Afterword

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In his introduction to a collection of essays published in 1994 entitled The Making of Political Identities, the political theorist Ernesto Laclau encapsulated what he sees as the political situation toward the close of the twentieth century, after the end of the Cold War, the breakdown of the Soviet Union, and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. Laclau argues that the aftermath of the clash of political ideologies that dominated the post–World War II political landscape left a certain void in the demarcation of political identities in an emerging era of neoliberal globalization. Laclau writes on the cusp of what is also the emerging era of digital media transformation and recontextualization of political, social, and personal everyday experience and practice. Twenty years later, we are deep into the decontextualization of a post–Cold War global landscape, the map of which is being redrawn around primarily economic, national, and transnational hegemonies. Laclau reflects on the issues surrounding questions of political identity in terms that accord with the configuration we noted in the Introduction to this volume in relation to Habermas’s analysis of the tension between a late modern and a postmodern interpretation of modernity at the turn of the millennium. Regarding the changes to the ways in which political identities are formed in what Habermas prefers to call late rather than postmodernity, Laclau notes:

If agents were to have an always already defined location in the social structure, the problem of their identity, considered in a radical way, would not arise—or, at most, would be seen as a matter of people discovering or recognizing their own identity, not of constructing it. Problems of social dislocation would thus be seen in terms of the
contradictory locations of the social agents, not in terms of a radical lack threatening the very identity of those agents. (2)

The “radical lack” that Laclau rightly notes as constitutive of the lifeworld at the turn of the millennium has proved fertile soil for the proliferation of digital media expressions of social identity. The fluidity and constructivism in the experience of identity formation that arise from what Laclau sees as a de-ideologized global landscape (at least in terms of the way ideologies had come be characterized in the twentieth century) has encouraged an openness and adaptability to technologically transformed communicative practices. The computational turn in communication that constitutes the digital transformation of communications facilitates the rapid formation of a plurality of virtual identities that, coupled with the potential choice of anonymity or identity-masking, need not even be coordinated or consistent with one another. From Plato and Aristotle on, the philosophical tradition has worried over the epistemological and ethical status of mimetic, intentionally virtual representations. Plato has the character of Socrates in the Republic cite “an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy,” exiling the mimetic poets from the ideal republic unless they can mount a philosophical justification for the value of their rôle. Aristotle, on the other hand, argues that a human being is innately mimetic, “the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation” (1448b, 7–8). In particular, he observes:

And it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation. The truth of this second point is shown by experience: though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art. . . . [T]he reason of the delight in seeing the picture is that one is at the same time learning—gathering the meaning of things. (1448b, 8–11, 15–17)

The delight that we naturally experience in representations, while inherently pleasurable and potentially educative, entails puzzling and even disturbing implications in its apparent freedom from the direct consequences of physical action in the world. As conduits of representation and ever more intensified virtualization, communication media display the ambivalent tensions that we experience between the elements of pleasure and knowledge attached to all representations. Before the advent of the personal computer, the heavy preoccupation with violence in the one-way media of film and television had been accompanied by a relative proscription of nudity and sexuality. The latter, however, have found a fertile environment in the more individually controlled, interactive structure
of the Internet. The ubiquity and omni-availability of virtual media connection means that a significant proportion of the time of a very high proportion of the population of developed (and, with the advent of mobile devices, the developing) nations is spent in virtualized, rather than embodied, engagements, so much so that the once apparent distinction between real and virtual, the presented and the represented, no longer pertains, and a new regime of representation and virtual action, of uncertain proportions and implications, emerges.

With the increasing virtualization, through personal and mobile devices, of both solitary time and communication with others, a shift has taken place in the balance that still pertained in the era of film and television between real and virtual experience. The passivity of media consumption that predated computerization and interconnectivity maintained a certain proportionality with reading and the clarity of overt contrast between reading and action in the world. With computer virtualization and Internet interactivity, that clarity of contrast no longer pertains. We are swiftly becoming naturalized to virtual community and communications, to the degree that the former (putative) relation between nature and culture rapidly approaches (or may be well past) a tipping point in which human beings are no longer naturalized in a biosphere that has itself become deeply unbalanced as a result of the impact of scientific and technological intervention (see, e.g., Hayles, 1999; Wolfe, 2010). How human beings understand their social and species identity and take up their agency in such a vertiginous context opens new horizons of ethical and political reflection and debate. The authors of this collection on digital culture are convinced of the necessity and value of this debate on identity and agency in and of the digital nexus.

REFERENCES


