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The individual and the collective: the politics of becoming for and with others

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores twin aspects of Hans Asenbaum's discussion in *The Politics of Becoming: Anonymity and Democracy in the Digital Age*. It first, and briefly, considers what democratic subjectivity connotes for Asenbaum. Here, it focuses on the relation between the production of democratic political subjectivity and democratic practices of self-constitution. Its main goal, however, is to examine Asenbaum's understanding of disidentification and, in particular, the relation he envisages here between the individual and the collective. It asks whether disidentification might entail not a politics of becoming but a politics of becoming with others.

The Politics of Becoming: Anonymity and Democracy in the Digital Age (Asenbaum, 2023) is an intriguing and thought-provoking book, which seeks to address the ways in which categorization by identity not only reifies or essentializes those identities in unhelpful ways but stifles people's abilities to explore their inner multiplicity. To address the resulting 'dilemma of difference' (Young, 1989, p. 268) this produces, Hans Asenbaum investigates the idea of anonymity as a practical way of realizing the disidentification that is pivotal to the 'politics of becoming' he advocates. A politics grounded in how identities, understood as constantly changing assemblages, can be transformed in ways that enable people to explore their multiplicity, perhaps even to become multiple. One notable feature of the book is a detailed and fascinating assessment of how digital spaces might allow for the re-assembling of identities in ways that moderate some of the power asymmetries present in offline activity. Another is his novel discussion of public performances of anonymity as a mode of democratic engagement, which centres on how such practices can liberate the 'fugitive self' (Asenbaum, 2023) and covers topics as diverse as online debate, masked protests,

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pamphleteering, and political graffiti. Central to all of this is the idea of disidentification, which Asenbaum sets out as a way to counter the rigidities and reifications of classic identity politics. It is this core idea that I want to reflect on in this paper. In particular, what it indicates about the relation – or perhaps the inter-relation – between the collective and the individual self in a politics of becoming.

In the introduction to *The Politics of Becoming*, Asenbaum writes: 'I propose a politics of becoming as a political strategy realized through radical democratic acts of disidentification', continuing, disidentification 'means distancing ourselves from the persona we perform in our everyday interactions and exploring our inner multiplicity' (2023, p. 2). Those coming across these words having read the work of Jacques Rancière might pause at this point to ponder the second of these sentences: that disidentification equates to the freedom to explore our inner multiplicity. Not just because Rancière (1999) links disidentification through his account of 'wrong' explicitly to enactments of *equality* rather than freedom but also because of the apparent individualist emphasis of the claim. As Asenbaum notes elsewhere in the book, it is the 'freedom for the *individual subject* to live its inner multiplicity' that concerns him, hence his stress on the 'democratization of subjectivity on the *individual* rather than collective level' (2023, p. 80, my emphases).

The reason for this is that, limited by egalitarian arguments for the politics of presence (Phillips, 1995), existing accounts of democracy, including difference, agonistic, deliberative and participatory variants, tend to focus on collective political identities, leaving less space for the exploration of self-transformation and self-realization: that is, the 'freedom for the subject to change' (Asenbaum, 2023, p. 68). Each variant, as he acknowledges, makes *some* suggestive claims concerning performative identity construction, ranging from assertions about embodied presence (difference democracy), through participatory self-development (participatory democracy) and autonomous self-transformation (deliberative democracy), to agonistic democracy's insights into the production of novel collective subjectivities. Ultimately, though, he adjudges them all to 'fall short of realizing freedom within these processes' (Asenbaum, 2023, p. 68).

The relation that Asenbaum sketches between the multiple self and democratic subjectivity is multifaceted. Throughout the book, Asenbaum talks at various times of the freedom of the democratic subject to express its multiple self; of personal freedom to express the multiple self in democratic spaces; of democratic self-constitution; of the democratization of subject constitution; of the democratization of identity construction on an individual level; and of imagining the democratic subject in transformative terms. Not all of these connote in the same way. Indeed, there appear to be at least two different senses of the democracy-subject relation in play. One centred on the production of a *democratic* political

subject, to which I will return shortly, and one oriented around *democratizing* the process of identity, subject, and/or self-constitution (terms that seem to be used interchangeably). I tend to think of the former as relating to the *demos* and thus being a collective subject of some kind. The latter, however, emphasizes the multiplicity of the singular self. While it is clear why Asenbaum values the multiple self as a counter to the restrictions that identity categories impose on their members, what is less clear is whether or not explorations of inner multiplicity are always and necessarily a good thing in terms of democracy understood as a collective project. Could there, for instance, be cases of self-cultivation that produce an anti-democratic self? Is there any risk that the pursuit of multiplicity might undermine or fragment the kinds of concerted action on which democratic politics depends, where some element of commonality might be required?

Here, I am reminded of some remarks that Erinn Gilson (2014) makes, as part of her examination of vulnerability. She is commenting on the Deleuzian conception of becoming. As well as being 'movements of creative deformation' that loosen and reconfigure normative patterns, perhaps of the kinds that concern Asenbaum, becoming, she writes, also involves 'a process of alteration that takes place only through a *relationship* with another being (*or, more precisely, another multiplicity*)' (2014, p. 139, my emphasis). What Gilson points to here is the unplanned and unwilled nature of the connections between multiplicities and, as a result, the unpredictability and uncontrollability of their effects on those involved. Becoming, understood thus, may well involve the kind of undoing of the self that Asenbaum champions, where particular norms can be subverted and aspects of identities de- and re-constructed. But it also suggests that as a relational practice, becoming might not always lead to positive (progressive, pleasant, democratic, freedom-enhancing) outcomes. I will come back to the question of relationality later. For now, I want to return to the idea of disidentification as a radical democratic practice, since this is central to the case Asenbaum builds for his politics of becoming.

Theories of disidentification come in different forms, perhaps the most familiar and possibly most influential of which is that put forward by the thinker already mentioned, Rancière. As Asenbaum rightly acknowledges, when Rancière discusses disidentification he distinguishes it from the logic of identification that characterizes the police allocation of identities (Asenbaum, 2023, p. 74; Rancière, 2007, p. 561). Disidentification involves a break with or rejection of policed identities, together with a laying claim to democratic equality through an 'impossible identification' or, so-called 'wrong' name (Rancière, 1992, p. 61); a name that cannot be 'confused with any real social group' (Rancière, 1999, p. 126). Disidentificatory democratic politics, for Rancière, creates a 'gap' (1992, p. 62) or an '*un-space*' (2007, p. 561, original emphasis) within the police order, a space of 'indeterminate

possibilities' (2007, p. 561) for the generation of a new common sense and new community.

Disidentification involves the production of a democratic 'we,' a *demos*, but it does so *not* in terms of installing an alternative identity in place of the policed one it rejects. Democratic politics, as Rancière presents it, is not about claiming or asserting a collective identity. For Rancière, 'subjectivation', to quote Samuel Chambers, 'involves a refusal of identity' (2013, p.120). Rather, disidentification is a collective process enacted by a 'part of those who have no part' (Rancière, 2004, p. 305), a process of conjoined doing that constitutes those involved as political subjects (May, 2010, p. 79). Democratic politics entails, in other words, action in concert, rather than the production of the type of conindividual democratic subjectivity (Deseriis, 2015) that Asenbaum is critical of, where individual identity is subordinated to group identity. If the relation between a Rancièrean understanding of disidentification, as an activity constitutive of the *demos*, and the apparently individualistic politics of becoming that Asenbaum champions is not one of subordination of the individual to the collective, then what is it? How, for instance, does the former enable the latter, and how, just as importantly, does it limit it? What kinds of individual 'identity construction' (Asenbaum, 2023, p. 68) might emerge from such a non-identarian account of disidentification?

It is not unusual for democratic theorists drawing from Rancière to privilege the version of disidentification set out in Rancière (1999) and related texts (e.g. Rancière, 1992, 2003, 2007), as Asenbaum does. I too have done exactly the same. What this misses, however, are the arguments that Rancière makes in other parts of his oeuvre. Arguments that offer an alternative lens on disidentification and that focus expressly on a question central to Asenbaum's (2023, p. 14). As Laura Quintana has convincingly shown, in texts like *Proletarian Nights* (Rancière 1989/2012), for instance, Rancière explores forms of quotidian experimentation and 'micropolitical displacements' (2020, p. 33), what Quintana (2020) labels 'practices of emancipation,' that work *individually* to shift bodies from their assigned places in the police order. Disidentificatory processes comprising 'bodies that enter into conflict with what is expected of them and produce disjunctions between their words, gestures, dreams, and the manner in which they tend to be fixed and inscribed in certain forms of embodiment' (Quintana, 2020, p. 55). Not the spectacular forms of collective democratic politics sketched in *Disagreement*, which sit at the heart of the version of disidentification sketched there, with all the caveats that attach, but ones that focus on how everyday practices of the self might be able to modify and shift ways of thinking, seeing, being and doing. To better understand the connections between collective subjectivation and the individual freedom to nurture inner multiplicity, one option *might*, therefore, have been for Asenbaum to examine some of these other writings.

Perfectly legitimately, however, to investigate disidentification at the personal level Asenbaum turns instead to an alternative account of disidentification, namely that set out in the writings of queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz. In Muñoz's case this is an understanding of disidentification that is indebted to the psychoanalytic writings of Michel Pêcheux (1982) and to the later works of Michel Foucault (1986, 1987, 1997). As Asenbaum states, Muñoz understands disidentification not simply as entailing the rejection of dominant interpellations, which parallels Rancière's account of rejecting policed names. Disidentification for Muñoz also requires the acceptance of 'alternative interpellations' (Asenbaum, 2023, p. 79). What is pertinent here is that, rather than freely generating one's own identity *ab initio*, Muñoz stresses the ways that 'encoded meaning[s]' are recycled and rethought; how the 'code of the majority,' for example, is broken open and used as 'a raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture' (1999, p. 31; cited also in Asenbaum, 2023, p. 79). In this, Muñoz's approach shares similarities with both Foucault's and Judith Butler's respective accounts of agential possibilities as being embedded in normalising power relations. It suggests how the hold of particular identity categories can be loosened and, in Butler's (1997) language, 'resignified'. The point for Muñoz, however, is that the kinds of 'identificatory positions' that interest him are 'hybrid' or 'hybridized' ones, ones not 'comfortably situated in any one discourse of minority subjectivity' (1999, p. 32).

For Asenbaum, Muñoz's work is significant because it foregrounds the '*democratization* of identity construction as subjects gain a greater freedom in articulating their multiple selves' (2023, p. 79, my emphasis). It is what Asenbaum does *not* say about Muñoz's argument that I want to highlight. This returns me again to the key theme underpinning this paper of what relation Asenbaum envisages between the individual and the collective. Not just in the sense of wondering where the individual fits within collective processes of subjectivation or what might be required for experiments in multiplicity to be enacted collectively, though both of these are important considerations, but also in terms of how the two – the individual and the collective – might be co-implicated.

In his brief reading of Muñoz, Asenbaum focuses on how disidentification works 'on the level of personal identity' by noting the importance for Muñoz of personal stories of people 'struggling to identify as they are being hailed by different identity categories' (2023, p. 79). Asenbaum further observes how Muñoz expressed attraction to the identity performances of others who were not part of his identity group. But Muñoz also does something else. He explores not only the impact of these performances *on* the self as practices of self-constitution or freedom. He also examines how modes of performance *of* 'the self', as he describes them, operate '*for others*' (Muñoz, 1999, p. 145, my

emphasis). Indeed, Muñoz interprets Foucault's idea of 'care of the self' as 'a working on the self *for others*' (1999, p. 144, my emphasis) and as a 'care of the self *for others*' (1999, p. 145, my emphasis). There is, in other words, a specifically other-oriented dimension to the disidentificatory practices that Muñoz focuses on that links the individual and the collective, which it might have been fruitful for Asenbaum to consider. This link appears to be fundamental to Muñoz's understanding of agency as allowing for the development of counter-publics, which 'signal new spaces within the social' (Muñoz, 1999, p. 146) and facilitate productive interventions in the 'majoritarian public sphere' (Muñoz, 1999, p. 143).

As Muñoz's example of Pedro Zamora indicates,[1] disidentification as a practice of freedom both enacts minoritarian subjectivity and entails counter-publicity, enabling others to imagine a transformative politics. My question is whether Asenbaum sees his own account of democratic subject constitution as presupposing or entailing a similar aspect of being – or, in his language, becoming – for others. Going beyond Muñoz and noting that Asenbaum rightly argues that identities are never freely chosen but are always socially imprinted, this raises a further, and final, question for me. What might an account of becoming *with* – rather than for – others look like? Not simply in the sense of how the multiple self might be practised in solidarity with others, though this is relevant, but rather one that views relationality, to pick up an earlier point (see also Butler, 2015, 2016), as being at the heart of democratic political agency? To put things differently, where, when and how, for Asenbaum, do relationality and multiplicity intersect, if at all?

Note

1. Pedro Zamora was a Cuban American AIDS activist educator. His appearances as a gay man living with AIDS on the reality show, *The Real World: San Francisco*, helped bring wider public attention to HIV/AIDS.

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