

Identification

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In northern Thailand highland peoples have long been subjected to exclusion and discrimination. They face the same difficulties as many indigenous peoples across the globe: denied citizenship, scapegoated for a variety of social and environmental ills, subjected to racism, denied basic rights. But in Thailand the term indigenous is not generally used to describe highlanders. Instead they are most often called hill tribes (*chao khao*), or ethnic minorities (*chao klum noi*). In the Thai city of Chiang Mai in mid 2007 a group of village leaders and NGO workers representing highland communities gathered at a workshop on Indigenous Futures to discuss what it means to be indigenous. For much of the day the representatives debated whether the term 'indigenous' ought to be applied to themselves and their people, and if so what Thai language term ought to be used to translate 'indigenous' appropriately. The debate about terminology went back and forth around a handful of possible terms all of which used the term 'chon' or 'chao', meaning group, as a component. One prominent village leader, well known as a campaigner for highland culture and rights, made the point repeatedly and insistently that it would be better to "use 'khon' which means people, not *chao* this or *chao* that." Referring to the autochthonous name for his people, *Pgakeryaw*, he spoke about how his grandmother brought him up to believe that "*Pgakeryaw* means we are people, not animal." He asked why we had to speak of being a group, instead of speaking of being simply human beings, deserving of the same respect and dignity as all human beings.

His comment pointed to the way that, as 'hill tribes', highlanders have often been denigrated as primitives and denied the same rights and opportunities granted to other members of the Thai state. It was this very lack of recognition that the highland representatives gathered were working to redress – as they have been for many years. Ultimately, however, the elder's call to speak of people rather than groups was ignored by his colleagues: the term *chon* was included in all of the possible translations for 'indigenous' proposed at the end of the day. This points to a vital underlying fact of contemporary life – there is no escaping being named and identified as part of a group. Furthermore, there is no escaping being identified as part of an officially recognised and sanctioned group: a gender, a race, an ethnicity, a nation. Identification is a central aspect of contemporary life, and to be a fully fledged member of modern societies around the world one must be identified, possess identification papers, be a named member of a group. As others present at the workshop acknowledged, it is not enough simply to be a human being.ⁱ To claim a place of legitimacy and respect within the state, one must be a particular kind of human being – one with the right identification.

In a way this chapter is about what it takes to be recognised as the right kind of human being by the state and thus *not* to be treated – as highlanders have been in the past – as dirty and dangerous (animals) or as primitives yet to be socialised to a civilised world. More than this however it is about the processes through which we are identified in the systems of governance and power that prevail in the contemporary world and what these processes mean both for how we are *subjected* to the machinations of power in the world and how we may act within and upon them.

This chapter considers what identification is, what it means and how it works. Identification is a way of thinking about how we make ourselves, how we name ourselves, how we place ourselves, how we become the labels by which we explain ourselves to others: I am a mother, a woman, a wife, an American, a New Zealander, a citizen, a student, a teacher, a cyclist, a dancer. What do these labels mean? How are they linked to my sense of who I am? And most importantly, what do they *do*? What possibilities come into being with particular processes of

identification and what other possibilities are closed off? How do power relationships shift as certain identities are called into being?

This chapter explores some of these complex questions and introduces how theories of identification have helped geographers understand important aspects of contemporary social and political life. I begin with a brief literature review then offer my own definition of what identification is and how the concept has been used. Then, drawing on examples from my own research in Thailand I discuss how theories of identification can help to understand the emerging indigenous rights movement and associated political wrangling around nation, ethnicity, and belonging. As with any area of social theory identification is an idea that is not only useful for how it helps us to understand the world but for how it helps us to transform it. In the last part of this chapter therefore I will explore how indigenous activists are engaging in identity politics as a powerful tool within broader strategies for positive social change in their communities and nations.

Geographies of identification

Social geographers have been writing about matters of identity and identification at least since the 1970s when the two very different philosophical traditions of Marxism and Humanism began to shape streams of geographic thought.

Humanistic geography was perhaps the first and most radical shift towards close consideration of the self in geography. At a time when the discipline was dominated by spatial science and positivism, humanist geographers built on the Berkeley school of cultural geography, shifting their focus to the realm of subjective human experience (see Tuan 1976, Ley and Samuels 1978). The field claimed to be establishing a 'truly human' human geography focused on subjective experiences of place, giving a central position to human awareness, human agency, and the power of human creativity. Identity was for humanistic geographers a matter of 'essential' human characteristics and emerged in relationship with place.

In sharp contrast, early Marxist engagements with questions of identity drew on what might be called an anti-humanist perspective which asserted that humanism had overestimated the free agency and creative power of the human subject to the exclusion of the structural conditions that shape and delimit social systems. What characterises early Marxist engagements with identity and processes of subject formation is a concern for how they are linked with broad processes of oppression and injustice. It was the material consequences of identities that interested Marxist geographers rather than the nature of that identity itself. Class identities were understood as crucial in shaping economic opportunities and were reflected in diverse empirical settings, whether in the spatial segregations of modern cities (Harvey 1973, 1977), the structures that reproduce poverty (Peet 1977), or the cultural imperialism and Anglo-American societies (Buchanan 1977). For these scholars their primary responsibility as geographers was to understand and write about the oppressions and injustices of the world in order to contribute to a process of change (Harvey 1973). Class identities were crucial in delineating the populations whose emancipation was the focus of such change.

Working from a strict structuralist position most assumed the subordination of the individual to dominant social and economic structures. Structuration theory (Giddens 1976, 1979) drew on something of a middle ground between this foregrounding of structure and a humanist tendency to prioritise the power of individual agency. As Nelson notes, “‘the subject’ within structuration theory represented a negotiation between the hopelessly determined subject of structural Marxism and the volunteerism of humanist perspectives” (1999: 334). At the same time as the subject was understood to be determined by dominant structures, those drawing on Giddens recognised the power of individuals and groups in shaping those structures.

The emergence of feminist geography challenged many of the assumptions made by geographers drawing on humanism, Marxism and structuration theory. Pointing out the gendered nature of oppression, feminists challenged the underlying representations of class struggle put forward by Marxist geographers

(Massey 1994) and sought to rebalance the gender bias in geographic research (Monk and Hanson 1992). Likewise, the humanists assumptions that they could speak from a 'universal human experience' was criticised by feminists who pointed out that gender (and race and class) had been made invisible by such research (Rose 1993). As Derek Gregory notes "the subject of humanism was a fiction constructed through an ideology which suppressed the multiple ways in which human beings are constructed: these erasures both promoted and privileged a white, masculine, bourgeois, heterosexual subject as the norm" (2004: 363). In questioning such norms feminist geographers started to point to the ways normative identities do not reflect innate human characteristics (as the humanists would have it) but are constructed in and through dominant discourses. This perspective developed through the 1990s as feminist critiques drew increasingly on poststructuralism to work towards greater anti-essentialism, embracing "multiplicity, difference and the 'decentred' subject" (Nelson, 1999: 334).

With the rising influence of feminism and poststructuralism in geography, the cultural turn of the 1990s saw a wider shift to anti-essentialist perspectives with the recognition of the contingent nature of knowledge and its inevitable situatedness in the machinations of social power (Benko and Strohmayer 1997; Gibson-Graham 1994; Natter and Jones 1997; Soja 1989). Drawing inspiration from the work of key post-structural thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida, geographers became increasingly attentive to texts, to discourse and discursive formations, and the politics of representation as an important pathway to understanding the social. Identity could no longer be understood as simply the reflection of a fundamental inner truth but as something constructed somewhere between the imposed norms and expectations of our social contexts and the limited agency that individuals could apply to their lives. With the influence of post-structuralist and feminist thought increasingly nuanced understandings of identity and the subject have emerged, firmly positioned within perspectives that question the existence of absolute truths and the legitimacy of meta-narratives and overarching theories employed to explain reality. Geographic research around identity began to delve more deeply in to the politics of

difference, unpacking how discourses of, for example, gender (Pratt 2004), race and ethnicity (Winders, Jones and Higgins 2005), class and economy (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006), nation and democracy (Hardwick and Mansfield 2009; Kong and Yeoh, 1997), genealogy and descent (Nash 2002, 2003, 2008) intersect with intricate machinations of power to produce powerful normative subjects that seldom recognise adequately the diversity and complexity of human experience.

Although much of contemporary geography's engagements with theories of identity and the subject are significantly different to Marxist perspectives of the 1970s many geographers remain concerned with questions of injustice and social change. Whether the focus is on better understanding inequalities in the labour market (McDowell 2004), the construction of ethnic identities in the world music scene (Connell and Gibson 2004), the contingency of race (Holloway 2000), or the everyday and embodied constitutions and contestations of gender identities (Bondi 2005), there is often an underlying ethical concern to unravel the complex ways in which ideas about identity act within and upon the world. Liz Bondi, for example, explores how an ideology of separate gendered spheres is "encoded within the fabric of cities" (2005: 10) so that normative ideas about gender roles are seen to be imposed upon individuals through the way the city functions. At the same time, she argues, gender is 'performed' by individuals who consciously transgress the norms of heterosexual gender roles, transcending and reshaping gender roles in everyday urban life.

Bondi's use of the idea of performance and performativity, taken from Judith Butler's work, is a good example of how contemporary social geographies explore how identification not only reveals acts of oppression, but also provide insights into how dominant paradigms may be resisted and transformed. Some geographers explicitly seek to extend the understanding of how identities can be linked to transformative acts through action research projects that work with communities towards social change. Examples include Lakshman Yapa's engagement with urban poor in Philadelphia, Gibson-Graham's work on community economies in the LaTrobe Valley and the Philippines (2005, 2006).

Gibson-Graham in particular theorise that the transformative work of creating and sustaining a community economy begins with a rethinking of subjects – not as individuals subjected to the whims of global capitalism, but as capable, knowledgeable and resourceful subjects. The ways that shifts in subjectivity may be bound up with acts of social transformation is of particular relevance to the concepts and processes of identification which I explore in this chapter.

Defining identification

The idea of identification captures a particular aspect of how subjects are brought into being. The subject as an idea, a concept, something imagined and ephemeral, comes into material being through the process of identification. In a moment of identification an identity is linked to *somebody*. It is a way of thinking about subjects and subject formation that draws strongly on a Marxist tradition, and is informed by feminism and poststructuralism.

Identification has become a central part of contemporary life within the nation-state. State powers require us to have a concrete identity, to be named according to gender, ethnicity, origin. It is the consequence of what Foucault identified as the extension of state power into the intimate details of people's everyday lives and the introduction of modern modes of rule which sought to govern the lives of state subjects much more closely than ever before (Foucault 1977, 1989). The modern state requires that we be identified so that we can be drawn within its 'embrace' (Torpey 2000) as documented and governed citizens – and there are very few who can escape this demand (or would choose to).

The importance of identification to daily life is easiest to grasp in relation to those documents that everyone everywhere is required to have: identification papers. Whether these take the form of a birth certificate, a driving license, a national identification card, or a passport, documents of official identification such as these have both material presence and material consequences. With the right identification you are permitted to join the ranks of the legitimate citizens of your nation, to attend school, to access medical treatment, to be recorded on the state immunization register, to travel, to get a job, to pay taxes, to own

property. Without the right identification these rights and freedoms can be restricted. With the wrong identification you might be expelled from the country you call home, or denied medical treatment, education or employment, or imprisoned.

The fact that it is nearly impossible to exist without an official identity, represented by the papers we are obliged to carry, indicates that processes of identification sit at the heart of contemporary social and political forms. But identification as a social and political process goes far beyond the material presence of identification papers. It is the process we engage in every time we are asked to define who we are. Questions as every day as 'where are you from?', 'what do you do?', or the request to identify whether you are male or female, or European/Hispanic/Asian/Aboriginal on any official form solicits an identification from us and places us in a social, political, and territorial landscape. Such moments of identification sometimes seem so normal and natural to us that we pay no attention to them. At other times identification challenges socio-cultural norms and is thus a more troubling act, as when the neo-Nazi contests the vision of contemporary a multicultural society by declaring his allegiance to the Fatherland or the transsexual disrupts normative views of gender by declaring her newly acquired womanhood. Whether identifications seem normal, natural, strange or threatening, they are moments that position us in relation to the societies in which we live – moments in which relationships of power are enacted and revealed.

Power can be present in many different ways in and through moments of identification. Identification might be an act of subjugation by the state or compliance by the citizen, it might be an act of rebellion or transgression by the nonconformist, it might be an act of transformation that seeks to bring into being a new self, a new community, a new world. In each of these moments we are brought into being as certain kinds of subjects (c.f. McKinnon 2007). In the right circumstances the act of identification makes us, for at least a moment, that thing which we have been called: woman; man; Hispanic; European; indigenous; citizen; thief. Identifications that run counter to the norms, expectations and

aspirations of those around us, however, rarely stick. To be effective (and affective) identity-claims must have wider resonance, they must, as Laclau put it, contain “a dimension of universality” (2000: 36).ⁱⁱ

When effective, identification momentarily fixes us in a world that could otherwise be seen as always in a process of becoming, a world of flux and change where we and our ‘environment’ are always in the process of being born (Ingold 2006). Each of the designations listed above carries with it complex and contested meanings. It means different things in different temporal, social and political spaces to be, for example, a woman or a man, a Thai or a hill tribe, a Hispanic or a European. For highland peoples in Thailand, for example, there is not anything innately insulting about the term ‘hill tribe’ or *chao khao*. Indeed, several of the representatives at the workshop on Indigenous Futures could see no reason not to continue to use that term. But it was because the term ‘hill tribe’ has come to be associated with a particular way of understanding highland peoples as primitive, exotic and alien, that the majority of the group agreed they needed to introduce a new term for themselves. The power a name carries, and the degree to which it is considered to reflect something *true* about the people so-called, has a great deal to do with who is doing the naming and who is listening.

Identifying someone as ‘x’ ascribes a fixed identity which, from certain perspectives reflects real and essential characteristics of the person so named. The language of identity tends to speak of some interior truth, an underlying and basic essence of a person. For example, ethnic labels, such as ‘Hispanic’ or ‘Mexican’, are often used as if they reflect something innate about the person so described. In the right context that person named may be compelled to submit to that designation and be subjected to the abuse and prejudice it could entail. In other circumstances the label ‘Hispanic’ may be enthusiastically claimed and celebrated in an act of ethnic pride, solidarity and resistance to dominant prejudices. In both cases the names are used in ways which give a person an identity, whether one imposed or claimed – the identity is seen to be linked to something fundamental about *who that person really is*.

In the language of subjects and subjectivity on the other hand acts of naming do not so much reflect a pre-existing identity as actually create the subjects they describe – linking people to sets of discourses that impel or encourage them to perform certain identities and shape the realm of possibilities for how they relate to and are positioned in the social world. To speak of the subject is not the same thing as speaking of the self, but the self is placed in the world through the coming into being of particular subjects. The designations of male and female are obvious examples here. Dominant norms of masculine and feminine deportment and physicality have been much challenged through second wave feminism and queer theory. Nevertheless, with the exception of societies that recognise a third sex (such as the *katoey* in Thailand or *fa'afafine* in Samoa) cases that blur the hard boundaries between male and female often cause great controversy and elicit strong emotional responses. This is so in the recent case of the South African athlete Caster Semenya who was subjected to genetic testing to 'prove' she was a woman. Although she has a woman's body and she and her family believed her to have been female from birth, genetic testing 'found' her to be of ambiguous gender leading the International Association of Athletics Federation to consider banning her from future international competition. Normative discourses of gender set the realm of possibility, and those who challenge that norm, whether by accident of birth, a deliberate effort to cross gender boundaries using dress, deportment, or medical treatment, have no choice but to fight for a space of recognition (see Brown 1997, Ingram 1997)

Identification papers and the act of identifying oneself might fix who you are in a particular space and time, but in theories of the subject that fixity is always temporary. Where identity is understood to be singular, permanent, and true, the subject is a changeable and moving thing, linked to shifting social and political discourses rather than any internal essence. The term 'subject positions' is often used to indicate something of this mobility, describing how people can move between different identities or subject positions in different places and spaces – the same person might be wife and mother in the home, executive in the office, consumer in the shopping mall. But the idea of subject positions is also seen as

problematic because it continues to assume a degree of fixity. The idea gives a tool for imagining the multiplicity of 'selves' that individuals perform and give a basis for examining how subjects are constituted differently in different settings. Judith Butler notes, however, that the language of subject positions assumes a pre-existing position that exists external to the subject and awaits someone to step in to it like a job vacancy waiting to be filled. At the same time, it assumes a blank self who moves to occupy different positions throughout daily life. While a person may be different kinds of subjects in different spaces and places, moving from one to another is not as easy as a language of 'positions' might suggest. Butler (1993) argues that this language of subject positions fails to recognise how discourse in fact materialises new subjects, rather than constructing them from pre-existing building blocks.

The language of identification extends the idea of subjects as mobile and material. Identification speaks of the moments in which subjects materialise, the moments when they come into being. It focuses attention on the process, speaking of how we are always (already) in a process of becoming. And it draws the mind to how subjects come into being in and through relationships whether they be intimate relationships with friends and family, or our relationships with the institutions, cultures, and discourses of which we are a part.

The key moments in which we come into being as subjects, the key moments in which we are identified, have been considered by a great many key theorists of modern times. Louis Althusser spoke of the moment when a policeman calls out 'hey you!' and immediately the person who is being called recognises themselves as the guilty subject (2001). The same phenomenon occurs regularly today when the sirens blare behind you and you suddenly think it is you who has done something wrong. Althusser called this process 'interpellation', the moment when the guilty subject is hailed and suddenly comes into being as that which is named – the person that has done something wrong, broken the law, misbehaved. In that moment the guilty subject draws on a host of societal norms and expectations to understand themselves as a transgressor, and becomes

subject to the powers that decide what is right or wrong behaviour (represented in this example by the policeman calling out).

Foucault took this idea further to analyse how transgressive subjects came into being in different ways as normative social and political discourses shifted through time. For Foucault, when a person is identified as criminal or insane they become subject to the normative discourses particular to the era: a criminal in 1750 was understood very differently to a criminal in 1950 (Foucault 1977). The understandings that arose with modern modes of power from the mid-1800s on brought into being new kinds of subjects. The 'insane' subject for example only came into being in this modern era. Where before there were madmen and seers, once these same people were identified as insane they became understood as being sick and diseased people who could be 'treated', and thus normalised, through the institutionalised interventions of the medical profession (Foucault 1989).

Judith Butler draws on Foucault's intellectual tradition to analyse an even more subtle way in which human beings are identified and brought into being as particular kinds of subjects in relation to social norms. Butler (1990) focuses on the question of gender and discusses how a girl is 'girlled': as soon as the family knows the sex of a baby it is immediately brought into a social world of gendered understandings. The name she is given, the colour of the clothes she is dressed in, the expectations for behaviour or preferences all begin to shape the child into what we expect a girl to be – far beyond what might be accounted for by biology.

The subtle and not-so-subtle processes through which people are subjected to dominant discourses *places* us in the world. In some ways what Butler, Foucault, Althusser (and others) are speaking about is not so different to the naming of a child that constitutes an often ritualised welcoming in to the social world. A name can indicate a child's heritage, the language that will be their mother tongue, the culture to which they have been born, a homeland (present or lost), a position in a family, and most of all a place in humanity. With a name, and a gender, a child can be recognised by the community, the gods, spirits and

ancestors, and, of course, the state. It is this latter recognition that is most relevant to the question of identification. Along with the naming of a child and the gendering of a child through informal secular rituals or religious ceremonies comes the official, state sanctioned recognition with the granting of the birth certificate.

Identification and the state

The birth certificate is the first official identification document we are granted and one that we must carry through life, and produce again and again to prove who we are and where we belong. It is the first of a series of formal recognitions and certifications that are a confirmation of our legitimate being in the world. The system of formal identification that requires us to have birth certificates, identification cards, drivers licenses, passports etc, is a core component of being a member of a modern nation-state. Within this system we must be formally placed in relation to our family, our sex, our ethnicity, and our nation in a reified way that is distinctly different from family and community based processes of naming.

Identification granted by 'the authorities' are vastly overdetermined, meaning that they carry a heavy load of additional significance and meaning that is deeply embedded in the constitution of the global political systems in which we live. The system is based on the assumption that every single person on the planet belongs (or ought to belong) to a given territory, a particular nation-state. These identifications are so deeply embedded in our sense of social norms that it is usually taken for granted that such official documents are normal and necessary. It is only when the process is somehow disrupted or competing systems of identification clash – moments in which these identifications are suddenly made strange to us – that we become aware of these formal recognitions as fabrications.

An example of when practices of formal identification become strange and problematic is in cases of people who are not automatically recognised as belonging to the country of their birth. Highland indigenous peoples in northern

Thailand, whose circumstances I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, are one such case. Many highlanders born in Thailand do not have Thai citizenship, even if their families have been in the country since the first citizenship legislation was passed in 1956. In the decades since the majority of highlanders have been issued with registration papers of some kind, but a significant proportion remain without citizenship (see McKinnon 2005). Without citizenship papers highlanders rights within their home state are limited: the ability to move freely within the country is curtailed, opportunities to access education, healthcare, or employment are limited, and non-citizens are under the constant threat of 'repatriation' across the border into Burma or Laos.

There have been moves in the last decade to grant citizenship to those highlanders who are eligible. Under Thai legislation eligibility depends upon presenting proof that one's parents were born on Thai soil. If you are able to present household registration papers and birth certificates that can prove this (which is not always an easy task for communities in which, until very recently, mothers rarely gave birth in hospitals) then you have the right to apply for citizenship.

The application process itself can be extremely intimidating – while (if accepted) it constitutes a confirmation of your legitimacy and your belonging within the Thai nation, that confirmation can also seek to displace the community and family based belonging that came before. One example of this is the story of one Akhaⁱⁱⁱ woman who applied for citizenship in her late teens. She was told by the government official processing her application that she must choose a new name, a Thai name. That Thai name, written on her new Thai ID card, grants her the right to stay in the land where she was born and where her family live, to attend its hospitals and schools, to travel freely within its borders and to get a job. Even with the card the process of recognition is not complete: every time she is required to show the card she is again in a moment of becoming the Thai citizen, again asking the officials to recognise her legitimacy. But by demanding that she take a new name the state here sought to displace her Akha name and diminish,

at least on paper, her membership of a community considered fundamentally not-Thai.

The position of the Akha in Thailand is not so dissimilar to that of many peoples around the world who find themselves somehow outside of a system of national identification: the stateless children of eastern Malaysia whose parents fled conflict in the Philippines and who have grown up without access to any of the education or health care that Malaysian children are entitled to (Kassim 2009); the Serbs who suddenly found themselves declared non-citizens when independent Croatia came into being in 1991 (Denich 1994); Palestinians who no longer have a state (Akram 2002; Mavroudi 2008); the Roma whose settlements cross multiple European states (Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens 2005). The Akha, the Palestinians, and the Roma are examples of people who do not fit with efforts to identify belonging in relation to the nation-state. Examples like this make strange the assumption that everyone belongs somewhere, to some territory and to some state authority. They reveal the constructedness of this idea, the way in which it is a fabrication – but a fabrication with very concrete, material implications.

To briefly recap, identification is first a process: that of the coming into being of subjects as they are named and therefore given a place in the world. While the act of naming is part of every human culture, the kind of identification I am referring to is particularly relevant to the operation of the modern nation-state system. In this system everyone, regardless of whether they live in Europe, Africa, America or Asia, must have official identification papers that give them a place within the state. In practice many people lack such documents and suffer for it as there is simply no space for people to exist outside this system. This is why the plea made by the village elder to simply be recognised as being human is not enough – there is no room to *just* speak of common humanity in a contemporary state-based system of identification. This is also why the highlanders gathered at the meeting in Thailand were so interested to debate what name they should use for themselves – one's name, one's identification is vitally important in this contemporary political system. What you are called by

those who represent state authority has very real, very material implications. While identifying or naming oneself or others is a rhetorical act it is tied very closely to the concrete world. Particular identifications in particular places can determine whether you are considered to belong inside or outside the borders of a nation or the boundaries of community and family. They can enable you to move freely, to seek a livelihood, to obtain an education, or they can bar you from all of these things.

Through identification the self becomes intimately connected to the larger machinations of the political, the social and the cultural. When we are identified and placed, the singular embodied self comes to mean something against these broader structures and processes. Thus it is in identification that one can see the inseparability of the discursive (the act of naming or being named) and the material. Because of this identification is a potent site of social and political change and transformation.

Transformative possibilities

It is well recognised that identification and subject making can not only be processes of being made subject to dominant discourses but also processes of intentional and unintentional change. Butler speaks of how each time the performance of normative identities is repeated there is room to shift and alter (1993). Laclau discusses how the subject is a political agent in which ideology and identity merge to form the foundation of hegemonic political struggles, articulated as the “interpenetration between universality and particularity” (Laclau 2000: 305, see also Devenney 2004, Howarth 2004). Amongst geographers, Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) posit that affective transformations of subjectivity are the starting point for local community based efforts to step outside capitalocentrism – the discursive dominance of global capitalism. None of these authors accept the volunteerism of a humanistic perspective, which tends to take “an expansive view of what the human person is and can do” (Tuan 1976: 266), emphasising the creative power of humanity and playing down the role of dominant systems and structures in society. While they do not accept that human beings are entirely free agents, there is also a recognition that within

dominant structures there is still room to manoeuvre and to reshape subjects. The room for reshaping emerges due to the inevitable incompleteness of any identity-claim. The fixity of identities is never complete, never unopposed or whole, and “‘identity’ itself is never fully constituted” (Butler, Laclau and Zizek, 2000: 1). Because identities are intimately linked with larger machinations of the political, the social and the cultural, the reshaping of subjects also holds the potential to reshape wider communities linked by social, political or economic ideologies and practice.

Processes of identification are one such conduit to reimagining subjects and thus acting upon the world. As well as being about moments in which we are subjected to dominant discourses, identification is also about the moments in which we identify *ourselves*. These can be well thought out and clearly articulated political movements but can also be much more everyday and less deliberate. Foucault speaks of the daily self discipline we impose upon ourselves, shaping ourselves to fit the norms of society through appropriate dress and deportment. This daily discipline can take many forms and be tied up with aspirations to become a certain kind of person. Contemporary Lacanians (such as Slavoj Zizek 1992, 1997 or geographer Paul Kingsbury 2005, 2008) speak of the ways we channel a desire to become a certain person into the desire for objects which we feel will bring us closer to that goal (the *objet petit a*): the right shoes, the right watch, the ‘right’ man, the bigger house, the better job etc. Such acquisitory desires are akin to the performances of identity through which we place ourselves as this kind of person. Flag waving and anthem singing on national holidays, choosing to buy free trade or organic, undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca or Jerusalem or Ayodhya brings into being in oneself a certain kind of person: perhaps a patriot, a hippy, a devout member of the faith. All these actions, of acquiring the right object or companion, of performing certain rituals or duties, are in themselves a process of identifying the self – of naming, locating, materialising the self as a certain kind of subject. As we perform these acts we link ourselves to that thing with which we identify – the nation, the subculture, the faith – and thus bring that thing into being in

ourselves (see Laclau 2000, Žižek 1991). Each of these acts is thus an act of becoming.

Every act of becoming is always saturated in a cultural milieu and always already overdetermined. But acts of identifying ourselves are not simply replications, what society or culture tells us to be or to desire. While no act of identification is completely new and original, neither is it mere repetition – as Butler (1993) has argued there is always room to move. Repetition never produces something completely identical. Even though thousands may celebrate their patriotism, undertake a pilgrimage, or claim an ‘alternative’ hippy identity, each person's version is slightly different. And in some cases the performance of a particular identity is also a wilful act of reshaping that identity. Every act of becoming has this potential to also be an act of social and political change as individuals and collectives shape the ways they perform certain identities, nudging at the edges of what it can mean and shifting and changing what it is to be *this* or *that*.

The practice of identification as a transformative act is in part what the Indigenous Futures workshop was about. It was an effort to actively and consciously shape the official language of identification used by state authorities, to identify highlanders in a language of their own choosing and potentially reshape the futures that highlanders could have within the Thai state. Rather than just an act of reshaping individual identity, however, it was an effort to begin to reshape a group identity initiated by just a small handful of leaders and activists. In the absence of a formal process for appointing community representatives this group formed an ad hoc group to represent the people and communities who could be affected, and came to the meeting with varying degrees of accountability to those communities. Some were community leaders who would be directly held accountable by members of their villages, some were activists and academics whose level of accountability relied entirely upon their personal sense of responsibility to represent their compatriots as fairly as possible.

It was the NGO staff and activists who led the push for the indigenous designation. This group was most acutely aware that they have to act within the hegemony of the Thai state and the international nation-state system – there is no way to exist beyond it, no way to simply be human and not identified as a member of this or that group and thus be thought to legitimately belong or not. In a way they were in the role of the subaltern subject who knows that in order to speak and be heard they must speak the language of their oppressors (Spivak 1988). In contrast, the *Prageryaw* elder introduced at the beginning of this chapter perhaps hoped that he could continue to speak his own language and still be heard. The NGOs, however, know that they must engage in language of identity politics. While the elder appealed to a fundamental universal sense of shared humanity, the NGOs were enlisted in a struggle that is firmly embedded in politics, and were trying to work within this inescapable global political system. By seeking membership in and support from the international indigenous movement they look to bypass the structures of their immediate oppressors, the Thai state. Through this they will be able to access a set of institutions established by and for indigenous peoples as an instrument to claim certain rights and privileges from within the state – in this case simply the right to belong.

The designation of ‘indigenous’ is a term which expresses a set of universalising claims about what it is to be indigenous. These are claims which pertain to highlanders material circumstances (their marginalisation in the state, their particular ways of relating to land and spirit) and which resonate at a global scale. An indigenous identity, in other words, has a dimension of universality that gives it political clout. To be recognised as ‘indigenous’ by the Thai state and the international community would bring with it significant change. Definitions of the term ‘indigenous’ put forward by the International Labour Organisation (ILO 2003), the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), and powerful multilateral agencies like the Asia Development Bank set the parameters for who is considered to be ‘indigenous’ and who is not. The definitions proposed by these organisations share two key characteristics. First

people are indigenous if they are descendents of those who have lived in an area before colonisation. The IWGIA for example states that:

Indigenous people are the disadvantaged descendents of those peoples that inhabited a territory prior to colonization or formation of the present state (IWGIA 2009).

Second, indigenous peoples are distinct from the dominant society and have maintained their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions since colonisation and the establishment of new states. The ADB for example speaks of:

Maintenance of cultural identities; and, social, economic, cultural and political institutions separate from the mainstream or dominant societies and cultures (ADB 2009).

Alongside these formal characteristics the term indigenous usually reflects a special relationship with the land and the natural environment. While recognising difference and disadvantage, the term indigenous also recognises the special place of indigenous peoples and special rights and legitimacy (although these are seldom embraced wholeheartedly by the nations in which indigenous peoples live). In addition, being indigenous means access to international support via global indigenous agencies, the United Nations, and the significant collection of groups and organisations who are involved in the global campaign for indigenous rights.

For the highland NGOs present at the Indigenous Futures workshop the ability to access these international support mechanisms was seen as an important step. Such international support could, it was hoped, provide more leverage for domestic campaigns for equal rights and would enable highlanders to come together with other marginalised groups in the South of Thailand to work for policy change at the national level.

At a more fundamental level the move to adopt the term 'indigenous' and the discussions about how best to translate that term into an acceptable Thai language phrase gave highlanders the chance to choose a pan-tribal name for themselves. As one village representative put it "now, we will not be stuck with

the terms defined and called by others, but we will define ourselves, and choose the term to call ourselves.”

In order to harness the transformative power of identification, the term chosen must first hold some recognised power. This is why the name *Pgakeryaw* has little wider resonance while the term ‘indigenous’ holds great weight – the latter has a globally recognised significance and respect (even though indigenous peoples in most places still struggle for their due recognition). While there is an international platform to support indigenous peoples, in Thailand there is as yet no space to speak of being indigenous. As one NGO representative stated:

We are a group of indigenous peoples in Asia. Even though there is no space for the term in Thailand, but we are indigenous peoples here, and we are the indigenous peoples that do not have opportunity, and are disadvantaged.

In order for the term to gain power in the Thai context the group discussed strategies for opening up a space in which their indigeneity could be recognised. Reflecting on their current involvement in the international indigenous community a Thai academic/activist present at the workshop said:

International participation is good because there is space [for indigenous peoples], but at national level it is not good, because there is no space.

Using the international community as leverage the group seeks a new identification, creating a space to speak of themselves as indigenous and a space in which to be recognised, to belong, and thus to be considered legitimate.

Conclusions

This chapter has discussed how identification works in multiple ways to connect discursively constituted subjects with the self: through the imposition of identities that subject individuals and groups to normative discourses; through acts that claim particular identities, and through conscious engagements that seek to reshape the self and the world. All these processes connect the autonomous embodied self to sets of ideas about who you are or ought to be. All are embedded within social, political, ideological tropes that shape and limit the types of identities it is possible to claim. But those limits themselves are

malleable – even in the case of the strict demands of the state. The example of the Indigenous Futures workshop in Thailand demonstrates one of many pathways being pursued to find new spaces in which subjects may be redefined.

The example of the Indigenous Futures workshop also highlights the characteristics of identification that make it such a potent political tool. Identification is where the discursive becomes linked with the material. It is where selves become an embodied articulation of the ideological and the rhetorical. In the process of imposing, claiming, or contesting identities we make our *selves* meaningful in relation to the norms and ideologies to which those identities refer. This is a powerful tool for maintaining existing systems: daily reinforcements of gender norms is one example, the constant reiteration of capitalocentric discourses and the helpless worker within that is another. It is also, however, a powerful tool for acts towards social transformation. Within processes of identification there is the potential to work towards bringing new kinds of subjects into being, and with them new possibilities to reshape our ways of being in the world. The efforts of those present at the Indigenous Futures workshop is one example. The group sought to draw on established ideas about what it is to be indigenous, and the accompanying recognition of the legitimacy of indigenous ways of life, cultural forms and relationships with the land. By claiming an indigenous identity, the NGOs hope that highlanders can create a space for new recognition and new legitimacy within the Thai state. The creation of a new indigenous Thai subject could, if it is successful, transform the conditions under which they are given membership of the state. It is an effort to create new subjects, but it is also an effort to create new worlds – one in which highlanders, as an indigenous *group* – can be given the same respect and dignity as other members of the Thai state.

Endnotes

ⁱ Of course, what it is to be human is itself a complex and contested question. The autochthonous names that many indigenous groups use to name themselves often mean simply ‘human’, distinguishing themselves from plants and animals at the same time as establishing a relationship between people and what western imaginary would label ‘the environment’ (see Bird-Rose 1991; Ingold 2006). In contrast, the United Nations Declaration of Human rights is another kind of imagining of what it is to be human, a creature born with innate rights and

privileges peculiar to us as a species. However imagined, humanity and human rights mean nothing if the person in question is not recognised as being 'fully human' by those able to effectively dehumanise or deny a person their human rights.

ii It is important here to clarify Laclau's conceptualisation of universality. Together, Butler, Laclau and Zizek (2000) recognise the central role of universalising discourses in politics, but clearly reject a Habermasian sense of universality. For Habermas, the universal is real, innate and pre-established. In contrast these three theorists "maintain that universality is not a static presumption, not an a priori given, and that it ought instead to be understood as a process or condition irreducible to any of its determinate modes of appearance" (2000: 3).

iii The Akha are one highland group among many. Other recognised groups are Hmong, Htin, Karen, Khamu, Lahu, Lisu, Lua, Mlabri, Yao.

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