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The politics of identity and inclusion

The struggles around race and gender are fundamentally about inclusion on an equal footing in the political community

Anonymous, camouflage-clad men taking protesters away in unmarked cars — federal agents, sent by the United States president, Donald Trump, with the obvious intent of escalating violence. This is what's happening in the city of Portland. 'Can we call it fascism yet?' asked the *New York Times* columnist Michelle Goldberg.

Trump responded by saying that the push should be extended to more Democrat-led cities. And, across the US, a battle is going on, for values, dignity and democracy — and over power and words.

A couple of weeks ago, the 80-year-old civil-rights activist John Lewis died. When Barack Obama was elected president, he gave Lewis a handwritten note: It read: 'Because of you, John.' Many interpreted the election of Obama as an end to the struggle of the civil-rights movement. They got it wrong the moment Trump won the presidency on a platform of racism, thinly disguised as concern for white, working-class men.

The Black Lives Matter protests are rooted in racial oppression, where African-Americans are imprisoned, die prematurely, lose their jobs and are disproportionally hit by the pandemic. But the fight is also about something more — the right to be seen as a full human being.

You could call it a struggle for democracy. One could also call it, as some have, identity politics.

Pressure point

Is there a point when one person's freedom struggle turns into another's loss? The answer, in a way, is yes. Social status is not just about money but also about hierarchy. When women move up, men do not have to suffer in absolute terms — but relationships change. In this place of friction, conflict and a feeling of loss can emerge. It is this pressure-point populists

exploit and try to amplify.

Within the left, class and identity are often set against each other. Among left-wing debaters, dismissing transgender people or advocating harsh treatment of immigrants has become a way of capturing the conservative moment, without purportedly having to give up one's own identity as a champion of justice.

What liberals such as Yascha Mounk call threats to 'freedom of speech' are often (though not always) something else — massive, organised criticism in a public sphere which incentivises and exacerbates hatred.

The alleged conflict between class and identity is partly due to the fact that social-democratic movements today lack an idea of how economic equality can be achieved. But the answer to this failure should not be to ignore demands for justice. In a left-wing analysis, the struggle for expanded minority rights cannot be detached from economic justice: they presuppose each other.

An argument sometimes put forward is that too much focus on identity politics is counterproductive, because it might alienate the majority. If Obama had not been so black, Trump would not have been elected. If women had not pushed so hard for equality, men would not have felt so much resentment. The one who makes demands is seen as the one who creates polarisation.

Fundamental flaws

This analysis contains three fundamental flaws. First, it is morally dubious, as it makes the oppressed responsible for their oppression. Secondly, it is based on the same, stereotyped misconception of which 'identity politics' is often accused. Anyone who believes that focusing on issues of racism will automatically create a backlash among the 'white working class' — a verbal construct of very recent vintage — makes the prejudiced assumption that the latter is a homogeneous group, with given, deeply-rooted, conservative views.

The third error in the reasoning is that it does not seem to correspond to reality. In the two major political rights projects that have emerged in recent years, #metoo and Black Lives Matter, the result has been rather the opposite. The loud demands have not led to a marginalisation of these movements. Instead, they have raised awareness of, and sensitivity towards, the issues far beyond those directly affected. 'Identity politics' has engendered recognition, solidarity and broad alliances.

Where does the intense anger come from in the 'culture wars', these storms of hatred? A real fear of lost privileges, a grief over a world that is disappearing? Yes, but to a large extent the rage is inflated and synthetic.

In her acclaimed recent history of the US, *These Truths*, the Harvard professor Jill Lepore identifies 'social media' as where the civic idea of conversation and deliberation shaping democracy comes to a dead end. On their platforms a specific type of speech is rewarded — angry and resentful — distorting not only politics but also professional journalism. It is easy to whip up a Twitter storm, while to be the target of one can be very painful.

What liberals such as Yascha Mounk call threats to 'freedom of speech' are often (though not always) something else — massive, organised criticism in a public sphere which incentivises and exacerbates hatred. This is probably why the culture wars of recent years have often felt constructed and Twitter-optimised — performative outbursts with the primary purpose to strengthen one or other debater's personal brand or position in the Parnassus.

Extension of rights

It is important to recognise that the left has problems with intolerance. There are dangerous tendencies within the so-called 'cancel culture', especially when the reaction to a provocative statement is not to respond to it but to try to get the person fired. Yet it is important to be careful and precise.

The fact that it is not as easy today to express certain views *unchallenged* is not in itself a sign of 'illiberalism'. That people forcefully object when transgender individuals are attacked or when the N-word is used should be understood as an extension of rights and liberties to those previously denied them — not a restriction.

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Sometimes it sounds as if movements fighting for expanded rights are as big a threat as the forces that want to restrict them. But that is simply not true. At the moment, there is a real push against democracy and civil rights by authoritarian politicians all over the world.

Trump, writes Masha Gessen in her new book *Surviving Autocracy*, is not an exception but a logical consequence of history. He stands on the shoulders of 400 years of racial oppression and 15 years of intense

mobilisation — in laws and language, in the media and on the internet — against Muslims, immigrants and, generically, the Other.

Lewis and Martin Luther King fought for the rights of black Americans as a way to expand the definition of who belongs. Trump's project — as with the Sweden Democrats, Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Poland's Andrzej Duda — is actively to expel people from the group that constitutes the political 'we'.

Gessen quotes the German philosopher Hannah Arendt's explanation for why people are attracted to fascism and authoritarian leaders. It is about the temptation to throw off the 'mask of hypocrisy' — to not have to try to be moral, with the failure that always entails.

Conflicts over race and gender are different from other political arguments: a discussion of tax rates does not call into question anyone's existence. Conflicts over identity are much more visceral. For they ask the question: who has the right to belong? And they demand an answer.

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