

[Anne Phillips](#)

## What's wrong with essentialism?

Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)

**Original citation:**

Phillips, Anne (2010) *What's wrong with essentialism? Distinktion: Scandinavian journal of social theory*, 11 (1). pp. 47-60. ISSN 1600-910X  
DOI: [10.1080/1600910X.2010.9672755](https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2010.9672755)

© 2010 University of Aarhus

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/30900/>  
Available in LSE Research Online: April 2012

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final manuscript accepted version of the journal article, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer review process. Some differences between this version and the published version may remain. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

What's wrong with essentialism?

Anne Phillips

This paper identifies and discusses four distinct meanings of essentialism. The first is the attribution of certain characteristics to everyone subsumed within a particular category: the '(all) women are caring and empathetic', '(all) Africans have rhythm', '(all) Asians are community oriented' syndrome. The second is the attribution of those characteristics *to* the category, in ways that naturalise or reify what may be socially created or constructed. The third is the invocation of a collectivity as either the subject or object of political action ('the working class', 'women', 'Third World women'), in a move that seems to presume a homogenised and unified group. The fourth is the policing of this collective category, the treatment of its supposedly shared characteristics as the defining ones that cannot be questioned or modified without undermining an individual's claim to belong to that group. Focusing on these four variants enables us to see that the issue is sometimes one of degree rather than a categorical embargo.

Work on feminism and multiculturalism increasingly summons up for criticism the spectre of cultural essentialism. This runs as a thread through the essays in a recent collection on *Sexual Justice/ Cultural Justice* (Arneil et al, 2006). It figures in a ‘mapping of the terrain’ as the object of an entire school of post-colonial feminism (Shachar, 2007). And though I do not much use (or like) the term, I have been willing enough to hear my own work on *Multiculturalism without Culture* described as a critique of cultural essentialism. As its deployment in such works confirms, essentialism is thought to be a bad thing. We do not, on the whole, say, ‘that position is essentialist and that’s why I like it’; or, ‘I have some sympathy with your argument, but find it insufficiently essentialist’. As Ian Hacking (1999:17) puts it, ‘most people who use (essentialism) use it as a slur word, intending to put down the opposition’.

Yet it is also commonly argued that we cannot avoid at least some kind of essentialism: that it is a politically necessary shorthand; or even, in some arguments, a psychologically inevitable feature of the way human beings think. Diana Fuss (1989) has argued that the essentialism/ constructionism binary blocks innovative thinking, providing people with too easy a basis for unreflective dismissal. Gayatri Spivak (1988) famously wrote of a strategic essentialism that could invoke a collective category – like the subaltern or women – while simultaneously criticising the category as theoretically unviable. Though she subsequently distanced herself from what she saw as misuses of the notion of strategic essentialism, the idea that we may have to ‘take the risk of essence’ in order to have any political purchase remains an important theme in feminist theory and politics.

From a different direction, it is sometimes said that while essentialist constructs are, in a sense, category mistakes – drawing the boundaries between peoples or things in the wrong place - there is not much point rubbishing them as analytically wrong, because once in existence, they become part of our social reality. Anthropologist Gerd Baumann simultaneously criticises and accommodates an ‘ethnic reductionism’ that divided the population he was studying in Southall, London, into five religio-ethnic groups: Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, African Caribbeans, and whites. The categorisation was, he argues, seriously misleading, privileging one kind of group identity over others that were more important, and obscuring the dynamic ways in which group boundaries are drawn and redrawn. For many of his older interviewees, it was a particular region of the Indian sub-continent (the Punjab, Gujarat, Bengal), or particular island of the Caribbean, that provided the key terms of self and other identification; for some of the younger ones, a new ‘Asian’ identity was being forged that cut across distinctions between Hindu, Muslim and Sikh. The static five-way categorisation - widely employed by local politicians and policy makers, but also by the communities it was describing - reduced or denied this complexity. It mis-represented culture as ‘an imprisoning cocoon or a determining force’ (Baumann, 1996:1), encouraged potentially racist stereotypes, and significantly underplayed the multiple and imaginative ways in which people negotiate their cultural identities. For all his criticism, however, Baumann does not consider it appropriate simply to dismiss ‘folk reifications’ as falsely essentialised constructs. Once they have entered into people’s self-definitions, they assume a life of their own.<sup>i</sup>

Some psychologists, meanwhile, have suggested that essentialist thinking might just be part of the human condition, meaning that part of the way human beings process

complex information is to seek out a deeper property – what we might then term an essence –linking the things that look alike. If we conceptualise racist thinking, for example, as the presumption that visible differences of skin colour or physiognomy indicate something significant about other characteristics like intelligence or temperament, then maybe part of what sustains racist thinking is an innate tendency within the way we process information. Drawing on studies of pre-school children in Europe and the US, Lawrence Hirschfeld (1996) notes that children as young as four understand racial types in terms of an underlying essence, attributing differences in skin colour to something heritable and fixed at birth, while seeing differences in body shape or occupation as more susceptible to change.<sup>ii</sup> Though stressing that the use of race markers as a basis for dividing people up into different kinds may be specific to particular epochs and societies, he suggests that the tendency to create ‘human kinds’, and attribute to at least some of these a ‘nonobvious commonality that all members of the kind share’ (p196) (an essence, in other words) is built into our conceptual system. He is not saying it is impossible to eradicate notions of race from our mental repertoires, but he makes the plausible point that telling children race is unimportant (as in the advice that ‘we are all the same inside’) will not be the most effective strategy if it fails to accord with a deeply rooted tendency to think in terms of essentially differentiated groups. The particular features we employ to identify groups will be shaped by history; but the process of identifying a group by some presumed essence may not be so.

Even setting aside the still contested terrain of conceptual systems, it is clear that theoretical analysis depends on at least some process of abstraction. This typically involves separating out something deemed core from other things deemed peripheral, so

appears almost by definition to involve claims about accident and essence. Sociologists from the days of Max Weber have been encouraged to hone their analytical tools through the construction of ideal types. Analytic philosophers characteristically develop their arguments by stripping away misleading ‘contingencies’ in order to identify essential points. If we take essentialism to mean the process of differentiating something deemed essential from other things regarded as contingent, this can appear as a relatively uncontroversial description of the very process of thought.

Like most of those who have used the term, I continue to think essentialism a bad thing - but what exactly is wrong with it? Is it a matter of degree, a question of context, or something that must be avoided at all costs? Part of my previous reluctance to employ the term is that it covers a multitude of possible sins, and in what follows, I identify and discuss four distinct meanings. The first is the attribution of certain characteristics to everyone subsumed within a particular category: the ‘(all) women are caring and empathetic’, ‘(all) Africans have rhythm’, ‘(all) Asians are community oriented’ syndrome. The second is the attribution of those characteristics *to* the category, in ways that naturalise or reify what may be socially created or constructed. The third is the invocation of a collectivity as either the subject or object of political action (‘the working class’, ‘women’, ‘Third World women’), in a move that seems to presume a homogenised and unified group. The fourth is the policing of this collective category, the treatment of its supposedly shared characteristics as the defining ones that cannot be questioned or modified without undermining an individual’s claim to belong to that group.

The four are clearly not identical, so one might be engaged in essentialised thinking on one score while managing to avoid it on others. Indeed, one of the ironies of

essentialism is that social critics challenging the structures of thought that sustain racism and sexism commonly attack the first two, but are often criticised in their turn for falling into the third or fourth. It is, in fact, in our political engagements that we are most likely to fall foul of one or other version of essentialism. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is hard to find reputable scholars who can be plausibly castigated for their deployment of essentialised categories: we have most of us been sufficiently sensitised to the dangers to avoid such talk. In our political activities, by contrast, or in policy advice that divides populations into distinct religio-ethnic communities or assesses forms of engagement with this or the other 'community', those essentialisms often retain their force. Rogers Brubaker (2002: 166) argues that it is 'central to the *practice* of politicized ethnicity' to cast ethnic groups, races, or nations as protagonists, and make claims in their name, and his main concern is that academic analysts should not uncritically adopt these vernacular categories as their own. In his view, it is a category mistake to criticise the *political* practice of essentialising or reifying an ethnic group, for 'reifying groups is precisely what ethnopolitical entrepreneurs are in the business of doing' (167). I do not share his insouciance as regards the political practice. It is in our political activities and discourses that essentialism is most alive today, and this where it most needs to be challenged.

### *Essentialism I*

The first problem with essentialism is the attribution of particular characteristics to everyone identified with a particular category, along the lines of '(all) women are caring and empathetic', '(all) Africans have rhythm', '(all) Asians are community oriented'. The

‘all’ in such claims is usually implicit rather than stated, and even among those who hold most firmly to the view, allowance is commonly made for individual exceptions. It would, however, be a mistake to regard this as absolving the assertion from criticism. As the phrase about it being the exception that proves the rule suggests, acknowledging exceptions does not weaken the impact of the general rule. When a category that applies to billions (like women) is employed, even the most rigid of essentialists will of course anticipate exceptions. Investing such categories with explanatory force still remains an extraordinary leap.

That said, there will often enough be *some* basis for the attribution. It is unlikely that the choice of characteristics is entirely random; and there may well be some observed history that lends itself to the claim. But the correlation might be statistically insignificant, and even where it is statistically strong, the attribution turns what is only probabilistically true into a much stronger claim. The problem here is one of over-generalisation, stereotyping, and a resulting inability even to ‘see’ characteristics that do not fit your preconceptions. In practice, this leads to discrimination: ‘I would never employ, marry, believe an X, because they are all unreliable.’

There is plenty of research suggesting that the typical correlations are indeed misleading and overstated. As regards gender differences, it is widely thought that girls have better communication skills than boys and that boys are better at maths, that women are more empathic than men and men more aggressive than women, that girls and women are better at routine tasks while boys and men are better at complex problem solving; and there is indeed some evidence to substantiate these common beliefs. Yet when Janet Shibley White (2005) examined 124 meta-analyses of gender difference, she found the



gender differences close to zero or small in 78% of cases. There *were* differences, but the leap from this to claims of the form ‘(all) women x’ or ‘(all) men y’ was clearly unfounded. The studies approximated the stereotypes in only a few areas: Hyde reports moderate to large differences in throwing velocity and distance (one thinks of Iris Marion Young’s famous essay (2005) on ‘Throwing Like a Girl’); in attitudes towards casual sex (men liked this more than women); and in physical – though less so verbal – aggression. In some of the most interesting results, Hyde reports the enormous power of self-stereotyping according to dominant gender codes in ‘creating’ gender difference. In one such example, men and women were divided into two mixed groups and asked to complete the same maths test. The first group was told beforehand that the test was thought to contain a certain gender bias, the second that it was gender neutral. The men did better than the women in the first group, but there were no significant gender differences in performance in the second. Hyde concludes her analysis with a warning about the social costs of overinflated claims of gender differences.

Similar points can be made with regard to inflated claims of cultural difference. As is particularly apparent from recent developments across Europe, exaggerated discourses of cultural difference can be employed to represent young women from ethnic minority backgrounds as peculiarly in need of state protection; and essentialised constructions of oppressive (ethnic minority) families and victimised (ethnic minority) young women can contribute to a climate in which governments find it acceptable to impose illiberal bans on activities involving minority ethnic groups. The decision of the French National Assembly to ban schoolchildren from wearing ‘conspicuous’ displays of religious or political allegiance in public schools (in intention and effect, banning the

Muslim headscarf) is one obvious example, for at least part of the justification for this was the claim that headscarves were being imposed on Muslim schoolgirls by family and community pressure. The policies adopted across Europe of restricting the entry of fiancées or spouses from outside the European Union until the potential marriage partners are variously eighteen, twenty-one, or twenty-four is another telling illustration. Setting aside, for the purposes of argument, suspicions about the main object being to reduce non-white migration, the rationale is that this protects young people from coercion into marriage, for it is mainly young people of non European origin who are exposed to the dangers of forced marriage, and it is plausible to think they will be better able to withstand parental pressure when they are twenty-one or twenty-four than when they are sixteen. Different minimum ages for marriage to partners from inside or outside the EU are then justified by claims about the greater exposure to familial coercion and lesser ability to resist it for young people in minority ethnic groups. These claims reflect and reproduce damaging cultural stereotypes (for fuller discussion, see Phillips, 2007; Scott, 2007; Phillips and Saharso, 2008).

I do not contest the claim that individuals are coerced – that some French schoolgirls adopt headscarves because of their fears of being harassed or denounced as impure, or that many young people are forced into unwanted marriages – but I take issue with the kind of racial profiling that generalises from evidence that *some* young people marrying partners from outside the EU are unwilling participants to a presumption that *all* such marriages are bogus. I do not think it appropriate to impose blanket bans on an entire practice because of evidence that some of those engaged in it are being coerced. I object to the failure to recognise that young people from minority ethnic groups can be as

clear in their own minds about the choices they are making as young people anywhere; and I believe that an essentialised discourse of minority cultures, as almost defined by their tendency to coerce and constrain, has combined with an essentialised discourse of the victimised young women from minority groups to legitimate these illiberal policies.

As Ian Hacking reminds us, however, in his sceptical take on social constructionism, something might have an extra-theoretical function – might, for example, encourage racist or sexist ways of viewing people – and yet still be true. Unmasking a function does not in itself add up to refuting a claim. It has, moreover, been a key tenet of feminist and critical race theory that there are costs to denying as well as to exaggerating difference. Arguing for gender equality on the grounds that there are *no* differences between women and men can mean an over-ready acceptance of dominant scales of value. Arguing for racial equality on the grounds that we are all the same under the skin can suggest that some skin colours are indeed problematic. Arguing for cultural equality on the grounds that people are all fundamentally the same can suggest there is therefore no cost to being expected to align your own cultural practices with those of the dominant group. An unreflective critique of essentialism may not sufficiently address these concerns.

Acknowledging difference is not necessarily essentialist. Even profiling is not all bad. Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen (2006) notes that we do not usually consider it outrageous if the police work on the assumption that the perpetrator of a violent crime is more likely to be male than female; and even those strongly opposed to racial profiling tend to think it a waste of police resources if they search for the perpetrator of a racist hate crime among the victim's own racial group.<sup>iii</sup> As regards forced marriage, while I

reject blanket bans, I do not consider it outrageous if police and social workers draw up lists of risk factors that help them identify the young people most likely to be at risk of coercion into marriage. Any such list is clearly open to stereotyping and misrepresentation, and it will often be the case that the harms associated with this – the potential demonisation of particular minority groups, and the treatment of young people from these groups as particularly passive victims – outweigh any advantages. But if we want societies to take effective action against problems such as forced marriage, targeting information and resources where they will be most effective looks a sensible idea.

This suggests that what is wrong with this first kind of essentialism is to some extent a matter of degree. We can all agree that over-generalisation, stereotyping, and an inability even to perceive characteristics that do not fit our preconceptions is a problem; but the very use of ‘*over*’ generalisation may then be the important point. It is hard to see how any structured analysis of social and political issues is possible without abstraction and the deployment of (then always potentially stereotypical) generalisation. What else, after all, is induction? Uma Narayan (1998) argues that ‘antiessentialism about gender and about culture does not entail a simple-minded opposition to all generalizations, but entails instead a commitment to examine both their empirical accuracy and their political utility or risk’. This suggests a continuum rather than an embargo, at least on this first version.

### *Essentialism II*

In the second version of essentialism, characteristics are attributed, not to the individuals making up a particular category, but to the category itself. So, it is *because* you are a

woman that you are more caring than a comparable man, not because you live in a society where girls and women are expected to be more caring, or a society where family policy encourages a division of labour between male breadwinners and female carers. This is probably what most people understand by essentialism: not merely a perception of groups as different (with the associated risks of over-generalisation), but the attribution of these differences to some underlying and static 'essence'. This move naturalises differences that may be historically variant and socially created. As regards gender or race, this typically involves a biological or genetic determinism. As regards nationality or culture, it typically involves a reification that produces the 'nation' or the 'culture' as an entity in itself. As Brubaker (2002:164) puts it, the latter commits the error of 'groupism': 'the tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflict, and fundamental units of social analysis'.

It is easy to see why this kind of essentialism is problematic, though again, there are risks in overstating the case. We should surely criticise discourses that naturalise socially and historically constructed differences, that attribute, for example, women's lesser participation in the world of high politics to a genetic difference between the sexes. It is not inconceivable, I suppose, that we might uncover a relevant genetic trait, but it would have to be very differentially distributed between the sexes to account for the current global imbalance, where women are less than one in five of the world's elected representatives, and a miniscule proportion of the world's leaders. There are explanations enough for this in the way our societies are organised without drawing on some as yet undiscovered string of DNA.

We should also, in my view, resist the more modest notion that social differences are ‘grounded’ by nature, because differences involve categories, and categories are the kind of thing that human beings produce to achieve some social purpose. I take this to be an important part of what Judith Butler (1999) argues in her critique of the sex/gender distinction. Thinking of ‘gender’ as a socially variable construct built upon a pre-given biological ‘sex’ is not enough to save us from the charge of essentialism, for in accepting without question the naturalness of the founding male/female divide, we concede too much to the norms of heterosexuality, and to the practice of grouping people according to their reproductive organs. Why not group people according to height? Why not according to the length of their little finger? The reason, obviously enough, is that we live in societies that attach enormous significance to reproductive complementarity, and need therefore to know whether someone is biologically ‘female’ or ‘male’. But that is already a social explanation. The choice of salient distinction is not simply given to us by nature. It is itself a social act.

The other point to stress is that the naturalising of socially and historically generated difference is not restricted to those categories most open to biological or genetic determinism, but can also figure in relation to ones that are self-evidently social and historical. Nations, for example, come into existence at particular periods of history, and even those with the most ethno-cultural conception of nation or nationality must know that these cannot be defined in biological or genetic terms. So where is the essentialism here? I would locate it in the reification, the construction of nation or culture as *entity*. When people talk of ‘cultural practices’, or seek to explain the strange behaviour of their neighbours by reference to something termed their culture, they

conjure up a simplified and homogenized *thing*. As Tariq Modood (2007:93) puts it ‘rich, complex histories become simplified and collapsed into a teleological progress or unified ideological construct called French culture or European civilization or the Muslim way of life’. It is one thing to talk of there being culturally specific ways of expressing joy or mourning the dead or ordering relations between women and men. It is quite another – and far more troubling - to say that ‘culture x’ organises gender relations in one way and ‘culture y’ in another. The first way of talking about cultural difference is always vulnerable to stereotypes, over-generalisation, and the rigidity that fails to perceive when similarities are greater than difference (open, that is, to the worries attached to essentialism I), but it can also be relatively uncontentious. The second way of thinking about cultural difference commits us to culture with a capital C, and casts culture itself as protagonist. ‘Culture’ becomes the explanation, and people’s activities the explanandum. This is a route that brings us to an essentialised version of culture.

### *Essentialism III*

The critique of stereotypes has been a staple of the feminist and anti-racist diet for years, and essentialisms I and II have come in for their fair share of attack. The irony, as many feminists and critical race theorists acknowledge, is that movements to combat the hierarchical structures that generate and sustain these stereotypes often invoke a collectivity that itself seems to presume a unified, perhaps essentialised, group. Feminism, for example, challenges absurdly over-stated generalisations about women and men, attacks discriminations and exclusions on the grounds of gender, and in some versions, argues for a world beyond gender. Susan Moller Okin (1989:171), for one,

argues that ‘a just future would be one without gender. In its social structures and practices, one’s sex would have no more relevance than one’s eye color or the length of one’s toes.’ Yet a *feminist* movement to achieve this self-evidently anti-essentialist goal necessarily invokes ‘women’, may indeed make a virtue out of women organising autonomously as women, and often calls for gender specific measures that treat women differently from men. This invocation of the very categories under attack is part of what Joan Scott (1996:3-4) calls the ‘constitutive paradox’ of feminism. As she puts it:

Feminism was a protest against women’s political exclusion: its goal was to eliminate “sexual difference” in politics, but it had to make its claims on behalf of “women” (who were discursively produced through “sexual difference”). To the extent that it acted for “women”, feminism produced the “sexual difference” it sought to eliminate.’

In the very practice of challenging a particular way of conceptualising women, feminists then seem doomed to replicate it.

The ‘women’ brought into existence through this politics may, moreover, obscure many differences *between* women along axes such as class, sexuality, race, nationality, or religion. Feminists have rigorously avoided inflated claims about the essential differences between women and men, but in the practice of feminist politics are likely to make all kinds of generalisations about ‘women’ or ‘women’s interests’ or ‘women’s oppression’. These are not, to be sure, the kind of generalisation that says women are good at routine tasks but bad at problem solving, but rather generalisations about women being discriminated against in employment or under-represented in politics or expected to assume primary responsibility for care. Yet these generalisations, too, can obscure



significant differences of location and concern, and often mean that the experiences of (all) women are read off the specificities of one sub-group. When the sub-group standing in for the category as a whole is relatively privileged, this poses an especially acute problem. 'The feminist critique of gender essentialism does not merely charge that essentialist claims about "women" are overgeneralizations, but points out that these generalizations are hegemonic in that they represent the problems of privileged women (most often white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual women) as paradigmatic "women's issues".' (Narayan, 1998: 86)

Uma Narayan goes on to stress the irony: that in addressing the tendency towards gender essentialism, feminists sometimes replicated essentialised thinking at a new level. They accepted, that is, the injunction to attend more closely to differences among women and not presume that women throughout the world faced the same set of issues and concerns, but they sometimes did this through equally totalising categories such as Western culture, non-Western culture, or Third World women. It became important not to generalise from the experiences of 'Western women' because this was said to fail to recognise the specificities of 'Indian' or 'African' culture'. Essentialised understandings of cultural or continental difference then replaced previously essentialised understandings of gender. I have said that there are costs to denying as well as to exaggerating difference, but too much anticipation of difference is also dangerous. Generalisations about how the people in particular cultural groups act, or what problems the women in those groups face, can be seriously misleading.

The worries about simplifying, homogenising, and stereotyping take us back to issues already discussed under essentialism I. The more distinctive feature of essentialism

III is the way movements for political and social change conjure into existence ( in their own minds at least) political actors like workers, women, peasants, ‘the people’; and the problems associated with this way of conceiving social groups. When Spivak made her much repeated comments about the ‘strategic use of positivist essentialism’ (1988: 205), she was reflecting on the work of the *Subaltern Studies* group, and in particular their attempt to retrieve an ‘insurgent’ or ‘rebel’ or ‘subaltern’ consciousness from documentation written from the perspective of counter-insurgents. Claims about group consciousness look like essentialising claims, not just in the modest sense of generalising from what may be very different individual experiences, but in the attribution of an essential personhood to a group. A loose categorisation of multiple locations and perspectives then comes to figure almost as a person, capable of acting, willing, challenging, and having a consciousness all of its own. Even if we are suspicious of the notion of individuals having unified identities, the treatment of collectives as quasi-persons endows them with more unity than they can justifiably claim.

Can we, however, think politics without collectivities? Can we think collectivities without at least some kind of essentialism? In one illuminating discussion of this, Iris Marion Young (1994) utilises Sartre’s distinction between group and series to conceptualise gender as seriality. She recommends that we reserve the term ‘group’ for self-consciously mutually acknowledging collectivities with a self-conscious purpose: reserve it, that is, for those historically specific and often short-lived moments when people do indeed combine together in a common project, and it becomes appropriate to describe them as part of a unified group. Groups come and go, however, emerging from and falling back into a less self conscious and more passively unified ‘series’. A series is

defined by reference to material practices and structures: 'gender , like class, is a vast, multifaceted, layered, complex and overlapping set of structures and objects. *Women* are the individuals who are positioned as feminine by the activities surrounding those structures and objects.' (p728)

Much of the time we may not realise we are part of this series, though it could become quickly apparent when we discover shared limits and constraints. Even in realising this, however, we may choose not to make membership of that particular series a defining part of our identity. Gender as seriality *is* a material claim: it commits us to the view that there are social structures that impact, in however multifaceted a way, on all women; and while compatible with a great diversity of ways of experiencing being a woman, and with widespread refusal to adopt gender as self-definition, it would be thrown into question by evidence that being a woman set no limits to one's life. In refusing, however, claims about the unity of experience or unity of identity, it offers a non-essentialist way of thinking of collectives. It also helps us understand the way a series can generate what is, genuinely, a group, and the way a group falls back into the relative passivity of the series, sometimes after succeeding in its political project, sometimes after failing.

#### *Essentialism IV*

The final way of thinking about essentialism is in some ways the most challenging, for this is an essentialism that comes into play precisely at the moment when the generalisation fails and the stereotypes no longer work. This is essentialism at its most overtly normative: the treatment of certain characteristics as the defining ones for anyone

in the category, as characteristics that cannot be questioned or modified without thereby undermining one's claim to belong to the group. So, you're not *really* a lesbian if you also sleep with men; you're not *really* working class if you like opera; you're not *really* a Muslim if you tolerate non-believers.

The normative weight is sometimes imposed from the outside, by people so mired in their stereotypes that they find themselves compelled to re-categorise those who display aberrant behaviour. Unable to cope with the idea that activities, interests, or qualities considered intrinsic to one category of person might be found in people belonging to another, they simply re-categorise the person. The more damaging cases are those where the normative weight is imposed from within the collectivity, such that people find themselves repudiated by what they had continued to consider their own community. At all those moments when you are told that you are not 'really' (Indian, working class, a feminist, a Trotskyist, whatever), there is a kind of categorical coercion at work. You are being refused your own self-definition because of some attribute deemed an essential component of the category you have tried to claim.

Sadly, this kind of controlling, regulating, and policing activity can characterise movements for social change as much as movements against it. Perhaps particularly at the moment when what Iris Young termed a series generates a self-consciously committed group, the group may devote much of its energies to policing its own boundaries and ensuring that members really are united by the same practices and concerns. It is a frequent comment on radical politics that groups can become more preoccupied with the finer points of contention between themselves and their closest political neighbours than with self-evidently larger areas of disagreement with

mainstream political parties; dissidents within are continually at risk of expulsion. It is also one of the perennial criticisms of identity politics that the identity in question can become a form of social control, to the point where one's choice of sexual partner or relationship to one's parents, or even one's holiday destination, can become the heated object of political debate. When this happens, the identity is being defined by reference to an essential defining characteristic, and those who do not fit are in trouble.

Of the various meanings discussed in this essay, this last is the one where the essentialism seems most unambiguously wrong. Interestingly, it is also the version that comes least readily to the fore, perhaps because it is so patently grounded in non-naturalistic claims. When people say I cannot regard you as an x because your views or lifestyle break the defining codes of x-ness, the 'essence' is clearly a social not a natural attribution. If being Indian, for example, were a matter of nature, nothing you subsequently did or said could take it away. It is precisely because it is a social construct that we are able to describe people as no longer 'really' Indian, or no longer 'really' working class, or no longer 'really' lesbian. This reinforces the point made in relation to essentialism II: that it is a mistake to think of essentialism primarily in terms of nature or biology or genetics, for much of what we rightly criticise as essentialist is political or social or historical. Essentialism is a way of thinking not always so easily distinguished from more innocent forms of generalisation, and what is wrong with it is often a matter of degree rather than categorical embargo. It should be clear, however, that we cannot hope to draw the line between an acceptable and indefensible essentialism in a distinction between the natural and the social.

## Bibliography

Arneil, Barbara, Deveaux, Monique, Dhamoon, Rita and Eisenberg, Avigail, eds. (2006) *Sexual Justice/Cultural Justice: Critical Perspectives in Political Theory* New York and London: Routledge

Baumann, Gerd (1996) *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press

Brubaker, Rogers (2002) 'Ethnicity without Groups', *European Journal of Sociology*, 43/3: 163 – 189

Butler, Judith (1999) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.

Fuss, Diana (1989) *Essentially Speaking* New York: Routledge

Hacking, Ian (1999) *The Social Construction of What?* Harvard, Mass. and Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Hirschfeld, Lawrence (1996) *Race in the Making: Cognition, Culture, and the Child's Construction of Human Kinds* Cambridge, Mass and London: MIT Press.

Hyde, Janet Shibley (2005) 'The Gender Similarities Hypothesis' *American Psychologist*, 60/6: 581-592

Latour, Bruno (2003) 'The Promises of Constructivism', pp 27-46 in Idhe, Don and Selinger, Evan eds. *Chasing Technoscience: Matrix of Materiality* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press

Lippert-Rasmussen, Kasper (2006) 'Racial Profiling Versus Community', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 23/2: 191- 205

Modood, Tariq (2007) *Multiculturalism: a Civic Idea* Cambridge: Polity

- Narayan, Uma (1998) 'Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism' *Hypatia*, 13/2 : 86-106
- Okin, Susan Moller (1989) *Justice Gender and the Family* New York: Basic Books
- Phillips, Anne (2007) *Multiculturalism without Culture* Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press
- Phillips, Anne and Saharso, Sawitri (eds) (2008) *The Rights of Women and the Crisis of Multiculturalism*, special issue of *Ethnicities*, Vol. 8/3
- Scott, Joan W. (1996) *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press
- Scott, Joan W. (2007) *The Politics of the Veil* Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press
- Shachar, Ayelet (2007) 'Feminism and Multiculturalism: Mapping the Terrain', pp.115-148 in Laden, Antony Simon and Owen, David (eds) *Multiculturalism and Political Theory* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Spivak, Gayatri (1988) 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', pp197-221 in Guha, Ranajit and Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty eds. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Stoler, Ann Laura (1997) 'On Political and Psychological Essentialisms', *Ethos* 25/1: 101-106.
- Young, Iris Marion (1994) 'Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective' *Signs*, 19/3: 713 – 738
- Young, Iris Marion (2005) *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## Footnotes



---

<sup>i</sup> This may expose Baumann to Bruno Latour's complaint against the archetypical 'critical sociologist', who when asked whether constructed reality is constructed or real, blandly responds that it is both. Latour (2003) presents this as the ultimate trivialisation. He rejects both the idea that we could conjure something into existence purely through our categories, and that we could then find ourselves fooled by them. "'We" never build a world of our own delusion because there exists no such free creator as "us" ... "we" are never deluded by a world of fancy because there exists no force strong enough to transform us into the mere slaves of powerful illusion.'

<sup>ii</sup> For a sympathetic but critical review see also Stoler (1997).

<sup>iii</sup> He makes these observations in the context of a powerful argument *against* racial profiling.