Clearing the Skepticism: Social Movements at the University of Zimbabwe

By

Charles Dube
Jenet Mudekunye
Clearing the Skepticism: Social Movements at the University of Zimbabwe

Charles Dube and Jenet Mudekunye

Great Zimbabwe University

Corresponding Author’s Email: charliedoobs@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research went beyond the anecdotal to the empirical vis-à-vis an analysis of identity politics and its meaning within a university context. Premising politics on a particular collective identity has often been perceived as the basis for dissociation, defeatism, exclusion, and separatism. This has resulted in a skeptical reception of groups that base their politics on a collective identity, be they movements based on feminism, general workers’ movements or students’ movements. Based on the case of Matabeleland Development Society (MDS), this study employed Erving Goffman’s Dramaturgy and Manuel Castells’ ‘Power of Identity Approaches’ to unearth the above assumptions that underlie the political critics of identity politics. The said organization is a social movement that was formed in 1992 at the University of Zimbabwe by, and for, students originating from Matabeleland and some parts of the Midlands Province. Matabeleland is a province in Zimbabwe, and the underpinning objective of the MDS, as stated in its Constitution, is to champion the socio-politico-economic development of their regions of origin. Members of the MDS base their politics on a collective ethnic identity that stems from their belonging to the Matabele ethnic group. Research findings in this treatise are based on in-depth unstructured personal interviews that were conducted among some selected members of the MDS through snowballing. The research also utilized documented evidence such as the MDS Constitution, which contains the history of the MDS. Findings from this study revealed that criticisms levelled against social movements have often missed their real nature. Presupposing politics on a collective identity is not synonymous with separatism. Neither is it an attempt to overemphasize difference. The practical significance of the treatise is in its original contribution to the field through the edition of the MDS case material, an arguably novel case inasmuch as research on social movements is concerned.

Key words: identity, social movements, separatism, ethnicity, politics

Assumptions Underlying Critics of Identity Politics

This study deconstructs the main assumptions critics of social movements level against them. The thesis goes from the theoretical to the empirical understanding of movements that base their politics on a collective ethnic identity. Worthy of note are the assumptions that: (1) a collective identity masks an individual identity; (2) social movements tend towards separatism and exclusion at the expense of unity, and that; (3) identity politics is an act of condescension. These assumptions have meant that groups that base their politics on a collective ethnic identity are viewed with scepticism. It is the scope of this research to unearth the above assumptions using case material at the University of Zimbabwe. As a social movement that bases its politics on a Matabele ethnic identity, the Matabeleland Development Society will be the case study in point. Informing the study is Castells’ analysis of how diverse identities operate within different contexts. The study also borrowed heavily from Irving Goffman’s (1969) dramaturgical model, which analyses how individuals may either showcase or conceal their primary identity depending on a particular context. For instance the desire and/or pressure to conform to group interests may mean that an individual conceals his/her interests and behaves in a way that the group expects. Attempts will be made to unpack whether pressure for conformity overrides the rational autonomy of those individuals with a collective ethnic identity.

Like other progressive social movements, student movements have been affected by identity politics, a politics that stresses strong collective group identities as the basis of political analysis and action (Glazer, 2006). The basis of this politics can be traced to the 1960s when early movements were formed. These include the Civil Rights Movement, Movement against the War in Vietnam, and student movements which were premised on an attempt by students to gain student rights and decision-making powers. From these movements emerged early radical women’s movements with their slogan ‘the personal is political’. According to Alcoff (2006), identity politics is centred on the idea that activism involves groups turning inward and stressing separatism, strong collective identities, and political
goals focused on psychological and personal self-esteem. Writing about the gay movement, Lemonik (2004:121) defines identity politics in the following fashion:

“The politics of identity is a kind of cultural politics. It relies on the development of a culture that is able to create new and affirmative concepts of the self, to articulate collective identities, and to forge a sense of group loyalty. Identity politics - very much like nationalism - requires the development of rigid definitions of the boundaries between those who have particular collective identities and those who do not”

Identity politics is based on a number of assumptions; the immutability of ideologically constructed collective identities; the empowering aspect of identity politics; unity and solidarity that a particular group perceives to have or might have really lost as a result of subscription to the values of dominant social institutions. Also, as Hall (1996) notes, these collective identities, for many, provide a retreat where a particular minority group can feel ‘comfortable’ and ‘safe’ from the assaults and insults of the rest of society. However, by focusing on the above assumptions, social movements based on identity politics have often missed the other side of the coin, the disempowering aspect of identity politics, separatism and exclusion that results from identity politics, the conservative nature of this kind of politics, the divisive consequence of basing politics on collective identities, and the threat to rational autonomy that identity politics entails.

It is because of the latter views that identity politics has been critiqued, in varying degrees, from both left and right. For liberals, a strong sense of ethnic or racial identity poses a priori problem for a democratic state; “for Elshtain (2006) because it conflicts with the development and assessment of public ends, for Glazer and Moynihan (2000) because it has been created by exclusion, and for Roosevelt and Wilson because it threatens the security of the United States” (Alcoff, 2006:10). From this point of view, social and ethnic identities are disuniting and, therefore, should move away from basing their politics on identity. Leftist writers such as Todd Gitlin, Emmanuel Wallerstein, Richard Rorty and Nancy Fraser have, in varying degrees, critiqued movements that make identity their organising basis and are worried about ‘overemphasizing’ difference (Alcoff, 2006). This manifested itself in the 1990s when most leftists wanted to carefully distinguish good and bad forms of multiculturalism, and were very critical of forms that they felt reified identity and promoted a politics of visibility without an agenda of class struggle. From the onset it can be noted that the concept and phenomenon of identity politics is subject to a diversity of analysis from diverse schools of thought. As result of this, there is need to continue unpacking the real implications of basing politics on a collective identity. This research was conducted with this in mind.

At the University of Zimbabwe, dominant student movements are those organized along ethnic identity, examples of which include Mashonaland Central University Students Association (MCUSA), Chipinge University Students Association (CHUSA), and Matabeleland Development Society (MDS). These student movements base their collective identities on ethnic origin and generally aim to be platforms for representation of students from their respective ethnic groups at the University of Zimbabwe and, as with others, beyond university. Like any other social movements, the pervasive language espoused by these associations is that of empowerment, representation, inclusion (or otherwise), and reclamation or reaffirmation of a collective identity. These goals, noble as they might seem to be, have had their fair share of critics from diverse schools of thought, depending on their theoretical orientation and other subjective values. These critics range from a perceived to a real realisation that, by basing their politics on ethnic identity, these student movements have, in one way or the other, contributed to disunity, dissociation, differences, exclusion, and to the undermining of rational autonomy, or individual identity, especially as a result of their emphasis on collective identity.

It is important to note that while identity can be collective, it can also be individualistic. Castells (1997:356) defines identity as socially constructed, dependent on context, historic or otherwise, and asserts that it is “people’s source of meaning and experience”. According to Castells, identity, as opposed to role, is internalized, based on cultural attributes, and can be individual or collective. Its main function is to explain the purpose of one’s actions; its content depends on who does the construction, and for what purpose, in what context, and within what power structure.

This research comes at a time when most, if not all, of the student movements that base their politics on ethnic identity are on the brink of collapse. This realisation gave me the impetus to add another objective to this research, that is, to explore the reasons behind students joining students’ movements. The hypothesis behind this is that students join social movements because of the perceived socio-politico-economic benefits that come with being a member of a particular social movement, the absence of such benefits may be enough to demoralise and demotivate those who subscribe to a particular social movement. In rational choice theories, individuals are seen as motivated by the wants or goals that express their ‘preferences’. They act within specific, given constraints and on the basis of the information that they have about the conditions under which they are acting. At its simplest, the relationship between preferences and constraints can be seen in the purely instrumental terms of the relationship of a means to an end. As it is not possible for individuals to achieve all of the various things that they want, they must
also make choices in relation to both their goals and the means for attaining these goals. Rational choice theories hold that individuals must anticipate the outcomes of alternative courses of action and calculate that which will be best for them. Rational individuals choose the alternative that is likely to give them the greatest satisfaction (Heath 1976:3). Likewise, students may opt to join particular social movements as a way of pursuing the above ends, that is, whichever benefits they believe will accrue to them by virtue of their belonging to these social movements. For example, they may feel that the real or perceived unity that a collective identity brings to a group might economically, or politically empower them vis-a-vis the dominant group.

The Other Side of Identity Politics

More often than not, the critic of identity politics can be said to be based on assumptions which do not go beyond the anecdotal to the empirical. This anecdotal picture of identity politics, however, may not actually correspond to either the actual lived experience of identity or its politically mobilised forms. In view of this, an alternative account of identity politics can be used to show the inadequacy of the assumptions behind the critique of identity politics.

When one go beyond the anecdotal to the empirical, there might not be sufficient evidence for the absoluteness with which the critics of identity have assumed that strongly felt identities always tend toward separatism. While there can be problems with essentialist constructions of identity and overly narrow formulations of political alliance, and while there can be serious problems with the view that only those sharing an identity can unite together in common cause, it must be noted that these positions are the result of certain kinds of constructs of identity rather than the automatic effect of a strong sense of group solidarity and group cohesiveness. In the National Black Politics Survey conducted in 1993-1994, the first survey of mass political opinion among African Americans conducted in the United States, one of the most striking observations was a very high degree of belief in what political theorists like Dawson, Holliman and Brown call “linked fate”, that is, the belief that what generally happens to people in your identity group, in this case your racial group, will significantly affect your life (Dawson, 1994; Holliman and Brown, 1997). Researchers found that over 80% of respondents felt a strong sense of linked fate with African Americans as a whole. Alcoff (2006) notes that the idea of linked fate means that African Americans will tend to use group data as a kind of proxy to understand how a given choice might work out for them as individuals. A belief in linked fate has obvious political ramifications for alliances, organising, and one’s ability to trust the analysis of political leaders. Yet researchers also found that less than 40% of their respondents agreed with such proposals as “blacks should control the economy in mostly black communities,” or “blacks should control the government in mostly black communities” (Alcoff, 2006:10). Even fewer than this (by about a third) agreed with the proposal that “blacks should have their own separate nation” thus the very high level of group identification that exists among African Americans showed no evidence of having a correlation to a racially separatist political approach or a tendency to reject coalition efforts. In view of this, the researcher saw it academically fit to conduct an on-the-ground research at the University of Zimbabwe to ascertain the lived experiences of minority groups in relation to the dominant one(s). This research is crucial as it unpacked abstract generalisations that often pervade an analysis of social movements.

Justification for the Study

This study took the University of Zimbabwe as a complex community, whose system and subsystems need to be understood, if its mission of producing competent graduates is to be attained. As one of the major subsystems, students need to be understood, especially in relation to how they act in relation to each other and also how the collective decisions they often take at the University can also be taken beyond University life to shape national economic, social, and political structures at large.

As a very influential institution in relation to national activities, there is need by University policy makers to understand how organisations operated by students can have ripple effects on national activities. Also, to take note of how social movements that base their politics on a collective ethnic identity can function in a way that determines the politico-socio-economic direction of both the University and the nation at large. This is so because ideologies espoused by such social movements have the capacity to breed vibrant economic and political leaders. At the same time, there are chances that social movements can be the basis for separatism, exclusion and political despair, especially in the event that organisational goals are not met. In view of all of this, the research is of policy significance since it helps to unpack what social movements really stand for as building blocks to enhancing the operations of the University as a whole.

Usually, university authorities are sceptical of organisations whose operations appear misty. Given such scepticism, research on social movements on campus can help clear the scepticism. This is so because findings from the research can help unearth the real nature of social movements in a way that will help clear the said scepticism. Alternatively, if the findings portray a negative image of social movements, this can also help authorities
relate to such organisations from a position of knowing as opposed to merely making assumptions. This research is, therefore, practically important in unearthing the truth relating to the functions of social movements on campus; whether or not they contribute to fragmentation among students from diverse ethnic groups; and whether or not they are vehicles through which the socio-politico-economic development of the University can be effected.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The study was informed by Manuel Castells's (1997) perspective on identity. Castells offers a typology of identity constructions corresponding to a variety of political agendas and historical contexts. His work provides a model for a contextual analysis that analyses the operation of concepts within contexts rather than assuming that concepts operate uniformly across contexts. In an attempt to uncover the processes at work in the construction of identity in the network society, Castells offers three types of identity; “legitimizing identity” endorsed by prevailing power structures and typically manifested in nationalism; “resistance identity” expressed by those in “positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized” by the dominant social structure; and “project identity” premised on the construction of “a new identity that redefines their position in society and...seek(s) the transformation of the overall social structure (1997:8). From Foucault’s (1977) perspective, legitimizing identity leads to the internalisation of domination and the legitimization of an over-imposed normalising identity. In his analysis of a refugee identity, Waldron (1987) notes how external forces converge to form and legitimate such an identity. These forces, namely international law, humanitarian agencies, host governments and society, and the refugee’s own culture and experience “reduce the totality of the individual to the single facet of refugee status” (Waldron, 1987:203). Likewise, minority groups on campus have had the identity of minority status stamped upon them in a way that legitimizes their minority status.

‘Resistance identity’ is generated by social actors devalued by the logic of domination and thus resists the identities generated by these dominant institutions. This is what Castells has referred to as the “exclusion of the excluded by the excluded” (Castells, 1997). It entails turning exclusion on its head through the reversal of the dominating value judgments as well as the reinforcement of the boundaries. In this light, subscription to a collective identity by a minority group is tantamount to rebellion against the dominant political ideology espoused by the majority group. At the University, the so-called minority groups may adopt a resistance identity opposed to the surrounding culture of domination and labelling. Those who write about refugee identity, (Rowe, 2006; Hadjiyanni, 2002; Papastergiadis, 1997; Werbner, 1997) have highlighted how refugees can resist a stigmatised refugee identity. Rowe (2006), for example, chronicles how, in 2005, Sudanese refugees in Egypt staged a protest against the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Cairo and how this protest de-stigmatised a refugee identity.”

Under ‘project identity’, the social actors build a new identity, thus redefining their position in society with an attempt to transform the overall social structure. Castells (1997:356) is particularly interested in the notion of ‘project identity’ and he hypothesizes that “subjects, if and when constructed, are no longer built on the basis of civil society, but as a prolongation of communal resistance”. Furthermore, he argues that in the network society, meaning is organised around one primary identity (that frames others), which is self-sustaining across time and space. In the same manner, students sharing a collective ethnic identity can cultivate a project identity through participation in events enabling them to perform new identities and to transform their social contexts.

In view of the above typology, student movements can be understood to be premised on an attempt, in varying ways, to turn exclusion on its head and exclude the exclusors. At the same time, recognition and representation will be fought for within the realm of victimised status. The most important and revolutionary element of identity politics is the demand that oppressed groups be recognized not in spite of their differences but specifically because of their differences (Lemonik, 2004). A political group founded on identity, whether of the right, centre, or left, will deal with and seek to alleviate injustices associated with real or perceived oppression against them based on that identity. This may involve social and legislative reform like affirmative action with the goal that people within the group can in this way achieve equality.

An inward-looking approach can also be opted, for example, where a group separates itself from the dominant group. Proponents of identity politics argue that those who do not share the identity and the life experiences that it brings to members of an oppressed group cannot understand what it means to live as a person with that identity. That is, people who do not share a particular group identity cannot understand the specific terms of oppression and thus cannot find adequate solutions to the problems that members of the group face. More often than not, this has served as the basis of exclusion on the part of the minority groups. This assumption has also meant that inclusion of members from the dominant group in the fight against real or perceived oppression becomes almost, if not completely, impossible. The guiding slogan, then, becomes “If you cannot beat them do not join them”. Castells, to a great extent, concurs with Pecheux’s (1982) conceptualisation of the evolution of identity as a process of identification, counter-identification and disidentification with the dominant discourse. Like Castells’s ‘resistance identity’ concept, Pecheux’s counter-identification involves a rejection on the part of the subject of the dominant meaning (although not an attempt to construct an alternative discourse). In the same manner, project identity
resembles Pecheux’s disidentification thesis which represents the construction of new and alternative meanings. Thus, an ideological convergence can be noted in the arguments posed by these scholars, that identity is mediated individually and collectively through posing challenges to dominant discourses and meanings in society - what Mockler and Sachs (2006) have referred to as identification with the ‘other’, a view that also pervades Hall’s (1996) and Derrida’s (1981) writings on identity.

The study also employed Goffman’s (1969) dramaturgical approach. In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Erving Goffman suggested the notion of identity as a series of performances, where we use ‘impression management’ to portray ourselves in different environments. We conduct these performances before others in ‘front regions’, whereas we relax, and perhaps formulate our identities, in ‘back regions’, where we do not need to concentrate so hard on giving an appropriate performance. According to Goffman, people have a notion of self to the extent that they present some sort of role to others. Goffman considers the notion of social self to be located within the social act performed in the front stage. ‘Front regions’ stands for the performance visible to an audience through which actors produce and present an image of themselves by contributing with arguments, values, judgments, and so on. In contrast to the front stage, backstage can be regarded as an invisible preparation-arena of a social situation, like a makeup room of a theatre where the actors put on makeup, study their lines and mimic in front of the mirror and, concentrate on their role. It is a domain where information that is hidden in the front can be released. If the actors have been socialised into ideas of femininity and/or masculinity, social values, custom and traditions, these ideas should become embedded in our sense of self, our back stage where norms and cultural values can be regarded as parts of its constitution. Thus, we define ‘back stage’ as the initiation platform for the cultural, social and linguistic knowledge that guides symbolic interactions, and ‘front stage’ as the communicative practices through which social identities are exhibited and managed. This is especially so in face-to-face interaction. This analysis seems to fit into an understanding of the link between ethnic identity and rational autonomy, where individuals within a particular ethnic group might conceal their personality that is, their ‘back regions’, for conformity’s sake. In much the same manner, students subscribing to a single ethnic identity may forfeit their independent thoughts for the sake of the group. The desire to be members of a group may outstrip pursuit of autonomous viewpoints.

Elshtain (1995) argues that individuals have to enter the arena of public debate and action as dispassionate or anonymous reasoners so that they weigh the evidence on the basis of its merit no matter its implications for the future of one’s own social group. This attempt towards objectivity might be lost as a result of oversubscription to group identity, as if identity is static, fixed and compartmentalised. Generally, identity is dynamic and not static, emergent rather than fixed, fluid rather than compartmentalised (Mockler and Sachs, 2006). Castells (1997), for example, posits the coexistence of a number of different identities for the individual, organized around a ‘primary identity’ which frames all other identities or roles subscribed to by the individual. While the individual may play a number of roles concurrently and internalise each of these roles to the point where each represents an aspect of their identity, their ‘primary identity’, which is more sustained across time and space than others, provides a frame of reference for other identities. Individuals who conform to a collective identity may do so, either wittingly or unwittingly, at the expense of their individual identity.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative methodology. The researcher acknowledges how his position as a researcher might have slightly influenced the outcome of the research. This is especially so in view of the convergence of the ethnic roots between the researcher and the interviewees. The researcher had, therefore, to carry out the research with the acknowledgement that the said convergence might sway him into a subjective analysis of data provided by respondents.

An in-depth unstructured personal interview was the main method used in this research. Through this method, interviewees elicited perceptions and feelings that other methods such as focus group discussions may not be able to procure. The twenty interviewees were interviewed on aspects that centred on a diversity of issues and how these preferences were influenced by some sense of belonging to the group, that is, on a collective identity. The researcher conducted interviews in settings convenient and familiar to the interviewees: halls of residence, sports fields, dining halls, and the University Green. Questions invited detailed answers about the reasons for joining the Matabeleland Development Society, expectations they had of the society, the extent to which they had been met, how they felt about various aspects of the society, (for example, its structure vis a vis operations, its objectives and whether they are in line with what they expect of the society), and how they got to know about the organization.

To select the twenty individual cases from the MDS membership register, the researcher identified a student who was personally known to him and then used the snowballing technique to select the other three students who were prepared to be interviewed. All twenty members of the social movement are still affiliated to the movement. The
feasibility of this technique came from the fact that there are only a few members who are still affiliated to MDS, only fifty members are left after others withdrew their membership, either formally or informally.

In order to place the research on the MDS within the context of the university the Dean of Students was interviewed. Because of the strategic role the Dean plays between students’ organizations and University authorities, he was considered the appropriate source of information. The Dean was interviewed as a representative of university authorities to elicit University authorities’ attitudes and perceptions towards social movements that are formed by students at the University. It is the Dean of Students who sees to it that organizations that seek to operate on campus are registered so they can do so legally. In the event that an organisation is viewed with scepticism by University authorities, it will not be registered, the registration, or otherwise, of which is done by the Dean of Students.

The research also made use of documented evidence, such as the MDS Constitution. Since one of the objectives of this study is to investigate the origins of the MDS, the Constitution was used as it provided the history of the MDS. It outlined when the MDS was formed and the reasons behind its formation. The MDS Constitution was one of the main sources of information, since it outlined the goal(s) and objectives of the movement. This information was used to explore how the society had lived up to these objectives and goal(s) and how, by stressing (or not stressing) these objectives, unity or otherwise, representation, recognition, and/or empowerment or disempowerment have been achieved. The constitutional objectives were also used as one of the bases for interviews, the aim being to unearth whether these objectives generally tally with those that individuals had when they joined the social movement. This secondary data made possible comparisons of objectives between those written in the constitution and those held by individual members of the association. As said earlier, convergence or divergence of these objectives was used to account for the near death of the association as well as the continued subscription to the association of those who have done so to date.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The MDS Constitution: A Paradox of Theoretical and Practical Inconsistencies

This section analyses the MDS Constitution with an attempt to highlight how it shows some inconsistencies between what respondents said and some of the objectives that the MDS, as enshrined within the constitution and what it stood for. This constitutional analysis was done after interviews had been conducted, the main aim of analysing the constitution is to compare what the constitution says and what the MDS members believe their society stands for. Some of the objectives outlined in the constitution will be unpacked vis a vis responses given by the majority of respondents. The preamble of the constitution reads as follows:

“The Matabeleland Development Society is an organisation formed at the University of Zimbabwe by the students and for students originating from Matabeleland and some parts of the Midlands in the year 1992. The underpinning objective of the society is to champion the socio-politico-economic development of their regions of origin. The society also focuses on fostering a culture of ubuntu, thereby producing a breed of patriotic, self-conscious and visionary leaders to champion the cause of the people of Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands” Matebeleland Development Society Constitution, 1992).

At face value, the preamble of the constitution seems to be the guiding principle of the society. This is so because the preamble contains the underpinning objective of the society to which all members of the society are expected to subscribe. However, it is ironic to note that, from the responses given by the respondents, very few see themselves as being part of the society beyond university life. They do not envisage a situation where, after leaving university, they continue to subscribe to the MDS with the intention of championing the socio-politico-economic development of their regions. It is also ironical to note that, from the interviews conducted, many of the respondents had no clear understanding of what the Society stood for; with others admitting that they had not even gotten hold of the society’s constitution despite being members of the society for a considerable period of time. Most of them had still not corrected the misconceptions they had before joining the Society. These misconceptions ranged from the thinking that the MDS was established solely to financially benefit students from Matabele land and some parts of Midlands to the belief that, generally, the society was there for them as students, without these benefits stretching beyond university life. These misconceptions largely account for the looming death of most of the societies on campus. Most, if not all, of the interviewees had no idea whatsoever how the socio-politico-economic development of their regions would be championed by students.
One of the objectives of the MDS is “to assist fellow students, individuals and groups from said regions or districts both psychologically and materially during their stay at university” (MDS Constitution, objective number 1.2). From responses given by most respondents, this objective is either misinterpreted to mean otherwise or little is known of its existence. Rather than seeing themselves as ambassadors of their fellow students from Matabeleland who are not part of the society, most members of the MDS have the perception that they are the ones who are supposed to benefit materially and psychologically. As a result, when asked about their reasons for joining the Society, answers alluded to the material benefit that they looked forward to getting from the Society.

The Anecdotal and the Empirical: A Politics of Condescension

From the fieldwork conducted, it emerged that identity politics is a politics of defeatism, separatism, exclusion, condescension, dissociation, and acknowledgement and acceptance of the title of ‘other’. It is the recognition of victimization, an acceptance of minority status as well as admittance of the oppressive nature of the dominant group for which the ‘other’ group is not part of. Mandle (2006) posits that it is a politics of despair - thus a conclusion that the dominant social institutions represent the interests of those dominant groups. Arguably, it can be said that identity politics is a realisation that dominant groups are unwilling to recognize them, that unity between the former and the latter is a pipedream and that assumptions by the minority groups that the persistent fight for recognition and representation will yield to social justice is a utopian assumption. This is evidenced by responses given that were a pointer to the belief that when it comes to social movements, separatism is inevitable. One respondent even foresaw separatism not only among groups but also within groups themselves. In much the same manner, a different respondent argued that people have always been separate even from birth, thus ruling out the possibility of unity, however defined, that a collective identity can be brought to individuals. He carried the argument on separatism further to suggest that students from Matabeleland should have their own representative boards at the University. Not only did he argue for that, but also for a nation divided on the basis of ethnicity, with the hope that this will be more representative than a government of so-called national unity. This constitutes what Castells (1997) has referred to as resistance identity, with Pecheux (1982) preferring to call it counter-identification.

Identity politics is a politics of disunity since it overemphasizes difference (Alcoff, 2006), and promotes group loyalty at the expense of societal loyalty. It is because of this that identity politics has sometimes been criticized as naive, fragmenting, essentialist, and reductionist. Bell Hooks (1989), for example, argues that identity is too narrow as a basis for politics. Arguably, a group that bases its politics on identity is anything but united, rent as it is by multiple and often competing identities based on class, gender and so on. It is because of this that some respondents argued that the MDS can never fight with success for a collective goal since individuals will always have a diversity of ambitions, which, in themselves, militate against such pursuit of protecting group ambitions. In this manner, the resistance of a dominant identity even goes beyond Castells’s comprehens and analysis of resistance identity. This is so in view of how individuals within a group may resist demands made by a group as they pursue their own motives.

Identity politics is, therefore, a politics of visibility that is destitute of an agenda of class struggle (Alcoff, 2006). It is privy to the existence of class differences within a group perceived by most of its members to be characterized by equality and the pursuit of any other rights whose attainability had proven to be difficult in the whole society. It is blind to the existence of inequalities within a perceived egalitarian group. The result of these differences within a seemingly united group has meant that there is a paradoxical unity, a unit of disunity. Arguably, rather than talk of group solidarity, one would talk of intragroup solidarities based on pursuit of individual interests. Interviewees, for example, acknowledged the potential for the MDS to be used by overambitious members to climb up political and economic ladders. Within the same group, therefore, are divisions based on class, age, gender, and disability (or otherwise) as well as economic and political statuses of the individuals within that particular group. Within the group there is oppression of the oppressed by the oppressed. By this is meant that within a group that recognises (and at times tries to change) its position of oppression, there are representatives who also have the capacity to oppress. Thus, while relationships between identity formation and power structures can be noted between dominant and subordinate groups, it also pervades intragroup relations.

The arguments posed above highlight that to base one’s identity on one’s ethnic origin is tantamount to legitimating a belief in immutable and natural ethnic differences, a central tenet of conservative claims for support of the status quo. It then becomes a stumbling block to unity, since a belief in the irreconcilability of ethnic differences implies that there can never be unity among the ethnic groups. This divisive nature of identity politics has also been noted by Mandle (2006) in her analysis of feminism. According to Mandle, identity politics makes the coalitions needed to build a mass movement and social change extremely difficult. With its emphasis on internal group solidarity and personal self-esteem, identity politics divides potential allies from one another. She notes how difference in feminism militates against the inclusion of men in the struggle against sexism, especially in view of the difficulties in changing men’s behaviour and attitudes as a result of the assumption that the sexes share so little.
Mandle argues that identity politics defines groups as so different from one another, with the gap dividing them so wide and unbridgeable that interaction is purposeless. In view of this, identity politics is based on fear of societal unity that will inevitably lead to the erosion of group’s identity, hence the desire to maintain a group’s identity becomes an end rather than a means to an end.

In the rapidly changing context of the twenty-first century society, it has become increasingly evident to many people that identity categories are, as Gamson (1996:39) puts it, both ‘necessary and dangerous distortions’, while Petersen, (1998:51) notes that the effort to define who we are inevitably involves ‘regulations and exclusions’. Like any other social movement, ethnic movement identity can be argued to be an attempt to transform exclusion on its head by excluding the excluders (Castells, 1997), thereby creating reverse exclusion, a vicious circle of exclusion. As responses reflected, given the possibility, efforts will be made to fight the dominant institutions at the University with the intention of setting up, for example, a students’ union independent of the dominant one that is thought to be lopsided. In her analysis of difference feminism and its attempts to fight sexism, Mandle (2006:9) says:

“In declaring female traits superior to those such as aggression and rationality which characterize men, difference feminism seems to reject sexism by turning it on its head. It thus provides a clear group identity for women which stress the way they are special.”

In the same manner, identity politics based on ethnicity ‘stresses the way they are special’ and, consequently, excludes the ‘special’ group from that which is not. In this case, identity politics becomes an act of condescension. Responses such as “we are not like them (that is, other ethnic groups on campus) in every respect”, as reflected, for example, in the way they dress, are pointers toward the need to reaffirm and ascertain their high esteem and special status they accord themselves in relation to other ethnic groups. Colson (2004) notes that this notion of ‘taking back’ (derogatory terms) is a hallmark of identity politics.

At the heart of identity politics is the idea that struggle against oppression can only be fought by people who face that oppression, and that the more ‘radical’ or shocking the actions of the movement, the better. Likewise, arguments by respondents that students from other ethnic groups have adopted a Matabele dress code highlight that, contrary to the Marxist view that the ruling class ideas pervade the general thinking, dominant ideologies and (dress) codes are not always subscribed to by those under that rule. It emerged from the discussion that a culture of domination has been resisted by those seemingly dominated by such a culture. The adoption of a minority’s dress code is an evidence of a culture of resistance that can be created by one ethnic group as a way of resisting dominant institutions espoused by a particular ethnic group.

Does Collective Identity Mask Individual Identity?

Goffman’s (1969) dramaturgical model in analysing identity construction and deconstruction was also noted from the findings, especially in view of how identity politics constrains individual identity. Human behaviour is reduced to the notion of ‘taking back’ (derogatory terms) is a hallmark of identity politics.

In her analysis of difference feminism and its attempts to fight sexism, Mandle (2006:9) says:

“A More Realistic View of Identity Politics: The Inevitability of Separatism?

The MDS is a case of identity politics in action. From the respondents interviewed, seven of them revealed that identity does not necessarily entail separatism. Groups that base their politics on an ethnic identity at times may lack political, economic and socio-cultural representation. Thus, when they take up ethnic mobilization, in most cases, it will be a way of trying to achieve representation and a means to negotiate individual and group benefits. They may, therefore, unite the demands for recognition with the demands for redistribution. More often than not, identity based organising leads not toward separation but can precisely be the key to the enhanced political mobilisation and involvement of other ethnic groups into mainstream politics. Likewise, the MDS is premised on an attempt to mobilize social, political and economic resources whose distribution has been viewed to be skewed in favour of groups other than theirs. They, thus, resist a disenfranchised identity in favour of one that is advantageous to them vis-a-vis.
accessing the said resources. In this case, it can be argued that the MDS has tried to redefine its identity of victimised status through the creation of what Castells (1997) has referred to as project identity.

The view that identity politics balkanises the political landscape and threatens the viability of the political order is more in tune with simplistic and misinformed apprehensions about the role of conflict in politics than with the more reasoned and well-established political science axiom that societal integration and political power are inextricably bound. As Philip Gourevitch (1998) suggests, the threat of conflict often lies in the inability of those who feel threatened to ascertain what the conflict is exactly about. This is, in no small measure, true of identity politics and the feelings of distress that it causes among those who see only chaos and instability in its wake. University authorities have been reluctant to register social movements because of the perception that they represent political time bombs. The authorities have failed to ascertain what these social movements really stand for and how they would operate upon their registration. Because of their seemingly conservative nature, the authorities have insisted on the maintenance of legitimizing identity, that is, one they authorise and endorse.

The Link Between Individual Identity and Collective Identity

This study provides further support for the argument of “cultural citizenship” advanced by anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1985) with an attempt to counter a model of the abstract individual citizen who participates in civil society as a rational agent imagined to have no gender, race or cultural background. Rosaldo argued that this model is ineffective in addressing the prejudices that beset, for example, white women and people of colour when they enter the public arena, such as the interrupting of their speech, dismissal of arguments, and peremptory rejections. Thus, in actuality, the public arena is a space where students from Matabeleland and some parts of the Midlands province negotiate with one another, and the concept of the cultural citizen allows one to understand their specific identities as an integral part of their activities as citizens, the basis, in some cases, of the knowledge they bring and the very rights they are claiming, rather than that which must be “left at the door.” Notably, part of the problem has been a view that regards culture as a relic, an inert heirloom handed down wholesale from time immemorial rather than as a kind of social practice always involving innovation and change. A more accurate understanding of what cultures are will yield a more realistic account of cultural identity and its impact on politics.

In view of this, it can be said that there is need for a better account of the nature of identity itself than the sorts of accounts one finds among those who criticize identity politics. Strongly felt identities are not always synonymous with political disasters. This is so because identity is not what its critics have always viewed it to be. There is, therefore, a need to understand the circumstances under which strongly felt identities lead to separatism and other related problems. In her counter argument to the view that identities lead to separatism, Alcoff (2006) argues:

“The notion that identities lead to separatism or mutually exclusive political agendas seems to be based on the idea that identities represent discrete and specifiable sets of interests. Identities, it is assumed, must therefore operate on the model of interest group politics: a specific set of interests is represented by lobbyists or movement leaders in order to advance that specific agenda. That agenda may, naturally, come into conflict with other agendas put forward, or even with the “majority’s interests,” and thus there will be a conflict that can be addressed through compromise but never completely resolved...Social identities can and sometimes do operate as interest groups, but that is not what identities essentially are.”

In the same manner, this research found that MDS does not represent a specifiable set of interests that are independent of the “common good.” It emerged that, in general, social movements are not always premised on an attempt to single-mindedly pursue one seemingly selfish agenda and as incapable of considering other points of view or a larger frame of reference in which the “common good” is considered. It must be noted that specific interest groups have particular pre-set agendas for the promotion of which reason becomes attenuated to the instrumental calculation of advancing that cause, without the possibility of calling the cause into question or modifying it in light of larger public concerns.

This, however, is not the goal of MDS, since the majority of respondents highlighted that they do not see their cause as premised on selfish interests that serve to prioritize the wishes of students from Matabeleland and some parts of the Midlands province. In fact their arguments pointed to the fact that, to them, the so-called “common good” had not been as commonly good as it had been expected to be, hence the need to fight for this goodness to be distributed evenly across all ethnic groups. On the basis of analysing a wide sample of identity based movements, Castells (1997) describes identity as a generative source of meaning, necessarily collective rather than wholly individual, and useful as a source of agency as well as a meaningful narrative.
Identity and Context Specificities

More often than not, students make use of a collective identity with the perception that they might directly benefit from the use of that identity. Generally, students who joined the MDS envisaged that they, for instance, might benefit financially and/or politically. One of the respondents, for example, foresaw the birth of vibrant politicians from such an organisation; political leaders who could restructure national politics in a way that could be beneficial to all citizens regardless of ethnic origin. In view of this, it can be argued that Castells' analysis that identity operates within contexts holds water. In a context in which students from some parts of the country occupy peripheral positions at the University, a collective identity may be used to climb to the limelight.

Findings from this study revealed that there is a mixture of views in terms of how identity politics impacts on the politics of the nation at large. As mentioned in this study, diverse reasons account for people's joining an organisation. In this case of the MDS, some of the responses revealed some discontent in how the national politics was being run, especially in view of the ethnic under-representation that characterised national politics and how this impacted negatively on the development of some parts of the country. With this discontent, these members felt that they could use the MDS as the springboard to national politics. This is especially true of senior members of the association, whose responses highlighted that the MDS could place them into the political limelight. In view of how higher institutions have been used by politicians such as Arthur Mutambara (Zimbabwe's Deputy Prime Minister), Tendai Biti (Minister of Finance), and Nelson Chamisa (Minister of Information Technology) to climb the political ladder, these senior members envisage a bright political career beyond university and the MDS. This need for embarking on national politics stems from the perceived under-representation that these members feel characterise their ethnic group.

On the other hand, most of the rank and file members of the MDS have another view of the MDS in relation to national politics. As mentioned in the study, when they joined the organisation, some of them had no idea whatsoever what the organisation they joined stood for, more so, that other members wanted to use it to climb the political ladder. While these expected to benefit from the society, this benefit, they thought, would come in monetary value more than anything else. This also accounted for their lukewarm responses to questions that required that they elicit their perceptions on the MDS in relation to national politics.

CONCLUSION

Social movements have to be understood from a position of in-depth analysis and not assumptions. One has to go from the anecdotal to the empirical if an understanding of such organisations is to be obtained. The research noted the dark side of social movements that needs to be addressed if their flaws are to be addressed. Despite a consistent fight for a united front, groups that premise their politics on a collective ethnic identity can do so at the expense of unifying university students in all its activities. Identity politics can lead to separatism as groups concentrate on furthering group interests at the expense of those of society at large. This has been seen to influence some students' perception of national politics, where a divided nation on the basis of ethnicity is perceived to be better in terms of representing its citizens than an ethnically united one. Not only were aspects of separatism noted among groups, but also within groups themselves. Within groups that fight for representation and recognition are those whose ambitions are dissociated from those of the group. Dissolution of individuals' primary identities can also result as collective identities pervade those of individuals.

This treatise also revealed that criticisms levelled against social movements have often missed their real nature. Premising politics on a collective identity is not synonymous with separatism. Neither is it an attempt to overemphasize difference. From the research it emerged that minority groups on campus suffer double standards practiced by dominant ones. While these minority groups are accused of tending towards separatism, it is the dominant groups that separate themselves from other groups. Such separatism has meant that students from minority ethnic groups have to struggle to access resources on campus. This is so because of the peripheral positions they are accorded when it comes to such access. Findings from the research also revealed that such separatism can even pervade national politics, where, for example, development, in its multifaceted nature, can elude some areas of the country due to under-representation of those areas.

It was also noted that a collective ethnic identity can be used to fight for politico-socio-economic empowerment on the part of minority groups. Rather than fight as individuals, students from minority ethnic groups can use a collective identity to fight for such benefits. Critics of identity politics have often questioned the source of power from which "special interest" groups aim to empower themselves. Underlying this assumption is the belief by such critics that identity politics is a zero-sum game; that benefits that accrue to one group are necessarily at the expense of other groups. This, however, is not always the case with social movements. This is so because while
social movements fight for empowerment, inclusion, recognition, and representation, they rarely fight against the achievement of this on the part of other groups.

REFERENCES

Blackwell: Cambridge, 1996.
Papastergiadis.