



## The Rise of Identity Politics

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*The new wave of political correctness propagates a culture of social media outrage and public shaming, writes Elle Hardy*

The charge of cultural appropriation was brought, and the students at Ohio's prestigious Oberlin University soon became international news. They were protesting that the campus cafeteria had bastardised Vietnamese culture, serving up a ciabatta roll with pork and coleslaw and calling it banh mi. 'The gross manipulation of traditional recipes...' the student newspaper denounced, was '... cultural appropriation by modifying the recipes without respect'.

A layered rumination is the best way to appreciate the absurdity: that they would exhaust the great left-wing tradition of solidarity on something so idiotic; that they could not focus beyond the end of their plates to the plight of the people serving them, some of America's lowest paid workers; that the integrity of a bread roll—once a symbol of poverty and disenfranchisement—was now not only a political battle but a perceived right.



At the same time as the Oberlin students were protesting, Merriam- Webster announced that 'socialism' was the most searched term in America in 2015, increasing by 169% over the course of the year. Bernie Sanders' openly socialist campaign for the Democratic primary was courting many Americans, particularly young people, felled by sloganistic hope and change, and seeking radical solutions.

Young Americans, still grinding out of America's great recession, facing higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and student loan debt than the two generations preceding them, saw their elites fighting for themselves on campuses, and turned their energies towards a 75-year-old senator who had a worldview that explained why they couldn't get a job.

Older Americans weren't faring much better. Seeing the middle class of their country eroded in a decade and a loathed, corrupt polity, they turned to the campaign of businessman Donald Trump. His extreme—and in many cases impossible—ideas was accepted by his followers, because unlike everyone else, 'he is saying what we have been saying'. Anyone with a fondness for history's hinges could contrast the anger of the enfranchised at Oberlin with the rise of the new anger of insurgent movements on the left and right of American politics, and their ripples throughout the West.

Further, that the rise of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump came as such a shock to political and cultural elites, shows that their preoccupations and reflections of what was happening in America was so strikingly foreign to so many.

Whatever the outcome of the 2016 election, the Trump-Sanders insurgencies will have a dramatic and lasting effect on American politics. In particular, their focus on the economic concerns of people at the margins, as opposed to the cultural concerns of the soft centre, has sown the seeds of the type of identity politics fought for by the students at Oberlin. The second half of the 20th century produced a period of peace and material gains for the western world that allowed us to look more inwardly than perhaps ever before. While the social justice movements of the 1960s and 70s focused on systematic discrimination as their political aim, culturally, it adopted individualism in the form of awareness of identity and consciousness. Perhaps as a result of emerging prosperity, or the understanding of the clear failure of communism, racial, gender, and sexual rights emerged as the primary issues for the New Left, supplanting centuries of struggles rooted in economics. The emergence of a new class, those identifying as culturally oppressed, began to emerge in intellectual movements. The Combahee River Collective, a black feminist lesbian group, released a statement in 1977 outlining identity as their key motivation for political organising:

We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/ economic lives.

Though many still saw the battlefield as material, the focus had moved to the subjects of the

struggle. It became not what you were doing, but who you were.

## ACCELERATION IN THE 1990S

In many ways, the 1990s can be seen as a decade as revolutionary as the 1960s. The Soviet Union fell and many believed that The End of History was here: liberal democracy was the only way. Clinton, Blair, and Keating fused this into the third-way politics of social liberalism with neoliberal economic reform. The disintegration

of the Balkans and brutal civil wars in Africa asked questions of western interventionism, and globalisation came in for increased attention from many on the left.

Two seminal academic essays came to define identity politics as we know it today. In 1988, American women's studies academic Peggy McIntosh wrote *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies*, which contained 46 examples of white privilege, from 'I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider,' to 'I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color that more or less match my skin'.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a legal academic and leading exponent of critical race theory, followed McIntosh with her 1993 work *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color*. Oppression, she says, is layered, and greater than the sum of its parts. Her highly influential work has had the effect of further casting the lens on personal experience, creating a bidding system for moral authority based on personal characteristics. As with the 1970s, prominent critics saw the flaws in the resurgence of the identity movement early. Historian and political advisor Arthur Schlesinger Jr saw that the emerging orthodoxy of abandoning integration and acceptance of minority groups was dangerous to social unity, for a society without a common basis cannot reform itself to end marginalisation where it occurs.

Critic and writer Robert Hughes saw the movement as a defeated left-wing trying to recreate politics in its own image. He wrote in *Culture of Complaint*:

Its only vestiges of power were cultural. It went back into the monastery—that is, to academe— and also extruded into the art world.

## THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS

It is telling that, while the New Left was busy in the monastery, the great crisis of late capitalism came and went with a relative whimper. The global financial crisis spawned movements such as Occupy, which failed to unify a culturally-focused left and materialise into a political force.

The emergence of social media, and the destruction of traditional media, saw identity politics accelerate its reach and influence. Concepts such as gender fluidity and cultural appropriation possessed a greater political gravitas to many on the left than economic inequality.

Hughes' observation of the retreat in the acadamae began to crystalise. With a number of surveys showing only around 10-15% of academics in the United States now say they are conservative, campuses have become a fertile breeding ground for identity politics—and an ongoing battle for those who intellectually never left.

A new vocabulary emerged, the correct use of language such as 'cisgenderism', 'misogynoir', 'cultural appropriation', and 'check your privilege' at its core. Trends and conflicts had to be studiously monitored for fear of getting one's opinion wrong, or causing offence.

The great inclusive movement has proved itself as exclusive as they come.

The notion of liberation by erasing structural barriers has passed. Pantomime values have taken hold, where who is good and who is bad is seen as more powerful than whether (and why) an idea is right or wrong. Germaine Greer's views on transgender inclusive feminism are seen to be so wrong that they cannot be debated, while western criticism of other cultures is ongoing colonisation.

The arbitration of matters has been socialised, so that the wave of opinion—led by the loud—isolates, demands apology, and smears. Figures both public and private are routinely forced to apologise for views expressed on social media for fear of isolation and increasingly, risk to their employment.

There is also a troubling tendency to medicalise grievance, with the invention, promotion, and self-diagnosis of pseudo-psychological concepts such as trigger warnings, and a distaste for negativity and scepticism beyond a rigid set of accepted constructs.

## **REPRESENTATION VERSUS POLITICS**

Overwhelmingly, identity politics has shown itself to be politically useless. How does identity politics deal with a drought, or a constitutional crisis? It is not politics at all, rather a mechanism for apportioning blame and signalling virtue.

The tendency toward shaming and public disciplining, along with boycotts and no-platforming, are proving time and again to give more air to the views they are attempting to silence. The cyclical nature of identity politics scandals

is so predictable as to be laughable. 'Internet reacts' is now a reporting sub-genre, as deskbound reporters give equal weight to the statements of prominent public figures and anonymous screechers.

Equally, opinion journalism has evolved to a culture of apparently serious confessional writing. Solipsism is viewed as worthy of serious interrogation. We are left with a generation of writers not interested in telling the stories of others, because they are too busy telling their own.

Identity's pseudo-events have seen the New Left cast market economics as invalid because it is



perceived to be the domain of white, straight, able-bodied men. It's funny then, that two of them have been able to capture the zeitgeist so precisely to produce mass movements that have electrified America, and the western world over the last year, transcending the bluster of the personal for traditional, tangible concerns.

Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders may appear worlds apart, but they speak to an overlapping constituency: those left behind by the current state of economics and politics. They speak to many men, who *The Economist* has noted, have not adapted well to trade, technology or feminism. They speak to the former American middle class, shattered by a decade of economic shocks and political dysfunction. The challenge the essentialist assumption that identity is the primary source of advantage, not economic or political power.

The US election race has shown that material concerns are paramount in the practice of effective politics. Trump and Sanders recognise that poor white men in regional America who have seen their jobs, industries, and towns disappear, are not only angry but have every right to be. They understand that there's more to empowerment than seeing a vision of yourself reflected in Hollywood films.

While the media has elevated politics of identity to prominence, there's little to show for their effectiveness outside of social media activism and universities. A theoretical movement cannot survive without an effective political branch. Robert Hughes noted in his 1993 essays:

The sense of disappointment and frustration with formal politics has gone down into culture, stuck there and festered,' Robert Hughes noted in his 1993 essays.

Sanders and Trump both have their share of troubling ideas, and the latter doesn't appear capable of defeating Hillary Clinton, but this ought not to discount the anger of their millions of supporters. Their campaigns show that class and nationalism remain the most potent political forces, and their primary campaigns have pulled their colleagues in their direction as they cut through the platitudes and capture the mood of the times.

Identity politics, for all its oxygen and outrage, has been found louder than it is angrier. The 2016 US election campaign has showed that fury, not outrage, is the great political mobiliser.