

Josef Raab

Contrary Approaches to Difference: Ethnicity and Identity Politics in the Americas

Zusammenfassung:

Ausgehend von den gegensätzlichen Haltungen des bolivianischen Präsidenten Evo Morales und des US-amerikanischen Präsidenten Barack Obama gegenüber identitärer Differenz stellt der Aufsatz verschiedene Strategien im Umgang mit Differenz in den Americas heraus. Infolge der Überlagerung identitärer Markierungen und der zunehmenden Deterritorialisierung kultureller Praktiken und ethnischer Zugehörigkeit bewegt sich das akademische Verständnis von Identität immer mehr weg von Essentialismen. Dieses enträumlichte und nicht-essentialistische Verständnis kultureller und ethnischer Identität muss insbesondere in den Americas mit einem transnationalen, inter-amerikanischen Zugang einhergehen, da nationalstaatliche Grenzen für identitäre Praktiken zunehmend irrelevant werden.

The election of Evo Morales to the presidency of Bolivia in 2005 and the victory of Barack Obama in the presidential race of the U.S.A. in 2008 both mark drastic changes in these two countries. The Aymara Morales has declared himself the first fully indigenous head of state of Bolivia since its Spanish colonization – a contested claim due to the partly indigenous ancestry of previous Bolivian presidents – and he uses his ethnicity as symbolic capital in the national and international competition for resources. The African-American Barack Obama, on the other hand, spoke in his March 17, 2008 “Speech on Race” in Philadelphia of his “firm conviction ... that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.” While Morales stresses ethnic difference and has embarked on a redistribution of economic and symbolic capital by inverting colonialist hierarchies, Obama seeks to unite his nation under the motto of “e pluribus unum.”

Behind these opposing approaches to ethnic identity lie diverging strategies in dealing with each nation’s internal logic of difference. Starting from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the field of identity politics, Sebastian Thies and Olaf Kaltmeier write:

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.” 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 – a tendency that can be applied to other identity politics like those based on gender, age, consumption or class. (29)

While Morales emphasizes difference, foregrounding the identitarian marker of ethnicity and using it to demand changes in the distribution of resources, ownership, and capital, Obama – although astutely aware of difference – tries to unite his nation in the pursuit of common goals.

It is this typically optimistic and forward-looking strategy that has produced comparisons between Barack Obama and the Founding Fathers of the United States: on the cover of its first issue after Obama's inauguration *The New Yorker* magazine fittingly depicted the President with the wig and garments typical of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson (Fig. 1). This artistic comment invokes the possibility of overcoming ethnic boundaries in the pursuit of a more equitable nation.

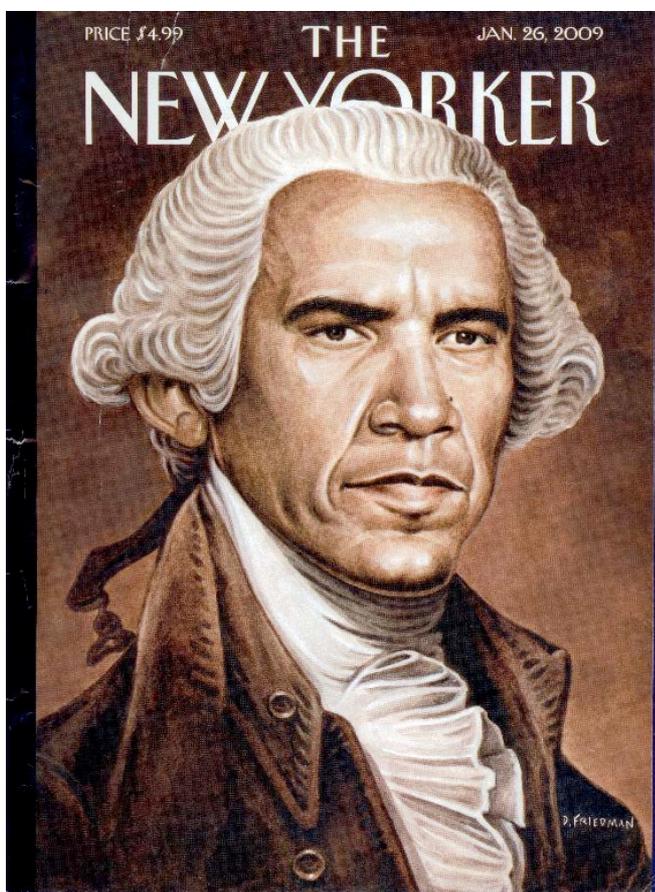


Figure 1: Cover of *The New Yorker* magazine, Jan. 26, 2009



Figure 2: Official Portrait of Evo Morales

In contrast to this non-essentializing representation of Obama by the *New Yorker*, Evo Morales likes to stress his indigeneity in official portraits and public appearances. The depiction in figure 2 combines identitarian markers of indigeneity (coat) with those of nation (flag) and leadership (decorations). By adding an ethnic component to the traditional invocations of nation and power in presidential portraits Morales voices a counter-discourse against the earlier, non-indigenous power elites (supported by and supportive of U.S. political and economic interests); he

deliberately inverts hierarchies. While Obama has taken over for himself and his policies the idealistic doctrines of the U.S. Founding Fathers, the union leader and socialist Morales opposes neo-colonial power structures and wants to bring about radical change. Whereas for Barack Obama “change” means a return to the Enlightenment ideals of the United States’ Declaration of Independence, Evo Morales’ ideals of change aim to undo some of the evils of five centuries of colonial and post-colonial rule. Both presidents, however, use identitarian strategies of self-fashioning and coalitions in pursuing their political goals.

The contrary positions of Evo Morales and Barack Obama toward the logic of difference which ethnicity provides are by no means developments of the 21st century. Issues of ethnic identity have concerned the Americas at least since the Conquest. And they remain a passionate and a contested topic today. This essay will present some cultural and academic positions on ethnic identity politics in the Americas and it will argue that in order to understand local and national situations, a transnational consideration of the Western Hemisphere in general is necessary.

The current age of globalization has spawned a renewed focus on political and cultural negotiations in what one might call with Pierre Bourdieu “the field of identity politics.” This emphasis on ethnic, cultural, and political identity manifests itself throughout the American hemisphere: new indigenous movements have contested post-colonial forms of political representation in Ecuador and Bolivia; the debates on ecological consequences of industrialization and on intellectual property rights have put indigenous groups from the Amazonian region on international agendas; the (primarily Mayan) Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional in Chiapas, Mexico has claimed autonomy from the Mexican state and control over land and resources (Fig. 3); and large numbers of people have been mobilized for and against immigration reform when changes in immigration law were proposed in the U.S.A. in 2006 (Fig. 4).



Figure 3: Proclamation of Zapatista Self-Rule



Figure 4: Protests against Immigration Reform, Los Angeles, California, 2006

While the Zapatista movement highlights difference and bases its political claims on its difference from the Mexican governmental elites, the protests against immigration reform in the U.S. sought to minimize difference, as immigrants and non-immigrants, Latinos and non-Latinos joined forces in their pursuit of a humane treatment of legal and illegal immigrants. Both these issues have transnational components, however. The Zapatista movement opposes the Mexican government's catering to U.S. interests and the U.S. protests against immigration reform focus mainly on the fate of immigrants from Mexico, Central, and South America.

With the de-territorialization of ethnic and cultural groups as a consequence of intra-national and transnational migration, it becomes increasingly difficult to pin down difference. And because of the superimposition of identitarian markers, group identities and coalitions keep shifting. At the "Primer Encuentro de Autoridades Indígenas de América" held in La Paz, Bolivia in January 2006, for example, Evo Morales highlighted his own Aymara identity while at the same time including in his own proposed group identity other indigenous groups inside and outside Bolivia:

Y nos damos cuenta, Evo Morales Aima, nacido en la nación aymara, mi nacimiento político-sindical en la zona quechua, agradecer a los hermanos del departamento de Cochabamba, al

movimiento cocalero y acá ven, aymaras, quechuas, chapacas, conduciendo el país, desde la Presidencia de la República, desde la presidencia de las Cámaras correspondientes, por eso nuevamente quiero decirles, hermanos y hermanas, quienes apostaron por las reivindicaciones, la dignificación del movimiento indígena originaria, no solamente de Bolivia, no solamente desde el movimiento indígena sino también personalidades, la gente de la ciudad, intelectuales, no se equivocaron, no nos hemos equivocado.

Morales speaks of his biological as well as of his political birth and he is well aware of differing group identities to which he belongs: Aymara, indigenous, Bolivian, socialist etc.

Although he has appointed himself the spokesperson of indigenous people, he forges alliances with other groups with whom he shares certain practices or positions. For example, in his April 22, 2009 speech to the United Nations in New York City Morales at first presented himself as the representative of indigenous people, demanding his right to be heard: “Los pueblos indígenas no nos vamos a callar hasta lograr un verdadero cambio.” But then he went on to include in the group for which he was speaking all anti-capitalists, claiming that “Los grandes efectos de los cambios climáticos no son producto de los seres humanos en general, sino del sistema capitalista vigente, inhumano, con desarrollo industrial ilimitado, por eso siento que es importante acabar con la explotación a los seres humanos y acabar con el saqueo de los recursos naturales.” While Evo Morales tends to foreground (ethnic, cultural, political, national) difference, he does so with respect to a series of factors/traits/positions, which means that what exactly the distinctive identitarian marker (and with it Morales’ *habitus*) is, depends on the situation and issues at hand. As Thies and Kaltmeier have rightly pointed out, “in the postmodern age ... fixed categories are challenged and identity formation is described as a strategic, situationally flexible, and inconsistent process” (27).

In both separatist and integrative approaches to difference, the individual, by establishing his/her own identity and the identity of his/her group in terms of ethnicity and culture, assumes the right to self-assertion and can use his/her proclaimed and professed identity and affiliation to claim certain forms of cultural, symbolic, political, or economic capital in the name of his/her people. In such claims and self-positionings, ethnicity plays an increasingly central role in the Americas today. But while demands for social and economic goods (e.g. Evo Morales) or political autonomy (e.g. the Zapatistas) tend to rely on essentialist notions of ethnicity, current academic discussions commonly de-essentialize ethnicity: concepts like “multiculturalism,” “new ethnicities,” “creolization,” “hybridity,” “*mestizaje*,” “diasporas,” and “post-ethnicity” articulate profound changes in our understanding of ethnic identity.

Barack Obama seems to share academia’s prevailing de-essentialist positions toward ethnicity. In his 2008 speech on race he remarked:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave-owners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible. ... [I]t is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one.

Obama uses his own ethnic background to relativize the divisive potential of race and he invokes the Founding Fathers' motto of *e pluribus unum* to rally for a new group identity that crosses racial divides.

This strategy is easier to implement in a United States environment than elsewhere in the Americas for three reasons. First, ethnic minority groups managed to demand their rights as citizens much earlier in the U.S. than in other American nations. As Timothy J. Meagher writes, since the protest marches led by Martin Luther King in the 1960s

racial and ethnic relations, boundaries, and identities in the United States were entirely transformed. A new configuration of ethnic and racial relations, a new structure of thinking about ethnicity and race – a new discourse – emerged. ... African, Native, Asian, and Latino Americans entered into arenas of political and economic competition and struggles for cultural recognition with a heretofore unknown power and confidence. (193-94)

Second, the U.S.A., because of its eminent political, economic, and military position, experiences far less external pressure than any other nation in the Americas. While the United States has exerted significant political, economic, and military power over Latin American nations at least since the U.S. war with Mexico (1846-48), less power has been exerted in the opposite direction (with the Cuban Missile Crisis as a notable exception). Bourdieu has remarked that the state is both a field of power and a cultural field (cf. Webb/Schirato/Danaher 85). In this competition for numerous types of capital, cultural and political conflict flared more strongly in the U.S.A. between the 1950s and the 1980s than elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere. Third, because of the high percentage of mestizos, ethnic divisions tended to be less intense in Latin America (until the rise of the Indigenous Left in the past two decades) than in the United States. It is no accident in this regard

that while the U.S.A. did not have a non-white president until 2009, Mexico had been ruled for five presidential terms by the Mexican Benito Juárez from 1858 to 1872.

In analyzing the role which ethnicity plays in identity politics in individual American nations, a transnational perspective is most illuminating. The massive inter-American migration movements, multiethnicity and pluriculturality as well as the growing differentiation of lifestyles in the Americas alter traditional formations of ethnic identity. Other factors that impact identity politics in the Americas are the technological revolution of the conditions of media production, distribution, and reception as well as the formation of global consumer cultures, which Manuel Castells has called “the informal phase of globalization.” The revolution in media technology and the acceleration of social processes lead to a space-time compression, in the context of which de- and re-territorializations occur in the competition for goods and resources. And where old structures and borderlines become tenuous and murky, there is an increase of conflicts in terms of identity politics. The potential of these cultural transformations for conflict manifests itself in particular where the continuity of (post-)colonial structures of power is concerned: in the politicization of ethnic identities, the break-up of patriarchal social regimes, and the changes in religion-based forms of social hegemony. In this context, cultural identities are increasingly used in a strategic manner (as identitarian capital) within social, political, and economic conflicts.

Since media representation is crucial in identity politics and since (particularly electronic) media are transnational, an inter-American perspective on “the access of actors to forms of self-representation” (Thies/Kaltmeier 29), on what Stuart Hall calls the “regimes of representation,” and on media consumption and influence is essential. For example, by using the transnational medium of the Internet in order to proclaim their cultural identity and voice their demands, indigenous groups have been far more successful in winning the support of foreign governments and NGOs for their causes than they could have been through armed warfare in a confined territory. First, they employ their ethnic identity/difference as a resource to claim (symbolic, economic, political) capital and recognition. Second, they seek a non-sectarian, transnational affiliation with other groups in order to voice their demands more powerfully.

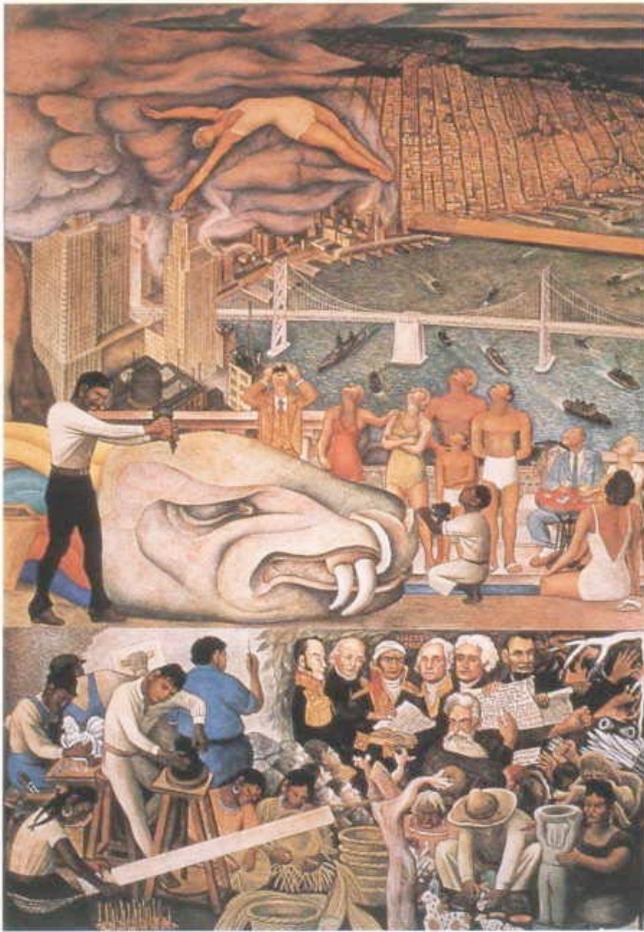


Figure 5: Diego Rivera, “Pan-American Unity” (1940)

But the transnationality of identity politics in the Americas is by no means a development of the 21st century. The Mexican painter Diego Rivera, for example, underlined it in his 1940 mural “Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and of the South on This Continent” (Fig. 5), which is commonly known as “Pan-American Unity” and which is painted on a wall of the San Francisco College of Arts. Next to and above several heads of state of the Americas Rivera presents to us a collage of North and South American artists and workers, united in a common endeavor and in a common gaze. The skyscrapers of North America and the landscapes of South America come together, as do earth and sky, work and leisure, black, brown, red, and white. The word “marriage” or “unity” in the mural’s title is probably best represented visually by the depiction of the Golden Gate Bridge and the ship and boat traffic underneath it. This is a vision of interconnectedness, of harmonious cultural contact, and of ethnic pluralism. In Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of identity politics, Rivera’s artistic expression of inter-American pluralist harmony fulfills the symbolic function of self-perception and of making meaning. Webb, Schirato, and Danaher point out that for Bourdieu the field of cultural production is “an important site for crafting meanings, social forms and social relations, and finding ways to make sense of them.” They go on to remark concerning the field of cultural production:

If the field is in fact ‘disinterested,’ it can be presented as something that tells the truth because it has no investment – no ‘interest’ – in pleasing the government or sponsors, or in attracting buyers. And because this field is dedicated to making meanings – that is, to its symbolic function – cultural products can be seen as indicators of how members of a society perceive themselves and their values. (150)

For Rivera (national, cultural, and ethnic) difference exists but this difference retreats in the interest of commonality. With this position Rivera implicitly affirms the plurality of identitarian markers and argues for a concentration on those that make a “Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and of the South on This Continent” possible.

The interrelation of different markers of identity – ethnicity, class, gender, sexual preference, religion, age, nationality, consumer orientation etc.– needs to be taken into account in examining how individuals and groups of social actors resort (in changing constellations) to discourses and performances of different identities and constitute what Stuart Hall has termed “new identities.” Identities, performative practices, and identifications change. Especially in past decades there has been a growing fragmentation and hybridization; identity-based classifications that result from processes of uprooting, marginalization, and heteronomy have been shown to be fluid and processual. Numerous affiliations and markers play into an individual’s identity. Gloria Anzaldúa, in her groundbreaking *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, gives this account of her own mestiza identity:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. *Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings. (80-81)

So individual identity has come to be seen, with Anzaldúa, as “an act of kneading,” in which ethnicity is just one factor that interacts with many others in shaping an individual’s sense of herself. Fragmentation, hybridization and the fluidity of classifications require a mediation or even translation of identitarian strategies, discourses, and identity-related practices in everyday life, through which complexity is reduced, contradictions are managed, and social relations can be

reorganized. “The new *mestiza*,” writes Anzaldúa, needs to be able to live with contradictions, be “a crossroads.” This is because she is an individual who is not only determined by race or ethnicity but also by gender, class, language, religion, and many more factors. From this point of view, essentialist approaches to identity and ethnicity are reductionist and over-simplifying; the foregrounding of difference centered on one identitarian marker (e.g. ethnicity) may unduly obfuscate the commonality in another. Nonetheless, such views and strategies are politically effective.

A transnational approach is particularly important in the light of the massive current social and cultural changes occurring in the Americas and their accompanying conflicts of identity and processes of cultural hybridization. A Cinco de Mayo parade is not indigenous to Los Angeles, a Caribbean Street Day is not indigenous to Brooklyn, New York, the Oktoberfest is not indigenous to Milwaukee, and gangsta rap is not indigenous to Buenos Aires. Yet all of these examples have become de-essentialized in terms of ethnicity in the course of their transnational migration and their adoption by individuals and groups from very diverse backgrounds – ethnic and other.

The current social, cultural, and political processes of change in the Americas can be seen as exemplifying worldwide tendencies in the informal and economic globalization, the emergence of transnational forms of collectivization, and the revocation of ethnic and national categories in transnational contexts. Much research has been done – especially by sociologists – on questions of migration as they relate to transnational spaces, translocation, diaspora, issues of “belonging,” and “long-distance nationalism.”

Notions of fragmentation, de-territorialization, and hybridization dominate cultural-studies approaches to transnationalization processes. Refuting concepts of cultural homogenization like “McDonaldization” or “Cultural Imperialism,” the debate in cultural studies and in the social sciences draws upon differentiated so-called “glocal” conceptualizations of cultural hybridization, multiculturalism, interculturality, creolization, or transculturation. The end of “the social” (according to Baudrillard) marks the beginning of a new “power of identity” (Castells). This manifests itself, on the one hand, in the emergence of “new” identity-based communities, the “ethnicization of the political,” or tendencies of “neo-tribalization.” On the other hand, existing identities consolidate in defending their positions, as articulated in the concept of the “clash of civilizations” or in Samuel Huntington’s tendency to equate the U.S.A. with “Euro-America.” As cultural and ethnic symbols become increasingly contested, we can observe a use of culture and ethnicity as a resource for demanding various kinds of capital.

Beyond the general transnationalization tendencies, the Americas show a regional momentum that cannot be reduced to the worldwide globalization processes. This momentum is based

historically on the shared colonial history and postcolonial condition of the societies of the Western Hemisphere; it is determined by (a) the continent's social, political, religious, and linguistic common ground; (b) the massive inter-American migration flows between South and North America in the 20th and 21st centuries; (c) the growing transnational integration of the culture and media industries; and (d) the strong, if asymmetrical, economic interdependence. The articulation of regional/ethnic/cultural/political/economic/social difference becomes a complicated issue in view of the commonality and regional overlap with regard to so many other identitarian markers.

The current transnationalization processes as well as the consideration of regional momentums require a rethinking within cultural studies in the sense of a fundamental new conceptualization of regionalist studies as transnational area studies. The cultural studies context of the United States plays a pioneer role here, as it, informed by the postcolonial theory debate, introduced a postnational turn as early as in the late 1980s. The thematic orientation toward the inter-American borderlands, respectively the *Transfrontera* contact zone (along the Rio Grande) as well as toward Diaspora Studies brought forth a methodological paradigm shift toward a decentralization and deconstruction of the discourses on cultural hegemonies in the sense of a "dissemination of the nation," as Homi K. Bhabha calls it. The Presidential Addresses by Shelley Fisher Fishkin and Emory Elliott at two recent annual conventions of the American Studies Association testify, for example, to the shift in American Studies toward a stronger consideration of transnational issues and of an inter-American contextualization of U.S. phenomena. Following inter- and pluricultural approaches, guiding concepts such as "transdifference," transnationalism, the context of the Frontier, and "TransAm" demonstrate the attempt within North American Studies to integrate into the study of U.S. phenomena theories and empirical analyses of global processes.

This development can also be observed in the *Estudios Culturales* in Latin America, which have put particular emphasis on the cultural impact of inter-American economic integration and the interconnection of the culture industries, cultural hybridization (e.g. Néstor García Canclini) and frontier problems, as well as questions of cultural policy studies (e.g. George Yúdice). Latin American Studies have also recently turned their attention to hemispheric and "transborder" processes with regard to media, politics, and migration.

These recent academic reorientations of nation-centered approaches toward transnational area and cultural studies respond to the growing complexity of ascertaining "difference" and cultural/ethnic/national identity. While Evo Morales foregrounds within Bolivia his own ethnic difference as indigenous Aymara and his political difference as socialist anti-U.S., he has also forged alliances with indigenous groups in the United States and Canada since 2006, minimizing national difference and highlighting transnational ethnic commonality. As to the U.S., the George

W. Bush attitude of “whoever is not with us is against us” has given way to new diplomatic initiatives, as seen, for example, at the April 2009 Summit of the Americas held by the Organization of American States, when Presidents Obama of the U.S. and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela agreed to resume diplomatic relations between their two countries. It seems that in politics as well as in artistic and academic approaches toward identity and difference, the prevailing sentiment is that there is more that unites us than divides us. With massive migration, the rapid change of neighborhoods in the metropolitan areas of the Americas, the spread of diasporic communities, the growing medial and technological interconnectedness across long distances, and the intensifying interconnection of the local, the national, the supranational and the global levels, a de-territorialization of identitarian practices can be observed. As space is becoming less defining in terms of identity, it is getting harder to draw clear lines of demarcation in terms of identitarian difference. As Pierre Bourdieu wrote in *Homo Academicus*, the establishment of difference and the nature of an individual’s *habitus* are essential to societies and to the constitution of culture and identitarian groups:

There is no way out of the game of culture, and one’s only chance of objectifying the true nature of the game is to objectify as fully as possible the very operations which one is obliged to use in order to achieve that objectification. (12)

What we should seek to understand are the “operations” at work in identity politics and the strategies used in maximizing or minimizing difference.

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About the author:



Josef Raab is Professor of American Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany. He received his PhD at the University of Southern California (Los Angeles) and he completed his post-doctoral *Habilitation* at the Catholic University of Eichstätt. His research focuses on inter-American Studies, ethnicity, American literature, and media. The three most recent books he co-edited are *Die deutsche Präsenz in den USA/The German Presence in the U.S.A.* (with Jan Wirrer), *E Pluribus Unum?: National and Transnational Identities in the Americas/Identidades nacionales y transnacionales en las Américas* (with Sebastian Thies), and *Hybrid Americas: Contacts, Contrasts, and Confluences in New World Literatures and Cultures* (with Martin Butler). He is currently co-director (together with Sebastian Thies and Olaf Kaltmeier) of the ZiF Research Group on ethnicity in transnational integration processes in the Americas.