

Cornel West, "A Matter of Life and Death." *October* 61 (1992), 20-23.

I'd first like to congratulate those who had the vision and determination to bring us together, for one can see that this is quite a relevant and pertinent issue. And I'm sure that the organizers did not know that the conference would be held the same day that David Duke was up for election in the state where my mother and father were born-old Jim and Jane Crow Louisiana. Nor did they know that it would be the day after Michael Jackson decided to make his statement about identity-black or white-in a video. But I think this matter raises three fundamental questions that I want to zoom in on very quickly. The first is "What do we mean by '*identity*'?" Since this term itself can be a rather elusive, amorphous, and even vaporous one, we need to have heuristic markings for it. The second is "What is the moral content of one's identities?"-because we all have multiple positions in terms of constructing our identities; there's no such thing as having one identity or of there being one essential identity that fundamentally defines who we actually are. And third, "What are the political consequences of our various identities?"-which is what Joan Scott was talking about with such insight.

So let's begin with a heuristic definition. For me identity is fundamentally about desire and death. How you construct your identity is predicated on how you construct desire and how you conceive of death: desire for recognition; quest for visibility (Baldwin-no name in the street; nobody knows my name); the sense of being acknowledged; a deep desire for association-what Edward Said would call affiliation. It's the longing to belong, a deep, visceral need that most linguistically conscious animals who transact with an environment (that's us) participate in. And then there is a profound desire for protection, for security, for safety, for surety. And so in talking about identity we

have to begin to look at the various ways in which human beings have constructed their desire for recognition, association, and protection over time and in space and always under circumstances not of their own choosing. But identity also has to do with death. We can't talk about identity without talking about death. That's what a brother named Julio Rivera had to come to terms with: the fact that his identity had been constructed in such a way that xenophobes would put him to death. Or brother Youssef Hawkins in Bensonhurst. Or brother Yankel Rosenbaum in Crown Heights.

Persons who construct their identities and desires often do it in such a way that they're willing to die for it—soldiers in the Middle East, for example—or, under a national identity, that they're willing to kill others. And the rampant sexual violence in the lives of thousands of women who are attacked by men caught up in vicious patriarchal identities—this speaks to what we're talking about. But if in fact identity has something to do with these various kinds of desires, these various conceptions of death (we are beings—toward—death), it's because we have, given our inevitable extinction, to come up with a way of endowing ourselves with significance.

So we'll weave webs of existential meaning. We'll say something about the terrors of nature, the cruelties of fate, the unjustifiability of suffering. It sounds very much like religion. But let's understand: religion not in the theological sense, but in the etymological sense of *ligare*, which means to bind. Identity is about binding, and it means, on the one hand, that you can be bound—parochialist, narrow, xenophobic. But it also means that you can be held together in the face of the terrors of nature, the cruelties of fate, and the need for some compensation for unjustified suffering: what theologians used to call the problem of evil. And believe me, identity cuts at that deep existential level where religion resides. That's what's frightening, especially for the left that, like

Habermas, has linked itself to an Enlightenment bandwagon. For it's a shaking of the rationalist foundation.

But keep in mind, here, the crucial interplay between desire and death, the quest for existential meaning and material resources. For identity is about bodies, land, labor, and instruments of production. It's about the distribution of resources. That's, in part, what David Duke is all about. He's addressing a background condition of the maldistribution of resources in which downward mobility is forcing a working class, squeezed by taxes and exploited by a ruling group, to race-bait and scapegoat black folk, Jewish people, and women. So we must always keep in mind the role of material resources and the various systems that generate their distribution and consumption. There has to be a dialectical interplay in talking about these things; and of course that's one of the problems of a narrow and xenophobic identity politics or political positions. Such positions cause us to lose sight of the fact that we linguistically conscious animals have, up to this moment, had to labor under a radically inegalitarian distribution of resources.

And we thus come to our second question: "What is the moral content of your identity?" It's another way of raising the question of how radically democratic are you when you talk about defining your identity, especially in relation to this maldistribution of resources. If this is important, it's because one of the most disturbing things about identity talk-especially in America, but my hunch is it's true around the world-is that when people speak about identity, they always begin by talking about the victims. Having a conference on race? Bring on the black folk. We don't want to invite some white racists so they can lay bare the internal dynamics of what it is to be a white racist. No. Having a conference on gender? Bring on women. As if whiteness is not as fundamentally

constructed within the discourse of race as blackness is. As if maleness is not as fundamentally structured in the discourse of gender as is femaleness, or woman. As if straightness were inscribed into the nature of things, and those who are not straight have to provide some account of their identity. No, let's talk about identity-from-above as well as identity-from-below. That's something that is rarely stressed, rarely examined, rarely specified. We need to get a handle on how this whiteness, maleness, and straightness functions over time and space in relation to blackness or brownness or yellowness or womanness or gayness or lesbianness, etc.

I would hope that in our studies as well as in our discussions we recognize the very different status-the different political status-between identity from above and from below. I think this has much to do with the degree to which, when we talk about identities, we rarely speak of some of the larger identities that shape us. For example, national identity-which is very different from having a nation-state-is one of the most powerful means of constructing desire and death in our present moment. It functions on a different axis from that of race or gender, but with dialectic affinities. Why? Because there are racialized subjects who are deeply linked to national identity. That's one of the fascinating things about black neoconservatives: they're against identity (they're thinking about black identity), but they are also the most rampant American nationalists in the country. The same thing would be true on other axes as well.

Thus addressing the moral content of one's identity forces us to raise the question of what and where the radical democratic project is. To what degree is that project called into question by certain narrow forms of identity politics? And what social basis could there be for a radical

democratic project? I'm not going to answer that, but I'm raising the question. I think this is something that we have to grapple and come to terms with.

But I want to end by saying something about the last question, the one about the political consequences of one's identities. Since this has to do with strategies and tactics, it is something the left rarely talks about. Intellectuals usually have little to say about this. How do you go about binding people? What is the political version of the *ligare* activity, which is to say, mobilizing and organizing? Although at this present moment, one cannot, must not, give up on the radical democratic project, yet we find ourselves up against a wall in trying to put forward effective ways of mobilizing and organizing. Yes, the left is Balkanized; yes, the left is fragmented. The older universalist projects of the left have been shattered-shattered in part because they did not speak effectively to desire and death: they are an Enlightenment project whose critical acumen we must preserve but whose glib pseudouniversalisms we must radically call into question. As long as we simply hide various particularisms, but without that critical acumen, there cannot be a radical democratic project. So there must be strategies and tactics that cut across identity politics, cut across region, and gender, race, and class. Class is still around even though it's been unable to constitute an identity that has the saliency and potency of the other identities. And we must attempt to think about how we create and sustain organizations that acknowledge this. Because we're in the bind we're in partly because we've been unable to generate the transgendered, transracial, transsexual orientation of social motion, social momentum, social movement. And if we can't do that, then there will be many, many more David Dukes by the end of the twentieth century, even while we engage in our chatter about identity.

So we have a crucial organizational, strategic, and tactical imperative. It's not that we have to have an organizational meeting, but we have to engage the question of mobilization as an object of reflection, because as Joan Scott said, politics and thinking go hand and hand. And while our politics are understood in a multidimensional and multilayered way it is also true that, on the ground, without the kind of social motion, momentum, and movement that I'm talking about, we'll feel ourselves more and more pushed against the wall as the xenophobes-be it the Lombard League in Italy, or the skinheads in Germany, or Le Pen in France-more and more speak their right-wing constructs of desire and death to mobilize and organize *their* populace.

And that's serious business. When you get working-class folk, lower middle-class folk in Louisiana saying that what they see reminds them of Germany in 1930, that's not a plaything. And of course black folk know that by experience. That is a serious challenge.