

Deafness and the Riddle of Identity

By LENNARD J. DAVIS

The recent demonstrations at Gallaudet University did more to launch deafness and deaf culture onto the national scene than any event since the release of the 1986 film *Children of a Lesser God*. Media reports of hour-by-hour dramas unfolding on the campus, culminating in a shutdown of the university, evoked in many people's minds the student revolution of the 60s. But in the hearing world, from blogosphere to op-ed page, observers expressed confusion about what the issues really were and why there was so much turmoil and anger over the mere choosing of an upper-level administrator.

That administrator, Jane K. Fernandes, selected to be president, was quoted widely as saying that one of the reasons she was such a lightning rod for criticism was that deaf students and faculty members perceived her as "not deaf enough." That charge was quickly rebutted by many within the deaf community, who said that their opposition to Fernandes was based not on her degree of deafness but on her leadership style, decisions she had made in the past, irregularities in the selection process, and her inability to quell the agitation at Gallaudet.

But the "not deaf enough" issue is alive and well among deaf scholars, students, and activists. Even though Fernandes may have exaggerated that accusation to bolster her own position, and even though her detractors denied its relevance, the charge formed at least part of the subtext of students' anger and is a topic of debate within the deaf community. Now that passions have been spent and an interim president, Robert R. Davila, appointed, it might be useful to examine what deaf identity might be and how that identity fits in with current notions of other identities based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. Even with all the recent hoopla about deaf issues, most people probably aren't paying a lot of attention to what goes on within the deaf community. But the discussions there can point the way to a new and better understanding of identity in our postmodern world.

What does it mean to be "not deaf enough"? In Fernandes's case, the accusation meant that she was not a native signer of American Sign Language (ASL). Fernandes learned to sign later in life; she is best described as a user of Pidgin Signed English (PSE), a blend of English and ASL. So she cannot speak with the "accentless" signs that would read, to a native signer, as the most elegant ASL. In effect, she would be speaking sign language the way that Henry Kissinger, Arnold Schwarzenegger, or perhaps Borat speak English.

Many hearing people would deem any prejudice against someone because of his or her accent shocking and unethical. To understand the issue, you have to know that ASL has

become the armature on which the figure of deaf identity has been built. Until relatively recently, deafness was seen as simply a physical impairment: the absence of hearing. In the past, much discrimination against deaf people was based on the assumption that they were in fact people without language -- that is, dumb. And "dumb" carried the sense of being not only mute but also stupid, as in a "dumb" animal.

But over the past 30 or so years, the status of deaf people has changed in important ways, as deaf activists and scholars have reshaped *the idea* of deafness, using the civil-rights movement as a model for the struggle to form a deaf identity. Deaf people came to be seen not just as hearing-impaired, but as a linguistic minority, isolated from the dominant culture because that culture didn't recognize or use ASL.

Important scholarship formed the foundation for this new construction of deafness as a sociological phenomenon rather than a physical impairment. That view of deafness became possible only after linguists like William C. Stokoe Jr. established ASL as a genuine language (in the late 50s and early 60s), not just a set of gestures or pantomime, as had been thought. Later, in 1993, Harlan Lane, a professor of psychology and linguistics at Northeastern University (and the winner of a 1991 MacArthur "genius award"), drew on the ideas of Edward Said and Michel Foucault to suggest that the deaf were like a colonized people. Lane was instrumental in defining deaf identity based on the notion that deaf people were a linguistic and even an ethnic minority, since they not only shared a common language (ASL) and, by this time, a common culture, but also were seen by others as a separate group.

Other deaf-studies scholars who solidified the concept of the deaf as a minority group include Carol Padden, Tom Humphries, Jack R. Gannon, John Vickrey Van Cleve, Benjamin J. Bahan, Paddy Ladd, and MJ Bienvenu.

The definition of the deaf as a colonized, ethnic, linguistic minority has in turn been widely accepted in deaf circles and taught for more than a decade in deaf-studies programs and at institutions like Gallaudet and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. It was that definition of deaf identity that fueled some of the student animosity toward Fernandes and the protests at Gallaudet. (Fernandes was also seen as lacking other characteristics, besides classic ASL proficiency, that deaf "insiders" consider crucial to "pure" deafness: a physical warmth and directness that is intense and intimate; pride in being deaf; and a certain attitude, both amused and cynical, toward the hearing world that results from a shared set of experiences. Fernandes was seen as not having those traits and experiences, and as being cold, aloof, detached from those markers — in sum, "not deaf enough.")

The construct of the deaf as a linguistic, ethnic minority is attractive, but flawed. Yes, it has removed the biological stigma of deafness; for the most part, the deaf are no longer viewed as "handicapped" or "disabled." Deaf people get to be a sociological group, a "community." But there is a negative side: The idea of an ethnic group or minority is tinged with the brutal history of racial politics. There is a sense in which slavery, apartheid, miscegenation laws, and medical experiments have forged the apartness of the

racialized minority and in which the oppressor group has created the oppressed. Is that the best model on which deafness should base its existence? Furthermore, a re-examination of identity politics is under way in this country that questions even the concept of group identity. Postmodernism combined with globalization has undermined traditional notions of individual and community. It's hard enough to say what it is to be an "American" now, let alone a member of a minority in the United States. It seems to me the minority model of deaf identity is too crude, too rigid, too limiting.

The central problem with defining deaf people as a linguistic group is that to do so, you have to patrol the fire wall between the deaf and nondeaf in very rigid ways. If deaf people are defined as only those who are native users of ASL, you have to define all nonusers of ASL as "other." That excludes, or at least marginalizes, deaf people who are orally trained -- that is, who were taught to eschew ASL for speech alone; have cochlear implants; or never had the chance to learn sign language. Many people who grew up in non-ASL settings in the 1950s and 1960s and who have quite happily thought of themselves as deaf would have to reassign themselves to some other camp. Likewise, the strict linguistic-group definition expels hard-of-hearing people who have not learned ASL. Ironically, the model also stigmatizes those who have been educated orally; they are seen as victims of oral education rather than as victims of audism. Since it is hearing parents who usually make the decision to educate their deaf children orally, rather than with ASL, or to give them cochlear implants, it doesn't seem fair to define those children as not deaf. The other flaw in the model is that it defines hearing, signing children of deaf adults (CODA's) as deaf, since they are native sign-language speakers. One could argue that CODA's aren't discriminated against by the hearing world, but if one takes that tack, then one has to abandon the idea that language is the key defining term. And that brings us back to some notion of deafness as a biological impairment.

Defining deafness in terms of ethnicity doesn't hold up any better than linguistic definitions. While it is true that many deaf people share a common culture, history, language, and social behavior, with the advent of the Internet, the mainstreaming of deaf students into regular classrooms, the decline of residential schooling for the deaf, and the demise of deaf clubs (where deaf people in large cities gathered regularly to socialize), it is harder to argue that the deaf are significantly different from the nondeaf. There is less of a *there* there. Changes in the overall culture have to some degree erased the sense of "otherness" that the deaf historically have held on to as a way of defining themselves. That is why places like Gallaudet have come to be seen nostalgically as the "home" of deaf people and deaf culture: They continue to define the deaf as a separate cultural group. (Naturally the choice of an overseer of such a safe house would be seen as crucial, since that person would be a kind of keeper of the flame.)

The argument that the deaf are an ethnic minority also presupposes a "pure" deaf person, imitating the worst aspects of racial profiling. In this ethnic-group model, just as in the linguistic model, there is an in-group and an out-group. Those most "in" are deaf-on-deaf people, that very small percentage (perhaps only 5 percent of all those born deaf) who come from a deaf family that is, whose parents were born deaf. The elite also includes those who have been lucky enough to have attended Gallaudet, the National Technical

Institute for the Deaf, and other deaf institutions of higher education. Excluded are the hard of hearing, those who learned to lip-read and speak instead of sign, hearing children of deaf adults, those who never had a chance to learn sign language (because they were too poor, or the facilities weren't available), and deaf people with limb impairments or spinal injuries that make it impossible for them to sign.

Further complicating definitions of deafness are all things digital. Deafness "disappears" in cyberspace. While using the Internet or pagers, for example, deaf people do not use language much differently from anyone else. In the blogosphere, we are all bloggers, whether we are deaf or not.

And is a deaf person excluded from his ethnic identity of deafness if he or she chooses not to act deaf? Some deaf people have lip-reading and speaking skills that might allow them to pass for hearing. Others might choose to avoid the more obvious deaf markers — such as colloquial ASL, physical warmth, and intensity — that I've already mentioned. African-Americans who speak standard English and do not code-switch are sometimes accused of being "Oreos" — black on the outside and white on the inside. Do we really want to go down the road of thinking of some people as deaf "Oreos"? (Or would the comparative term be "cochleos?")

The ethnic model is also dubious because of the current association between ethnic groups and violence. Regionalism, tribalism, and ethnicity have recently led to wars in Darfur, Bosnia, and the Middle East. Is the model of ethnic pride really more desirable than a cosmopolitan internationalism?

One of the key notions of an *ethnos*, a people, is the idea of an extended kinship system. People within an ethnic group are related not only by language, history, and culture, but also by a family structure that passes along a genetic inheritance. But the vast majority of deaf people do not come from deaf families. According to a widely cited statistic, well over 90 percent of deaf people are born to hearing families. The deaf, hearing children of deaf adults, people with disabilities, and queer folk are, as the deaf-studies scholar Robert J. Hoffmeister has written, only "one generation thick," having parents and children most likely different from them. In that sense, those four groups have more in common with each other than with any ethnic group. One can argue that deaf people pass along their culture through a nonkinship system, but then you are talking about a different kind of social organization than an ethnic group.

Related to this point is a strategic issue. Are legal protections for ethnic groups used as effectively to redress problems related to disability as those in the Americans With Disabilities Act? Does one want to choose the category of ethnic group as the regnant defining term and then seek legal protection or redress under that status? Or is it better to allow legal rights and protections to apply under the statutes that cover disability? People with disabilities have fought hard and revised our notion of civil rights. Why should deaf people adhere to a problematic notion of ethnicity when their rights are more clearly protected under the rubric of disability?

The concept "deaf world" or "deaf culture" (indicated by ASL signs) is compelling for many deaf people. It does not have any associations with biological deficiency or race. The problem with the terms is that they are too general and too elastic. If you start defining what you mean by either, you immediately fall back into categorical generalizations of the kind we have been discussing. Who is deaf? Who belongs in the "deaf world"? How do you get into it? Who are the gatekeepers? What makes "deaf culture" different from any other culture? If one were to substitute "white world," "black world," "Jewish world," or "non-Jewish world" for "deaf world," would one be happy to celebrate and analyze the meaning of those terms? What if we said "ASL-users-only world," or "40-percent- to 100-percent-hearing-loss world"?

The problem with such concepts is that they exclude people, reduce their rights, and create marginalized communities. And then there is the question of who gets to set up the barriers and checkpoints. In the past, it was hearing people who did; now segments of the deaf community have declared themselves the gatekeepers, by defining deafness in the narrowest possible terms. Of course no group of people can exist without some kind of cultural and social distinctions. But in thinking through, in the best theoretical sense, new directions for deafness, we have to look at the problems and the solutions with a high degree of rigor.

Deaf people aren't the only ones struggling to define themselves in this new age of post-identity. They don't have to go it alone. What brings together all the social injustices of the past 200 years is the idea that people with various bodily traits have been discriminated against because of those traits. Rather than *defining* people according to those traits, a newer, more-inclusive concept of identity holds that you can't base your full and complex identity on those putative bodily traits because you can't justify their existence as markers anymore. The grand categories of race, gender, and so on are no longer valid because they no longer contain rigid fire walls. Who is black and who is white, who is a man and who is a woman are questions whose answers are murkier than ever. Likewise, deafness as a category can exist only if you rely on comparably rigid fire walls. If you let go of the idea of rigid boundaries, then you have to face a more continuous line of possibilities, including the hearing-impaired, hard of hearing, partially deaf, profoundly deaf, and so on. You also have to deal with people with varying degrees of both oral and ASL abilities, including a range of ASL usage among children of deaf adults. So the concept of deafness can get very messy, unless you perform a kind of "common sense" purifying of the category -- which might work, but has the same pitfalls as "common sense" racial categories, for example. Common sense in this context is really just socially constructed truisms that are never really common at all.

I am arguing that defining the deaf or any other social group in terms of ethnicity, minority status, and nationhood (including "deaf world" and "deaf culture") is outdated, outmoded, imprecise, and strategically risky. We would be better off expanding our current notions of identity by being less Procrustean and more flexible. Rather than trying to force the foot into a glass slipper, why not make a variety of new shoes that actually fit?

In that scenario, for example, people who are "one generation thick" could find commonality. So people with disabilities, deaf people, gay people, and children of deaf adults could say: We represent one potential way out of the dead end of identity politics. We are social groups that are not defined solely by bodily characteristics, genetic qualities, or inherited traits. We are not defined by a single linguistic practice. We need not be defined in advance by an oppressor. We choose to unite ourselves for new purposes. We are not an ethnic or minority group, but something new and different, emerging from the smoke of identity politics and rising like a phoenix of the postmodern age.

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Section: The Chronicle Review

Volume 53, Issue 19, Page B6