



How Identity Politics Divides Us

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The idea that Indigenous Australian's should have a separate voice in our Parliament, the push to make Australia Day a representation of our divisions rather than our unity, and the calls for formalised diversity quotas are all manifestations of identity politics, where our legal rights are allocated according to our race, gender and sexuality. This identity politics movement seeks to divide us, and poses a threat to the functioning of our liberal democracy.

Identity politics alleges that our institutions do not treat people equally and perpetuate privilege and oppression. Privilege is defined as unearned advantage gained by membership of a historically powerful group, while oppression is being subject to constraints on one's liberty because of membership of a historically disadvantaged group. Oppression and privilege are created not just by political institutions, but cultural phenomena like the use of language and the 'construction' of identity.

Identity politics is an expansion of the Marxist analysis of class, where society is seen as a zero-sum contest for power between the privileged and the oppressed. The Italian theorist Antonio

Gramsci, an early proponent of this kind of analysis, argued that, ‘The marginalised groups of history include not only the economically oppressed, but also women, racial minorities and many “criminals”’. Just as the proletariat is at the mercy of the predatory capitalist class, other groups in society are unable to live freely while their social context is constrained by the preferences and institutional power of other groups.

This analysis takes as given that evidence of the differential impact of state action on various groups is itself evidence of the hegemony of a privileged elite. For example, the racial bias of Australia’s criminal justice system is revealed in the disproportionately-high rate of incarceration of Indigenous Australians.

Identity politics argues that our established values, customs and history do not represent the diverse racial, cultural, and gender identities of Australians. Oppression is seen as an innate feature of the very concepts and language used in the dominant culture. Everything from the fundamentals of liberal democracy such as freedom of speech and the rule of law, the iconography of the nation, and even the everyday language of the people, is condemned for reflecting only the interests of the wealthy and powerful, and oppressing women, members of minority races and cultures, and the economically disadvantaged.

The structures of oppression—racism, sexism, classism and so on—created by our biased institutions interact with one another, creating a hierarchy of privilege and oppression, in a dynamic sometimes referred to as ‘intersectionality’. In response to aggregate group differences, members of oppressed groups are motivated to see their political interests as tied to their identities, and to vote as blocs.

Identity groups are encouraged to cooperate with one another for tactical advantage, although this cooperation is not always smooth as there are internal conflicts as to which group is the more oppressed. In theory, though, they are united in a vision of a world of radical liberation, in which their identities, and the oppression on which they are founded, melt into air.

Proponents argue that our institutions oppress the people who share these identities, who are all morally required to fight back against them. Consider a recent exchange between *The Guardian* journalist Katharine Murphy and a counterpart from *The West Australian*, Sarah Martin at the National Press Club. As part of a panel discussion, Martin said that she ‘considered [herself] a journalist, not a female journalist’. Murphy replied, ‘There is a special place in hell for women who don’t help other women’. That this is a line first used by former United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at a Hillary Clinton rally should surprise no-one.

This demand for group loyalty in the struggle against our political and cultural traditions is incompatible with liberal democracy. Such is the threat it poses to sensible politics, in America there is already a growing realisation among some on the left that identity politics is a dead-end. Left-wing academic Mark Lilla argues in a new book that politics should be about ‘emphasizing what we all share and owe one another as citizens, not what differentiates us’. Socialist senator Bernie Sanders has also made the case that identity politics is an abandonment of the working class. While this is a welcome development, it will prove futile unless it is more widely understood

why identity politics is not just politics as usual.

In America, Hillary Clinton's 2016 Presidential campaign provides a vivid example of identity politics in action. Clinton attempted to recreate the coalition that carried Barack Obama to consecutive victories, made up of minority groups, women, young people, and those with university degrees. Clinton rallies were littered with signs displaying '[identity group] for Clinton'. 'Immigration reform' was designed to win Latino voters, with the assumption that Trump's tougher posture could not appeal to American Latinos. Clinton herself first entered the Democratic Party Convention by breaking a 'glass ceiling' and becoming the first female nominee of a major party for president.

In Australia, identity politics can be seen in the bipartisan talking point that Australia's greatness resides in its multiculturalism, by which it is meant that the diversity of identifiers claimed by Australians is somehow more important than the identity that they all share. It can also be seen in the 'social justice' campaigning of the country's crony capitalists and sporting organisations. All of these cases are about disestablishing traditional norms, which are held to be in some sense discriminatory.

Political correctness is also a manifestation of identity politics. While there is nothing new about social pressure enforcing social norms, political correctness is a systematic attempt to deconstruct the complex web of meanings connoted with words and symbols to expose hidden prejudices. New taboos are asserted and new usages favoured, with the goal of eliminating connotations that perpetuate disadvantage.

All Australians must reject identity politics, which threatens the breakdown of liberal democracy and an even more powerful and arbitrary state. Instead, we must advocate for our universal institutions and formal equality. Only from there can we cultivate the empathy and mutual trust on which our civilisation depends.

PROBLEMS WITH IDENTITY POLITICS

Identity politics is revolutionary in its aims. It aspires not to government but to perpetual reign, seeking to replace the established institutions and customs of our country with notions supposedly more democratic and reflective of society's diversity. Identity politics, then, is a far-reaching critique of our entire social order.

There are three main problems with identity politics: it is incompatible with being an individual, it renders impossible the spirit of compromise on which liberal democracy depends, and it demands an expansive, arbitrary state that will manage every aspect of our lives.

First, identity politics takes literally the activist maxim that 'the personal is political', and asserts that converse is also true. Every action by an individual either perpetuates oppression or fights it. Every individual who is a member of an oppressed group is himself oppressed, and every individual who is part of the dominant group is himself privileged, no matter the actual experiences he may have had.



In this way identity politics denies the diversity of experiences of individuals within groups, reducing each person to the group identity and ascribing to him the group experience. You can never be more than a member of your identity group.

This perspective also denies us the ability to change our own circumstances. Anyone who thinks that the identity politics-defined context does not apply to him is guilty of false consciousness, apparently unable to know his own mind.

Second, by locating politics at the level of between-group conflict, rather than as an activity engaged in by individuals for their own purposes, identity politics weakens the possibility of political compromise.

Public policy becomes a matter of life and death for each individual self—this leads to the left's routine conflation of their supposed political oppression and violence. This is used to excuse its own violence, as seen in the attack on Andrew Bolt earlier this year and in the riots on American university campuses.

Because the self is constructed by the realities of structural oppression, it can only be understood by those who have experienced the same forces. Only in-group members can properly understand the interests of the group. The experience of oppression cannot be understood by those who are privileged, and because of this the privileged cannot justly make suggestions to, let alone rules for, the oppressed.

Recent discontent about 'cultural appropriation' and the offensiveness of artists assuming trans-cultural points of view is illustrative. The author Lionel Shriver spoke at the Brisbane Writers Festival in 2016 in defence of authors' right, indeed duty, to draw on the experiences of others, and she noted that without this kind of engagement, there could be no fiction. For this she was subject to the predictable social media storm.

Third, identity politics calls into question liberal democracy itself, and ultimately expands the power of the state.

If empathy is not possible, if it is not possible to creatively engage with and assume the point of view of another, then liberal democracy fails. Indeed, the entire civilising process of abstracting from our own experiences to general social rules fails.

All institutions, including rules, are seen to reflect only the prejudices of those who created them, and those people's interest in retaining and strengthening their own power. Everything is political. This in turn justifies the seizure of power and the elimination of institutions built to disperse or limit it.

In political correctness we can see the corrosive effect of identity politics on community. Our language and our culture bind us together and allow the emergence of the trust upon which liberal democracy depends. Without a shared network of symbols we must always talk past each other. In his invention of Newspeak, George Orwell saw clearly that those who claim authority over the



dictionary mean to take possession of the mind itself. The goal of political correctness is ultimately to render the new taboos unthinkable.

Identity politics extends politics to every part of society, eliminating the distinction between public and private. For this reason, identity politics is very different from politics as usual.

Democratic politics has always been based on politicians putting together coalitions of interest groups through the promise of preferential public policy. But it is a false equivalence to see the coalition of identity blocs, defined top-down by Marxian analysis, as the same as, say, the coalition of small business owners, professionals, and farmers coming together to campaign for reduced regulation and taxation. This policy goal can be delivered from within the institutional structure of the country. By contrast, identity politics sees no possibility of compromise.

In this inconsistency, we can see the future of identity politics: an expansive bureaucracy inserting itself into every exchange between individuals and groups, a state based not on rules but on trade-offs, and the constant monitoring of all relations to ensure that they are not 'oppressive'. It brings to mind the notorious reflection by former head of the Australian Human Rights Commission, Gillian Triggs, that despite extensive restrictions on free speech 'sadly you can say what you like around the kitchen table at home.' It should be obvious that such ideas cannot coexist with our traditional liberties. The final danger of identity politics, then, is that it provides another rationalisation for a state that will not leave us alone.

TOWARDS A SOLUTION

Taken to its logical conclusion, identity politics poses a threat to the continuation of the liberal democratic order, by indicting not only our existing institutions but the possibility of institutions founded on formal equality—that is, the idea that a rule can and should be applied to all individuals regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances.

The rejection of a rules-based order is mistaken. Identity politics misunderstands individual dignity and democracy. Universal rules secure dignity, and institutions embedded in a complex system of law and custom express collective solidarity rather than suppress it.

Being bound by the same institutions in the same way is an expression of, and reinforces, empathy. The principle of equal justice before the law, for example, assures that each of us, should we be accused of a crime, will be treated as everyone else is treated. And because we each know that everyone is subject to the law in this way, we can rely on one another to behave in certain ways. Institutions such as this one enable us to imagine ourselves in the place of others, and this builds mutual trust.

Similarly, sharing a language and customs strengthens our ties to one another. The norms and expectations embedded in this culture work like the principles of justice to create shared understandings and references, upon which relationships can be built.

Identity politics, by contrast, divides people (who otherwise share an institutional identity) on the



basis of aggregate results that mean nothing to specific individuals. This is not a useful exercise. And in any event, it is self-defeating: the remedies for the constructed grievances assume the individual agency and democratic solidarity that identity politics undermines.

The relevant question is not whether our institutions favour particular norms—of course they do—but whether they represent a good faith attempt to secure the rights of everyone subject to them. The freedom and prosperity of our liberal democracy strongly suggests that they do.

However, it will not be enough to defeat identity politics at the ballot box. In defending our existing institutions, we cannot retreat from the defence of our values. Identity politics extends its critique to all aspects of our society, and we must extend our defence to meet its challenge.

At the institutional level, some of the tension created by identity politics can be eased by limiting the influence that national politics has over our lives.

Situating political power in local institutions, closer in geography and custom to the people they represent, would provide more opportunity for people to see their own identities reflected in their political representation, as would increasing the use of direct democratic engagement, like plebiscites.

Over the longer-term, the case for our history and institutions needs to be made in the academy and the popular culture.

The challenge identity politics represents to liberal democracy is genuine, and not easily dismissed. Our nation-state's political and social institutions have emerged from our history and tradition, and establish certain norms that do not exist everywhere in the world.

Liberalism's ambition, as it has been understood for more than two centuries now, has been to bring more and ultimately all of the members of society into the community of meaning that our institutions represent. That ambition is as important now as it has ever been. We need to make the case that liberal democracy remains the best way to protect the rights of all Australians and to secure a stable social order within which individuals can live their own lives.

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