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THE RISE OF "IDENTITY POLITICS"

An Examination and a Critique

The rise of "identity politics" forms a convergence of a cultural style, a mode of logic, a badge of belonging, and a claim to insurgency. What began as an assertion of dignity, a recovery from exclusion and denigration, and a demand for representation, has also developed a hardening of its boundaries. The long overdue opening of political initiative to minorities, women, gays, and others of the traditionally voiceless has developed its own methods of silencing.

At the extreme, in the academy but also outside, "genealogy" has become something of a universal solvent for universal ideas. Standards and traditions now are taken to be nothing more than the camouflage of interests. All claims to knowledge are presumed to be addressed from and to "subject positions," which, like the claims themselves, have been "constructed" or "invented" collectively by self-designated groups. Sooner or later, all disputes issue in propositions of the following sort: the central subject for understanding is the difference between X (for example, women, people of color) and Y (for example, white males). P is the case because my people, X, see it that way; if you don't agree with P, it is (or more mildly, is probably) because you are a member of Y. And further: since X has been oppressed, or silenced, by Y—typically, white heterosexual males—justice requires that members of X, preferably (though not necessarily) adherents of P, be hired and promoted; and in the student body, in the curriculum, on the reading list, and at the conference, distinctly represented.

This is more than a way of thought. Identity politics is a form of self-understanding, an orientation toward the world, and a structure of feeling that is frequent in developed industrial societies. Identity politics presents itself as—and many young people experience it as—the most compelling remedy for anonymity in an impersonal world. This cluster of feelings seems to answer the questions, Who am I? Who is like me? Whom can I trust? Where do I belong?

But identity politics is more than a sensibility felt and lived by individuals. It is a search for comfort, an approach to community. The sense of membership is both a defense and an offense. It seems to overcome exclusion and silencing. Moreover, in a world where other people seem to have chosen up sides and worse, where they approach you—even menace you—because you belong to a particular group, it seems a necessity to or find or invent one's strength among one's people. From popular culture to government policy, the world has evidently assigned you a membership. Identity politics turns necessity to virtue.

But there is a hook: for all the talk about "the social construction of knowledge," identity politics in practice slides toward the premise that social groups have essential identities. At the outer limit, those who set out to explode a shrunken definition of humanity end by shrinking their definitions of blacks or women. In separatist theory, they must be, and have always been, all the same. After a genuflection to historical specificity, anatomy once again becomes destiny. This identity politics is already a tradition in its second generation, transmitted and retransmitted, insti-

tutionalized in jargons, mentors, gurus, conferences, associations, journals, departments, publishing subfields, bookstore sections, jokes, and, not incidentally, in affirmative action and the growing numbers of faculty and students identified and identifying themselves as "of color."

In this setting, identity politics promises a certain comfort. But what was, at first, an enclave where the silenced could find their voices tends now to harden into a self-enclosed world. In the academy, the pioneering work in the early 1970s toward making women's studies legitimate, bolstering labor studies, rethinking the damage done by slavery and the slaughter of the Indians, opening up the canon to hitherto silenced traditions—all this work was done by scholars who had one foot in the civil rights and antiwar movements and who came to their specialties already bearing something of a universalist or cosmopolitan bent. But much of the succeeding work tended to harden and narrow. Identity politics in the strict sense became an organizing principle among the academic cohorts who had no political experience before the late sixties — those now in their twenties and early thirties. After the late 1960s, as race and gender (and sometimes class) became the organizing categories by which critical temperaments addressed the world in the humanities and social sciences, faculty people working this territory came to display the confidence of an ascending class speaking predictably of "disruption," "subversion," "rupture," "contestation," "struggle for meaning." The more their political life is confined to the library, the more aggressive their language.

But identity politics is not simply a product of the academic hothouse. It also thrives in the society at large — in the media of the mass and the margins alike, in schools and in street lore. Some students carry the rhetoric of their particular group to campus with them. Alert to slights, they cultivate a cultural marginality both defensive and aggressive. Fights over appropriate language, over symbolic representation (whether in the form of syllabus or curriculum or faculty or even cuisine), over affirmative action and musical styles and shares of the public space *are, to them, the core of "politics." Just as these cohorts have their clothes and their music, they have "their politics" — the principal, even the only form of "politics" they know.*

The specialists in difference may do their best to deny the fact that for a quarter of a century, they have been fighting over the English department while the right held the White House as its private fiefdom. But academic currents are not so insulated from the larger social world as parochial theory may presume. The legitimacy of racial animus on a national scale, the boldness of right-wing politicians, the profusion of straightforward race prejudice among students have all made the academic left edgier and more offensive. Affirmative action has been successful enough to create a critical mass of African Americans who feel simultaneously heartened, challenged, and marooned. The symbolic burden they bear is enormous. In the absence of plausible prospects for fighting the impoverishment of the cities, unemployment, police brutality, crime, or any of the economic aspects of the current immiseration, it is more convenient—certainly less risky—to accuse a liberal professor of racism. Identity politics is intensified when antagonistic identities are fighting for their places amid shrinking resources. The proliferation of identity politics leads to a turning inward, a grim and hermetic bravado celebrating victimization and stylized marginality.

The thickening of identity politics is relative. We have to ask, Thickening compared to what? Compared to "universalism," "common culture," "the human condition," "liberality," "the Enlightenment project"—the contrary position wears different labels. I shall group them all (at Robert Jay Lifton's suggestion) under the heading of commonality politics—a frame of understanding and action that understands "difference" against the background of what is *not* different, what is shared among groups. This distinction is one of shadings, not absolutes, for differences are always thought and felt against a background of that which does not differ, and commonalities are always thought and felt in relation to differences. Still,

the shadings are deeply felt, whence the intellectual polarization that shows up in debates about the complex of problems including the curriculum, diversity, and so on.

The point I wish to assert is that the thickening of identity politics is inseparable from a fragmentation of commonality politics. In large measure, things fell apart *because* the center could not hold. For chronologically, the breakup of commonality politics predates the thickening of identity politics. The centrifugal surge, on campus and off, is the product of two intersecting histories. There is, obviously, the last quarter century of America's social and demographic upheavals. But these, in turn, have taken place within the longer history that snakes forward throughout the West since the revolutions of 1776, 1789, and 1848. Throughout this period and beyond, believers in a common humanity clustered around the two great progressive ideals: the liberal ideal enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and, later, in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen; and the radical ideal that crystallized as Marxism.

Such legitimacy as the left enjoyed in the West rested on its claim to a place in the story of universal human emancipation. Two hundred years of revolutionary tradition, whether liberal or radical, were predicated on the ideal of a universal humanity. The left addressed itself not to particular men and women but to all, in the name of their common standing. If the population at large was incapable, by itself, of seeing the world whole and acting in the general interest, some enlightened group took it upon itself to be the collective conscience, the Founding Fathers, the vanguard party. Even Marx, lyricist of the proletariat, ingeniously claimed that his favored class was destined to stand for, or become, all humanity. Nationalist revolutions—from 1848 to the present—were to be understood as tributaries to a common torrent, the grand surge of self-determination justified by the equivalent worth of all national expressions. Whether liberals or socialists, reformers or revolutionaries, the men and women of the left aimed to persuade their listeners to see their common interest as citizens of the largest world imaginable. *All* men were supposed to have been created equal, workingmen of *all* countries were supposed to unite. Historians of women are right to point out that the various founding fathers were not thinking of half the species; yet potentially inclusive language was in place. The power of the discourse of political rights was such that it could be generalized by extrapolation. Thus, within fifty years, women—grossly subordinated in the antislavery movement—were working up a politics based on their constituting half of a human race that had been decreed to share equal rights.

Marxism, in all its colorations, became the core of what may be called the idea of the left —the struggle to usher in and to represent common humanity. There exists, Marx asserts in his early writings, a universal identity: the human being as maker, realizing his "species being" in the course of transforming nature. With the audacity of a German idealist primed to think in first principles, Marx adapts from Hegel the idea that a "universal class" will give meaning to history—though not without help. To accomplish its mission, this class to end all classes requires a universal midwife: the revolutionary. To every particular circumstance and cause, the universal priesthood of communists is charged with bringing the glad tidings that History is the unfolding of Reason. The communist party, like God, has its center everywhere and nowhere. The proletariat is his nation. Like the emigré Marx, he is at home nowhere and everywhere, free to teach people of all nations that not a historical event or a struggle against oppression rises or falls which does not have its part to play in the great international transfiguration.

Such is the lyric of Marxism, the rhetoric that appealed to revolutionaries for a century after the death of the founding father. And therefore Marxism-Leninism, the universalist technology of revolution and rule later codified by Stalinists, is, if not the unshakable shadow of Enlightenment Marxism, at least its scion. Lenin's Bolshevik party thrives on and requires this lineage, even if Lenin and Marx are not identical. Under Lenin, the party, this directive force that sees all and knows all and acts in the ostensibly general interest, becomes the incar-

nation of the Enlightenment's faith in the knowability of the human situation. Farther down a road already surveyed by Marx, Lenin makes intellectuals essential to the revolution, thereby securing the dominion of universal ideals.

From 1935 to 1939 and again during World War II, the Popular Front could even conjure a new commonality—a cobbled-together anti-Fascist fusion. In the end, Marxists could always ask rhetorically, what was the alternative that promised universal justice, a single humanity? And so, partly by default, from one revision to the next, Marxism remained the pedigreed theoretical ensemble hovering over all left-wing thought. And yet, once the antifascist alliance was broken, the universalist promise of Marxism proceeded to unravel.

From this point of view, the intellectual radicalism of the early sixties can be seen as a search for a substitute universalism. Having dismissed Marxism for what C. Wright Mills called its "labor metaphysic," the New Left tried to compose a surrogate universal. "The issues are interrelated" was the New Left's approach to a federation of single-issue groups—so that, for example, the peace, civil rights, and civil liberties movements needed to recognize that they had a common enemy, the "Dixiecrats" who choked off any liberal extension of the New Deal. More grandly, in a revival of Enlightenment universalism, Students for a Democratic Society's Port Huron Statement spoke self-consciously in the name of all humanity. The universal solvent for particular differences would be the principle that "decision-making of basic social consequence be carried on by public groupings": that is, participatory democracy. In theory, participatory democracy was available to all. In practice, it was tailored to students, young people collected at "knowledge factories" as the industrial proletariat had been collected at mills and mines; young people who were skilled in conversation, had time on their hands, and, uprooted from the diversities of their respective upbringings, were being encouraged to think of themselves as practitioners of reason. When the early New Left set out to find common ground with a like-minded constituency, it reached out to the impoverished—the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee to sharecroppers and SDS to the urban poor, who, by virtue of their marginality, might be imagined as forerunners of a universal democracy. If students and the poor were not saddled with "radical chains" in the system of production, at least they could be imagined with radical *needs* for political participation.

But the student movement's attempts at universalism broke down—both practically and intellectually. In fact, the ideal of participatory democracy was only secondary for the New Left. The passion that drove students—including Berkeley's Free Speech Movement—was the desire to support civil rights as part of a movement with a universalist design. The New left was a movement-for-others searching for an ideology to transform it into a movement-for-itself, but participatory democracy was too ethereal an objective with which to bind an entire movement, let alone an entire society. Freedom as an endless meeting was only alluring to those who had the time and taste to go to meetings endlessly. The universalist impulse regressed. Enter, then, the varieties of Marxism by which universalist students could imagine either that they were entitled to lead a hypothetical proletariat (Progressive Labor's Stalinism) or that they themselves already prefigured a "new working class."

But these attempts at recomposing a sense of a unified revolutionary bloc were weak in comparison with centrifugal pressures. Such unity as had been felt by the civil rights movement began to dissolve as soon as legal segregation was defeated. Blacks began to insist on black leadership, even exclusively black membership. Feminist stirrings were greeted with scorn by unreconstructed men. If white supremacy was unacceptable, neither could male supremacy be abided. One group after another demanded the recognition of difference and the protection of separate spheres for distinct groupings. This was more than an *idea* because it was more than strictly intellectual; it was more a whole way of

experiencing the world. Difference was now lived and felt more acutely than unity.

The crack-up of the universalist New Left was muted for a while by the exigencies of the Vietnam War and the commonalities of youth culture. If there seemed in the late 1960s to be one big movement, it was largely because there was one big war. But the divisions of race and then gender and sexual orientation proved far too deep to be overcome by any rhetoric of unification. The initiative and energy went into proliferation—feminist, gay, ethnic, environmentalist. The very language of collectivity came to be perceived by the new movements as a colonialist smothering—an ideology to rationalize white male domination. Thus, by the early 1970s, the goals of the student movement and the various left-wing insurgencies were increasingly subsumed under the categories of identity politics. Separatism became automatic. Now one did not imagine oneself belonging to a common enterprise; one belonged to a caucus.

But note: the late New Left politics of dispersion and separateness, not the early New Left politics of universalist aspiration, were the seed-ground of the young faculty who were to carry radical politics into the academy in the 1970s and 1980s. The founders of women's and black studies had a universalist base in either the Old or the New Left. But their recruits, born in the early or later 1950s, did not. By the time they arrived on campuses in the early seventies, identity politics was the norm. They had no direct memory of either a unified left or a successful left-of-center Democratic party. In general, their experience of active politics was segmented. The defeat of the left was so obvious it was taken for granted. For these post-1960s activists, universalist traditions seemed empty.

The profusion of social agents took place throughout the society, but nowhere more vigorously than in the academy. Here, in black and ethnic studies, women's studies, gay and lesbian groupings, and so on, each movement could feel the exhilaration of group-based identity. Each felt it had a distinct world to win —first, by establishing that its group had been suppressed and silenced; then by exhuming buried work and exploring forms of resistance; and, finally, by trying to rethink society, literature, and history from the respective vantages of the silenced, asking what the group and, indeed, the entire world would look like if those hitherto excluded were now included. And since the demands of identity politics were far more winnable in the university than elsewhere, the struggles of minorities multiplied. When academic conservatives resisted, they only confirmed the convictions of the marginal—that their embattled or not-yet-developing perspectives needed to be separately institutionalized. In the developing logic of identity-based movements, the world was all periphery and no center, or, if there was a center, it was their own. The mission of insurgents was to promote their own interests; for if they would not, who would?

From these endeavors flowed genuine achievements in the study of history and literature. Whole new areas of inquiry were opened up. Histories of the world and of America, of science and literature, are still reverberating from what can legitimately be called a revolution in knowledge. But as the hitherto excluded territories were institutionalized, the lingering aspiration for the universal subject was ceded. A good deal of the Cultural Left felt its way, even if half-jokingly, toward a weak unity based not so much on a universalist premise or ideal but rather on a common enemy —that notorious White Male. Beneath this, they had become, willy-nilly, pluralists, a fact frequently disguised by the rhetoric of revolution hanging over from the late sixties.

New Board Member

We're happy to announce that Anson Rabinbach has joined our editorial board. Rabinbach is a professor of European history at Cooper Union, an editor of *New German Critique*, and the author of *The Crisis of Austrian Socialism* and, most recently, of *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity.*

Soon, difference was being practiced, not just thought, at a deeper level than commonality. It was more salient, more vital, more present—all the more so in the 1980s, as practical struggles for university facilities, requirements, and so forth culminated in fights over increasingly scarce resources. For the participants in these late-sixties and post-sixties movements, the benefits of this pursuit were manifold—an experience of solidarity, a ready-made reservoir of recruits. Seen from outside as fragments in search of a whole, the zones of identity politics came to be experienced from within as worlds unto themselves. The political-intellectual experience of younger academics could be mapped onto other centrifugal dispositions in post-Vietnam America. Group self-definitions embedded in political experience merged with other historicist and centrifugal currents to form the core and the legitimacy of the multicultural surge, the fragments of the Cultural Left. The idea of a common America and the idea of a unitary Left, these two great legacies of the Enlightenment, hollowed out together.

Thus a curious reversal of left and right. In the nineteenth century, the right was the property of aristocracies who stood unabashedly for the privileges of the few. Today, the aspiring aristocrats of the academic right tend to speak the language of universals—canon, merit, reason, individual rights, transpolitical virtue. For its part, seized by the logic of identity politics, committed to pleasing its disparate constituencies, the academic left has lost interest in the commonalities that undergird its obsession with difference. □

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