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The promise of liberal identity politics

There is no such thing as identity-less politics. That's why liberals have to embrace an inclusive approach to identity politics

Read this article in German.

Utter the words 'identity politics' nowadays and you risk igniting a row. On the American left, almost all politics is identity politics. That drives the American right crazy. And not only the right: liberal intellectuals like Mark Lilla of Columbia University are making the increasingly persuasive case that identity politics is bad electoral politics. A weak Democratic Party that is little more than an amalgam of myriad identity-based groups, they argue, may well be to blame for the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

The problem is that some American critics of identity politics assume there is such a thing as identity-less politics. But a quick look around the world suggests exactly the opposite: what Brexiteers, Russian nationalists, and Islamic fundamentalists have in common is that their politics are all about identity. And what is the massive backlash against immigration if not the assertion of one identity over another? The more globalised the economy becomes, the more politics around the world is being driven by very local identities.

Why is this troubling? And what can be done about it?

Start with the obvious: not all forms of identity politics are noxious. In an age of generalised distrust of politicians, when a voter *identifies* with a candidate, that is something to celebrate. Familiarity (and similarity) can breed confidence instead of contempt. A woman voter may be more likely to identify with a woman candidate. The same holds true for members of ethnic and religious minorities.

So identity can improve the representativeness of representative democracy.

And politicians, in turn, are more likely to deliver for citizens with whom they share an identity. Without Martin Luther King, Jr. and

other inspiring African-American leaders, there might have been no civil rights movement. Raghabendra Chattopadhyay of the Indian Institute of Management and Esther Duflo of MIT have shown that in India the needs of women get more attention when women politicians are elected. Harvard's Rohini Pande finds a similar effect when members of disadvantaged castes reach political office.

The downside of identity politics

So identity can improve the *representativeness* of *representative* democracy. And at a time when credibility is in short supply among politicians, candidates with a strong identity can make more credible promises. That is one good side of identity politics.

But there is also a bad side – several, in fact. The most obvious is that a political system driven by different identities can easily become fragmented. And if those identities are very different in their values, preferences, or interests, fragmentation and polarisation are not far apart. Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, or Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, certainly had strong identities; that was part of the problem, not the solution.

There is also the risk that the politics of identity can replace – or severely weaken – the politics of economic justice. Many injustices, of course, are both economic and identitarian. It is no coincidence that people of African descent in the United States, or indigenous populations in Latin America, are among the poorest of the poor.

Yet sometimes discrimination is not identity-based, but class-based (Karl Marx is not entirely dead). In other cases, economic failure does not discriminate. Slow economic growth can hold down everyone's income. The crashes that follow financial bubbles cause unemployment and suffering among people of all ethnicities and genders. If a focus on identity causes us to take our eye off the economic ball, we all suffer.

Manipulating identities

Another problem is that, as Ricardo Hausmann has argued, the know-how necessary to make a modern economy grow is embedded in people, not textbooks. And if you drive those people away because they do not share your identity, economic prosperity is sure to suffer.

This is what *chavismo* has accomplished in Venezuela: having fired or exiled the engineers who ran the national oil company, oil output collapsed, bringing the entire Venezuelan economy crashing down. And the lesson is not new: Robert Mugabe did something similar in Zimbabwe, with similarly catastrophic consequences.

That broader common we can help not only electorally, but also economically. Open societies educate or attract people with varied and valuable kinds of know-how, and they prosper that way.

The mother of all dangers is that identities can be manipulated for political gain, which is precisely what populists do. Neither identities, nor the rules of behaviour that they imply, are fixed. One can be a motherland-loving patriot without detesting the citizens of the country next door.

Yet history is full of examples of charismatic leaders who stoke the toxic fires of chauvinism. Every time Bolivian President Evo Morales runs into political trouble at home, he issues an anti-Chilean proclamation. It seems to have paid off: he has been in power for 12 years and will reportedly stand for a fourth term in 2019.

Liberal identity politics

Politicians like Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama are rightly admired for practicing the politics of inclusion. Under the big tents they erected, everyone – black or white, rich or poor – could find room. Yet nowadays the practitioners of politically divisive speech seem to have the upper hand: Donald Trump's border wall and Viktor Orbán's closed borders are big vote-getters.

Fortunately, they are not the only vote-getters. Liberal democrats believe in the common *we* of citizens who have equal rights. The challenge is to build a shared identity around liberal values, and to show that we are proud of our countries precisely because they embody them. This is what Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and French President Emmanuel Macron have managed so well.

That broader common *we* can help not only electorally, but also economically. Open societies educate or attract people with varied and valuable kinds of know-how, and they prosper that way. Pluralism is the solution to Hausmann's problem. It is no coincidence that tolerant and diverse cities like San Francisco and New York also have some of the

highest incomes anywhere.

So there is such a thing as a liberal identity politics. And it can be very effective. It is high time that more leaders began practicing it.

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