The Problem of Identity Politics and Its Solution

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The beginnings of identity politics can be traced to 1973, the year the first volume of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s Gulag Archipelago—a book that demolished any pretense of communism’s moral authority—was published in the West. The ideological challenge of socialism was fading, its fighting spirit dwindling. This presented a challenge for the Left: how to carry on the fight against capitalism when its major ideological alternative was no longer viable?

The Left found its answer in an identity politics that grew out of anti-colonialism. Marx’s class struggle was reformulated into an ethno-racial struggle—a ceaseless competition between colonizer and colonized, victimizer and victim, oppressor and...
oppressed. Instead of presenting collectivism and central planning as the gateway to the realization of genuine freedom, the new multiculturalist Left turned to unmasking the supposed power relations that subordinated minorities and exploited third world nations.

The original battleground was the American university, where, as Bruce Bawer writes in The Victims’ Revolution: The Rise of Identity Politics and the Closing of the Liberal Mind,

The point [became] simply to “prove”—repetitively, endlessly—certain facile, reductive, and invariably left-wing points about the nature of power and oppression. In this new version of the humanities, all of Western civilization is not analyzed through the use of reason or judged according to aesthetic standards that have been developed over centuries; rather, it is viewed through prisms of race, class, and gender, and is hailed or condemned in accordance with certain political checklists.

Under the new leftist dispensation, the study of English became the application of critical and literary theory to disparate texts so as to uncover the hidden power relations they concealed. The study of history became the study of social history or “people’s history,” the record of Western Civilization’s oppression of various groups. And popping up everywhere were new departments of “studies”: African-American Studies, Women’s Studies, Queer Studies, Chicano Studies, Gender Studies, and so on. “What these radicals blandly call multiculturalism,” wrote Irving Kristol, is as much a “war against the West” as Nazism and Stalinism ever were. Under the guise of multiculturalism, their ideas—whose radical substance often goes beyond the bounds of the political into sheer fantasy—are infiltrating our educational system at all levels.

This revolution in American universities was accomplished swiftly and largely outside the public eye. What little resistance the radicals met was vanquished with accusations of racism. It was not until the late 1980s, with Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaigns, the battle over the Stanford core curriculum, and the publication of Allan Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind, that the rise of identity politics on campus and the idea of “political correctness” became a page one story. By that time, however, it was too late. Alumni, trustees, and parents had no recourse. The American university was irrevocably changed.

There have been liberal critics of identity politics through the years. In 1991, historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. published The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society. Schlesinger noted that the Soviet Union had collapsed in a heap of warring nationalities and that the state of Yugoslavia was in the process of
doing the same, and asked whether America would be next. Presenting America as a nation of nations, a shared national culture whose diverse citizenry is united behind principles of liberty and equal justice, Schlesinger quoted Jean de Crèvecoeur’s 1782 *Letters from an American Farmer*:

*He* is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient pre-judices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. . . . Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.

In 2004, Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington published *Who Are We?* Huntington examined the stunning immigration, both legal and illegal, from Mexico and argued that it was undermining longstanding notions of American national identity. America, Huntington said, has both a creed and a culture. The creed is formulated in the founding documents of our nation and in the speeches of Abraham Lincoln. The culture derives from the Anglo-Protestant settlers who first peopled North America. Huntington worried about a “hispanicization” of American culture.

This book was controversial, to say the least. Nor was it without weaknesses. It is hard for this descendant of Irish and Italian immigrants to accept the notion that America’s culture is monolithically Anglo-Protestant. Furthermore, Huntington tended to underestimate the importance of the creed in shaping the culture. But such criticism should not obscure the fundamental point: Huntington, a Democrat who advised Hubert Humphrey’s 1968 presidential campaign, shared the same concerns one finds today among Trump supporters about immigration’s effect on American society.

This year another liberal academic, Columbia humanities professor Mark Lilla, has taken up the banner. “Identity politics on the left,” he writes, was at first about large classes of people . . . seeking to redress major historical wrongs by mobilizing and then working through our political institutions to secure their rights. But by the 1980s, it had given way to a pseudo-politics of self-regard and increasingly narrow, and exclusionary self-definition that is now cultivated in our colleges and universities. The main result has been to turn people back onto themselves, rather than turning them outward towards the wider world they share with others. It has left them unprepared to think about the common good in non-identity terms and what must be done practically to secure it—especially the hard and unglamorous task of persuading people very different from themselves to join a common effort.

Lilla exhorts Democrats to replace identity liberalism with civic liberalism in the mode of Franklin Roosevelt. That Lilla’s opponents wasted no time in labeling his argument as racist is a testament to how divided the Left is on this issue.

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Despite these intellectual dissidents, the Democratic Party and liberal elites appear committed to the idea that multiculturalism and identity politics, combined with the changing
demographics of America, will bring about an enduring Democratic national majority. The two victories of Barack Obama strengthened their assumptions and set the template for Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign. Lilla notes, for example, that a visitor to Clinton’s website could open tabs related to ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, but not one related to a shared vision of American community.

This approach has had catastrophic consequences for the Democratic Party. “The fatal conclusion the Clinton team made after the Michigan primary debacle,” Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg writes, “was that she could not win white working-class voters, and that the ‘rising electorate’ would make up the difference. She finished her campaign with rallies in inner cities and university towns. Macomb [County, Michigan] got the message.”

But the Democrats’ theory behind support for identity politics rests on shaky assumptions. Liberal journalist John B. Judis, who helped originate the theory with his book The Emerging Democratic Majority, has recanted his thesis. “The U.S. census makes a critical assumption that undermines its predictions of a majority-nonwhite country,” he writes. “It projects that the same percentage of people who currently identify themselves as ‘Latino’ or ‘Asian’ will continue to claim those identities in future generations. In reality, that’s highly unlikely.”

Intermarriage and assimilation will affect immigrants from these groups just as they have affected other immigrant groups. What’s more, voting allegiances can change as newcomers are integrated into the majority. There is also the problem that, as Democrats become more closely identified with identity politics, non-minority voters may swing even more decisively to Republicans—continuing the trend we saw in 2016.

Democrats fooled themselves into thinking that identity politics won Obama his two terms when in fact precisely the opposite had occurred. Obama made his debut on the national stage in the summer of 2004, during the Democratic National Convention that nominated John Kerry for president. The only reason anyone remembers that convention is because of Obama’s keynote address, where he repudiated the division of American society and famously said, “There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.” From the start, Obama’s appeal on the campaign trail was to the noblest and most unifying aspects of the American political tradition.

This didn’t last. Shortly before Obama was reelected, he gave an interview where he said his top priority in a second term would be immigration reform that included an amnesty for illegal immigrants. The reason, he explained, was that Hispanic turnout would win him victory. Here Obama was wrong. Targeted appeals to Hispanic and black voters did not win him reelection. What won him reelection were his attacks on Mitt Romney for not understanding the economic condition of working Americans.

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The most significant and effective advertisement of the 2012 campaign was a testimonial from a factory worker who had been laid off during one of Romney’s corporate downsizings. What came to be known as the “coffin ad” drove a wedge between the Republican nominee and the voters on whom Republican victory depended. Four years later, when the Republicans nominated a very different sort of candidate, these voters switched
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allegiances and backed Donald Trump. It is no accident that identity politics is most rampant today in the academy, in entertainment, in the media, in Silicon Valley, and in corporate boardrooms. Identity politics is a veneer over the class politics that truly defines our society, and education is the best prism through which to view class in America today. Higher levels of education are not only correlated with higher incomes and better life prospects, but also with a greater acceptance of the theories behind identity politics—including the idea, rejected last year by the voters of the rural Midwest, that they are the beneficiaries of white privilege.

The condescension of liberal elites toward the white working class, evangelical Christians, gun owners, and supporters of immigration control and cultural assimilation is as pronounced as it is repulsive. It is summed up in Hillary Clinton’s writing off of so many voters last year as belonging in a “basket of deplorables”—the converse of Mitt Romney’s similarly destructive class-based dismissal of the 47 percent of Americans who do not pay income taxes. (They don’t pay income taxes because they don’t make enough money to qualify.)

Liberals seem blind to the connection between the high levels of income inequality they criticize and what they would otherwise call the hegemonic discourse of identity politics. This is why Clinton’s comment that breaking up the big banks would do nothing for the minority groups at the base of her campaign was so revealing. It might not do anything for them as members of identity groups, but perhaps it would help them as workers and as citizens.

Enconced in affluent city centers and tony suburbs, liberal elites tell themselves that identity politics will carry them to the progressive future of their dreams. They appear utterly unaware that the radical cultural transformation they support—not to mention the insulting, dismissive, and self-righteous way they meet opposition to their designs—is seen from outside their bubble as provocative.

As political analyst Sean Trende has written:

Consider that over the course of the past few years, Democrats and liberals have: booed the inclusion of God in their platform at the 2012 convention . . . endorsed a regulation that would allow transgendered students to use the bathroom and locker room corresponding to their identity; attempted to force small businesses to cover drugs they believe induce abortions; attempted to force nuns to provide contraceptive coverage; forced Brendan Eich to step down as chief executive officer of Mozilla due to his opposition to marriage equality; fined a small Christian bakery over $140,000 for refusing to bake a cake for a same-sex wedding; vigorously opposed a law in Indiana that would provide protections against similar regulations—despite having overwhelmingly supported similar laws when they protected Native American religious rights—and then scour ed the Indiana countryside trying to find a business that would be affected by the law before settling upon a small pizza place in the middle of nowhere and harassing the owners.

We tend to view these stories as examples of the culture war. They are more than that: they are examples of a coastal, metropolitan, highly schooled upper class warring against the traditions and freedoms of a middle American, exurban and rural, lower-middle and working class with some or no college education. In short, examples of a privileged few attempting to impose their will on a recalcitrant majority.
Here is Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg again:

Obama’s refrain [of building “ladders of opportunity” for those left behind in the economic recovery] was severely out of touch with what was happening to most Americans and the working class more broadly. In our research, “ladders of opportunity” fell far short of what real people were looking for. Incomes sagged after the financial crisis, pensions lost value, and many lost their housing wealth, while people faced dramatically rising costs for things that mattered—health care, education, housing, and child care. People faced vanishing geographic, economic, and social mobility. . . . At the same time, billionaires spent massively to influence politicians and parked their money in the big cities whose dynamism drew in the best talent from the smaller towns and cities.

The result of this class conflict is an America in danger of coming apart. “Liberals must take seriously Americans’ yearning for social cohesion,” writes Peter Beinart in The Atlantic Monthly. But despite the efforts of liberals like Beinart and Lilla, the Left faces obstacles to stitching America back together. The wealthiest and most energetic segments of the Left are committed to multiculturalism on the one hand and transnationalism on the other. What is more, the Left rejects the natural rights theory of the American Founding at the core of our tradition.

What has traditionally held Americans together is the idea that each of us is made in the image of our Creator and endowed with certain unalienable rights. But not only that idea. We are also held together by the culture that emanates from the intermingling of dynamic peoples and unchanging principles. To combat identity politics, we must emphasize an American nationalism based on both a commitment to the ideals of the American Founding and a shared love of our national history and culture—a history and culture of individual freedom and religious pluralism, resistant to centralized authority and ever expanding into new frontiers and new possibilities.

We are united by our creed of freedom and equality, and also by our habits, our manners, our national language, our territorial integrity, our national symbols—such as the National Anthem, the Flag, and the Pledge of Allegiance—our civic traditions, and our national story.

The American people are united by our creed of freedom and equality, and also by our habits, our manners, our national language, our territorial integrity, our national symbols—such as the National Anthem, the Flag, and the Pledge of Allegiance—our civic traditions, and our national story. We should tell that story forthrightly and proudly; we should continue our traditions of local government and patriotic displays; we should guard the symbols of our heritage against attack; and we should recognize that the needs of our citizens take priority.

We should also remember the words of a great American nationalist, Abraham Lincoln, at the close of his First Inaugural Address:

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.