to different cultural identities, it should be noted that some of these identities depend on forms of embodiment. In this sense, identitarian capital related to gender, race and ethnicity cannot be conceived as exchangeable or accumulative in a simple manner. Nevertheless, there is constant intersection between discourse formations and identitarian forms of agency which makes it necessary to analyze how the “capitalization” of positions in the field changes when different discourses of identity politics are combined. It has to be taken into account, as well, that a person’s individual constellation of subject positions may in certain constellations facilitate intervention (e.g., a white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant, heterosexual male) or hinder it (e.g., a black, homosexual woman), while in other constellations the roles might be inverted.

One factor that helps determine the circulation of capital in the field is its visualization by different sectors of the public, as becomes manifest in symbolic clothes, flags, or logos. Circulation of identitarian capital implies – as Judith Butler argued – a notion of performativity as a reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains. Performativity in songs, speeches, narrations, ritualizations and other practices of identity leads to a consolidation of group identities, and it allows for a concept of non-essentialist, continuously changing identifications, even the emergence of new forms of identity. The more identitarian capital circulates in the field, the more economic, political or cultural capital is attracted. This is the case of the expansion of the field of identity politics in the U.S.A. in the aftermath of the African-American civil rights movement, the feminist movements and the various subsequent ethnic movements. All these interventions have led to a new distribution of capital or the transference of capital from other fields into the field of identity politics as may be shown by the implementation of politics of affirmative action and the expansion of ethnic and gender studies in the academic field.

3. The Differential of Power

One of the crucial topics regarding the logics of expansion and difference is the question of how these logics relate to the differential of power in the field of identity politics. In times when conflicts based on cultural identities are widely spread, the field is characterized by the involvement of political and economic elites, state

institutions, the media, and cultural producers. These actors are able to transfer economic and symbolic capital from other fields, or they dispose of institutional means of intervention which make their impact on identity politics more sustainable than that of other actors. This fact implies that a “level playing field” for actors in the field, as postulated by liberalism, is basically a myth. On the other hand, negotiations and conflicts between state institutions and social movements that include the intervention of international NGOs, supranational institutions, law firms, and intellectuals show that power in the field cannot be conceived with models of pyramidal sovereignty. When social structures of power leave little or no space for negotiations of identities, as in authoritarian regimes or colonial caste systems, the concept of the field of identity politics has only a limited heuristic value. If, on the other hand, counter-hegemonic strategies contend openly with hegemonic positionings, a topography of the differential of power is needed that displays how deeply political and economic elites, cultural producers, and social movements are interconnected, how dependent they are on wide spread mobilization of the public, and how affected they are by grassroots strategies of subversion, resistance and rebellion (cf. Scott). The topography has to extend to the microphysics of identity politics in everyday life. In this context it has to be acknowledged that everyday life cannot be reduced to a mere reproduction of and subordination to elite strategies (cf. de Certeau); it includes the necessity of creative everyday life tactics for coping with social inequalities and repression on the basis of identity politics.

Power in this context can be described with the help of Foucault’s concept of “governmentality”: a technology of self-government and populational control that conditions all actors within the field, and that allows for a de-centered analysis of power (Foucault, “Governmentality”). Governmentality explains how both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic actors in the field adopt a common set of rules based on a common understanding of cultural identity and the coherence of identitarian positionings, no matter whether these actors intend to contain conflicts or, on the contrary, plan to change capital distribution within the field by strategies of rebellion and resistance. This is why identity politics mediates so effectively between an extraordinarily wide array of actors with different degrees of identitarian and political self-determination.

4. The Power of Vision and Division

When approaching the *nomos* of the field of identity politics from the perspective of power, it becomes manifest that the dialectics of expansion and difference lead to a variety of distinct but similar strategies, practices, and discourses, depending on the specific position of an actor within the differential of power. In this context, two intricately related modes of power have to be distinguished. On an epistemological and discursive level, interventions are directed to maintain or change, legitimate or de-legitimate the fundamental principles of vision and division of the social world. (cf. Bourdieu, *Propos*). On a praxeological level, interventions in the field of

identity politics aim to regulate the allocation of capital in the field and the transfer of capital from other fields.

The power of vision and division is based on the symbolic capital necessary for classifying and creating social groups according to economic, religious, ethnic or cultural divisions. Therefore Bourdieu argues:

The categories of perception, the schemata of classification, that is, essentially, the words, the names which construct social reality as much as they express it, are the stake par excellence of political struggle, which is a struggle to impose the legitimate principle of vision and division, i.e., a struggle over the legitimate exercise of what I call the “theory effect.” (Bourdieu, “Social” 20-21)

We argue in this essay that all groups of actors in the field can be said to dispose to a certain degree of this power, its unequal and contested distribution in the field can be considered one of the principle motors of the changing conjunctures of identity politics.

The fundamental – or at least more sustainable – principles of vision and division are associated by Bourdieu with elites. Because of fairly direct access to mass media, these elites still hold the central power relays in the state apparatuses or supranational organizations, their categorizations of actors in the field are mostly consistent with political strategies of populational control, and their strategies have a long reach. When managing change in the field, the identity politics of political elites and state institutions are related to bio-power manifest in age-based, gender-based, ethnic or racial classifications that bear a series of analogies to categories created and used by corporate actors or economic elites in order to commodify cultural identities. As the example of the United States shows, policies like the census may serve to impose certain racial categories such as Hispanic, African-American, Asian-American, Hawaiian, Native American, or Caucasian identity and have both an impact on subjectivation in everyday life contexts and on the macroscopic level of channelling minority claims for recognition. The same strategies of creating new categories and articulating diverse cultural identities and social strata helps corporate interests to flexibly address segments of the public within the context of contemporary post-Fordist economy.

To impose these categories in the field of identity politics in systems of representational democracies, policies have to be mediated by hegemonic discourse. In this context, the dependence of institutional or corporate actors on cultural elites becomes evident. The participation of media, academia and cultural producers in public debates on the vision and division of social space along identitarian cleavages is crucial not only to the propagation of institutional discourses but also to the continuous re-elaboration of the semantics of difference. The intervention of these actors makes the power of vision and division in the field of identity politics highly versatile, adjustable and productive. There are of course various forms of co-optation by institutions or corporations such as *patronage* by public or private funds, but the symbolic capital of academia, media, and cultural producers depends on the popular notion that their interventions are less informed by special interests and more bound by a specific working ethos. This notion makes the interventions of

these actors highly effective on the markets of attention that regulate the field. They dispose of the necessary self-reflexive potential to bring to light the mostly hidden and opaque mechanisms of the field and lay bare those forms of speech and action ruled out by the *nomos* of the field.

As Cultural Politics approaches suggest, hegemonic power of vision and division is contested not only by cultural elites but also by social movements and loosely organized political milieus fighting for recognition.⁴ Marginal and subaltern groups can acquire through forms of public mobilization enough symbolic capital to change the differential of power in the field. This becomes clear, for example, in the movements of women's liberation that have accompanied Western democracies from the 19th century to the present day in changing constellations and articulations with other subaltern groups. The institutional mainstreaming of gender issues shows the considerable changes they have caused in modes of political representation (cf. Wichterich). Although the social movements based on race, class, and gender have catalyzed transformations in American societies from the Independence onward, it is particularly since the 1990s, along with the crisis of nation states, that they have successfully contested traditional regimes of political and cultural representation and promoted further democratization, extension of citizenship, politics of recognition, multiculturalism, and a significant expansion of the field of identity politics.

The successful identity politics of social movements, which in a series of cases has led to the constitutional recognition of cultural diversity and minority rights, has changed the forms of political struggle and predominant governmental practices within the field without disarticulating the field's overall mechanisms of social mediation. In multiculturalism every group or movement is assigned a space within the differential of power. This can be interpreted as a strategy to make groups "countable" in order to control them by governmental techniques (cf. Rancière). According to Hardt and Negri, "these conflicts make the fabric of global relations more fluid and, by affirming new identities and new localities, present a more malleable material for control" (37). On the other hand, in spite of the multicultural politics of (limited) recognition, there remains without a doubt a degree of incommensurability that escapes governmental control. In regard to modern assimilation politics, Zygmunt Bauman (*Modernity*) has argued that every attempt to establish a social order provokes new dislocations and new unclassifiable positionings. That is also the case in the politics of multiculturalism, where the established *tableau* of cultural identities is undermined by permanent differentiations, dislocations, and hybridizations.

One of the sources of incommensurability of positionings in the context of identity politics is the contingency of everyday life. In everyday life contexts insti-

⁴ Still, the mainstream in political sciences is concentrated on the power of intervention of the elites and the state, pursuing a top-down-perspective. To take into account the identity politics of less institutionalized actors, like social movements and their milieu of everyday life, Cultural Politics approaches have been established in the 1990s in the research on social movements in Latin America (cf. Alvarez/Dagnino/Escobar; Kaltmeier/Kastner/Tuider).

tutional or corporate identity politics and the underlying principles of vision and division are not simply overtaken. Instead, they have to be translated in order to fit different situational contexts. They can even be subverted by postcolonial mimicry or simply undermined by tactics of cultural resistance. As communication analysis of conversational constructions of cultural identities shows (cf. Czyzewski/Gülich/Hausendorf/Kastener), discourses through which identities are performed in everyday contexts have a practical logic different from the strategic coherence of discourses on the macroscopic level of observation. Given the flexibility of everyday language in regard to different horizons of interaction, institutional principles of vision and division may at the same time be invoked, perpetuated, caricatured, and overcome without necessarily undermining the speaker's authority.

As transnationalization, migration and urban pluriculturalism inform the lives of an increasing part of the population, the polyphony and contingency of everyday contexts cannot possibly be homologized without an excess of coercion. Despite this fact, the institutional power of vision and division can only function successfully if it reaches a certain degree of permeability of everyday life contexts. To this effect institutional actors deploy a series of governmental instruments that range from coercive power, schooling, media campaigns to affirmative action, symbolic recompense and "government through community" (cf. Rose). This governmental colonization of everyday life, however, is limited not only by contingency and polyphony but also by the fact that political elites seek to draw legitimation from the field of identity politics and thus are dependent on mobilization of everyday life actors. This implies a degree of homology in the regime of political representation that explains why institutional discourses have to fall back in certain conjunctures on everyday discourses of identity and the underlying principles of vision and division in order to be understood, legitimated and not sanctioned by disbelief. The manufacturing of consent thus has to be conceived as working both top-down and bottom-up, this being another factor of emergence and change in the field.

5. Distribution of Identitarian Capital

The power of vision and division of cultural identities can only be effectively exerted if based on a regime of circulation of capital that regulates how identitarian capital can be accumulated or allocated, and how other forms of capital can be transferred into the field and converted into identitarian capital. The mercantilist metaphor of distribution of identitarian capital is helpful for describing processes in the field in regard to the redistribution of power, but it does not imply that these processes are merely algebraic functions in the field. As in the case of the accumulation of public esteem or recognition, the circulation of capital has to be understood as a process of creating meaning or translating it from other contexts. In this creative process the circulation of capital in the field does not follow a pre-established set of rules; the rules are subject to constant renegotiations by different actors. Phenomena like homogeneous group identifications, which might be highly valued as identitarian capital from a particular perspective within the field, may be considered ana-

chronic from a position which postulates the pre-eminence of strategies of hybridization and the cosmopolitan fluidity of identity. Before further elaborating this perspectivist approach to identitarian capital in the following chapters on fractal topography, it is necessary to sketch how mechanisms of distribution of identitarian capital work within the field.

Established political and cultural elites bring stocks of social, cultural and/or economic capital into the field that have been accumulated over generations of hegemony and function on the bases of class or ethnic distinction. These forms of capital are intricately related to cultural identity and are reproduced by strategies of distinction in regard to social origin, biography, or academic career (cf. Hartmann). New actors in the field, on the contrary, have the option of strategic mimesis, as they can try to approach established elite positionings by assimilation. At the same time, they can challenge the stocks of capital of traditional elites by claiming their illegitimacy. In this vein, “whiteness,” “hispanidad” and “lo criollo” can be decapitalized to a certain degree by referring to the historical legacy of slavery or the extinction of indigenous peoples, especially in postcolonial societies where residual structures of the ethnic or racial caste systems still define positionings within the field of identity politics. In order to successfully challenge hegemony and the rules of capital circulation it depends on, new social movements must accrue symbolic power by social mobilization in order to change the regime of representation, and thus to counteract the colonization or articulation of everyday life contexts by institutional governmental practices. If actors like social movements bring to bear enough mobilizing power, the “exchange rate” between identitarian and economic capital may be changed in ways that impact institutional politics such as the allocation of subventions, symbolic recompensations, national or international development programs, reparations, or affirmative action. These measures lessen tensions in the field and ultimately uphold the field’s potential to mediate in social conflicts, as long as the overall rules of the field are accepted by the field’s participants. This phenomenon means that successes in the politics of recognition or in the “mainstreaming” of feminism or multiculturalism (cf. Fraser) – along with the concomitant transfers of economic or symbolic capital from other fields that such successes entail – do not necessarily signify a structural change within the field, but can be handled analytically on the basis of market regulations.

Apart from the political contentions mentioned above, the allocation of capital in the field of identity politics is highly influenced by corporate interests and processes of the commodification of identities (cf. Huggan; Brouillette; Gurr). Contrary to the Fordist era in industrialization which envisaged a standard consumer and reduced him to a function of human needs, post-Fordist production flexibly addresses consumer identities that differ widely in their identitarian dispositions. This process leads corporate interests actually to foster the emergence of new marketable identities, and makes commerce or commercials crucial factors in identity politics. Economic elites search new trends in the creativity of everyday life and in popular culture to create consumer identities for specific target groups. This strategy implies that intellectual property rights and their expropriation, as well as the protection of

commons and heritage sites, are an important site of contestation in the field of identity politics today.

The presence of corporate interests in the field shows how certain actors serve as mediators or translators between the field of identity politics and the economic field. These interferences between different fields and the conversion of different forms of capital are of crucial importance to the constitution of the differential of power in the field. The capacity to interact and to translate between various fields is a considerable strategic advantage of mediating actors over other players in the field. The intervention of economic elites in the field by means of ethnicized cultural production, such as World Music or urban marketing based on local identities, produces a considerable expansion of the field and deploys a practical logic of capital exchange that can overcome forms of cultural resistance and strengthen the hegemonic colonization of everyday life. At the same time, actors from everyday life contexts are able to use the ethnic labelling of cultural production, “ethnic economy” or ethno-tourism facilities in order to change living conditions in the community and to empower its members in ways previously impossible (cf. Kaplan/Li; Gutierrez). As commercialization of these products implies interaction between regional, national or even international consumers, these actors have to show increasingly a similar flexibility of positionings in regard to various logics of allocation in the field as economic elites.

6. The Fractal Topography of the Field of Identity Politics

In order to understand the over-complex constitution of the field of identity politics, one has to bear in mind that the microphysics of power relations in everyday life is not only vertically interrelated with the macroscopic level, it also bears a close resemblance to forms of interaction involving those institutional actors, social movements, and old and new elites conventionally associated with identity politics. If the overlapping of macro- and micropolitics is to be taken into account as part of the same field of identity politics, it is necessary to change the underlying field metaphor based on two dimensional relational space for a topography that can represent these over-complex dynamic constellations more adequately. We propose in this concluding section of the article that fractal topography is a way to meet the challenges of such a comprehensive model for the analysis of identity politics.

As has been defined by Benoît Mandelbrot, fractals are geometrical figures constituted by the iteration of self-identical or self-similar structures in non-linear dynamic systems. Contrary to Euclidean geometry, the configurations can be “zoomed” in on without losing complexity, regardless of the scale of the “zoom.” This implies a topography that is produced by recursive operations and thus relates to the performative, relational, and dynamic understandings of space in critical geography (cf. Massey). Indeed, because the matrix of uncountable constellations, different horizons of interactions, and multiplicity of discourses in identity politics is over-complex, it requires new models for conceptualizing these manifold relations. We would like to propose that discussions on fractality and over-complex-systems

serve as a fruitful stimulation for theorizations in cultural studies and social sciences.

Since the late 1990s there has been a “complexity turn” in social sciences (cf. Urry), which advocates the analysis of over-complex processes of transnationalization that interweave local, regional, national, and transnational horizons of interaction and meaning in manifold non-linear, process-open, and dynamic ways. In these over-complex constellations equilibrium is the exception rather than the rule, while the idea of emergence is central. Minuscule local perturbations can be amplified into structural breaks and global changes.⁵

Fractality is useful in many ways to describe identity politics, all the way from the underlying self-organizational structures constituting the field’s *nomos* to the construction of cultural identities on an individual level. This understanding of the field is based on the notion that all positions are informed by situational components and the interrelation with other actors in the field and can thus be seen as part of complex constellations. The fractal organization of these constellations will be further described and exemplified in the following passages.

Actors who intervene in the field differ widely not only in regard to their position in the differential of power, their access to forms of capital, and their strategies of vision and division, but also in regard to their organizational structure. Thus constellations confront highly institutionalized collective actors such as state agencies with demands from individuals and loose networks of pressure groups; cultural creators negotiate over content with transnational media conglomerates, and non-government organizations depend on the mobilization of individuals out of everyday contexts. In order to illustrate how the heuristic concept of the field of identity is to work, we propose to look at an example of a single organization in which different constellations can be made out at different levels of observation. Indeed, collective actors such as state institutions or NGOs cannot be considered as homogeneous entities. Their institutional politics of identity may be obstructed or even undermined by individuals or networks within the overall organization.

For example, when a recent constitutional amendment in a Latin American country grants indigenous peoples the right to bilingual education in a nation with a highly diverse indigenous population, this kind of symbolic politics does not necessarily reflect a will to implement these rights nationally on part of the executives in the Department of Education who, in our example, would belong to the *Criollo* upper class. Neither will these new directives automatically dislodge the views on assimilation held by the *Mestizo* public servant who argues in editorials over the content of the free school book program, nor dispel the reluctance felt by the indigenous school director to meet the demands of the local NGO chapter, when doing so would force his or her indigenous group to give up some measure of social

⁵ Although a series of Social Studies approaches in complexity-research are related to the systemic analysis of feedback-loops, autopoiesis, and co-evolutions, Chesters and Welsh offer a way of conceptualising complexity in terms of cultural studies based on social movement research inspired by the Deleuzian notion of *becoming*.

privilege in favor of other groups. All these integrants of the state institution form part of a constellation of informal networks within the Department of Education that pursue different strategies of ethnicization or de-ethnicization of politics. Finally, on a still smaller scale, every integrant is part of an ethnicist microphysics of power in everyday life that conflicts with sexually exploited migrant housekeepers, mobbing colleagues, racist real estate agents, etc.

This example shows that a collective actor like the federal Department of Education, which intervenes in the field of identity politics through an official institutional policy on multi-ethnicity is, when observed at a smaller scale, a constellation of different positionings within the organizational structure – which can be divided again into microscopic constellations of everyday life, face-to-face interaction, etc. Despite the particularities of any single constellation and possible process-oriented differences between interactions at macro- and microscales, all constellations tend to reproduce to varying degrees the *nomos* of the field. It is this kind of self-similarity of structures at different scales of observation that can be accounted for by the fractal topography of the field.

Fractality also comes to bear when describing how actors cannot be reduced to univocal and unambiguous positions, as their strategies may vary over time and are highly dependent on situational aspects.⁶ Because of the multi-sited contextuality individual actors should not be considered as homogeneous, coherent and entirely self-determined subjects but rather, in analogy to the overall constitution of the field, as fractal constellations of positionings or – in the Bourdieuan terminology further elaborated by Heinrich Schäfer – as a network of dispositions: “We define identity as a network of dispositions of a habitus that are selectively actualized and accentuated” (263). This definition includes cognitive, affective and corporal dimensions. It highlights that this network-identity is positioned but never fixed and always open for alterations and change.

In this sense, cultural identities are conceived as performed in processes of constant re-construction, re-articulation and re-accommodation. These creative processes in identity formation draw upon a fractal logic of self-similarity regulating the (re-)production of strategic positionings that together constitute the individual *vis-à-vis* the constellations he forms part of.

For example, we can identify a “strategic discursive multilingualism” (Gow/Rappaport) in recent indigenous movements in the Andes. In the case of a social leader of an indigenous movement from Ecuador, the strategy for intervening in the policy-making of international organizations and NGOs would be to advocate affirmative action and stress the indigenous’ role as “Guardians of the Pachamama,” at a time when combined ecological-ethnic discourses appeal to many international pressure groups (cf. Ulloa). When acting on a national level, he or she would use a

⁶ Although the concept of fractal identities has been used by a series of authors like Haraway, Strathern, Baudrillard, Gilroy, de la Cadena, and Ronsbo, it has received neither widespread reception nor systematic elaboration. Fractal identities are often used synonymously with incommensurably fragmented or hybrid identities.

national-popular frame of interpretation based on class discourse that propagates the common interests of all subaltern sectors in their fight against political hegemony. The municipality he or she lives in is governed by an indigenous *alcalde* (mayor), so the social leader would appeal to local identities trying to establish common interests between indigenous people and *mestizos* opposed to local white hegemony. Back from his or her voyage through the field's different constellations he or she would speak to the indigenous *comunidades* in *Kichwa*, addressing notions of reciprocity and morality that are deeply rooted in the everyday culture of indigenous people and *campesinos*.

Each horizon of interaction exacts new discursive strategies and performances of identities. The challenge in this fractal game of self-similar self-reproduction is no longer to establish coherence, but to comply with a less exacting logic of compatibility. This logic of compatibility is of crucial importance where actors are involved in an ever-increasing number of constellations as a consequence of the ongoing transnationalization, fuelled by phenomena like time-space compression, growing informational interconnectivity, and the interweaving of local, national and transnational horizons of interaction and meaning. Although the involved actors are still constrained by social norms, sanctions, and incorporated practical logics of biographical socialization, their successful intervention in the field of identity politics depends highly on their creative, reflexive, or reproductive use of mimesis as a form of translating and reinventing one's self in constantly changing constellations and differentials of power.

In order to position themselves vis-à-vis the growing inter-connectivity, actors have to translate between constellations in order to be understood or to interact successfully in varying contexts. These processes of translation comprise a series of phenomena ranging from mimesis, mimicry, and habitualized reproduction to creative, self-reflexive, or even subversive forms of positionings. It is by these performative means of translation that the actor in the field continuously reinvents his identity, although each translation produces the risk of untranslatable residuals in the original context. When we redirect our focus from individual positionings to the whole constellation, the actors' (self-)translation implies a semi-transparency in regard to the negotiation of identities in second- or third-degree constellations, and thus lays bare the incommensurable plurality and polyphony within the field of identity politics.

The actor's translation and narration of identitarian positionings and positions in the field brings with it further consequences, insofar as positions within constellations cannot be reduced to natural persons and institutions. On the contrary, virtual positions or fictions form part of the same constellations in the field as real life actors. Donna Haraway states in her influential text "A Cyborg Manifesto," which treats feminist identity politics in the late 20th century, that the collective identity of women – the "women's experience" as created or projected by the international women's movement – is both factual and "a world changing fiction" (150). This example shows that, in relation to constellations of identity politics, an ontological divide between factual and fictional positionings does not make sense. Histrionic performances or fictional narrations of the self produce similar kinds of political reactions by actors in the field as any other kind of strategic positioning. The confu-

sion of fact and fiction can even become a self-conscious game in identity politics. In the post-essentialist contexts of identity politics at the end of the 20th century, Haraway postulates that the cyborg – as a “creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” – is a strategic identity that allows for the transgression of the clear-cut boundaries of identity and its others established by “racist, male dominated capitalism” (151). Haraway draws upon fractality in this context in order to describe the processes of fiction based identity formation – cyborg “sex” – in terms of “the lovely replicative baroque of ferns and invertebrates” (151).

If self-similar reproduction in the case of the fractal fern is considered the way how narrations of identity reproduce themselves on the boundary of fact and fiction, this has consequences on how identitarian fictions are to be conceived in the field of identity politics. As Shotter and Gergen propose, the performative narration of the self is based on the appropriation of certain cultural discourses (*Texts* 168-69), propagated by popular, mass or elite culture. These discourses offer models for identification and are thus decisive in the formation of cultural identities. In autobiographic texts, which are a common form of identitarian positionings, real-life constellations encountered by the author are culturally represented and fictionalized in a process which closely resembles the fractal multiplications of constellations in the field.

For example, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, the semi-fictional autobiography of Chicano lawyer and activist Oscar Zeta Acosta, represents and fictionalizes constellations of identity politics in the early Chicano Movement. Acosta’s radical activism, the heroic self-stylization in his prose, and his enigmatic disappearance in the early 1970s converted him into a legendary character – a kind of cyborg position in the field of identity politics at the threshold of two constellations where interaction follows different but, at the same time, similar practical logics. Based on real life struggle in the context of racist exclusion of Chicanos in the 1960s and early 1970s, the autodiegetic constellations in the text unfold following the conventions of literary genres such as memoirs, mythical quests, and a kind of inverted *bildungsroman*. Biographical content is thus translated into narrative form in a way that addresses the horizons of expectation on behalf of the public of how (ethnic) identities should be narrated to be coherent and believable. As in the case of “auto-ethnography” (Pratt 7), these texts are moulded by the practical logics of textual production as manifested in literary genres and dominant epistemologies, but offer within this context strategies of transculturation and cultural appropriation that function in a manner akin to identity politics.

Autobiographic fiction is a particularly relevant example for identity politics because these texts have a performative quality of self-positioning. If the autobiographical pact (cf. Lejeune) with its genre conventions is not openly broken and remains verisimilar for a certain public, the position of the author in extra-literary constellations will be at least partly defined by self-similar constellations within his texts. This concept of the author’s autobiographical identity as a fractal constellation can be related to Foucault (*Language*) who shows the author to be a unifying and exclusive function of those discursive practices that constitute his *œuvre*. At the same time, the idea that constellations are only a semi-transparent medium for

positions and events from related constellations allows us to account for postcolonial criticism of the post-structuralist deconstruction of the author (cf. Naficy 4). In the context of identity politics, authors' positions in the field do matter for the understanding of the text regardless of their being "creatures of fiction" in real life. Authors – just like any other individual actor in the field – retain through their texts a certain kind of authorship of their own relational, situational, plural, or schizoid identities in the field.

7. Fractal Topography and Perspectivism

Fractal topography introduces a strong perspectivist notion into field theory. The description of fractals always depends on the scale of observation, as Mandelbrot shows in his foundational essay on Chaos Theory, which theorizes the problems of measuring an irregular and winding coastline:

We can imagine a man walking along the coastline, keeping away from it by no more than the prescribed distance η , and taking the shortest possible path. Then he resumes his walk, after having reduced his yardstick; then again, with another reduction, and again, and again ... To follow it in even smaller detail, our man must be replaced by a mouse, then by an ant, and so forth. Again, as our walker wishes to stay increasingly closer to the coastline, the distance to be covered will continue to increase with no limit in sight. (28)

"The basic uncertainty concerning the value of a coastline's length," he concludes, "cannot be legislated away in this fashion. In one manner or another, the concept of geographic length is not as inoffensive as it seems. It is not now, nor has it ever been, entirely 'objective.' The observer inevitably intervenes in its definition" (30).

In analogy to the fractal coastline, constellations in the field of identity politics should not be conceived as pre-established or fixed sites, nor as objectified relations that are categorized by an exotopic observer from a privileged perspective outside the field. They are rather the result of interaction-processes being described by a specific observer from within the field, who analyzes the relational logics of how identitarian capital is allocated or transferred between a given set of positions. Simply by his power of vision and division, this observer partakes in negotiations over the distribution of capital within the field. Therefore he can be considered an actor in the constellation he observes.

The underlying epistemology of fractal topography is intricately linked to praxeological aspects. In order to be able to interact in the field of identity politics, it is necessary for all intervening actors to produce a cognitive map of the constellation which they form a part of. Although institutional or medialized concepts of vision and division may inform these cognitive maps of individual actors in the field, the way a given actor describes a constellation, the positions of his counterparts, and their relation to his own position depends basically on strategic choices. While in some situations it may be useful for a certain actor to articulate the subaltern identities of "*los de abajo*" and oppose them to an equally amorphous concept of "*los de arriba*" that comprises elites and institutions (cf. Laclau/Mouffe), in contexts of

nepotism he might have to distinguish between those parts of hegemony who favor his cause and those who do not. Both strategies draw on conventional rhetorics of identitarian discourse and share the epistemological matrix of the field.

As the constellations in the field are characterized by over-complex inter-connectivity, actors are forced to found their strategic behaviour on metaphoric, metonymic, or synecdochic representations of their counterparts. Cognitive maps thus comprise positions associated with real life representatives of a collective actor or with the textual or mediatized self-positionings of these actors, all of them subject to a specific logic of representation based on the assumptions of structural self-similarity and the transferability of identitarian capital.

Working with *imagined constellations* in the field of identity politics, i.e., the aforementioned cognitive maps, allows for a much more flexible account of strategic interaction from an individual perspective; at the same time one has to acknowledge that the field holds a number of correctives to radical perspectivism. In the highly competitive field of identity politics, the capacity to position and articulate oneself depends on successful interaction. From the perspective of a certain actor, it may be perfectly permissible to represent the other by stereotypes, archetypes or self-projections, as long as these images allow him to anticipate his counterpart's strategic positionings and accumulate identitarian capital by conflict or negotiation. In this context it becomes clear that the accumulation of capital is not to be conceived as an objectifiable variable attributed to certain positions by a neutral observer. It is the role of each participant/observer in the ongoing negotiations to map the constellations by judging the amount of capital held by the positions in the field. In a context in which change within the field or the overall social space is imminent, an actor/observer from a subaltern position may perceive the distribution of capital in a wholly different way than his hegemonic opponents. The differing maps may depend on suppositions or fictions and be partially incommensurable, but this does not impede successful interaction and communication to happen on behalf of both actors.

The actor has to bear in mind that he will be sanctioned ultimately by the loss of some form of capital if he fails to interpret or successfully interact with his counterpart. Although self-similarity may be a powerful tool for understanding actors in the field, mental mappings of constellations must allow for an effective hermeneutic of the other that enables one to see difference as well as forms of self-representation on behalf of the other. The hermeneutics of the other is based on the capacity for self-reflection implied by the auto-evaluation of both the effectiveness of one's communication and the accumulative potential of the position one holds in a given constellation. Self-reflexivity is crucial to one's ability to adjust to situational aspects or changing constellations, and thus plays a crucial role in the emergence of new positionings in the field, discourse innovations, and borrowed strategies from other fields. In this sense it can be considered a motor of cultural creativity within the field.

However, one has to bear in mind that just as the power of vision and division cannot be conceived as an attribute solely of elite actors within the field, forms of self-reflexivity play as important a role in everyday culture as they do in the macropolitics of identity, even though they belong to a level of interaction more informed

by tactics than strategy (cf. de Certeau). De Certeau's notion of "tactics" that are employed in everyday practice to act creatively in and to subvert spaces defined by governmental, institutional and corporative strategies is helpful when it comes to defining differentials of power in the field in regard to vision, division and self-reflexivity. Strategic self reflexivity, as manifested in institutional and corporate policies or in political debates, may inform principles of vision and division in a more sustainable way than tactical practices do. This advantage stems from the more direct access to media resources, to economic and cultural capital, or to the power of coercion. But as Lorenz's image of the flap of a butterfly's wing has shown, even macrocosmic transformations can be caused in over-complex constellations by slight interventions from any position within the field.

8. Conclusion

The power of identity, i.e. the ever increasing impact of identity politics in the Americas, is of crucial importance to an array of issues studied by disciplines like sociology, anthropology, geography, linguistics, as well as literary, film, media and religious studies. For this reason, we propose to elaborate a model of the field compatible with these disciplinary approaches which combines the Bourdieuan notion of capital – in form of the heuristic concept of identitarian capital and the outlined dynamics of its distribution – with an understanding of the fractal topography of the field of identity politics. The core idea is to understand the logics of expansion and of difference which regulate the extension of the field and its relation to other fields, as well as phenomena linked to the intersectionality and plurality of identities.

We have argued that the proposed model of a field of identity politics allows for a process-related understanding of strategic positionings among the wide range of actors which all form part of (re-)negotiations and (re-)constructions of cultural identities in the current processes of transnationalization. The model intends to show the interrelatedness of identity politics in everyday life contexts with positionings of cultural and political elites, social movements, mass media and political institutions. In order to grasp the interrelations between these different contexts, the current transformations of identity politics exact complexity-oriented approaches which, in non-linear and dynamic ways, take into account the interweaving of local, regional, national, and transnational horizons of interaction. In order to understand the specific (post-)colonial resonances of identity politics in the Americas, these short term effects in the field have to be reflected upon in relation to medium and long term temporalities of postcolonial dispositions.

By drawing on the notion of fractality, the field can be conceived as a constellation of constellations, which are again constituted by further constellations, all of which reproduce or translate certain practical logics regulating the field and do not lose complexity, regardless of from where they are "zoomed in" on. Taking up the sociological concern with the observer's paradox, we postulate that in relation to identity politics the field cannot be observed from a neutral perspective without the observer's transforming the field by his power of vision and division. In this sense,

observers are considered actors in the field which, just as all other actors, necessarily take the role of observers. In order to interact successfully with other integrants of a specific constellation, they use cognitive mappings of the constellation and rely on a hermeneutics of the other.

This radical perspectivism is a way of reflecting postcolonial critiques on Eurocentric epistemologies in academia as well as of “international division of intellectual labor.” It also allows for the deconstruction of the ontological distinction between factual and fictional actors’ positionings and is thus able to lay the ground for the interdisciplinary dialogue between discourse- and actor-oriented disciplines in the broader context of cultural studies the proposed model of the field of identity politics aims for.

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