IDENTITY, EMPATHY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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by Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann

ABSTRACT: The insertion of identity politics into international relations undermines the capacity for cosmopolitan empathy, a capacity that might be useful in ameliorating some of the world's social problems. Empathy is the capacity to put oneself into another's shoes and recognize a stranger's humanity. The useful post-modern stress on the mutability of identity has hardened in identity politics into the creation of exclusive social categories of Oppressed and Oppressor. The social creation of such categories through such devices as the politics of amnesia paves the way for isolationist indifference. Yet data drawn both from the sociology of genocide and from the author's own research shows that humanitarian empathy across lines of identity is possible.

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This essay argues against the insertion of identity politics into international relations. I maintain that both the Orientalist and the Occidentalist positions on international relations are incorrect and possibly harmful way of looking at relations not only among states, but also among individuals. Orientalism views the "Third World" or the "South" as having a certain set of immutable features, while Occidentalism argues similarly that the "West" or the "North" has a certain set of immutable features. The Orient and the Occident have incompatible cultures, and cannot understand each other's normative value systems. The Orient is communitarian, duty-based, and spiritual: the Occident is individualistic, rights-based, and materialist.[1] Therefore, individuals from each region are doomed to regard individuals from the other region as (in the language of identity politics) "Others", immutably different from themselves. Moreover, since people living in the Occident are part of a more powerful and privileged culture than people living in the Orient, any attempt by the former to engage in discussion of the internal problems or normative beliefs of the latter is by definition cultural imperialism. And any attempt at humanitarian intervention of any kind is by definition actual physical imperialism.

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[1]There is a vast literature proposing these stereotypes. For a summary of how it affects international debates, see Rhoda E. Howard, "Human Rights and the Culture Wars: Globalization and the Universality of Human Rights", *International Journal*, vol. 53, no. 1 (Winter 1997-8), pps. 94-112. On how these stereotypes are interpreted by non-Western observers of international relations, see Donald J. Puchala, "Some Non-Western Perspectives on International Relations", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 34, no. 2 (1997), pps.129-34.

In contrast to the Orientalist/Occidentalist perspective, I maintain that individuals are capable of empathic relations across boundaries of gender, race, class and position in the international system. I base my argument on several bodies of literature emanating from the general field of the sociology of genocide. These bodies of literature address the politics of nationalism, the politics of memory and forgetting, and the study of rescuers during the Holocaust. I also base my position on my own ongoing research on how Canadians adopt empathic positions towards the human rights of "Others" in their own society.

Both these bodies of literature demonstrate that empathy towards people who are different from oneself is possible and that a cosmopolitan attitude to global problems can exist. By empathy I mean the capacity to imagine oneself in another's shoes, to recognize a stranger's humanity. Empathy entails the capacities for understanding and compassion; instead of viewing a stranger as so different from oneself as to be unworthy of one's regard, one views the stranger as having an equal claim to humanity and respect, regardless of his or her race, ethnicity, gender, social position, or geographical location. Cosmopolitan empathy extends such understanding and compassion beyond one's local community to far more distant locations. Cosmopolitan empathy is still in rather short supply: most people are too immersed in their own affairs to give much thought to strangers abroad. Nevertheless, to disregard the potential for cosmopolitan empathy is to undermine the world's capacity to generate humanitarian solutions to pressing international problems.

Debates in the Corridors

For some twenty years, a debate of particular relevance to international relations has been

raging in the corridors of academe. This is the debate about who is allowed to comment on what and where.[2] Which categories of individuals are permitted to comment on what types of social issues, in which parts of the world? Which categories of individuals are permitted to try to remedy world social problems?

In general terms, this is a debate about identity politics. Identity politics assumes that your thinking emerges in a predictable, linear fashion from your identity. Broadly speaking, in the literature on identity politics, there are two types of identity categories, oppressed and oppressor.[3] The debate then is whether any member of any category of (former or present) "oppressors" has any business commenting on the affairs of the oppressed. Thus, in some women's studies programs, there are debates about whether male students should be permitted into the classroom or, if permitted in, should be allowed to speak. Similar debates rage about the place of white North Americans in African-American or indigenous studies programs. The assumption here is that "Difference" (between men and women, whites and nonwhites) is so immutable, and so consequential for each social category, that understanding across lines of differentiation is

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[2]A similar debate rages in the arts community, where "voice appropriation" (engaging in artistic representation of someone or some group not oneself or one's own) is condemned by many who subscribe to identity politics.

[3]For an example of the use of these rather extreme terms, see Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression", chapter 2 in her *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pps. 39-65. See also Chilla Bulbeck, *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) who in an otherwise superb book consistently stereotypes "white Western women".

impossible.

Within the international community, these two identity categories are again easily located: Westerners are oppressors, everyone else is oppressed. In identity politics' discussion of international relations, then, the debate is whether "Westerners" are permitted to comment on the affairs of the rest of the world. By "Westerner" is meant white Westerners, non-whites living in the Western world being permitted to claim non-Western status on the basis of their cultural or even merely their genetic ancestry. Non-Western academics (or sometimes, merely non-white academics) claim that only they can understand their own non-Western cultures. Only they, embedded in their own societies, can speak for them. Western scholars cannot speak for other people's societies; they can speak only for their own.

Within this rhetorical debate, the principle of detached social analysis is rejected. So also is the idea that academics speak *about*, not *for*, the peoples, societies or states they analyze. In the view of identity politics, everyone is so affected by his or her own standpoint, his or her own experiences, that there is no such thing as objectivity in social analysis. The warning to beware of one's own subjectivity, common in academic literature for generations, has mutated into a flat statement that since complete objectivity is impossible, only subjectivity exists.

This discussion has real effects. It is not simply a matter of arcane academic debate, a harmless way to occupy the minds of intelligent yet passionate people who might otherwise want to influence events in the real world. Many academics in the West now routinely teach their students that they — as Westerners — have no right to intervene in, or even comment on, affairs in the non-Western world. Students are taught that cultural relativism requires respect for all other cultures, regardless of the social practices those cultures endorse. All cultures are morally equal,

and all cultures are pristine, pure, not to be polluted by outsiders' ideas. Any "universal" principle that violates or changes a culture's ethical beliefs is a form of cultural assault. Moreover, it is a form of Western assault, as most "universalist" ideas mask a Western agenda. Students are also taught to be deeply ashamed of the imperialist and exploitative pasts of their own societies. They are often so ashamed that they can recognize nothing good at all in the traditions of liberalism, social democracy, labor agitation, feminism, and anti-racism, that characterize much of the social history of the West in the last two centuries. For a Westerner to comment on any aspect of non-Western societies is to subject those societies to Foucault's disciplinary "gaze", in this case the gaze of the white person simultaneously repelled by, yet seeking to control, the non-white.[4]

Identity politics emerges in part from standpoint theory. Standpoint theory draws our attention to the fact that one's views on social relations and social norms are influenced by one's individual position in life.[5] Standpoint theory has made an important contribution to social analysis. Attention to the standpoints of women, African-Americans, gays and lesbians, and other such status groups has enhanced social science in the last 30 years. Feminist comments on international relations theory, for example, have obliged scholars to scrutinize more closely the

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[4]Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1979).

[5]See e.g. Helen E. Longino, "Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Problems of Knowledge", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1993), pps. 201-212.

underlying masculinism of their assumptions about the behavior of political actors.[6] So also, the intervention of theorists from societies that formerly were mere objects of study by Western scholars has changed the way international relations are viewed. In my own field, the intense discussion of human rights in Africa by Africans themselves in the 1990s was a significant advance over the situation in the 1970s and early 80s, when a handful of Western scholars and a small cohort of Western-trained African lawyers and philosophers dominated almost all such discussion.

A modest recognition of the existence of subjectivity in social analysis is a useful corrective to any naive belief in the capacity for complete objectivity. Nevertheless, the scholar's imperative is to try to overcome such subjectivity in her own analysis once she recognizes it. Her subjective situation may result in her asking new questions, or observing social relations in a way not found in the literature. But she must make sure her own subjective situation can be generalized before she argues for its relevance.

Subjectivity is a useful aid to intuition, to the asking of new questions and the framing of new analyses. Subjectivity is linked to identity. Nonetheless, there is no predictable path from identity to subjectivity to intellectual standpoint. Many factors other than identity affect subjective perceptions. Assumptions about to which social categories a scholar or commentator belongs belie the complexity both of identity and of thought.

Further, the assertion that only those who are members of particular social categories may comment on them conflates a claim of empirical truth with a normative position. The empirical

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[6]Jill Steans, *Gender and International Relations: An Introduction* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

claim is that those who are not members of a particular society or social group are incapable of understanding it, therefore incapable of making any useful academic contribution to discussion of it. The normative claim is that non-members therefore *should not* make any such comments, since -- based on the unavoidable ignorance that non-membership in the group entails — they are likely to do more harm than good. Westerners, in particular, should not involve themselves in any way in the affairs of the non-Western world. In the non-academic world — which some scholars and most of our students enter — this normative claim is extended to ban actions, not merely words. Even the best of intentions, extreme identity politics theory claims, result in detrimental consequences, even when kind-hearted Westerners try to improve living conditions or promote human rights or democracy in the non-Western world.

Citizen-Citizen International Relations

This extreme standpoint position in international relations rejects, in effect, the existence of humanitarian empathy. Individuals who are members of certain social groups (broadly, in this debate, "Westerners"), are thought to be incapable of empathic connection with individuals who are members of other social groups. What is thought to be empathic connection is filtered through too many Western assumptions about social norms and social morality to be of any assistance to persons in need in the non-Western world. Empathic international relations, therefore, are impossible. Cosmopolitanism, a viewpoint that assumes that the connections among all human beings outweigh their differences, is rejected.

The debate about who is allowed to comment on conditions where is of great importance

in the age of globalism. Advances in travel and communications render the traditional confinement of international relations to state-state interactions obsolete. Students of international relations in the age of globalism recognize the increasing importance of humanitarian non-governmental organizations.

An even newer social phenomenon is what might be called "citizen-citizen international relations". As Kim Richard Nossal argues, "We should think about every human being as a potential actor in world politics ... ."[7] Citizen-citizen interactions might be defined as part of international relations when such interactions are established between citizens of different states for the explicit purpose of discussing or changing political, social or economic conditions, or when such interactions have the unintended effect of stimulating interest in international political, social or economic affairs.

Until perhaps 30 years ago, it was very difficult for private citizens from societies at far reach from each other to establish personal relationships for such purposes. But technical barriers to these relationships have eroded rapidly in the last 30 years. Individuals travel more and visit more "exotic" places, where they often realize that the exotic people they encounter are like them in many ways. Perceived difference gives way to recognized similarity. And electronic communications, especially the Internet, mean that those individuals can write to each other on a daily, indeed hourly, basis. There is still a class bias in this form of citizen-citizen social interaction: it is the educated and the comparatively wealthy who engage most in these activities. But governments cannot stop their citizens from communicating directly with foreigners,

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[7]Kim Richard Nossal, *The Patterns of World Politics* (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1998), p. 121.

previously safely ensconced in faraway countries whose news was always influenced by state interests or media distortion. And democratic governments must pay attention to their voters. If voters have been discussing international relations with private citizens in foreign countries, these discussions may well influence what they want their own governments to do.

Given these technological advances, what does it matter if academics in their corridors and at their conferences continue to argue that such citizen-citizen international relations are illegitimate, that "Westerners" should confine their comments and activities to their own societies? It matters because such academic chitchat is repeated in classrooms and affects the way younger generations think about their role in world society.

Over the past 15 years, there has been a marked shift in the way intelligent young people in my own university regard their position in the wider world. Many white students have absorbed feelings of guilt about their own imperialist backgrounds (regardless of their actual ancestries, and the high possibility that many are descended from economic or political refugees). They conclude, as a consequence, that they have no business commenting on internal political or social relations in countries to which they nevertheless devote considerable time as members of environmental or development-oriented student groups. Many of the non-white students, even the considerable proportion that is Canadian-born, have absorbed the rhetoric of "Otherness" and use it to defend such practices as the Taliban's gynocidal persecution of women in Afghanistan.[8]

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[8]See e.g. Zohra Rasekh, Heidi M. Bauer, Michele Manos, and Vincent Iacopino, "Women's Health and Human Rights in Afghanistan", *Journal of the American Medical Association*, vol. 280, no.5 (August 5, 1998), pps. 449-455.

Perhaps such views are merely the folly of youth, analogous to the guilt my own pseudo-Marxist generation of Canadian student radicals felt at being "bourgeois". But if ideas do influence action, then to inculcate several generations of North American students with radical identity politics that teach them to divide the entire world into mutually exclusive categories of Oppressed and Oppressors may well be to undermine that generations' future capacity for empathic international relations. We need only look to the effects of Maoist teachings in Paris on the Cambodian *genocidaires*, Pol Pot and his colleagues, to alert us to the real consequences of rhetorical teaching in university classrooms.

Despite such Occidentalist and Orientalist teachings, humanitarian empathy does characterize citizen-citizen international relations. And such relations are not necessarily based on similarities of personal characteristics among such citizens.

Sitting and Standing: Postmodern Identity Politics vs. Cosmopolitan Realities

Franke Wilmer titles a recent article "Where You Stand Depends on Where You Sit".[9] She does not explain this phrase, perhaps taking it as self-evident in social theory that human actors' behavior is predictable from a finite set of recognizable features of identity. Certainly Wilmer is correct to point out that the standpoint of indigenous peoples, her focus of study, is often different from the standpoint of the Westerners who administer them. Her summary of the political

[9]Franke Wilmer, "Where You Stand Depends on Where You Sit: Indigenous Peoples and the State/System", paper presented at a conference entitled "Looking at the World Through Non-Western Eyes", Walker Institute of International Studies, University of South Carolina, April 3-4, 1998.

demands of indigenous leaders in the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and their assertion that they have a different world view and normative ethic than white settlers, is a familiar one to any Canadian.[10]

Yet where indigenous peoples stand collectively in their negotiations against the "West" (the people of European ancestry who dominate most of the countries in which they live) does not necessarily predict where they sit within their own communities. In Canada, there is much social conflict among aboriginal people on First Nations' reserves. Some of it is along identity lines that might be thought to be predictable: some native women object, for example, to the powers held by male-dominated traditional councils.[11] But other native women do not object to such powers and participate in such councils themselves. There is also a general conflict on some reserves between traditionalists and modernists. And there are conflicts over the distribution of resources among families or clans. Some native leaders handily absorb "Western" techniques to control opposition into allegedly "traditional" means of social control. For example, the leaders of the Sagamok Anishnawbeck First Nation in Ontario attempted a "traditional" banishment of a member

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[10]For an exposition of this difference by an aboriginal scholar in Canada, see Mary Ellen Turpel, "Aboriginal People and the Canadian *Charter*: Interpretive Monopolies, Cultural Differences", *Canadian Human Rights Yearbook 1989-1990* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1990), pps. 3-45.

[11]Native Women's Association of Canada, "Aboriginal Women and the Constitutional Debates: Continuing Discrimination", *Canadian Woman Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3 (Spring 1992), pps. 14-17.

who published criticisms of them.[12] Thus where indigenous individuals "stand" on any given issue depends very much on the circumstance and on their own private interests, as well as on their aboriginal identity.

Wilmer's implicit thesis, in using the phrase "where you stand depends on where you sit", is that personal identities determine personal opinions. By recognizing difference among categories of human beings, one can predict their likely opinions: or at least, one can predict that members of their social category will have different opinions than members of other social categories.

Determining where people sit, however, is not always an easy matter. Mary Hansen is a Canadian woman who exemplifies humanitarian citizen-citizen international relations. Yet where she stands is not predictable from where she sits. A retired teacher in her mid 50s, Mary Hansen dedicates a considerable proportion of her time to helping people from, or living in, other societies. In 1997, Mary traveled to Sri Lanka to visit her daughter, who was working there in an aid project. During her visit Mary met some members of CIDA (the Canadian International Development Agency) who, learning that she was trained to teach English as a Second Language, asked her to conduct a needs analysis in Sri Lanka. Having spent several weeks of her family visit engaged in this project, Mary returned to Sri Lanka in 1998, spending six months setting up a school of English. On her return to Canada, she became the private volunteer English tutor and unofficial mentor for a young woman in her community claiming refugee status from a former Soviet Bloc country. During the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, she began an active email

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[12]Marcia Hoyle Barron, *Finding Our Way: Paths to Justice Reform in an Aboriginal Community* (Ph.D. Thesis, McMaster University, 1998), pps. 119-24.

correspondence with Marissa, a female professor in Belgrade, whom she had met only once, in Canada. From this correspondence she learned that Marissa had a friend whose hospitalized mother had died in a bomb attack. This personalizing of the bombing — the image of another woman's mother killed — strengthened Mary's opposition to Canada's participation in the NATO attacks.[13]

Nothing in Mary Hansen's personal identity predicts her active involvement as a private citizen in international relations. Where Mary stands is not predictable from where she sits or sat, now or in the past. Mary is a white native-born Canadian woman, a Catholic, living with her husband in an attractive home situated on a large plot of land in the Niagara Peninsula. Mary does not believe that her status as a woman has caused her disadvantage in Canada. The individuals whom Mary has helped bear only the most marginal similarity to her own personal circumstances. Mary herself describes her motivation for helping them in the following way: "I just feel I have to do something, that's all: I just have to do something to help others, to connect with others, to stand by others".

Mary Hansen's involvement in citizen-citizen international relations belies the postmodern politics of identity. The politics of identity would predict unconcern with citizens in other countries: as a Western "Oppressor" Mary Hansen should be enjoying, not sharing, her relative wealth and privilege. Where she stands should be on the side of transnational profit-making and the expansion of Western culture and ideologies. She sits in privilege: she should be trying to enhance her own comfort, not help people who -- according to the theory of identity politics —

[13]Interview with Mary Hansen (pseudonym) December 7, 1999.

are not even remotely connected to her.

Just as the philosophical perspectives and empathic capacities of Mary Hansen, a "Western" woman, cannot be predicted easily from her personal situation, so also the philosophical perspectives and empathic relations of "non-Western" women cannot be so predicted. In her autobiographical account of life as a person of Chinese ancestry, Ien Ang makes this clear.[14] Ien was born in post-colonial Indonesia into the Peranakan Chinese community. This was a community of individuals descended from Chinese settlers who had lived in Indonesia since before the European incursions. Her Peranakan mother spoke Chinese, but did not pass the language on to her daughter, whom she wanted to become Indonesian. Identified as outsiders by the Indonesian regime in the 1960s, her parents emigrated to the Netherlands, where Ien grew up.[15] Thus, Ien is a speaker of Indonesian, Dutch and English, who looks Chinese. Most people, unable to distinguish between genetic inheritance and ethno-linguistic affiliation, identify her as Chinese. Where she "sits" therefore, in the minds of many people who encounter her, is with China, or the Chinese masses, or some variant of the Orientalist version of China. Where she "stands" is another matter. Presumably, it is partly a result of her various positions in the world; Chinese-origin minority in Indonesia, ethnic Peranakan but Chinese-looking immigrant to the Netherlands, woman, person enjoying the world traveling privileges of a highly-educated academic, etc. But

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[14]Ien Ang, "On Not Speaking Chinese: Postmodern Ethnicity and the Politics of Diaspora", *New Formations*, 24 (1994), pps. 1-18.

[15]On the Dutch colonial policy of separating "foreign Orientals" from indigenous Indonesians, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 1991), p. 122.

it is probably also a result of idiosyncratic factors that identity politics cannot recognize.

Mary Hansen and Ien Ang illustrate the difficulties of adopting either Occidentalist or Orientalist points of view. An Occidentalist would ascribe to Mary Hansen an entire set of social values — individualism, materialism, lack of commitment to family and community — that she does not hold.[16] An Orientalist would similarly ascribe to Ien Ang a set of social values that she does not necessarily hold. Neither woman's background, social attitudes, or personal politics can be predicted by a superficial reading of the ascriptively obvious aspects of her "identity".

A key aspect of identity politics is the recognition of "Difference"; that is, the acknowledgment that the world is not populated by a homogeneous mass of people, all of whom live the same modern life of materialism, preferring the "McWorld" of mass U.S.-controlled consumption to their own indigenous cultures.[17] As with standpoint theory, so with the principle of difference: this is a useful contribution to social theory.[18] Homogenizing theories of modernization or of convergence, which assumed in the past that all societies and cultures would eventually approach the North American "norm" both in terms of social organization and in terms of culture, have been shown to be erroneous. Neither theorist, practitioner of formal state-state

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[16]Rhoda E. Howard, "Occidentalism, Human Rights, and the Obligations of Western Scholars", *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol. 29, no.1 (1995), pps. 110-26.

[17]The term "McWorld" is from Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).

[18]A useful discussion of this and other key postmodernist terms can be found in Charles Lemert, *Postmodernism is Not What You Think* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

international relations, nor private citizen should assume that everyone in the world shares the same views as she.

Yet while difference is characteristic of human social and normative practice, it is neither immutable nor absolute. The different frequently tire of their difference and want to be the same as those who are admonished to respect their "Otherness". The attractions of modernity — that materialist, individualist, autonomous lifestyle that so many Westerners enjoy — are strong. Given the chance, many people in the non-Western world gladly abandon their difference to enter the modern world economy, move to cities or to developed Western societies, and renounce local customs that they find oppressive.[19] They want to be permitted the complex identities, composed of preferences and normative choice as well as tradition and normative imperatives, that are routinely available to Westerners. They are tired of sitting oppressed by the burdens of centuries of tradition: they want to stand free.

Thus even if we could ascertain where everyone sits, the recognition of difference does not mean that only those who sit in the same place can stand with each other. Nor does it mean that where one stands is at all predictable from where one sits. Where Ien Ang stands, for example, may very well be a consequence of factors unknown even to those who have read her essay on the complexities of her personal identity. We do not know how Ien votes on tax bills wherever she lives, whether she is willing to pay higher taxes that will support better welfare programs, or whether she favors lower welfare costs and more disposable income for herself. We do not know whether she invests her disposal income in blue-chip corporations, spends it on clothes, or gives

[19]Rhoda E. Howard, *Human Rights and the Search for Community* (Boulder: Westview, 1995), pps. 113-21.

it away to charities. We do not what she thinks about human rights in China or indeed, if she thinks about that particular social issue at all.

Mary Hansen and Ien Ang reveal the dangers of post-modernist essentializing of identity. Originally meant to oppose the homogenizing effects of modernist theory, showing how identities could be constructed, deconstructed, created and changed, post-modernism has metamorphosed into lists of easy-to-describe identities which are presumed to predict what individuals think and how they behave. Individuals' collective identity, their membership in categorizable groups, is the overriding aspect of their being. "Groups" may be infinitely divided and subdivided — viz; feminist, Jewish feminist, lesbian Jewish feminist — but all individuals must be pigeonholed into one identity or another. It does not do, in this form of politics, to state that although a Jewish lesbian feminist, your primary identity is that of birdwatcher, philatelist, mother or philosopher. You are permitted multiple identities (as long as they can eventually fit together into one box), but not multiple roles, multiple interests, idiosyncratic experience or philosophical agency.

This last concept is particularly important. Philosophical agency implies that the individual can "think" herself beyond her personal identity and experience. She can think herself into the position of the "Other". But the position of the person or society alleged to be "Other" implies not only "Difference", so beloved of post-modern theorists, but also sameness. The connections among strangers, the capacity to identify with someone who outwardly seems most unlike oneself, is one of the chief impeti of human social empathy.

The Capacity for Human Empathy

Mary Hansen's attitude to helping other people is a typical empathic response. She does not regard those different from herself as " Others": she regards them as similar to herself, having feelings as she does. The more time she spends with people who were originally strange to her, the more she regards them as individuals and the more she wants to help them. In this respect, she confirms Helen Fein's finding that in general, altruistic people view those they help as individuals, not members of a strange group, and that they define those individuals as members of their own universe of obligation. For the altruistic person, says Fein, there is no "Other": "[I]dentification with the other as other tends to be a self-annulling motive in an altruistic transaction ... for as one begins to identify ... and internalizes the role of the other(s), he or she is no longer perceived as the other but simply as a fellow human". [20] As Mary herself puts it, "Each one of us has the capacity to see others as their sisters and brothers." Speaking in particular of one Sri Lankan co-worker, she says "I don't feel [sic] of her as the Other: we all have the same feelings".

Psychological studies show that "a crucial aspect of our capacities as social creatures is that we can empathize with others", by taking the role of the other or by imaginative inner imitation. Empathy means being able to "envisag[e] ... others in their local circumstances."[21] It may be more difficult to envisage others in their local circumstances when those circumstances are markedly different from one's own, and when there is no immediate basis of common understanding. But

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[20]Helen Fein, *Congregational Sponsors of Indochinese Refugees in the United States, 1979-1981: Helping beyond Borders* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1987), p. 52 and pps. 166-17.

[21]Nancy Sherman, "Empathy, Respect and Humanitarian Intervention", *Ethics and International Affairs*, vol.12 (1998), pps. 103-19, quotations from pp.104 and 105.

it is not impossible. "[T]he emergence of the human rights culture seems to owe ... everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories": these stories constitute a sentimental education that "sufficiently acquaints people of different kinds with one another so that they are less tempted to think of those different from themselves as only quasi-human".[22] The more stories Mary Hansen hears, the more foreign "others" seem like herself.

"Where you stand depends on where you sit", the phrase Franke Wilmer employs, is based on an unverified assumption about the nature of moral reasoning, the assumption that one cannot step outside one's own personal experience. There is much evidence that the reverse is true of human empathy. Many people are indeed capable of stepping outside their own personal experience. Their universe of obligation, to use Helen Fein's trenchant phrase, is not confined to the "Us", as opposed to the "Them".[23] As Rorty observes, moral progress "consists in an increasing ability to see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike us as

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[22]Richard Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality", in Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley, eds. *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pps. 118-19 and 122-23; quotations from Rorty originally found in Neta C. Crawford, "Postmodern Ethical Conditions and a Critical Response", *Ethics and International Affairs*, vol. 12 (1998), pps. 132 and 133.

[23]The phrase is originally from Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide: National Responses and Jewish Victimization During the Holocaust* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 33.

outweighing the differences."[24]

A recent study I conducted confirms Rorty's insight. This study investigates the attitudes of Canadians to social groups previously considered to be inferiors or outsiders, such as aboriginal peoples and gays and lesbians. The study also investigate attitudes to groups of "strangers"; that is, people who would not have lived in Canada in large numbers until Canadian immigration was shorn of racially-based criteria in the 1960s. According to identity politicians, such groups are "Others", so "Different" from majority (white, Western) Canadians as to be irredeemably outside the Canadian community. This is not what I found: rather, I found Canadians of all origins, Western and non-Western, white and non-white, capable of adopting empathic attitudes to those who might seem very different from themselves.

In 1996-7 I interviewed 78 civic leaders in Hamilton, Ontario on a range of human rights questions.[25] Forty were women, 38 were men. Thirty-five were either members of, or connected to, various groups who would be identified in postmodernist theory as "oppressed": 5 self-identified gays and lesbians (and one parent); 4 aboriginal people; 19 other individuals who were not white (although several were "Western" in the sense of having been born in the West); two white parents of non-white children; three Jews, and one person with an obvious disability. I was interested in the moral reasoning of these 78 civic leaders. In particular, I wanted to examine how they had learned to accept the moral claims of groups in English-Canadian society who until 30 years ago had been subordinate to the dominant white, Protestant, Anglo-Canadian male world view. Among other topics, I posed questions to these respondents about freedom of speech, hate

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[24]Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality", p. 129.

[25]Mary Hansen was not one of these civic leaders.

crimes, gay rights, aboriginal rights, and immigration and multiculturalism.

Although this research concentrated on Canadian, not international, issues, it provides clues as to how citizens open up their world view to become empathic towards groups of people different from themselves. These 78 civic leaders displayed an attitude of compassion and understanding for those previously considered to be outsiders in Canadian society.

In their attitudes to freedom of speech, these Canadians clearly showed their concern to empathize with others. In Canada, there are hate speech laws that prohibit incitement to genocide and the wilful public promotion of hatred against any identifiable group.[26] Almost all the civic leaders supported these laws, and the majority wanted to see them strengthened. Such support did not depend on whether the respondent was him or herself a member of a subordinated group; regardless of their own personal identifications, almost all respondents were very concerned about the sensitivities of minorities who might be suffering discrimination in Canadian society. Circumspection, a little giving way on freedom of speech, was in their view the way to preserve the human dignity of those who otherwise might feel less than accepted in Canada.[27]

With regard to hate crimes, as opposed to hate speech, respondents evinced a similar concern for minorities. Amendments to Canadian law mandating stricter punishments for hate

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[26]*Martin's Annual Criminal Code 1999* (Aurora, Ontario: Canada Law Book Inc., 1998), S. 318 and 319.

[27]Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, "Canadians Discuss Freedom of Speech: Legal Regulation and Moral Circumspection", available from author or online at University of Denver, Human Rights Working Papers, http://www.du.edu/humanrights/workingpapers/.

crimes than for ordinary crimes had been introduced in Parliament shortly before I conducted my interviews. The respondents split down the middle on whether or not they supported stricter punishments for hate crimes. Nor did the split reflect disagreements between those personally vulnerable and those personally not vulnerable to hate crimes: both groups split about equally. Those who supported stricter punishments for hate crimes did so because they believed that such crimes were in effect attacks upon, or threats against, entire groups, such as blacks or gays. Those who objected to stricter punishments felt that "a crime is a crime" regardless of the status of the victim. A universalist compassion for all human beings required, in their view, a universal sense of the dignity and worth of every human being. In the eyes of several black respondents, a crime against a white person was no less a crime than one against themselves or their own sons or daughters. Both groups, those who supported and those who opposed stricter punishments for hate crimes, couched their arguments within their empathic concerns for others, whether members of identifiable subordinated groups or merely individuals worthy of respect and concern.[28]

The attitudes of these civic leaders to gay rights also showed their capacity for empathy. Almost all respondents believed that there should be improved spousal rights for gays in Canada; 36 also accepted the right of gays to marry, and 42 accepted the right of gays to adopt children.[29] Forty-four traced their evolved sympathy for gays in part to the realization that someone they knew, a friend, co-worker or relative, was gay. Thus they realized that they were personally in

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[28]Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, "Hate Crimes and Canadian Public Opinion: Diversity within Diversity", in progress.

[29]Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, "The Gay Cousin: Learning to Accept Gay Rights", forthcoming in *Journal of Homosexuality*, 2000/01.

touch with the "Other", or had been unknowingly in touch with him for years. Added to this was the soul-searching that a number of the civic leaders were undergoing in their respective churches, a process both spurred by, and spurring, social change in the larger society.[30] Several recent immigrants to Canada from countries where gay rights are not yet spoken of — if not regarded with outright horror — were also engaged in this journey of learning to accept gay rights, to see gays as members of their new Canadian community and therefore just as worthy of respect as any other member of the community.

Respect was also a word these respondents frequently used when discussing rights for aboriginal peoples. Indeed, these civic leaders had by and large absorbed the perspective on indigenous issues that Franke Wilmer argues is specific to indigenous peoples themselves. The majority of these civic leaders accepted that group rights were necessary for aboriginal people in Canada. Only twelve opted for a philosophical viewpoint of "strict equality"; that is, the absorption of individual aboriginals into the wider Canadian society on the same basis as non-aboriginals.[31] In other instances where group rights might be claimed, as in special employment equity

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[30]Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, "Gay Rights and the Right to the Family: Conflicts between Liberal and Illiberal Belief Systems", forthcoming in *Human Rights Quarterly*, also printed (as Rhoda E. Howard) in Peter Baehr, Cees Flinterman and Mignon Senders, eds. *Innovation and Inspiration: Fifty Years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1999), pps. 111-129.

[31]Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, "Canadians Discuss Aboriginal Rights: Strict Equality versus Group Identity", in progress.

(affirmative action) programs for minorities, these same civic leaders disliked group rights.[32] This finding demonstrates that they were fully aware of the special status of aboriginal peoples in Canada.

Finally, these 78 civic leaders were well aware of the cultural issues that might arise as new types of immigrants arrived in Canada. In answer to the question "Should all religious or ethnic groups [in Canada] have to support women's/gay rights" they showed great sensitivity to the problem of asking for cultural conformity to legal requirements. Responses were not easy to categorize, but they ranged along a definable continuum. While some respondents simply said "the law is the law", many others pointed out the need for education for new immigrants. They also stressed the need to respect difference as much as possible.[33]

The respondent pool discussed above may not have been typical of all Canadians in its beliefs (although respondents' answers regarding gay rights and freedom of speech did reflect national survey results). Most of these civic leaders were active in local, national or international organizations dedicated to helping others. Some were motivated in part by their personal circumstances: for example, both an aboriginal and a Jewish respondent drew on their own experiences of prejudice in arguing for full human rights for gays. Many of the women considered themselves feminists, whether or not they believed they had personally suffered in any direct way from male oppression. Some of the respondents were motivated by their religious faith; among

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[32]Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, "The Sins of the Fathers: Employment Equity and Affirmative Action in Canada", in progress.

[33]Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, "Cultural Relativism and Public Opinion: Canadian Civic Leaders Discuss Women's Rights and Gay Rights", in progress.

them were several Christians who reported an expansive reading of Christian texts on equality and respect. Others, not religious, were simply compassionate people, whose activities on behalf of others could not be predicted by either personal circumstance or religious faith. One, for example, had been diagnosed with cancer and told he had two years to live: he had decided to spend those two years helping others. None of the empathic activities of these civic leaders could be predicted in any linear way from their identities.

The unpredictability of empathic emotions and attitudes is one conclusion of the research conducted on rescuers during the Holocaust. It might have been thought that rescuers were those most closely connected to Jews, but such did not prove to be the case. Rescuers were often those who simply ascribed their actions to sets of beliefs learned in childhood. Reviewing the literature, Herbert Hirsch concludes that "Rescuers appear ... to be independent thinkers, freed from obedience and conformity, willing to follow their moral conscience. ...". But rescuers also had, according to Hirsch, the capacity for empathic imagination, the ability to put themselves in others' shoes.[34] A large study of 400 European rescuers concluded that they could be "discriminated from non-rescuers by a dominant orientation of 'extensiveness': simply put, rescuers just did not view Jews as the Other."[35]

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[34]Herbert Hirsch, *Genocide and the Politics of Memory: Studying Death to Preserve Life*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), pps. 149-56, quotation from p. 151.

[35]Helen Fein, "Genocide: A Sociological Perspective", *Current Sociology*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Spring 1990), p. 65. The original study is Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

This finding does not mean that some -- if not many -- individuals cannot be "turned", in the right circumstances, from being persons of ordinary day-to-day morality to being persecutors of those whom they deem unworthy of basic social respect, if not outright *Untermenschen*. Robert Jay Lifton has detailed the process of "doubling" that he found in Auschwitz doctors, helping them to reconcile their killing and healing roles.[36] The experiments of Stanley Milgram and Haney, Banks and Zimbardo show how ordinary people can easily turn into torturers, especially if people in authority seem to be suggesting to them that they should do so. By assuming scientific authority, Milgram's experimenters persuaded many naive subjects to administer what they believed to be dangerous electric shocks to other individuals.[37] Haney, Banks and Zimbardo created a simulated prison populated by psychologically healthy young American males, but had to cut short their experiment because the men playing the roles of guards had become very sadistic.[38] Torturers can also be created by deliberated training techniques. In Greece during the period of the *junta* in the late 1960s and early 1970s, carefully-picked young men were socialized into their roles partly by being treated very brutally themselves, and partly by being gradually introduced to more and more direct roles as torturers: they were also given financial and social

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[36]Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*, (New York: Basic Books, 1986), pps. 430-465.

[37]Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

[38]Craig Haney, Curtis Banks, and Philip Zimbardo, "Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison", *International Journal of Criminology and Penology*, vol. 1 (1973), pps. 69-97.

rewards for their participation.[39]

There is much debate in Holocaust studies over whether those who took part in the persecutions, tortures and murders had a personal or ideological predisposition to this type of brutal activity, or whether their actions were, in effect, consequences of the situation. Daniel Goldhagen argues that German culture at the time was very anti-Semitic; thus, Germans easily accepted and participated in the slaughter of the Jews.[40] Hannah Arendt argued that the idea of a murderous or brutal personality may be irrelevant, as the banality of the many tasks necessary to murder the Jews may have inured those who performed them to what they were doing.[41] Still other commentators argue that it took much political effort to persuade Germans to exclude Jews from their universe of obligation. Zygmunt Bauman claims that for this to occur, "primeval moral drives" of responsibility to others had to be suppressed.[42]

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[39]Mika Haritos-Fatouros, "The Official Torturer: A Learning Model for Obedience to the Authority of Violence", in Ronald D. Crelinsten and Alex P. Schmid, eds. *The Politics of Pain: Torturers and their Masters* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Center for the Study of Social Conflicts, 1993), pps. 141-59.

[40]Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Random House, 1997).

[41]Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1965). For a detailed description of the many mundane tasks required, see Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of The European Jews* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985).

[42]Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press,

Certainly the literature on genocide warns us that it is dangerous to assume that a culture in which individuals are predisposed to be kind and charitable, as the Canadians discussed above generally were, is immutable. All cultures can change. Canadians once possessed about the same level of anti-Semitism as pre-Hitler Germans: nowadays, such sentiments are unthinkable among the majority of the population. So is the explicit expression of many other prejudiced attitudes. Yet, should Canada become less wealthy and its citizens less competitive in the global economy, should it be riven and torn by the nationalist movement in Quebec, or should it be overwhelmed with immigrants and refugees, public reaction might become ungenerous and uncharitable. However empathic the relatively prosperous, highly educated Canadians discussed above appear to be, such empathy might not survive political or economic crisis.

Nevertheless, the generosity that is characteristic of much of Canadian society at present does signal the importance of human empathy across dividing lines of ascriptive identity. In the age of globalism, it is not only the erosion of technical barriers to contact among citizens that has changed the face of international relations. It is also erosion of the ideational barrier. A growing recognition of shared humanity among categories of people previously thought to be irremediably strange to each other is occurring in the globalized world. Individuals are increasingly involved in international relations, either on their own, in groups, or as voters pressuring their own governments. Much of their international activity has to do with their empathic beliefs in the equality of all human beings, hence their desire to ameliorate the sufferings of others elsewhere. The enterprise of identity politics undermines this capacity for cross-cultural contact by denying this empathic drive, by confining Westerners to Occidentalist stereotypes of materialism,

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1989), pps. 188-9.

individualism, and unconcern for others.

The Isolationist Bias of Identity Politics

Practitioners of identity politics want to create a better world, one in which no matter what your own identity is, you respect the identity of all "Others". Such respect entails unquestioning acceptance of whatever the "Other" tells you is an important aspect of his or her identity, even if such aspects offend your own sense of morality. But identity politics does not necessarily point to a better world. At its extreme, it points to a worse one in which individuals are obliged to remain within their status categories, afraid to venture out into any sort of cosmopolitan morality for fear it will damage the integrity of "Others'" identities. In identity politics, the postmodern respect for "Difference" has been transmuted into the insistence that "Difference" not only cannot, but should not be overcome.

One of the consequences of identity politics is the social production of social distance. The greater the social distance, the less we care about others and the more we disregard what happens to them.[43] Dividing the world into Occident and Orient discourages empathy and encourages the risk of distance or disengagement, exactly what Holocaust rescuers had to overcome. Identity politics tells us that we cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, understand or empathize with the "Other". We are locked into our categories: Westerner and non-Westerner, white and non-white, imperialist and exploited. But if we can never understand those who seem different from

[43]Everett C. Hughes, "Good People and Dirty Work", *Social Problems*, vol. 10, no.1 (Summer 1962), p.9.

ourselves, then as citizens we may well ask, why bother trying? Why not, rather, throw up our hands, in despair or in relief, abdicating all responsibility for the problems of those whose identities do not match our own?

The enterprise of identity politics is buttressed by resort to false collective memories. All men become guilty for the crimes of some men against women. All whites become guilty of the imperialist crimes some of their ancestors committed. Divisions among identity politics categories are forgotten. Identities are homogenized: if you are Indian, it matters little whether you are Brahmin or Dalit, in the face of the larger assault of white Western society. And if you are white, it matters little that you may be the descendant of peasants or starving workers; or that you, yourself, may be a hair's breadth away from poverty.

Identity politics also relies on what Benedict Anderson, analyzing nationalism, calls "homogeneous empty time"[44] Time is homogeneous: past is present; nothing has happened of any significance between a past Event and the present. In the identity politics interpretation of history, what was done Then to Us by Them is what is done Now to Us by Them. Past persecutions constitute present grievances that can never be forgotten or forgiven. Identity politics, like nationalist politics, never forgets past wrongs. In Canada, those who subscribe to identity politics cite as evidence of discrimination against Chinese today the discrimination against their forebears under the Chinese [Immigrant] Exclusion Act, revoked in 1947, and as evidence of the discrimination against Sikhs today the fact that a boatload of Sikhs was refused entry into Vancouver in 1914.

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[44]Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p.24. The phrase is originally from Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 265.

Following Anderson's arguments about how national communities are imagined, we can see how identity communities are also imagined. Identity politics requires creation of a sense of homogeneity among the disparate individuals who must be made to "fit" into the various identity boxes scattering the landscape, immaculately sealed and safely protected from penetration by individuals inhabiting any other identity box. This homogenizing project is simultaneously an exclusionary project, the imperialist or chauvinist being confined to the category of Exploiter; he (or she) for whom We (the Exploited) need have no sympathy or concern. The individualism of cosmopolitan universalism is rejected. Just as We (the exploited Other) have no interest in receiving the hypocritical compassion of the Exploiter, so the Exploiter deserves none of our compassion.

The amnesia of identity politics also requires "forgetting" or ignoring the many differences that exist among individuals who might otherwise "fit" into the same category. Social class, in particular, is forgotten. Yet among identity categories, there are extreme differences between rich and poor, between the single-parent mother on welfare and the single-parent mother with a fat paycheck, or between a highly-educated, professional African-Canadian and an uneducated, unemployed African-Canadian. But class is a fluid category, unlike gender or "race"; one's class position can change in the course of one's lifetime, and one's own decisions and actions can affect it. That social class can vary, and that some members of Oppressed social categories live infinitely wealthier and easier lives than many members of Oppressor categories, sits uneasily with identity politics.

In identity politics, your category defines your identity. Moreover, it defines or denies your

rights. This seems a strong statement, yet much of the rhetoric surrounding this debate, couched as it is in the language of grievance and resentment, denies humanity to members of categories perceived to be imperialists or exploiters. And history has demonstrated to us many times in the twentieth century that those who are denied humanity, whose individual selves, thoughts and feelings are deemed irrelevant because of their real or assumed former privileges, are easily denied their rights. This was the premise of both Communism and Nazism.

Standpoint theory contributes to this denial of rights. Standpoint theory is, among scholars, a deliberate choice. It is a choice that is influenced by the healthy need to recognize differences among regions of the world and among certain set social categories (race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation) which are the preoccupations of post-modern identity politics. But it is a choice which also ignores the vast variety of personal experience, which might contribute to "standpoints" unpredictable from observation of an individual's identity characteristics. Standpoint theory denies human agency in thought. One can think only what one's (classifiable) experiences predict (or which can be predicted crudely by identity politics theorists). One is not permitted philosophical autonomy: one is only permitted to think what it is assumed other members of one's same category ought to think. And if one is a member of one of the Exploiting or "Oppressor" categories, one is not capable of transcending that membership. One is not capable of autonomously overcoming one's identity privileges (if such they are), and one is certainly not capable of thinking or saying anything worth hearing from the other side, that of the Exploited or "Oppressed".

This theoretical choice of academic standpoint theory has real consequences. It teaches young people that they cannot step outside of their own environment. If they comment on the cultures, politics or interests of "Others", they are engaging in offensive behavior since, immured

in their own standpoint, they cannot possibly understand anyone else's. This induces guilt, fear of interfering, and an easy way out of caring for "Others". It paves the way for isolationist indifference.

Thus the very strong title to this concluding section. Identity politics encourages political isolationism. It does so because it denies humanity to individuals as individuals, as human beings with capacities for pain, suffering, generosity, empathy. There are only Westerners ranged against non-Westerners, members of the Occident against members of the Orient, each group seeking its interests, neither willing to acknowledge the "Other's" essential humanity. International relations, in such a contest, must be of the Hobbesian variety. Those empathic citizens who involve themselves more and more in international relations either directly as individuals, as members of humanitarian organizations, or as citizens pressuring their own governments for humanitarian actions, are irrelevant to the identity politics interpretation of international relations. Indeed, they do more harm than good. Isolationism — by both the Western citizen and the Western state — is the preferred option of identity politicians. Immured in the guilt of past Western generations, Westerners can but sit and observe present developments.

But fortunately for the world, empathic individuals like Mary Hansen, either unknowing or uncaring of postmodernist identity theory, continue their activities in international relations. These activities do indeed change the world, and may indeed erode "identities". Former outcastes in India may renounce Hinduism for the egalitarian Christianity espoused by Western missionaries; Muslim women who have encountered the seductive ideas of international feminism may reject their menfolks' authority. These actual, live, individuals — persons whose "Otherness" often

disappears on close acquaintance -- will define their own wants and needs in their encounters with Westerners. Exercising their personal and philosophical autonomy, they may well make choices that do not conform to beliefs about their wants and needs prescribed by those who categorize them into predetermined Identities.

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