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Are Multiple Identities the Answer, or, How Do We Actually Live “In-Between” Different Identities?1

I.

One of the distinguishing marks of work in the humanities is that it often contains a strong utopian dimension. One may claim, in effect – as many critical theorists, for example of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, have done – that this is the actual promise and raison d’être of literary and cultural studies. Critics in search of blueprints for agency and political practice usually dismiss this utopianism as, at best, unrealistic and, at worst, escapist. However, this is a short-sighted view. We are all aware of the fact that what may still look utopian at its first formulation may ultimately have important and valuable consequences in the real world. When the first feminists in the late 1960s formulated feminist claims they still had the status of almost a sectarian group and were often made fun of by the general public. Nowadays, a whole generation is profiting from their pioneering work without always realizing to whom they owe the possibilities that have been opened up for them. The same could be said about groups that profited from the new social movements.2

If utopias are an integral part of work in the humanities, then this must also apply to the field of American studies. Indeed, it is interesting to consider for a moment what the dominant utopias of the field have been in the past and what they may be at the present time. For this purpose, Leo Marx has come up with a useful distinction between American studies B.D. and American studies A.D., that is, “before the divide” and “after the divide.” The divide he refers to is that between the founding phase of the field, most

1 This essay extends an argument first presented in “Multiple Identities? Figurational Sociology and American Studies,” Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes: Figurational Approaches to American Culture, eds. Christa Buschendorf, Astrid Franke, and Johannes Voelz. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. Parts of this essay have been incorporated into the present version which was first presented at the “Futures of American Studies Institute” at Dartmouth College in the summer of 2011.

2 In his discussion of Aztlan as a utopia, Bill Ashcroft reminds us to what extent ethnic studies have been centered around such utopias especially in their beginnings: “Examples of these utopian formations include Oceania in the Pacific, Rastafarianism in the Caribbean, Pharaonic Africa, the religious profusion of the Indian past, and various forms of possibility thinking from other regions” (16).
prominently represented by the myth and symbol school, and the various kinds of revisionism that have emerged after the 1960s. Looking for the utopian dimension of these different stages, one may claim that the main utopia of American studies B.D. was the idea of America itself, or, as I have called it in a different context, the romance with America\footnote{See my essays “The Romance with America: Approaching America through Its Ideals,” and “American Literary History and the Romance with America.”} – an imaginary America that was purified of its imperialistic, racist, and other oppressive dimensions, or, as the New Americanists would put it, of its many states of exception. After the divide, on the other hand, basically two utopias emerge. One is the transnational utopia of international solidarity that is opened up by going beyond the borders of the nation-state and joining forces with the African diaspora of the Black Atlantic, or the subaltern peasants of the Southern hemisphere, or institutions of transnational indigeneity.\footnote{For an analysis of this transnational utopia see my essay on “Transnationalisms,” forthcoming in \textit{New Literary History}.} I consider this an attempt to regain the revolutionary subject that has been lost in the U.S. itself. The other utopia is the one on which I want to focus in this essay: I am referring to the concept of multiple identities, or of an identity in-between fixed national or cultural identities – terms that I will use here as a shorthand for a number of similar concepts such as heterogeneous, fragmented, or flexible identities, all designed to negate the idea of a self-conscious subject and a stable unified identity.\footnote{At one point, these utopias are linked, namely in the assumption that transnationalism produces “subjectivities in-between” that can resist the interpellative power of national ideologies such as that of American exceptionalism.}

It is not an exaggeration to say that this utopia currently stands at the center of American studies as well as cultural studies. One may claim, in fact, that it has become something like a magic formula in these fields to solve an impasse created by a certain, by now well-established and widely accepted power analysis. In that analysis, the ultimate power effect of the modern nation-state lies in the creation of subject-positions that keep the individual trapped in the imaginary hold of a national or cultural identity. This, in fact, is the explanation why the oppressed do not rebel against their oppression and often vote for their oppressors. As I have argued in a different context, cultural radicalism distinguishes itself from prior forms of political radicalism such as orthodox Marxism by the claim that it no longer sees economic structures or institutions of the state as the primary source of power effects in Western societies but culture (Fluck 2002). From the perspective of cultural radicalism, it is culture which determines the perception of reality before the individual is even aware of it by constituting the linguistic and cultural patterns through which the individual makes sense of the world. Consent is thus produced not through repression by the state and its institutions but by the system’s cunning ways of constituting “subjects” or ascribing “identities” through cultural forms. Thus, the critique of the philosophical concept of the subject, understood as a self-conscious individual, be-
came a major project of cultural radicalism. Displacing narratives of growth, maturing, and increased self-awareness, subject-formation was redefined by Lacanian misrecognition, Althusserian interpellation or Foucauldian subjection by regimes of knowledge. These theories of subject-formation departed radically from earlier sociological, psychological, or classical psychoanalytical versions in that they saw identity not as the end result of a process of socialization or of the talking cure but as the direct result of the hailing power of cultural representation.

It has been pointed out repeatedly in recent years that this theory of subject-formation has created a frustrating impasse for oppositional perspectives – and has thus undermined the original project of cultural studies to provide resistance to the encroaching forces of instrumental rationality. Cultural radicalism’s theory of subject-formation defined power in such an all-pervasive, monolithic way that resistance appeared impossible and even opposition could be seen as only another script of the system. In the long run, this could hardly be in the interest of the new social movements that provided the political base for cultural radicalism. It was at this point that the concept of multiple identities came to the rescue. In effect, it is hard to imagine how the impasse in the power analysis I have described could have been solved in any other way. One key move was to replace the term subject by the term identity. Although both can be considered cultural constructs by means of discourse, the term identity nevertheless opens up a greater range of options: an individual can be only one subject but she can have various, changing identities.

However, as long as identity is still conceived as “coherent” and unified, it is in danger of exerting the same tyranny of homogenization and subjection like the idea of the subject attacked by Althusser, Lacan, or Foucault. For cultural radicalism, a “unified identity” – such as, for example, American national identity – almost equals the idea of the subject, because it provides a false, illusory sense of unity and autonomous agency. A unified identity thus imprisons the individual and subjects her to a cultural script. Formerly a sign of hard-won maturity, it is now seen as a trap. The concept of multiple identities was created to escape this prison-house of a unified, fixed identity. If the actual power effect of modern societies lies in the interpellation of individuals into certain subject positions and identities, then the only way to regain a certain measure of agency must focus on the ways in which we can escape from this prison-house. This is where the idea of multiple identities that allow the individual to move between fixed identities or to live in-between them takes on central importance. Multiple identities point the way to a state of in-betweenness that can help to evade the effects of interpellation or may even become a source of dis-interpellation. In consequence, much of the work

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6 On the key role of the idea of resistance in the formation of cultural studies and of American studies, see my essay “Theories of American Culture (and the Transnational Turn in American Studies)” (2007).
that is currently done in American studies and cultural studies focuses on discussions of how a state of in-betweenness can be conceptualized in theory and envisioned in practice.

The perspective from which I want to analyze and discuss this current utopia may seem somewhat surprising at first sight. It is that of figurational sociology, a term most often used in reference to the works of Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu. The common link between them is the idea that specific character structures are the result of chains of social interdependencies that create a characteristic *habitus* within a group. In his magisterial two-volume study *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (*The Civilizing Process*), Elias traces the way in which growing interdependence, for instance at the court of French Absolutist regimes, increased the need for self-constraint and self-discipline on the side of the individual. In Bourdieu’s work, the key concept for the description of character structures that are the result of interdependencies in certain class formations is that of the *habitus*, which one may define as an internalized social norm of which the individual may not even be aware, because it has become her second nature. We encounter here, by the way, already an interesting clash of positions, because concepts like multiple identities or in-betweenness must, of course, see the *habitus* as only another, in fact, the supreme prison-house of the self, because it is based on internationalization and can be effective as a habit precisely because it remains largely “invisible.”

In response to such ideological effects of identity-formation, a critic like Fredric Jameson can welcome the idea of a multiplication of subject-positions with the following words: “What was very useful in France in the structural‐psychoanalytic period was that they began to speak of subject-positions. Then suddenly people realized that we all occupy innumerable subject-positions. That for example to talk in politics: a black person in the United States is not just a black, but also a woman and maybe there are sexual things, gender things and so on. We all occupy multiple subject-positions. I find that a very useful description as well.” Complementing Jameson’s point, Bill Ashcroft focuses on subjects who live in-between the borders of the nation-state by which subjectivity is normally constituted. For Ashcroft, globalization reveals “something that is true for all nations: that the nation – held captive by the state as a homogeneous focus of identity, a bordered entity with its own integral relationship with other similarly constituted nation-states – is in fact a transitional, fluid interaction of nations and identities. In short, the nation is a transnation” (13). Thus, Ashcroft’s term transnation is designed to capture “the fluidity of national subjects moving within and between the borders of the state” (14).

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7 Jameson’s description is well suited to highlight the difference between the current cultural studies concept of in-betweenness (which is also that of current American studies) and the use of the concept of in-betweenness in reception aesthetics where it is used by Wolfgang Iser to describe aesthetic experience. In Iser’s description, a state of in-betweenness created by aesthetic experience is seen as an extension of identity, whereas it functions as an evasion of identity ascription in cultural radicalism.
II.

A telling example of the logic at work in the move to the concept of multiple identities and multiple subject positions – and some of the problems created by it – is provided by the influential British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall. Hall started out as a New Left intellectual in the post-War years in Britain, before he discovered that class was not the only form of being disenfranchised. As a result, he was one of the first scholars in British and European cultural studies who introduced the concept of race as an analytical concept and then became a major theorist of the so-called new cultural politics of difference in race and gender studies. In his by now classical essays “New Ethnicities” and “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” Hall argues against the essentialization of the black subject and emphasizes “the extraordinary diversity of subject positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category black” (New Ethnicities 443). As a category for the description of identity, the term race is thus not sufficient. In effect, the major point of Hall’s essay on the new ethnicities is to criticize this type of identity politics. In order to work against identity politics, identity has to be redefined as positionality, and difference has to be reconceptualized, not as unbridgeable racial otherness, but as positional, conditional and conjectural construct. This, in turn, leads to a proliferation of identities, as Hall points out in the essay “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?”:

The point is not simply that, since our racial differences do not constitute all of us, we are always different, negotiating different kinds of differences – of gender, of sexuality, of class. It is also that these antagonisms refuse to be neatly aligned; they are simply not reducible to one another; they refuse to coalesce around a single axis of differentiation. We are always in negotiation, not with a single set of oppositions that place us always in the same relation to others, but with a series of different positionalities. Each has for us its point of profound subjective identification. And that is the most difficult thing about this proliferation of the field of identities and antagonisms: they are often dislocating in relation to one another (473).

Precisely because “they are dislocating in relation to one another,” the multiplication of identities can serve as an antidote to the danger of being entrapped in one unified identity.

In his programmatic essay “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference,” Stuart Hall explains the concept of multiple subject-positions and identities by drawing on his own experience as a Jamaican citizen who went to England in the 1950s as an immigrant and then, after the politicization of the 1960s, re-discovered his own blackness. In the course of these different periods of his life, he thus changed his identity, his own sense of self, several times, first from a respectable middle-class member in Jamaica to immigrant and then to

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8 For a more comprehensive and detailed analysis of the development of Hall’s work and his gradual move from class analysis to the so-called new politics of difference with its strong focus on the question of identity, see my essay “Stuart Hall: From New Left Politics to the New Cultural Politics of Difference” (2002).
black diaspora intellectual, so that he can say in retrospect: “If I think about who I am, I have been – in my own much too long experience – several identities” (15). The example seems convincing at first sight, but at a closer look it draws attention to an important aspect of identity-formation that is usually left out of debates about multiple identities and states of in-betweenness.

What representatives of the new cultural politics of difference like Hall may mean when they associate traditional concepts of identity with terms like “stable” or “unified” or “fixed” is the claim of sociological and psychological identity-theories that an identity depends on the ability of an individual to provide a continuous flow of experiences and memories with a sense of coherence and continuity. From this perspective, it is not the changing social roles per se which constitute Hall’s identity but what he, an individual by the name of Stuart Hall, has made of them, how he has integrated them by revising and extending his former identity – in contrast, for example, to other Jamaican immigrants to England who may have undergone similar changes in identity but who have nevertheless not become Stuart Hall. To be sure, because Hall’s identity is always in development, it is open and never fixed, but only within the context of Hall’s specific way of linking a continuum of experiences. Ironically enough, Hall himself illustrates this elementary fact involuntarily when he introduces his case for having been “several identities” by positing an “I” who makes this claim: “If I think about who I am, I have been – in my own much too long experience – several identities.” The heterogeneous, multiple identity Hall is talking about here is really the multi-faceted dimension of the life of a single individual who is able (as almost all human beings are in one way or another) to integrate different roles and experiences into a script of his own life. 9 Hall never indicates any awareness of the fact that the self is not constituted merely by a sequence of “subject-positions” but that identity is constituted by relating past and present experiences through narrative – which, again ironically, he employs himself when he provides us with a short history of his life. 10

III.

Hall’s use of the term identity and of the counter-term multiple identities remains confused and confusing. Specifically, he seems unable and unwilling to make a distinction between subject position and identity. However, it seems necessary to keep the two concepts apart, for not every subject position created by cultural representations can already be equated with an identity.

9 To be sure, the ‘I’ consists of various aspects such as body-consciousness, the emotional household, affects etc., but these aspects do not simply exist separately from each other but have to be related by some form of coordination.

10 The prevalent view in cultural radicalism that the illusion of a coherent identity is created by repetition is therefore unconvincing, as the example of Hall shows. The coherence-effect is provided by narrative, and narrative consists of more than mere repetition.
since an identity can only be formed by an attachment to a subject position – or the refusal to do so. Clearly, not every subject position we encounter in and through cultural representations has equal effects on us and our identity. A cultural representation can only be effective as a form of interpellation, when we attach our desire to it or “identify” with it. And, an important part in this process will be the question of whether and how this subject position fits into the narrative of our own identity. Hall is unable to acknowledge this, because he fully subscribes to a theory of identity formation as subject positioning by interpellation. A telling example is provided in his essay “Who Needs Identity?” where he has given the following definition of identity: “Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (6).

The equation of discursive subject-positions with identity has resulted in (explicit or implicit) claims that mobility, such as, for example, migration, is, by definition, anti-essentialist and counter-hegemonic, because it increases the frequency and variety of encounters with discursive subject positions and thereby undermines the interpellative hold of any single subject position. This explains the current vogue of conceptualizations of mobility and “in-betweenness” in cultural studies, from borderlands, diaspora and cosmopolitanism to the third space as sites outside of the interpellative power of the nation-state that open up new possibilities for the construction of heterogeneous identities, proposing for readers an understanding of identity as processual rather than fixed and constructed within but also against official representation. These “mobility”-concepts refer to positions in-between two or more cultures or within racial or gender ascriptions in order to reclaim a counter-hegemonic potential by undermining identities that are grounded in a single subject position. If identities would be created solely by interpellation into discursive subject positions, then the individual would be more or less “defenseless,” because she needs these subject positions in order to be able to gain any identity at all. But this individual can be rescued by the movement between cultures and the multiplication of subject positions linked with it, because this movement can function as a potential source of dis-interpellation. Ashcroft even goes so far as to say: “The borders from which we might be free are therefore not simply the boundaries of the nation but those of nation-ness, and ultimately of identity itself” (16).

Altogether, then, the concept of multiple identities holds three major (cultural and political) promises: 1) it promises an escape from the prison-house of a unified identity. In this sense, it is also a counter-term to the figural concept of the habitus, in its versions both by Elias and Bourdieu; 2) it promises at least a certain degree of liberation and freedom from the subjectifying and subjecting power effects of the modern nation-state; 3) it promises

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11 Thus, Hall’s use of the term identity in his own example is surprisingly reductionist. His existence in Jamaica or his immigrant status in Britain are not described as containing multiple identities in themselves. Clearly, for Hall, the idea of multiple identities refers to sequential movements between different identities, and not yet to a multiplication of identity options for an individual at any given time.
– again within limits, to be sure – an escape from the chain of dependencies in which the individual is always already embedded, no matter whether we think of cultural radicalism or figurational sociology. Intellectuals and academic classes often hold romantic views of the outsider as the person who – voluntarily or involuntarily – embodies independence and freedom from the repressive world of bourgeois norms.\textsuperscript{12} Although developed within the context of a critical tradition in cultural studies, the narrative of multiple identities can be seen as another version of this romance with border-existences and transnational spaces, offering the utopian vision of a liberation from the disciplinary power effects of modern civilization on new grounds.

Moreover, within this romance of the border or of a transnational flow across borders, the new utopia of identity-multiplication is linked not only with the prospect of liberation from a unified identity, but also with the promise of a privileged critical perspective. As Emory Elliott has put it in his Presidential Address to the American Studies Association: “This is especially true for people of color. Because of ‘dislocations that can properly be considered diasporic,’ artists of color were already citizens of a ‘transnational, Pan-American world’ that only a few scholars had recognized until the last two decades” (14). During a period of assimilation by white immigrants, “many people of color lived in fluid transnational cultural borderlands developing political and cultural centers of contact …” (15). As a result, “they developed new perspectives and found safer positions from which to critique aspects of U.S. policies and culture” (17).

IV.

But what if we take the argument seriously that no matter how many discursive subject positions we encounter, we still need an “I” that connects and coordinates these various options in a continuous and more or less coherent narrative of identity? The multiple identities Hall talks about would in this case be different manifestations of an “I” at different times; they would, in other words, contribute to a sense of self-expansion, but not necessarily to a decentering or deconstruction of the need to construct an identity based on continuity and coherence. The point can be illustrated by going back to a key debate in figurational sociology, Daniel Bell’s by now classical study \textit{The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism} which at the time of its appearance was considered a major challenge to figurational sociology's theory of modernity

\textsuperscript{12} See, e.g., Gloria Anzaldúa on the border: “It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. \textit{Los atravesados} live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal.’ Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens – whether they possess documents or not, whether they’re Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot” (25).
as a steady increase in self-constraint and self-discipline. As Bell argues in confirmation of many critics of Elias especially in the 1960s and thereafter, the story of an increase in self-constraint is only one side of the story of the civilizing process. In the functional differentiation of modern consumer capitalism, there is also a counter-movement at work, namely that of an increasing informality and permissiveness, “a growing leniency in codes of conduct (manifest in language, clothing, music, dancing, relations between parents and children, sexual conduct, etc.) which seemed to provide counter evidence to Elias’ theory that civilizing processes lead to stricter regulation of conduct, more intensive emotional controls and self-constraints” (Featherstone 204). One way to respond to this critique has been to say that informalization “should not be seen as a unilinear trend; rather it is a spiral process in which waves of informalization are followed by new waves of formalization” (ibid. 205).

In contrast to such a pendulum-theory, Bell takes his point of departure from what he sees as “disjunction of realms” at the center of modern capitalist societies. These different realms are ruled by contrary principles, thereby unraveling the Protestant Ethic-link between economic rationality and character formation: “The two realms which had historically been joined to produce a single character structure … have now become unjoined” (15). In the economic realm, self-control continues to be the supreme value in ever more professionalized contexts. In the realm of culture, on the other hand, precisely the opposite is at work, namely a liberation from discipline and self-constraint. For Bell, these conflicting demands constitute a central contradiction of capitalism. During the day, the individual has to control himself, and exercise strict discipline, while in the evening, he is expected to switch from Jekyll to Hyde and turn into a carefree consumer and unrepentant hedonist. Or, as Bell puts it in a memorable phrase: “On the one hand, the business corporation wants an individual to work hard, pursue a career, accept delayed gratification – to be, in the crude sense, an organization man. And yet, in its products and its advertisements, the corporation promotes pleasure, instant joy, relaxing and letting go. One is to be ‘straight’ by day and a ‘swinger’ by night” (Bell 71-2).

Is Elias’ theory of the civilizing process as an increase in self-constraint and self-discipline still applicable, then, or do we have to replace it by Bell’s counter-narrative of a growing subversion of self-discipline and a bourgeois

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14 See, for example, Cas Wouters: “Is the trend towards informalization a reversal of the civilizing process as Elias has defined it?” (“Informalisierung und der Prozess der Zivilisation” (290, my translation). Of all Elias-scholars, Wouters has taken up the challenge most openly and intelligently whether modern developments can still be described in terms of an ever increasing self-regulation. Elias himself pointed to the phenomenon of a “controlled decontrolling of emotions,” for example in sports. However, theoretically speaking, this looks like a rather lame concession. Elias obviously never tried to see the two tendencies dialectically, that is, as interconnected.
middle-class habitus, proceeding, in Bell’s words, “from the Protestant Ethic to the Psychedelic Bazaar” (54)? Contrary to Bell, it seems to me that the two options he describes do not necessarily contradict each other, but may even complement one another. Just like Stuart Hall, Bell ignores that the apparently irreconcilable attitudes he highlights have to be coordinated, if the individual is not to become dysfunctional. Indeed, for the person exercising strict discipline during the day and then switching to a carefree hedonism in the after-hours, the need for coordination has become even greater than before. It is hard enough to pursue a daily regime of self-discipline and, in doing so, to repress one’s longing for liberation from the iron cage of today’s advanced stage of instrumental rationality. But it is even more of a challenge to switch between two contradictory modes, to first exercise self-discipline and then to metamorphose into exactly the opposite. It is more of a challenge, because the transition has to be managed, so that the hedonism unfolding after the daily 9 to 5 grind can be contained and does not become self-destructive.

Indeed, such a “multiple-identity-management” must be even more of a challenge than traditional forms of self-control, precisely because self-control is undermined by multiple identities and thus no longer an internalized routine. If self-discipline and hedonism would remain unrelated and be in each other’s way, then capitalism might indeed have a problem. If, on the other hand, we acknowledge that these two opposite attitudes must be coordinated and in this sense “integrated,” then the need for self-control has not disappeared but increased and reached a new stage. The individual has to achieve the seemingly impossible, namely to coordinate two contradictory attitudes as part of an “I” and, as a result, this “I” may not be split by inner divisions but may even be enriched by a multiplication of options. What Bell has described is not the cultural contradictions of capitalism but the latest stage in an ever widening demand for around-the-clock-self-regulation with the potential, as his own example shows, of being able to live in several worlds at once.

V.

The concept of “multiple identities” would thus signal a remarkable increase in cultural options for the individual, but it would not necessarily describe an escape from the demands of a “coherent” and continuous identity-construction needed to coordinate a multiplicity of roles and subject positions successfully. Indeed, the widening of identity options evoked by the concept may turn out to be exactly the opposite of what it is supposed to be in

15 Cf. Ulrich Beck on this advanced stage of individualization: “Life, death, gender, corporeality, identity, religion, marriage, parenthood, social ties – all are becoming decidable down to small print; once fragmented into options, everything must be decided” (5). “Think, calculate, plan, adjust, negotiate, define, revoke (with everything constantly starting again from the beginning); these are the ‘precarious freedoms’ that are taking hold of life as modernity advances” (6).
critical theory and oppositional cultural studies: “Multiple identities” do not provide a liberation from the prison-house of a unified identity, but signal the arrival of a new habitus made for a time in which “flexibility” has become a supreme value and new norm, a time in which even pleasure has to be managed and integrated into what, at a closer look, is not a multiple but a multi-tasking identity.

At first sight, then, the concept of multiple identities seems to undermine the idea of the habitus, but at a second, closer look, it may be just another word for the description of a new habitus. This new habitus is characterized by a multiplication of options in which the individual has increased her own possibilities dramatically. The Chicana-activist Gloria Anzaldua, whom Ashcroft calls “the exponent of in-betweenness par excellence” (21),16 can help to illustrate the gains when she says in her book Borderlands / La Frontera: “But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the hieros gamos: the coming together of opposite qualities within” (41). “So, don’t give me your tenets and your laws. Don’t give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures – white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails” (44).

Multiple identities open up the possibility of living in multiple worlds that seemed to pose either-or options before. But this multiplication of options has its price. Far from being liberated into a new freedom, Anzaldua has to manage her three identity-options – white, Mexican, Indian – by “carving, chiselling, staunching the bleeding, and fashioning her own Gods.”17 Clearly, she stylizes herself as a creative artist who gains freedom of self-expression by the multiplication of identities, but she also has to face the new challenge of managing all of these hard-won freedoms. Although some of her imagery is taken from artistic production, it nevertheless makes clear that the construction of multiple identities does not come easy and must eventually lead to the challenge of a multiple identities-management – in this case by combining creative activities with first-aid healing measures and even something like a religious self-fashioning. And again it is an “I” – “What I want” – that emphatically insists on her right for self-expansion and thereby constructs a new, heroic founding myth in which Anzaldua overcomes the “lukewarm gods” of others by fashioning her own gods.

16 Cf. Ashcroft: “Perhaps the exponent of in-betweenness par excellence is Gloria Anzaldua, whose Borderlands / La Frontera crosses, or subverts, borders of nationality, ethnicity, gender, geography, and history” (21).

17 Similarly, Stuart Hall in his description of “different positionalities” and “the proliferation of the field of identities” in “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” emphasizes the difficulties linked with a multiplication of identities, because these “refuse to be neatly aligned,” “refuse to coalesce,” and “are often dislocating.” In consequence, “we are always in negotiation” between them. Hall here sounds like a weary politician who, in the search for identity, has to look for feasible compromises in endless backroom sessions.
VI.

Anzaldua’s case is instructive, because it allows us to set up a comparison with sociological theories of identity. In the context of sociological debates, theories of a multiplication of the self have become almost common-place today as part of an analysis of the latest stage of “turbocapitalism.” An ever growing number of choices compels the individual to manage an ever greater range of identity-options. Instead of seeing such a multiplication as liberation, however, sociological critics focus on the price: the greater the number of options, the greater also the need for coordinating and managing them – which is a task that can require constant, around-the-clock self-regulation and continuing choice-management. For Anzaldua, the multiplication of identity options is an adventure of self-exploration, for sociological commentators the adventure has already turned sour, because it has become a full time, 24/7 job. For Anzaldua, multiplication can be an adventure, because, at a closer look, her idea of multiple identities is still based on essentialist notions of identity politics, albeit now “multiplied.” The identity options she discusses remain those of ethnic studies, with the implication that each of the identities mentioned – white, Indian, Mexican – is a self-contained unit in itself, so that a multiplication of identity can take place only by moving to another racialized, ethnic, or engendered identity. From this perspective, the identity ascription of “Indian” is sufficient to describe the identity of a person belonging to that category – just as it seems sufficient for Hall to employ broad categories like immigrant to describe his own identity at a particular stage of his life.

In contrast, sociological critics of turbocapitalism would claim that Hall’s or Anzaldua’s narratives provide a still schematic and reduced view of what constitutes multiple identities, because it does not capture the real multiplication that takes place under contemporary conditions. For example, Anzaldua’s Indian identity will be, in reality, much more than “Indian” with a capital I. She may be a social activist who later turned writer, came out of the closet, rediscovered Indian spirituality and likes to live in Germany part of the year, because Indians are admired, if not revered in Germany. Moreover, she may by now have a MacBook, an iPhone, an iPad and several different Internet identities in social networks. The subject-position “Indian” cannot capture this multiplication of identity-options. However, if this is accepted, then one of the (perhaps not so welcome) consequences is that a key utopia of cultural radicalism has to be reevaluated, namely that of a position “in-between,” considered as the best hope for non-identity and dis-interpellation, for this “in-betweenness” and other “mobility”-concepts can only be considered liberating on the basis of a view of identity as still stable and fixed. As soon as the multiplication of identities results from a movement between roles and discursive subject positions that can be (and often for professional reasons, must be) easily and frequently exchanged, configurations of in-betweenness lose their critical edge and the “in-between,” instead of being the holy grail of non-identity, becomes just another brief stop-over in a restless race between
identity-options. In fact, to be in-between may even become more of a challenge and burden. It is at this point that figurational sociology may add a helpful interpretive perspective.

VII.

The starting point for such an inquiry must be the consideration that from the perspective of figurational sociology, the concept of multiple identities is itself a term for a new *habitus*, a *habitus* that may be called “multiplication management.” If we accept that premise, then this would mean that a) the flexibility of identity options is on the way to become “second nature” to people; b) that the development of this new *habitus* is a response to changing patterns of social interdependencies; and c) that at the bottom of these changing figurations, we find new social constellations and changing modes of power. Indeed, sociologically speaking one of these new social constellations is really not that hard to describe: it consists mostly of intellectuals and cultural workers, members of new social movements and those groups within academia that have developed the concept of multiple identities and propagate it with a certain euphoria. In terms of their education and cultural capital, they are (often Ivy League) members of the dominant class; on the other hand, economically and politically they have a marginal position in relation to power and are therefore part of what Bourdieu calls the “dominated” segment of the dominant class. This position has become even more precarious because of the growing volatility of their professional dependence, and it is this “flexibility,” as a neo-liberal rhetoric has it, that finds an uncanny echo in the concept of multiple identities.

In that sense, the Americanist who is trying to reenact the border romance of several identities is really not that far apart from the young professional who prides himself on his global savyness which allows him to travel around the world on different business missions and spend a life “in cars, areoplanes and trains, on the telephone or the internet” (Beck 25). The only difference is that the business man’s flexibility pays, while the flexibility celebrated in American studies is often connected with what we have come to call a “prekariat,” a social group, including students, intellectuals, and many people with a university degree, who live in a world of freelancing and subcontracting, of growing risk and insecurity in professional prospects and living conditions. The situation of this group is characterized by uncertain, shifting employment, constant mobility, a willingness to work flexible hours and accept self-exploitation as second-nature, an irregular income and uncertain prospects for the future. Liberation from a fixed and stable identity can thus tie in with a “liberation” from a fixed income and stable social ties. The ultimate irony in this surprising parallelism is that what is described as a cunning subversion of the interpellating powers of the system coincides
with the retreat of institutions like the state or the social security system from their responsibilities in matters of state protection, business regulation, social security, welfare policies, and environmental control.

To identify the social base for certain utopias is not to minimize or dismiss these utopias but to remind us all that utopias are socially embedded and have a social base. Understanding this new social configuration may also help to identify the changing patterns of interdependencies that are at work in the new *habitus* of “multiple/multiplied identities.” The more volatile one’s social and professional position, the greater the chain of interdependence, because all elements of social existence are now affected by a life of increased risk and therefore have to be constantly reassessed and renegotiated.\(^\text{18}\) This means putting together networks, constructing alliances, making deals (Lash ix). It requires constant negotiation and an ability to move between different networks. Flexibility and the need for cooperation are complementary: flexibility means to be willing to cooperate, and increased cooperation requires new degrees of flexibility.\(^\text{19}\) Not only identity has multiplied, but so have interdependencies. Multiple identities thus also lead to a growing multitude of networks: “Social capital is real capital in the information economy. Those who control social valves – connections between individuals – are the ones who are able to profit through information arbitrage” (Conley 31).\(^\text{20}\) Social relations are sought “for the sake of gaining additional social relations” (ibid. 167). The individual may be liberated from the prison-house of one unified identity, but the demands imposed on her are not getting less but more.\(^\text{21}\) The weaker the degree of internalization, the greater the need for self-observation, for self-regulation, and for a continuing management of choices.\(^\text{22}\) What is precarious is not only one’s employment situation, but also one’s freedom, because no routine can help to negotiate the conflicting and ever increasing demands emerging from a variety of social options. The more options one

\(^\text{18}\) On this point, see Ulrich Beck: “Anyone who wants to live a life of their own must also be socially sensitive to a very high degree … the terms of living together have to be renegotiated in each case” (xxii-xxiii).

\(^\text{19}\) Richard Florida uses that argument to effectively counter the charge of a growing loss of community in American life: “The decline in the strength of our ties to people and institutions is a product of the increasing number of ties we have” (7). And: “A key reason that weak ties are important is that we can manage many more of them. Strong ties, by their nature, consume much more of our time and energy” (276).

\(^\text{20}\) Cf. also Ulrich Bröckling’s description of the entrepreneurial self: “In order to accumulate and constantly update his knowledge, he has to be part of a large network – and has to be interested in expanding it continuously” (264, my translation). The growth of social networks on the Internet provides an obvious case in point.

\(^\text{21}\) Perceptively, two books on the contemporary multiplication of identity options take their point of departure from the key word “more.” See Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice. Why More is Less* and Peter Whybrow, *American Mania. When More is Not Enough*.

\(^\text{22}\) A new, absurd level of self-observation and self-regulation is reached in the proposal of two economists how to solve the budget crisis of California’s state university system by lay-offs instead of pay cuts: “Those who remain would get full pay but be asked to pick up much of the slack by cutting out their least productive 8% to 10% of activities” (*L.A. Times* July 07, 2009).
has, or, should one rather say: the more options one needs, the greater also the unintended consequences for which even more flexibility is needed. A “narrative of given sociability” is replaced by a narrative of non-linear, open-ended, flexible, multiple individuality in which “biographical solutions” are set against systemic contradictions (Beck xxii).

And the next step in this story of self-expansion will be that into virtual reality. As Florian Rötzer has pointed out: “The expectation linked to the age of virtual realities is that of being able to move back and forth at any given time between multiple worlds, and in and out of different bodies and identities, so that the seemingly insurmountable tie between one’s own body and one’s own identity is broken and the I can leave the prison-house of the body, if only temporarily. Bodies are fragile, vulnerable, and dependent on outer conditions. Inevitably, they limit the possibilities of the ‘I.’ They are too slow for the Internet age, have relatively few input-output-channels, and therefore put restraints on links with other technologies” (Rötzer 281, m.t.). This utopian vision of virtual realities illustrates to what extent the concept of multiple identities articulates the fantasy of an “I” that is in search of self-expansion and looks for technological means to turn that self-expansion into a *habitus*.

Figurational sociology challenges us to find a social context in order to explain why theories of the multiplication of identity have gained so much symbolic capital in their respective fields. Once that question is asked, a striking similarity between various groups of white collar workers in academia, culture and business emerges and identifies these groups as part of a new social formation, the so-called “creative classes,” “a new powerful group of intellectual workers” (Conley 66). We can describe the multiplication of identity as a new *habitus* of this social formation, a *habitus* that may be called “multiplication management.” Indeed, constant, daily multiplication management demonstrates all of the compulsiveness that one links with the concept of an internalized habit. And yet, this *habitus* is welcome, because it provides the creative classes with a feeling of self-expansion and, hence, with a sense of superiority over the bourgeois who is still not yet as flexible. The creative classes can feel superior, because they seem to possess more (imaginary) options than others. Moreover, the possibility of frequent identity changes seems to signal independence – provocatively, one might say: the one thing they do not really have.

To understand the multiplication of identity as a new *habitus* of the “creative classes” would also provide an answer to Daniel Bell. As a result of the

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23 See on this point Scott Lash’s remarks on “reflexive individualization” in his foreword to Beck’s study *Individualization*: “The reflexive individualization of the second modernity presumes the existence of non-linear systems. Here system dis-equilibrium and change is produced internally to the system through feedback loops. These are open systems. The point is that the feedback loop, that is the defining property of non-linear systems, passes through the individual. Individualization now is at the same time system destabilization. Complex systems do not simply reproduce. They change. The individual is the point of passage for the unintended consequences that lead to system dis-equilibrium” (Lash viii).
convergence of job and private life, the creative self has to become an entrepreneurial self for whom the two realms become increasingly indistinguishable.\textsuperscript{24} Economy and culture are no longer in disjunction but reinforce each other. As a consequence – and this seems to be the best answer to the “Elias-problem” whether modernity is characterized by a growing need for self-constraint or by the opposite, an ever increasing plurality of individual options – self-regulation and self-constraint are no longer identical. On the contrary, self-regulation now has to include the management of attitudes that constituted opposite values in earlier times such as unconstrained self-expression and conspicuous self-fashioning. In this respect, figurational sociology may profit from theories of multiple identities. Traditionally, a \textit{habitus} describes a firmly internalized identity; as such it seems to be identical with the forms of internalization typical of economic individualism in which self-discipline is the basis of success.\textsuperscript{25} In contrast, I have argued that the multiplication of identity typical of expressive individualism is now the new \textit{habitus} for whom the flexibility of identity options is becoming second nature. In effect, one may draw on figurational sociology itself in order to explain what it itself fails to acknowledge at this point. The new \textit{habitus} can be seen as a response to changing patterns of interdependencies, in which fluctuating power balances of society and the increased volatility of individual existences challenge the individual to increase her store of options for coming to terms with this new situation. Elias’ idea of self-constraint and Bourdieu’s concept of the \textit{habitus} can no longer capture this volatility and the ensuing need for a new flexibility. But their theoretical premise that identities are shaped by changing constellations of power and social interdependencies continue to be helpful also for an analysis of the new \textit{habitus}.

In traditional political critiques, power resides in clearly identifiable institutions and structures of society such as the state or class structures or a dominant class ideology. But in the age of expressive individualism, culture has become the major focus in the analysis and critique of power. As a consequence, power is now more broadly defined to include those linguistic structures, cultural norms, and coercive social identities that still stand in the way of an articulation and full recognition of difference. However, as definitions of power get broader, it also becomes more difficult to identify alternative institutions or oppositional strategies. Since power is now everywhere, it has become diffuse and fluctuating. Under these circumstances, the flexibility not to be permanently tied down by seemingly all-pervasive power effects provides the only possible protection against them: as long as difference is preserved, identity ascription has not yet taken hold successfully. The multiplication of identity – and the flexibility to live with the new challenges of identity-management connected with it – opens up the utopian vision of a


\textsuperscript{25} The terms economic and expressive individualism have been introduced by Robert Bellah in his study \textit{Habits of the Heart}. For an elaboration and discussion of their usefulness as an analytical tool cf. my essay “The Humanities in the Age of Expressive Individualism and Cultural Radicalism” (2002).
permanent state of non-identity; it looks like the best and most promising way to preserve difference under an all-pervasive power regime. However, not to be tied down in any particular professional position, location, or social identity is also a major value in neo-liberalism. Again, theoretical concepts of cultural radicalism and the new social realities created by neo-liberalism show an unexpected affinity at this point.

VIII.

What is the point of complicating the concept of multiple identities and positions in-between fixed identities in the manner I have done here? As I said at the beginning, the concept has become important in order to explain why the oppressed do not rebel against their fate and to sketch out what, given that fact, may be a new or another option for resistance. I also said in the beginning that the objection against this option because it is still utopian is by no means a valid argument against it. Another aspect has turned out to be of greater importance: the fact that identity, at a closer look, is always narrative identity and that this narrative identity needs a narrator, an I, who is challenged to provide continuity and coherence to experience. If that experience multiplies by motion, migration, or just by the increasing mobility of modern life, this means that the task of integrating these experiences grows and that, ultimately, this challenge of an increased multiple identity-management, with its close resemblance to multi-tasking, is bound to become a new habit – a \textit{habitus} that is welcome because it provides a new sense of agency and hence of empowerment. We are not far apart here from the utopia of American studies A.D., but with one important difference: what looks like a utopia of resistance and perhaps even liberation from the perspective of A.D. revisionism, may signal the arrival of a new stage in the relentless advancement of instrumental rationality from a figurational perspective.

Perhaps the reason for why there is not more resistance to current neo-liberal developments does not lie in a state of exception that allows people to disavow unpleasant realities about their American identity. Perhaps the reason has to be sought in the pseudo-democratization of a basic promise of neo-liberalism, that of individual empowerment. This neo-liberal narrative has inspired a new multitude of creative entrepreneurial selves who are too busy with their own personal drama of self-expansion to realize what is really going on in the society in which they live.

One may, in conclusion, take a step back and apply this observation to the field of American studies. In another context, I have claimed boldly that the history of the field can be summarized in two short sentences. American studies were established as manifestation of a romance with “America” which was then, in a second, revisionist stage, subjected to several stages of disenchantment.\textsuperscript{26} Ethnic, race, and gender studies have revitalized the field

\textsuperscript{26} See Fluck, “The Romance with America: Approaching America through Its Ideals” (2010).
by constructing a new romance of the border in which the fate of marginalized and disenfranchised groups is taken as the new paradigm for understanding modernity and, more specifically, American culture. Or, to apply the terminology discussed here, they have added a whole new range of identities and subject positions to our romance with America, although – or more precisely: because – this America can now be reconceived as a transnational space. However, just as the celebration of multiple identities is masking the fact that this multiplication is really, at bottom, another step in the history of the civilizing process, the romance of border, diaspora and other sites of hybridization and identity multiplication may also hide a sobering fact: not only can the center live very well with this multiplication; it may even come to actively promote it, because this form of multiplication works well not only for neo-liberal globalization but even more so for its “creative” self-authorization.
Works Cited


---27 All essays by Winfried Fluck listed here are also accessible for reading and downloading on the website http://www.jfki.fu-berlin.de/en/v/publications_fluck/.


