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The end of solidarity

How the obsession with identity politics, tribalism, and victimhood is atomising society

Read this article in German.

While political systems in Western societies continue to brashly ignore the basic needs of the populations they govern, they are showing an ever finer appreciation of cultural issues. Indeed, politicians in advanced economies are pushing so-called 'awareness' and setting up institutional frameworks accordingly.

This means that politicians of all stripes have neglected to do anything about the enormous cuts to real wages suffered by the lower half of earners in recent decades. They have driven the unemployed and those who cannot work into crushing insecurity: in Germany, for instance, programmes such as the mid-2000s Hartz IV (under then German chancellor Schröder) have cut living standards for those not in work. Currently, the right-plus-hard-right Austrian government coalition is implementing something similar.

The result is that, even in the upper reaches of the middle classes, there is a growing feeling that the next generation will not be better off than this one. This erosion of economic status goes hand in hand with cutbacks to democratic participation, as international agreements (e.g. the Maastricht Treaty) create *faits accomplis* which are beyond all checks and balances. In terms of EU foreign policy, too, swathes of populations in member states are left with the feeling that they have never experienced any form of democratic decision-making process.

Identity politics contribute to neoliberalism

When it comes to culture, however, politicians are showing an actually quite astonishing degree of understanding for even the smallest of concerns or the slightest of sensitivities, especially when these are experienced by people of specific ethnicities, religious persuasions, or

sexual orientation – i.e. identity issues. There is public debate about 'micro-aggressions', people are told to avoid words or gestures which might offend (usually quite a long way before somebody might actually take offence), and there are very serious considerations about the number of genders there might be. To put it in a nutshell: are we missing a toilet door, or do we have one too many?

This form of post-modern identity politics should not, however, be understood as compensation for the spread of neoliberal economics and their inherent inequality, but rather as an active contribution to them. The philosopher Nancy Fraser has identified this combination as 'progressive neoliberalism': post-modern identity issues are, according to her theory, the cultural agenda of neoliberalism.

It's a theory that can be backed up with at least two strong arguments. Firstly, a strengthening of individuals' concerns about their identity leads to widespread atomisation and distracts isolated people lacking solidarity from central questions. Those thinking excessively about their own identity get into a competition for victimhood, trying to outdo each other by applying 'intersectionality'; this makes them increasingly unable to recognise the more pressing interests at hand, and increasingly incapable of joining forces with other identity groups to pursue them.

In short, identity politics has redistributed social plights and their acknowledgement up the social scale towards the elites.

It's precisely this which discredits one of the fundamental principles of an emancipated citizenry: all the hate-filled talk of 'old white straight men' is actually an assault on the entire political and ethical programme of *bourgeois* universalism. Yes, *bourgeois*, because it was the established middle class which was the first in history not to see itself as a special case, but as a class whose membership might be extended to all. The working class would later follow this line of thought. As such, the middle class saw its emancipation not just as its own, but as a blueprint for society as a whole.

Its two central projects where establishing a rule of law which applies to all regardless of the identity of the individual as well as a civilised tone in public life. Moving the question of personal 'identity' into the background is therefore one of the successes of the *bourgeoisie* – and the ultimate goal of each other emancipation movement. As such, attacking the principle of everyone being equal before the law and riding roughshod over civilised interaction in the name of identity politics means being part of the axe that neoliberalism is using to chip away at

society and return it to a tribal, feudal state.

To precisely the same degree as neoliberalism has robbed people of the prospect of a better future, the propaganda of the identity politics movement has come to the fore and turned attention from the future back towards the past: after all, someone who no longer has anywhere to go needs at least to know from where they come; and anyone who has lost all hope of *be-coming* something interesting has no choice but to insist on *being* something important, precious, vulnerable.

The suffering of the lower middle classes

The second line of argument is that neoliberalism has torn out the centre of society in wealthy Western countries. We are talking about lower middle classes who, in the Keynesian years of the immediate post-war decades, advanced to modest prosperity and increased social status. These demographics have suffered tremendous losses both in real wages and social prestige. While the former was a result of an economic redistribution, the latter came from a cultural one.

Previously emancipatory intellectual movements such as neo-Marxism, feminism, and anti-racism moved into the cultural sphere, morphing into more fluid areas of research such as deconstruction, gender theory, and post-colonial studies. This led them to lose relevance to wider society as they gained in theoretical sophistication, complexity, and (most importantly) distinction. All of these issues which derived from the suffering of those exploited could now be used to show social distinction. In short, identity politics has redistributed social plights and their acknowledgement up the social scale towards the elites.

Trying to tackle issues of identity and social class from the identity end very rarely solves either; going at the problem from social class, however, can often resolve both elements.

One decisive driver behind these developments is surely that, since the 1980s, centre-left parties in Europe and elsewhere have become ever more indistinguishable from their conservative, neoliberal opponents. The only remaining difference has therefore to be highlighted in the field of culture. To speak in Marxist terms, the increasingly cultural bent of left-wing politics has led to a situation in which the problems of the economic base are now only dealt with in ideological superstructures. It's clearly wrong to think that this is an effective replacement. To put it simply: while in the 1970s, expanding the

welfare state was, for instance, considered a necessary prerequisite for feminist emancipation, during the austerity programmes which cut it back in the 1980s, women were fobbed off with discussions about saying 'her-story' instead of history or whether 'chairwoman' or 'chairperson' was the best way to deal with the 'female chairman' problem.

The cultural left is elitist

From this point of view, the hatred felt in the crumbling working class districts of many towns and cities becomes somewhat easier to comprehend. Not without justification, the 'cultural left' is felt to be little more than an elite ('Champagne socialists!') whose luxurious economic position allows them to be more humane and worldly while reducing other considerations to trifles. As such, the politics of symbolic gestures are not just a symbol of, but actually a driving force behind the growing gap between the lower middle classes and the upper reaches of society. The widening of this chasm, in turn, leads to disillusionment in this demographic, which no longer tries to advance socially, but rather focusses on keeping those snapping at its heels – e.g. ambitious migrants – at a safe distance.

While, on the one hand, post-modern identity politics continually reduces people to their diversity markers and backgrounds, it also co-opts the early-*bourgeois* Enlightenment dictum of 'fighting prejudice', stressing free access to the market for everyone in the spirit of fair competition. Yet this politics of free access is not actually fair at all – in fact, it adds to inequality, reducing competition even further as it does by skewing the odds in the game against hard work and towards those with handicaps (either actual or ostensible).

Yet even when opportunity is at its most equal, the politics of 'non-discrimination' cannot offer social justice: as Adolph Reed, thinker and activist in the US civil rights movement, so accurately pointed out, this kind of approach would still leave one per cent of people controlling 90 per cent of the resources; with the only saving grace that inequality would be equally distributed amongst people regardless of their skin-colour and sexuality. If this skewed society were to be less steeply inclined, or indeed if it were to be completely equal, then it would be harder for people to discriminate because there wouldn't be less advantageous situations into which groups discriminated against could be forced.

Trying to tackle issues of identity and social class from the identity end

very rarely solves either; going at the problem from social class, however, can often resolve both elements. In a society in which equality is in sight, people become increasingly disinterested in their individual identities; they stop navel-gazing about what they might *be*, and start thinking more about what they might *be-come*.

This text is based on an article in a recently-released work published by Johannes Richardt (Hg.): Die sortierte Gesellschaft. Zur Kritik der Identitätspolitik.Novo Argumente Verlag, Frankfurt/Main 2018, 194 pages, €16.00.



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