Conceptualizing Difference

Conference | University of Aberdeen | 13-16 April 2021
Introduction

The idea of 'difference' governs today's political thinking. Struggles for equality and justice are generally concerned with recognizing and protecting differences, not least because varieties of difference, including gender, sexuality, race, class, religion and language are used to justify political oppression, discrimination and exclusion. Difference has become axiomatic to political debate and therefore requires further reflection and analysis.

In this conference, we explore and interrogate 'difference' as a political category. We aim to map categories of difference structuring political life, in past and present, and across and beyond the global North. How and to what effect have categories of 'difference' been fostered historically, debated philosophically and in politics, fought over by social movements, codified in law, transmitted through education and the media, and lived out in everyday life? Moreover, we aim to explore more meta-level questions about what 'difference' means in the first place. How did our modern thinking about 'difference' come about? What roads of political thinking does it facilitate, and which does it close off? And can we think beyond 'difference'?

If you want to join the conference as audience member, please REGISTER HERE.

If you have any questions, please contact the organizers Sophie Lauwers and Fredericke Weiner.

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Sabine Hark
Professor for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies and Director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Women’s and Gender Studies at the TU Berlin.

Anyá Topolski
Professor in Ethics and Political Philosophy at the Radboud University Nijmegen.

Jane Anna Gordon
Professor of Political Science at the University of Connecticut with affiliations in American Studies, El Instituto, Philosophy, and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

Gurpreet Mahajan
Professor of Political Theory and Philosophy of Social Sciences at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Lewis Gordon
Professor of Philosophy at the University of Connecticut, Honorary President of the Global Center for Advanced Studies, and Honorary Professor in the Unit for the Humanities at Rhodes University, South Africa.

Keynote Speakers

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Vasudha Katju - Difference in Indian Feminist Activism: Caste and Sexuality in the Autonomous Women's Movement  
Demet Gülcüçek - Imagination of 'Europe': Negotiating Differences in Women's Rights Movements | **Keynote Gurpreet Mahajan**  
Difference, Identity and Recognition | **Panel 5: Solidarity, Identity and Difference**  
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| 10:30–11 | Break                             | **PhD Panel 1: The Philosophical Canon Rethought**  
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Marie Wuth - Between Flatness and Hierarchy: Difference in Spinoza's Ontology | **PhD Panel 2: Migration, Difference and Belonging**  
Andrea Cortés Saavedra- Social relations among Chilean and migrant children: navigating, embracing and challenging social differences in a diverse school in Chile  
Linda Sólveigar- Guðmundsdóttir - Intra-North Queer Migrations and a Privileged Longing for Belonging | **PhD Panel 4: Decolonizing Constellations of Difference**  
Ruben Hordijk - Spectral Inheritance and Response-ability for Plural Pasts  
Hannah Vögele - Property making difference: Present histories of (violent) ownership relations |
| 11–12 | **Panel 1: Embodied Difference**  
Jen Atkins - The Handmaid's Tale and Political Activism via Cosplay Choreographies  
Ope Lori - Undoing Codes of Conduct  
Rachel Shanks and Kirsten Phelps - School Uniform: It's Different for Girls | **Panel 3: Difference and Legality**  
Adi Goldiner - The ability/disability dichotomy and claiming disability rights  
Tamas Gyorfi - How do constitutions manage differences: the toolkit of constitutional democracies  
Máté Szalai - Constructing sexual and gender "minorities" in the Middle East - the case of Iran and Turkey | **Panel 4: Narrating Othering**  
Sybille Reinke de Buitrago - Conceptualizing Difference in Radicalization Narratives: Identity and Alterity  
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Day 1 | Tuesday | 13 April

9:30 am  Keynote Sabine Hark

11 am    PhD Panel 1: The Philosophical Canon Rethought

2 pm     Panel 1: Embodied Difference

4 pm     Keynote Anya Topolski
Professor for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies and Director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Women’s and Gender Studies at the TU Berlin.

Sabine Hark is a prominent public intellectual who regularly intervenes in debates on democracy, racism, sexism, and gender equality. Her books include: Deviant Subjects. Paradoxes of the Politics of Identity (1996, 1999); Dissident Participation. A Discourse History of Feminism (2005); Measured Spaces, Tense Relations. Entrepreneurial Universities and Gender Dynamics, with Johanna Hofbauer (2018), and The Future of Differences: Beyond the Toxic Entanglement of Racism, Sexism and Feminism, with Paula-Irene Villa (2020). She is a member of the editorial board of Germany’s leading feminist theory journal, Feministische Studien. Her current book project is entitled Community of the Unchosen. Notes on a political ethos of cohabitation forthcoming with Suhrkamp fall 2021.

Keynote:

Chair: Nadia Kiwan
Antagonism All the Way Down: Kant, Intersectionality and the Antinomic Absolute

Jorg Meurkes | University of Aberdeen

Kant’s notion of universality has a bad reputation among many intersectionality theorists and activists, for good reason. One of Kant’s formulations of the categorical imperative is known as the ‘formula of humanity,’ which in Kant’s view expresses the universal idea of humanity. Intersectionality theory and practice reveal, however, to use Sarah Ahmed’s succinct formula, that “Universal = white men.” In my paper, I present four ways Kant’s notion of universality has been interpreted: the universality of concepts/rules (normativity theory), the universality of the freedom of self-consciousness (existentialism), the universality of teleological reason (natural right/natural law theory), and the universality constituted on the basis of an exclusion of a contradiction (Marxism). The first three interpretations, I argue, do not stand up to intersectional critique. Things are more ambiguous with fourth interpretation. On this account, every universality contains a contradiction, in the both senses of the word, i.e., ‘holds in check and ‘is fraught with.’ I examine to what extent this notion of universality concurs with rather than contradicts Ahmed’s formula.
In a letter to Willem Van Blyenbergh, Spinoza notes: „It is beyond us to understand how God created the world and […] how he perceives it“ (1665, L21). In contrast to most Church Fathers and scholastics, Spinoza did not contrive a theory of being that would categorize, evaluate and position individuals and species according to their proximity or distance to God. Instead, Spinoza’s critique of anthropomorphic images of God and anthropocentrism questions categorizations and hierarchies by species and genus and acknowledges the relationality and interdependence of all beings. Nevertheless, Spinoza distinguishes between different kinds of individuals according to the composition of their bodies and corresponding complexity. One way to understand this kind of distinction is described as affective differentiation, which is not hierarchical, and realized without moral charge or normative implications. But Spinoza’s account could also be read as proposing a hierarchical order based on difference in complexity and capacity. What is at stake in the question of a flat or hierarchical order of ontology is the status of ontological difference, the implications of having a different nature, and whether difference, in fact, leads to hierarchy. The question arises whether Spinoza’s ontological model may serve as a justification for relations of dominance between individuals of different species and natures or even of the same nature. These questions are worth to be discussed especially once we take into account that the different natures of individuals and different capacities to affect and be affected are connected to power.

My aim in this paper is twofold: First, I shall elaborate on the importance of difference on an ontological level. From a Spinozist perspective, difference is vital for processes of individuation and individualization as well as the continuation of being. Second, I shall discuss potential political implications connected to interpretations of ontological difference. I will argue that we should be aware of the momentous consequences the conception of ontological difference can have for sociopolitical constellations and models.
Streaming service Hulu began production on a tv series adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s novel, The Handmaid’s Tale (1984), in late 2016. By the time it premiered in April 2017, just a few months into Donald Trump’s presidency, the series had already begun to inadvertently mirror divisive political and gender tensions in America. As the episodes and months unfolded, many women shied away from watching Hulu’s show, saying the misogyny was “too real” to watch. At the same time, draconian bills purporting to protect women’s bodies circulated ad nauseum throughout state legislatures—affirming growing support of a gender politics deeply rooted in difference and in keeping with Trump’s version of conservative populism. What’s remarkable is that The Handmaid’s Tale became even more relevant when it transcended its fictive landscape and began to actually exist in the messy terrain of the very real everyday. Here, I’m speaking of the protests against the curtailing of women’s rights staged by political action groups in crimson robes and white “wing” bonnets. Now, handmaids aren’t characters in books or on screens; they walk among us.

In line with the conference’s musings about identity and politics, this presentation highlights the ways that social activism, feminism, and—important to this dialogue—critical dance studies, intersect, parallel, and otherwise confront each other to map out how such an interdisciplinary approach might contribute an expanding vocabulary (and glean one, in return) in conversations around the notion of difference, especially concerning the political body. As an American Dance Studies scholar, my work investigates movement practices (dance) in the hemispheric Americas within a global context and in relation to power paradigms. The ways groups of people move are inherently tied to their sociopolitical, cultural, gendered, economic (and so forth) contexts. Yet, the handmaid protesters (some of whom are cisgendered men) don the same costumes and perform the same social choreography. Difference is hypothetically eschewed. Systematically, women face political difference and by utilizing the highly gendered, heteropatriarchal gestures and physical maneuverings from Hulu’s series, protest organizations like the Handmaid’s Coalition make literal and figurative “moves” toward erasing difference. But is that possible? The perforation, blurring, and innovation between the two performance sites of screen and street likewise speak to the moving body’s ability to create counter-narratives that might offer ways to resist political oppression and categorizations of difference. Ultimately, activist handmaids, flanking sidewalks in their double lines or sitting in courtrooms head bowed, embody nuances of “difference” and offer complex modes of “reading” a political body in action.
The use of feminist theorist Elisabeth Grosz’s (2011) definition of difference enables new power dynamics to arise around constructions of gender, race, class and desire. ‘Difference is the undoing of all stabilities, the inherent and immanent condition for the failure of identity that is concerned not with coinciding the subject with its past so much as opening the subject up to its becoming more and becoming-other’ (Grosz, 2011: 97). From this viewpoint, reiterating Hall et al. (1996), subject categories become temporary positions, socially and spatially constructed, rather than fixed given qualities.

In this presentation I will reflect on a series of artworks, those of my own and other visual representations, to investigate the concept of difference within the formation of identity politics. In particular, I will start the conversation with unpacking a seminal video work I made in 2013 I Want Me Some Brown Sugar. Featured in a solo show by the same name at the 198 Contemporary London, it is composed of screen images of different sexed and raced bodies, with layered text that discusses the way in which online pornography becomes a contradictory arena for taboo subjects on race, sexuality and gender. As a subtext, through difference(s) and specifically through the assertion of race, it’s intention was to deconstruct and destabilize normative looking relations, not only through race as the main signifier, given that the words ‘Black’ and ‘White’ are in capitals whenever different raced bodies encounter each other, but also through a host of multiple differences.

I Want Me Some Brown Sugar has continued to open up a discourse on the concept of difference and thereby the construction of identity through the process of undoing. Subject positions are constantly in flux and unfixed, bodies come and go into spaces in-between individual identities, transitioning from being into not being, through the performative repetition of gestures. The failure to fix an identity is confounded through the multiple differences between the sitters and walkers, the dressed and the undressed, the inter and intra racial heterosexual and homoerotic relations of men and women and between the characters in the image and the ‘I’ of the viewer. The use of Grosz’ definition of difference enables new meanings to arise around the constructions of gender, power dynamics and desire.

In addition, the presentation will unpack two more recent pieces of work, ‘The Lines Between Us’ (2020) and ‘I Becoming You’ (2020), two works which reflect on the personal relationship between myself the artist and my Father. Both pieces have been commissioned for the 2021/22, exhibition at Autograph called ‘Care | Contagion | Community — Self & Other exhibition’.

The presentation will continue to: Consider how we can move beyond categories of difference | To consider notions of becoming and familial lineage | Provide case studies of the concept of difference being put into action; through conversations around inclusion and exclusion.
School uniforms have long been a symbol of class and privilege as well as being mechanisms for surveillance and discipline (Meadmore and Symes 1996). A recent study of dress code policies in one American state concluded that the policies reproduced the ‘white, heterosexual male norm’ (Edwards and Marshall 2018). In Discipline and Punish Foucault focused on the ways that power is exercised over individual bodies. His concept of ‘docile bodies’ is particularly relevant in relation to school uniform policies. Schools are an important place for the construction of social norms and practices, including norms relating to gender expression and identity. In the context of school uniforms children will receive negative reactions to dress that does not fit what is expected of them (Graham et al. 2017). Happel (2013) describes the wearing of skirts as a part of ‘ritualized girling’ where girls take part in a symbolic performance of gender.

The origins of the school uniform come from a masculine, upper-class mode of dress. Girls’ uniforms can be classed into ‘quasi-masculine’ that are focused on promoting discipline and confidence, or ‘feminized uniforms’ that promote physical/emotional training in nurturing (Craik 2013). Even today girls’ uniforms contain ‘strange male traits’ - there are contradictions between some aspects of girls’ uniforms and what is considered feminine in the wider world (Okely 1993). Okely refers to two sets of attributes instilled in girls through this method: the ‘masculine’ traits of discipline and leadership as well as emotional attributes of self-control and self-negation. Craik describes ‘body techniques’ through uniforms that create and inscribe a series of oppositional values: ‘discipline versus spontaneity; group identity/conformity versus individuality/expressiveness; formality versus informality; compulsion versus choice; sexuality versus sexuality; and sexual versus sexual perversion’ (2003:130). Azzarito (2010) discusses the ‘constrained physicality’ of girls who learn to take up limited space and monitor their physical actions.

A key theme in the literature on gender and school dress codes is that of banning that which is deemed inappropriate or immodest which has particular implications for the governing of female bodies (Pomerantz 2007, Raby 2008). This presentation will include findings from a content analysis of the school uniform policies and school handbooks of all state secondary schools in Scotland (n=357) to show how school uniform policies continue to make school different for girls.
Anya Topolski is principle investigator for the Race-Religion Constellation Project and coordinator of the Race, Religion, Secularism Network. Her areas of expertise include racism, political philosophy, ethics, European identity and exclusion, gender, antisemitism and Islamophobia, political theology, Jewish thought, Arendt, Levinas, and Judeo-Christianity. She recently published Arendt, Levinas and A Politics of Relationality (2015) and the edited volumes Ethics for Psychologists: A Global and Case-Based Approach (2018) and Is There a Judeo-Christian? A European Perspective (2016). Her current research is in the field of critical philosophy of race and focuses on the race-religion intersection in Europe.

Keynote:
The masked differences of race, religion and secularism: Europe’s post-Shoah silence

Chair: Guy Eyre
Day 2 | Wednesday | 14 April

9:30 am  Panel 2: Negotiating Difference in Political Activism

11 am  PhD Panel 2: Migration, Difference and Belonging

2 pm  Panel 3: Difference and Legality

4 pm  Keynote Jane Gordon
Which differences come to matter to movements, and when, and how? In this paper, I seek to address this question through an examination of the autonomous women’s movement (AWM) in India. The AWM, often considered India’s feminist movement, has moved from seeking to elide differences in women’s experiences in order to construct a notion of the commonality of womanhood, to identifying, celebrating, and even basing its politics on the idea of differences between women. Changes in how feminists have approached difference have been driven by political events and processes in India since the 1990s, and have led to a heightened awareness of the role played by factors including religion, caste, class, ability, sexual orientation, and sexual identity in shaping women’s experiences. There is today a strong commitment to recognising the differences in women’s experiences across a wide range of social locations.

Yet the awareness of the differences between women has not always led to an easy incorporation of difference into Indian feminist activism. The autonomous women’s movement, while acknowledging various different identities and the social and political harms suffered by them, often found it difficult to include women (and persons of other genders) from various marginalised social locations within movement organisations and unable to take up the issues pertaining to them.

In this paper, I reflect on how two issues - of sexuality and caste - have been engaged with by the AWM. Using data derived from my doctoral research on this movement, I examine the variations in how the issues of sexuality (in particular, sexual orientation in the form of lesbianism) and caste (in particular, Dalit women’s issues) have been engaged with by the AWM. While it has been challenging to raise lesbian women’s issues in the AWM, this has been more successful in terms of having lesbian women activists in the AWM and raising issues that pertain to them, than attempts at working with Dalit women and on their issues. I argue that this dissimilarity is an outcome of various factors, including the nature of autonomous women’s organising and the social backgrounds of this movement’s activists. I argue that this gives us an insight into the specific mechanisms through which different identities come to matter to movements.
Imagination of ‘Europe’: Negotiating Differences in Women’s Rights Movements

Demet Gülçięçek | University of Warwick & Munzur University

Has Europe been imagined only in Europe? It is easy to give the answer ‘no’, but it is not always as easy to discuss ‘how’. How does the notion Europe might be resignified, when it is negotiated in a self-defined ‘non-European’ context where Europe is an object of desire, fantasy, hate? What work does it do to the other imaginations, such as the imaginations of Self and Other, different layers of ‘us’ and ‘them’? How does the imagination of Europe articulate to the political movements such as ones on women’s rights movements? This presentation will point to these questions, and try to open new ones, by analysing the negotiations of several ‘differences’, focusing on the women’s rights movements in early 20th century Istanbul. My analysis is based on an archival research on feminist archives in Istanbul. As a case study, it focuses on a Turkish women’s rights magazine, Kadınılar Dünyası (Women’s World), published in 1913, engaged with modernisation and nationalism debates while demanding women’s rights. Bringing poststructuralist feminist theories and Orientalism (and Occidentalism) studies together, I will argue that the negotiations of some differences are often articulated with other differences and I will focus on the production of the differences between European and non-European, femininities and masculinities, ‘us’ and ‘them’ in the national/local context. The production of these differences in the women’s movements in early 20th century will be investigated through the debates on ‘politics of location’, having a close look to the local contexts in the production of differences.
Social relations among Chilean and migrant children: navigating, embracing and challenging social differences in a diverse school in Chile

Andrea Cortés Saavedra | University College London

The European migration to Chile of the early twentieth century has been conceived within the Chilean social imaginary as a migration that benefited Chilean progress. In contrast, migration from Latin America and from neighbouring countries to Chile has been questioned and placed as a social problem. In this regard, it has emerged a production of explicit and implicit forms of social differentiation that separate the ‘us’ as a national ethos from ‘them’, the non-European migrants, as otherness. Then, indigenous and Latin-American 'others' have been racialised and positioned as a disadvantaged group in Chile.

Based on my ethnographic fieldwork with migrant children and Chilean teachers in a school placed in the north of Chile, this presentation will explore the discursive construction on social differences as well as the social relations among Chilean children and Latin American migrant children in a 'diverse school'. This presentation aims to identify and describe the teachers' discourses about migration and childhood, how the production of social differences is deployed and supported in a school context, and what broader discourses are mobilised to grasp negotiations of meanings and ways of belonging of migrant children. Moreover, I intend to describe how migrant students navigate, negotiate and challenge different school encounters, embracing or not the attributed position as social difference or minority within the Chilean school.

This paper’s theoretical framework is drawn on the notions of habitus and capitals developed by Bourdieu. I use these concepts as explicative tools in order to recognise the intertwining of the different social positions in which children’s subjectivities are constructed. Besides, I am tracing these concepts from the perspective of Archer’s Critical Realism; specifically, her theory of Analytic Dualism, to enrich the scope and possibilities of Bourdieu’s theory. This theoretical framework aims to understand how broader social inequalities are reproduced and how certain social structures and public discourses are embodied in practices in the daily encounters among children at a Chilean school.
Intra-North Queer Migrations and a Privileged Longing for Belonging

Linda Sólveigar- og Guðmundsdóttir | University of Iceland

This article is embedded in queer migration scholarship, while its originality lies in examining LGBTPQ intra-North mobilities to a small population in Northern Europe, namely Iceland. It discusses participants’ privileged subject position within the immigrant community relating to homotransnationalism, multiple affective belongings contrasting with the politics of belonging, as well as participants’ longing for a utopian futurity. The article argues that although LGBTPQIA+ identities and practices have become more socially accepted and legally included in recent years and decades, dominant stereotypes concerning issues of “race”, class, gender and nationality continue to construct the hierarchy of belonging. It reaffirms the importance of specifying issues of privilege, power, and differences in participants’ hybrid knowledge of residing in Iceland.
The ability/disability dichotomy and claiming disability rights

Adi Goldiner | King’s College London

The idea that some people belong to a social category of ‘disabled people’ is relatively recent. While the concept of ‘disability’ was first used to describe a limitation on one’s ability to perform a legal act, it is now commonly used to delineate people’s rights. Yet, the meaning of ‘disability’ both in the law and in everyday discourse varies significantly, giving rise to an on-going philosophical debate.

Within this debate, I identify two opposed models of disability addressing the issue of the ability/disability dichotomy. On the one hand, the minority group model holds that disabled people have some feature in common, which gives rise to a shared identity. This feature might be impairment, social stigma or self-identification. Hence, disability is an identity constituting characteristic, and every individual is either disabled or not. On the other hand, the universal model holds that disability is a universal human condition that characterizes all human beings, because we all either experience different kinds of disabilities or are at risk of becoming disabled. Accordingly, we are all disabled, or none of us are.

This paper explores the implications of these two opposed models of disability for the possibility of claiming rights that vest entitlements and subject others to duties relating to circumstances of disability. I begin by distilling the principle views associated with these two models, with regards to the conceptualization of disability, the disadvantage associated with disability and how to address it. I then argue that while the minority group model is hospitable to disability rights, the universal model undermines such rights. The main difference between the models’ compatibility to disability rights, I argue, is rooted in the ‘directed quality’ of rights, that is, the idea that rights correlate to duties that are directed toward the right holder. The universal model is compatible with holding certain agents under duties towards all individuals, but in denying the morally significant differences between some people who are not disabled and some people who are – and have greater needs or stronger interests than others – it erodes the foundations of claiming disability rights. Thus the liberal conception of individual rights underlies the distinction between disabled and non-disabled people.
Difference is part of the human condition; it is present in all societies. However, different political systems have different techniques to manage these differences. My paper argues that constitutions have an important role in managing social differences and analyses the toolkit constitutional democracies use for that purpose. (My paper focuses primarily on the differences of belief systems.) My thesis is that they use three main techniques that I will call selection, limitation and empowerment, respectively. First, in each political system, some of our disagreements are handled by the normal political process. The constitution provides a procedure or a mechanism by which one of the different views will be elevated to authoritative status. Second, each constitution imposes limits on which beliefs can be elevated to authoritative status and puts certain beliefs beyond the reach of the normal political process. Third, in each political system, the state leaves a certain area of autonomy to its citizens (or groups of citizens). Within this area of autonomy, the state does not impose an authoritative view on its citizens. Finally, I will also explore how this analytical framework can be extended to other types of differences that are related to immutable personal characteristics, like race.
While today Middle Eastern societies in general are pictured in the Western media as hostile to non-traditional sexual and gender groups, the evolution of sex- and gender-based differentiation has a very complex history in the region. Non-binary and non-heterosexual groups had been present and recognised in the Muslim communities before colonisation, nevertheless the arrival of the ideas of modernity and European empires reshaped how societies regarded sex and gender. This process resulted in the construction of sexual and gender groups as “normative minorities” representing backwardness, leading to the present dire situation. Nevertheless, the survival of pre-modern traditions resulted in very unusual practices and legal regulations even today.

The paper explores the process in which non-traditional sexual and gender minorities were constructed in the Middle East and the effects of modernisation on othering of such communities. Building on the linguistic framework of William D. Crano and Viviane Seyranian, I will conceptualise these groups as normative minorities and subjugate groups (based on their relative size, share in social power, as well as their normative perception) and discover the major causes behind the different evolution of such groups in the region. The research design will be built on a comparative case study method which will focus on Iran and Turkey, two societies which, despite their geopolitical and cultural proximity, have developed highly differently with regards to non-traditional gender and sexual groups: same-sex intercourse was legalised in Turkey in the 19th century, while the same practice is still considered to be a legal and moral sin in Iran. At the same time, in the Islamic Republic, sex-change intercourse is not just legal but is funded by state authorities. The research will seek the explore the reasons behind such particularities in detail.
Jane Gordon

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Jane Anna Gordon is author of, most recently, *Statelessness and Contemporary Enslavement* (Routledge 2020) and *Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau through Frantz Fanon* (Fordham University Press 2014) and co-editor (with Drucilla Cornell) of the forthcoming *Creolizing Rosa Luxemburg* and (with Cyrus E. Zirakzadeh) of *The Politics of Richard Wright: Perspectives on Resistance* (University Press of Kentucky 2019). President of the Caribbean Philosophical Association (CPA) from 2014-2016, she continues to direct the CPA Summer School and to co-edit the *Creolizing the Canon and Global Critical Caribbean Thought* book series. With Lewis R. Gordon, she edits the new, open-access journal, *Philosophy and Global Affairs*.

**Keynote:**

'Yours for Justice': The Continued Relevance of Ida B. Wells' Diagnosis of Domestic Racial Terror

Chair: Justine Bakker
Day 3 | Thursday | 15 April

9:30 am  Keynote Gurpreet Mahajan
11 am    PhD Panel 3: Difference Beyond Binaries
2 pm     Panel 4: Narrating Othering
4 pm     Keynote Lewis Gordon
Professor of Political Theory and Philosophy of Social Sciences at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi


Keynote:
Difference, Identity and Recognition

Chair: Joel Pierce
This paper submits that Sylvia Wynter’s work on the entanglement of race and religion allows for a nuanced and complex conceptualization of the production of difference, than what Wynter’s system theory of symbolic representation permits. The paper explicates how Wynter develops the connections between race and religion from a system theory of symbolic representation, which I will argue, privileges the onto-epistemic over the power structures or what I will call the onto-political as constituted by politics of the entanglements of race and religion. By critically analyzing the power structures that Wynter presents as effects of the onto-epistemic system which she develops by way of her system theory of symbolic representation, I show that these power structures are not effects of the onto-epistemic, but rather, they are as fundamental to the constitution of constellations of race and religion as the onto-epistemic. I formulate the power structures as the onto-political in relation to the onto-epistemic. In making this move, I theorise how the onto-political that constitutes and which is constituted by the entanglements of race and religion, produce differences beyond the binary framework in Wynter’s onto-epistemic system theory of symbolic representation. Building on Wynter, the paper concludes by proposing that the constellations of race and religion are fundamentally built on both the onto-political and onto-epistemic, with the latter being in constant change in the production of differences in the service of the shifting white western Christianity.
Political Secularism, Christianity and the Production of Difference

A. Sophie Lauwers | University of Aberdeen

Political secularism, the doctrine that advocates barriers between religion and politics, is often presented as a neutral and inclusive way of facilitating the coexistence of various religious and nonreligious groups. At the same time, secularism has often been invoked for political projects that exclude Europe’s Others, primarily Muslims and Jews. This paper unpacks some of the central binaries presupposed and reproduced by secularism, and shows how through a regulation of ‘religious’ presence in ‘secular’ realms like national culture, politics and the public sphere, non-Christian minorities are produced as ‘problem people’ (cf. DuBois, Gordon, Bayoumi). Drawing on the work of Gil Anidjar, I argue that secularism has historically served the interest of Western Christianity, in close association with systems of racial and religious exclusion, colonialism and Orientalism. The separation of ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ derives from a Christian history, which placed Jewish and Islamic religion and culture under suspicion. For Anidjar, this can be explained because Christianity itself invented the distinction between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’, thereby making itself into a ‘religion’ like no other and masking its enduring hegemony. I will illustrate how this problematic still manifests itself in contemporary European controversies surrounding religion in the public sphere and secular Christian majority culture. Lastly, I will discuss the implications of this analysis for the inclusive potential of a secularist framework, and the dangers and limitations of using a secularist framework to rethink problematic understandings of ‘difference’.
Difference is often constructed as that which divides us, following intersectional theorists I will think about difference as something that connects. In this vein, difference acts as a precursor, not opposition to collective action. Following Patricia Hill Collins, I understand difference as foundational to reflect on existing power structures. The recognition of different subject positions in the matrix of domination is foundational, otherwise we fall into the trap of Versaemtlichung (Hark 2017). However, politics is a collective action that requires us to come together on a shared project. Audre Lorde suggests this commonality through our differences; we do not stand together due to a particular difference, a smallest common denominator, we stand together because we all ‘live in the house of difference.’ (1982) I argue we need to rethink solidarity on these grounds. Solidarity proper is not based on sameness but on difference. I further argue that solidarity that links differences creates a new community founded on the recognition of difference. We can rightly call that a political utopia because it creates a common space for political action which heretofore did not exist.

Michael Brown | University of Aberdeen

This paper explores an ethnic joke form popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Britain, namely the Irish bull. The joke involved mocking the Irish for failing to pass as English, revealing themselves through expressions of false logic, and verbal constructions that resulted from direct translation of Gaelic into English ('I have a thirst upon me'). The paper explores the ironic study of this joke form written by the Irish writer, Maria Edgeworth, Essay on the Irish Bull (1802), situating her treatment of the bull in relation to other Irish appropriations of ethnic humour, notably in the case of malapropisms. It concludes that these forms of making mock reflected a process of 'soft othering' that marked out the ethnic communities of the British Isles, while standing in contrast to the 'hard othering' that alienated racial minorities from the process of British state formation.

Conceptualizing Difference in Radicalization Narratives: Identity and Alterity

Sybille Reinke de Buitrago | Academy of Police Sciences and Criminology, Lower Saxony, Germany

Radicalization narratives focus, among other aspects, on identity and alterity. Those behind such narratives aim to convince, draw in some while rejecting others, build dichotomies and difference, and mobilize for support. Extremist groups actively use social media to spread their narratives. While the topic of radicalization has gained renewed political and societal attention, how identity is appealed to and how difference is created in radicalization narratives on social media deserves more attention and analysis. Mobilization does not occur without effective appeals to identity, often framed with emotional terms.

This paper offers results of a qualitative analysis of radicalization narratives in online media, in particular YouTube videos, from Islamist and right-wing extremist groups in predominantly Germany. We find in these two milieus also parallels regarding the use of identity and emotions to build anxiety, dichotomies and resentment, and in the end to mobilize.
When difference becomes an object of discrimination, oppression, or exclusion this is often driven by a perception that it is more than merely different, but also wrong in some deep way – that it represents a degenerate way of being, or a deviation from some proper form. These sorts of judgement – especially pertinent to the politics of gender, sexuality, race, and bodily capacities – rely on deep-rooted metaphysical assumptions about the nature of living beings, and the organic world in general. In this paper I explore some of this metaphysics of the organic, and explain its social power, by building on some recent work on the phenomenon of ‘dehumanization’.

David Livingstone Smith (2011; 2016) defines dehumanization as the perception of other humans as ‘less than human’ – a cognitive operation that has often oiled the wheels of genocide and other atrocities. Drawing on psychological research into ‘folk biology’ (e.g. Medin & Ortony 1989) and anthropological work around the social construction of purity/impurity (e.g. Douglas 2001 [1966]), Smith argues that this relation to others is especially potent as a tool of social exclusion because of its implicit metaphysical structure.

When, for example, the Nazi dehumanizes the Jew, their belief is not just that the Jew is straightforwardly a different species, but that they are subhuman ‘on the inside’, in essence, despite their superficially human appearance. This contradiction between essence and appearance can be intellectually affirmed without much difficulty, but in the context of lived interaction with the other it generates a phenomenological dissonance, a felt ambiguity, in which the dehumanized other appears as neither truly human nor simply non-human. They do not fit into the perceived proper order of the world, and become unheimlich (‘uncanny’, ‘creepy’) – a liminal, in-between kind of being. As Smith puts it, the dehumanized other is experienced as a ‘metaphysically transgressive’ being, or in common parlance, a ‘monster’.

I argue that this analysis provides a clue to understanding (and deconstructing) other forms of difference-exclusion, beyond the above sense of dehumanization. In particular, I hypothesize that a related kind of metaphysical judgement is often at play in discrimination against disabled, non-heterosexual, and transgender people. In these cases, too, it is likely that a perceived contradiction between essence and appearance generates the phenomenology of the unheimlich, making such people into objects of disgust and contempt (see also Smith 2017).

There are subtle but powerful inter-relations between the boundaries of inclusion in the socio-political realm and the way we conceive the basic structure of the natural world. Any critical discussion of the politics of difference ought to be informed by an interrogation of this dynamic.
Lewis R. Gordon

Professor of Philosophy at the University of Connecticut, Honorary President of the Global Center for Advanced Studies, and Honorary Professor in the Unit for the Humanities at Rhodes University, South Africa.


**Keynote:**
Differentiating Difference

Chair: Josias Tembo
Day 4 | Friday | 15 April

9:30 am  Panel 5: Solidarity, Identity and Difference

11 am    PhD Panel 4: Decolonizing Constellations of Difference

2 pm     Panel 6: Traversing Difference

3 pm     Reflections and Future Collaborations
Panel 5 Solidarity, Identity and Difference

Anticolonial resistance along the settler-native lines: colonial difference and the question of solidarity

Elian Weizman | London South Bank University

My paper looks at how anti-Zionist Jewish-Israelis take up the role of ‘anti-colonial settler’ and attempt to understand the possibilities and limits their structural positions as settlers pose to resistance. While struggling for the same cause of dismantling the settler state alongside and in support of the Palestinians – the colonial lines of difference are clearly present. Indeed, this very position places them in an impossible paradox: as Jewish citizens of Israel, they occupy a position of power and privilege, that is legally enshrined and socially embedded. Their different structural position to Palestinians (and other non-Jewish citizens) also unveils other differences, apparent in their inability to support a claim for the actual departure of the settlers (that is, reversal of the settler colonial project), and their insistence on their own right to remain (or on their lack of choice in this matter), and the colonised, who can (and many times) reject it altogether. Importantly, the key difference is also so clearly demarcated around the question and the use of violence as a strategy of struggle, from which anticolonial settlers both historically and contemporarily refrain. These differences pose doubts over the possibility of settlers to inhabit decolonial struggle or forms of subjectivity – ones that entail rejection, refusal of the settler state and its structures, and might also entail the resort to violence among many other strategies of struggle for decolonisation. Here, I argue that this difference should be openly conceded and discussed, in the attempt to address the question of ‘resistance from within’, its contribution to the larger struggle, and its potential to contribute to true and meaningful decolonisation.
In recent years, there has been a new wave of criticism of identity politics. While the critical discussion of identity politics was a central topic of the internal debates of new social movements, identity politics is now discussed in the general public sphere as well as in general political theory. The central topos of this critique is that identity politics is essentializing: it fixes subjects to their social position and indulges in a politics of particularity that leads to divisions in the democratic discourse (Lilla, Fukuyama) and to divisions in the structures of solidarity within social justice movements (Fraser, Streeck). The current historical situation of the new critique of identity politics is determined by political progress and, at the same time, a backlash: while marginalized groups have been able to gain recognition and rights, these positions have increasingly become the target of attacks due to the success of right-wing populism and the shifts in discourse associated with it. This constellation leads to the assumption that the perceived increase in identity politics in this situation is counterproductive because it provides grounds for right-wing populist polarization. Against this background, it is important to ask in principle how identity politics works, what constitutes it, and what it means both for emancipatory politics and for the democratic project as a whole. We answer these questions by systematically drawing on the poststructuralist discussion of identity politics, which is a central point of reference in feminist, queer, and postcolonial critique, to show that identity politics is an act of construction: It is in the particular subjectivations of identity politics projects that political articulation and agency emerge in the first place. Identity politics is thus not necessarily essentializing and endangering democratic discourse, but rather constructive and required for democratic discourse.
Spectral Inheritance and Response-ability for Plural Pasts

Ruben Hordijk | Linköping University

The project of ‘spectral inheritance’ works towards a notion of ethics as response-ability as responsiveness to the multiple pasts that sustain, enable and constitute one’s existence. Following A. Azoulay’s analysis of the timeline as an ‘imperial technique’ that transmutes pastness as an open web of relations into a closed sphere of the no-longer, in favor of a modality of time that is always ‘in pursuit of the new’, I suggest that the time of modernity/coloniality is the preemption of ethics (‘response-debilitating’) and futurity (‘defuturing’; A. Escobar; T. Fry). In dialogue with N. Maldonado-Torres and S. Wynter, I take up the concept of ‘coloniality of being’ from the perspective of the imperial timeline, where racialization works as the denial of co-humanness through denial of co-evalness (what A. Al-Saji calls ‘racialized time’). In contrast to the timeline based on the closure of the past and the pursuit of the new, the framework of spectral inheritance asks the question of how to be ethically responsive to the response-debilitating conditions of modernity’s erasure and enclosure of the past through the imperial timeline and racialized time. The framework of inheritance is spectral, or ‘hauntological’ (informed by A. Gordon, J. Derrida, T. Morrison), to dislodge inheritance from a conservatism, a patrilineal and phallogocentric model based on the ‘proper’, where ‘property’ (objects) belong to a person (subject) and are passed on (in time qua timeline or bloodline) from father to son. But the notions of spectrality and inheritance also signify contamination and impurity, which means that the white patriarchal modern/colonial connotations of inheritance are sticky and must be confronted response-ably. These unwelcome inheritances cannot be negated or put aside: their undoing is itself a form of critical response as an affirmation that displaces and nourishes healing relations of an already-there that the modern legacies seek to erase, incorporate or destroy. ‘Spectral inheritance’ is therefore both the ‘object’ of inquiry as well as a method of inquiry, a way of ‘learning to unlearn in order to relearn’ not through the negation of critique but the positivity of taking up and accounting for inheritances of what, where and when we are. Decolonization is the horizon of the inquiry, an (epistemic, ethical and political) commitment to anti-patriarchal pluriversality and a reweaving of plural pasts for reclaiming ‘a world where many worlds can co-exist’ (Subcommandante Marcos).
Property making difference: Present histories of (violent) ownership relations

Hannah Vögele | University of Brighton

In my paper, I claim that most public engagement with - and discussion about – forms of gendered violence misses the mark. To counter this, I posit a somewhat constitutive relationship between the modern proprietary system, including property and propriety, and gendered (and racialised) violence. Therefore, I trace how “modern” systems of ownership have produced different relations between different people. Articulated through colonialism or patriarchal familial relations these present histories make and mark both specific properties of people and the specific relations of dispossession or proprietary access between them. Ultimately, the property relations of “western modernity” work to produce people differentially as possessive and/or dispossessed and/or as incapable of possession. This in turn enables and induces violent relationships between them. Drawing up a particular constellation of processes and events in the German (colonial) context can illuminate the pervasiveness of property and its impact. This helps to intervene in common debates about violence that fail to attack the root of the problem – in fact, to some extend are explicitly designed not to try to in the first place. Thus, I also understand this project as responding to a perceived lack within liberal feminist scholarly, public - and to some extent activist - understanding of violence.
From Historical to Intercultural Understanding: Gadamer and the Hermeneutics of Difference

Evgenia Ilieva | Ithaca College

Over the past two decades the emergence, consolidation, and growing prominence of cognate disciplines like comparative philosophy and comparative political theory has been accompanied by a renewed interest in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and its usefulness and significance for intercultural understanding. A fundamental problem that attends recent efforts to open Western philosophy and political theory to enrichment from traditions and thinkers that lie outside the Euro-American world is how to juxtapose, compare, and evaluate two (or more) vastly different forms of life, systems of belief, or epistemes. The philosophical challenge, put briefly, is this: is it possible to bring something of an entirely different order into our world of understanding without imposing our own epistemological categories and civilizational prejudices on it? Without reducing the other to the same? It is with a view towards tackling these questions that scholars have turned their attention once again to Gadamer’s hermeneutical concepts. Against this background, the present paper focuses on paradigmatic work in comparative political theory and comparative philosophy that has explicitly grappled with the problem of difference. Examined here are three models of encountering and learning from different traditions of thought – what I call the models of existential immersion, conversion, and pilgrimage – as exemplified in the contributions by Farah Godrej, Leigh Jenco, and J. L. Mehta. More specifically, the paper focuses on the way in which each of these scholars have conceptualized difference via their critical engagement with Gadamer’s hermeneutics. I will show that while the first two authors have sought to resolve the problem of the encounter with difference methodologically (Godrej) and epistemologically (Jenco), their respective solutions remain bound to a spectator theory of knowledge. This becomes especially evident when their work is contrasted with Mehta’s own. Unlike Godrej and Jenco, Mehta does not view difference as a problem to be resolved. The advantage of his approach, I argue, is that it provides liberation from the rigid subject-object dichotomy which encourages the view that the “objects” of our knowledge exist prior to and wholly apart from the act of knowing. Mehta’s work, therefore, opens the possibility for redirecting our attention to a question that has thus far been thoroughly avoided in the consolidation of these subfields: namely, the question of the very constitution of difference or in other words the question of heterology.
Exclusive versus Inclusive-Disjunction: A Conceptual Tool for the Political Theory of Emancipation

Edward Thornton | University of Aberdeen

In this presentation, I will examine one way in which our mode of conceptualizing difference can have an immediate practical impact on our social and political actions. Specifically, through an analysis of a movement known as Institutional Psychotherapy, I will show that, in situations of care, the fine line between an emancipatory and a disciplinary action can only be navigated by making a conceptual distinction between difference as exclusive-disjunction and difference as inclusive-disjunction.

Institutional Psychotherapy is a mode of psychotherapeutic practice that grew up in France around the middle of the 20th century, partly as a response to the horrific conditions and the mass starvations that occurred in French asylums during the Second World War. The aim of this movement was to create a total intuition of care, which could act as the site for political as well as psychic emancipation. Frantz Fanon and Félix Guattari were both trained in Institutional Psychotherapy and it is this training that informed their particular blend of political activism with psychotherapy.

At the root of the theory of Institutional Psychotherapy is a reformulation of our understanding of the subject, in which we see the individual subject as a product of pre-individual group relations. By prioritising the group dynamic over the individual agent, it is possible to recognise the ways in which difference is required for the production of subjectivity and is not a concept that we can simply apply to pre-given subjects in order to differentiate them.

By offering a concise explanation of the conceptual distinction between difference as exclusive-disjunction and difference as inclusive-disjunction, and by showing how this distinction is operative in the theory of subject-formation that underpins Institutional Psychotherapy, this presentation will contribute to the ‘Conceptualizing Difference’ conference by supplying a powerful new tool for political analysis.
Acknowledgements

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For any questions, please contact the organizers Sophie Lauwers and Fredericke Weiner.

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