

Difference

the African diaspora – that of a Black Atlantic – was developed by influential black British cultural theorist Paul Gilroy (1993a). Here, “diaspora” signifies the constant renewal of identity through creative hybridity and transformation under the very conditions of dispersal and difference, rather than the need to return to one’s “roots.” In other words, in the postmodern meaning of “diaspora,” the organic link between peoples and homelands has been severed.

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See: ***GLOBALIZATION, HOME, MOVEMENTS.***

Difference

Difference emerged as a keyword in cultural politics in the late 1960s. It became a central principle in the political imagination and thinking of a wide range of so-called new social movements that have proliferated since the 1920. In these contexts the word “difference” – literally, the quality of being unlike or dissimilar – loses its descriptive innocence and becomes a highly charged concept, to the point of being elevated as the proud emblem for a passionate political, often personal-political cause. **The right to be different** is one generic motto of this cause, especially in the areas of sexual, racial, and subcultural politics. Here, difference is capitalized on or mobilized as a positive marker of identity and, consequently, as the expression of dissent or critique of the oppressive social homogeneity imposed by the dominant sections of society (often described as “bourgeois,” “male,” or “white”). In other words, difference is the basis and the condition of possibility of various oppositional forms of identity politics, whose liberating effects work to expose as well as challenge the hegemonic culture of the developed Western world in the second half of the 20th century. Examples are the feminist movement (“sisterhood is global”) and youth subcultural groups such as punk (Hebdige, 1979), or slogans associated with symbolic affirmations of difference such as “black is beautiful” or “queer with attitude.” A romantic and/or militant attitude toward difference – and **being different** – is clearly at work in these usages.

In the academy, thinking about difference has similarly been a major concern. It has been the object of heated theoretical debates in a number of fields, where the term has taken on altogether more specialized, complicated, but no less politicized meanings. Much of the debate started off from an engagement with Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural linguistics (1966 [1916]), influential in the 1960s and 1970s, which introduced the idea that difference is central to the production of meaning. Put simply, signs (such as words) acquire meaning through their differential relationships with other signs. These relationships can be described as *a/non-a*. A specific mode of difference is opposition, where the relationship between two signs is *a/not-a*. The most extreme form of opposition is that of the binary opposition or dichotomy, which divides a continuum up in two mutually exclusive opposing terms: white/black; self/other; man/woman. In such dichotomies the

same and the different are often placed in a hierarchical relationship, as the different is purely negatively defined as that which is not-same, as deviant from the norm (or the normal). The idea that binary oppositions describe systems of domination has been the focus and the starting point of much further criticism and debate, both in the field of theory, especially poststructuralist critical theory, and in conceptions of political practice which have come to be associated with postmodernism.

In theory, Jacques Derrida criticized the unambiguous fixity of meaning that is implied in the binary opposition by introducing the term *différance*, which signifies that which both precedes and exceeds binary oppositions and hence unsettles (destabilizes and defers) meaning. This notion of unsettling binary oppositions has played a crucial role in enabling the articulation of modes of **politics of difference**, which are critical of essentialist notions of identity as the affirmation of (fixed) difference.

Profound engagement with ideas of difference occurred in various strands of feminist theory (whose celebrity representatives include Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Elizabeth Grosz, and Rosi Braidotti), which enjoyed intense popularity among feminist university students during the 1970s and 1980s. Succinctly, their theorizations of **sexual difference** are characterized by efforts to develop autonomous definitions of "woman" and "femininity," unhinged from their binary relationship to "man" and "masculinity," in which they are inevitably locked into the position of inferior or subordinate counterpart. In this usage, difference becomes emancipated from its status as other-than, and is promoted as simply other, as pure, irreducible difference (not "a/not-a," but "a/b"). In more practical political terms, such theories, sometimes called **difference feminism** or postmodern feminism, tend to be critical of equality as the key objective of the women's movement, arguing that the liberal struggle for equality would mean the assimilation of femininity into the dominant, masculine norm; in other words, submitting difference to the "logic of identity."

This kind of theorizing signals the elevation of difference as a value in itself, and with it a common suspicion of philosophical universalism. Closely associated with the rise of postmodernity from the 1970s onward, Western society has seen an unprecedented proliferation of **differences** as a result of processes variously described as fragmentation, diversification, or pluralization. Within feminism itself, this manifested in the falling apart of the unifying notion of global sisterhood in favor of a recognition of differences *between* women (based on race or sexual orientation, for example) and *within* the category "women." The postmodernist sentiments associated with this emphasis on differences are eloquently articulated by African-American philosopher Cornel West:

Distinctive features of the new cultural politics of difference are to trash the monolithic and homogenous in the name of multiplicity and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general and universal in light of the concrete, specific and particular; and to historicize, contextualize and pluralize by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing. (West, 1990: 19)

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Such statements are made **in the name of difference** – a radicalist trend that is in serious tension with more modernist, universalist versions of left politics such as Marxism and socialism. Cornel West is a representative of an influential cohort of black and postcolonial critics (for example, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha) who have contributed to the fact that race, ethnicity, and culture have become central to the politics of difference. In a more general sense this represents a IC20 tendency to treat culture and difference as synonymous: in the discourse of cultural studies, culture necessarily evokes difference (in the sense of particularity), whereas difference is extemporaneously equated with (and reduced to) **cultural difference**.

In parallel with but relatively distinct from these developments in critical discourse, the social insistence of groups on asserting their difference and of political demands for their recognition has become a ubiquitous and, increasingly, a normalized aspect of life in Western democracies, with serious implications for the conduct of public institutions and governance of the modern state. A key example of the state-led recognition of difference is the policy of multiculturalism, which officially sanctions and enshrines ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences within the encompassing framework of the state. In this bureaucratic context, **difference** becomes the cornerstone of diversity: diversity is a managerial, bird's-eye view of the field of differences, which needs to be harmonized, controlled, or made to fit into a coherent (often national) whole. The celebration of cultural diversity – popularly expressed in community festivals of ethnic food, song, and dance – is an article of faith in self-declared multicultural societies.

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Homi Bhabha (1990b) dismisses this uptake of difference as diversity-to-be-managed, arguing that the “*creation of cultural diversity*” implies “a *containment of cultural difference*”: “The difference between cultures cannot be something that can be accommodated within a universalist framework. Different cultures... very often set up among and between themselves an *incommensurability*” (Bhabha, 1990b: 208, 209). Bhabha’s perspective, motivated as it is by an instinctive suspicion – common among critical theorists – of the notion of management *per se*, exemplifies the big gap between the poststructuralist/postmodern discourse on difference as it has dominated the academic humanities since the IC20 on the one hand, and its use and meaning in more practical governmental and policy contexts on the other. Even so, in both contexts difference (whether or not conceived as diversity) is ideologically endowed with positive meanings: difference is good, and has to be affirmed.

However, at the close of the C20 and especially into the eC21, there were and are increasing signs of discontent with the untrammelled valorization of difference, in both theory and politics. US author Todd Gitlin expressed this discontent in the title of his 1995 book, *The twilight of common dreams*. In his manifesto on *The idea of culture* (2000), British intellectual Terry Eagleton rails against the “fetishisation of cultural difference,” reinvoking Raymond Williams’s idea of a common culture (which is emphatically not the same as a uniform culture) as a necessary condition of social life. In a broader context, this

resonates with the growing resurgence of a more negative meaning of “difference” in the social world: **difference as division**. Right-wing populists throughout the West base their militancy on a fear and resentment of the internal divisiveness presumably emanating from the emphasis on (cultural) difference. At a global level, the destructiveness of an obsession with difference manifests itself in disturbing phenomena such as ethnic cleansing, fundamentalism, and the image of “a clash of civilizations,” a strikingly evocative phrase first coined by Harvard Professor Samuel P. Huntington (1993). Against this tendency, calls for a new, humanist universalism – one that stresses “a common humanity” while recognizing differences which the world has come to respect – are becoming increasingly insistent, if still rather impracticable.

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See: **CIVILIZATION, DECONSTRUCTION, ETHNICITY, FEMINISM, FUNDAMENTALISM, GAY AND LESBIAN, GENDER, MULTICULTURALISM, NORMAL, QUEER, RACE, SEXUALITY.**

Disability

Disability is a recent and therefore somewhat mutable term with regard to political practice and/or theories of identity. In political parlance it replaces earlier cognates such as “handicapped” and “crippled”: in the US, for instance, the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act was renamed in 1990 the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, “disability” entered the language of daily commerce and employment law, under the following heading: “The term ‘disability’ means, with respect to an individual – (A) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such an individual; (B) a record of such an impairment; or (C) being regarded as having such an impairment.” **Disability law** has developed over the past 30 years in tandem with a broad **disability rights movement** (in the UK, sometimes referred to as the DRM) that seeks to redefine disability as a social and political question rather than as a matter of individual impairments:

What is called the “social model” in the United Kingdom and the “minority group model” in the United States has been the guiding framework for disability theorists since the 1970s, pushing with increasing strength for disability to be seen as a form of social oppression, and the appropriate response is one of civil rights rather than medical or social care. (G. Williams, 2001: 125)

Its recent uses notwithstanding, “disability” has a much longer history than this, and seems for most of its life to have been closely associated with impairment and incapacity. Some of its earliest appearances, IC16–eC17, are related to law and contract rather than