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Let's rethink identity politics

We need to go back to discussing whether an idea is emancipatory — rather than the positionality of its author

Probably one of the most alienating traits of the postmodern left, to outsiders, is the fixation on identities related to oppression — challenging, on the basis of such an identification, whether someone should be listened to at all rather than engaging with what they have said or written. Way beyond activist subcultures, this permeates progressive political parties, academia, the media and the wider Western cultural arena.

Not only is it unappealing to those not familiar with the lingo and associated expectations to find themselves walking on eggshells so as not to be bullied for ascriptive traits or purported *faux pas*. At least in its exaggerated and toxic form, it is based on a false analysis of social relations and oppression, and thus has little to offer for an emancipatory left.

The expansion of rights to members of more and more groups in Western societies over recent decades has raised sensitivity towards discrimination – rightly so – and various settings, from theatre to politics, have become more diverse. Representation of hitherto marginalised groups can expand the agenda of public institutions, which, in the long run, can bring about change in social structures.

Yet, representation has become an end in itself. Greater representation of the marginalised has been equated with realising social justice; descriptive representation of the thereby homogenised oppressed group has been elided with the substantive representation of the interests of its members.

Hijacked by the powerful

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, an American philosopher of Nigerian origin, draws attention in his book to the limits of this kind of politics. He is in favour of identity politics as conceived in the 1970s, based on shared experiences within certain groups but not limited to them and with a strong anti-

capitalist thread running through. But such emancipatory movements have been hijacked, he argues, by the powerful. He thus criticises deferential calls to 'listen to the most affected', for 'passing the mic' and 'stepping back', when this applies only to those who have made it into an elite arena – a party, an academic institution or the like – while ignoring the social developments that have left others excluded:

'[C]entering the most marginalised, in my experience, has usually meant handing conversational authority and attentional goods to whoever is already in the room and appears to fit a social category associated with some form of oppression — regardless of what they have or have not actually experienced, or what they do or do not actually know about the matter at hand. 'Táíwò emphasises what many black and other scholars describing oppression have noted: knowledge about power relations does not simply come to the oppressed. Disadvantaged and marginalised people do have a privileged position in noticing related injustices, and others should listen when they call them out. But pain, he stresses, 'is a poor teacher. Suffering is partial, shortsighted and self-absorbed … Oppression is not a prep school.'

Possession of an ascriptive identity does thus not automatically imply expertise or representativeness and may indeed mask power relations if the individual represents only the elite within a group.

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At the root is the postmodernist, relativist epistemology of 'standpoints', rather than one based on the recognition of an independent, objective world. Experience and perspective influence how we see that world, but they do not determine it. In this context, Nishin Nathwani spelt out the perils of substituting ideological critique with *ad hominem* attacks a decade ago:

'While initially intended to interrogate the discourse of dominant social groups to highlight how power can pollute the content of seemingly universalistic arguments, the new discussion on privilege has become a powerful tool to silence certain voices entirely. Rather than serving as an immanent critique of the ideological content of discourse, the rhetoric of privilege has become a means to divert attention away from the substance of arguments to their immediate origin. The pitfall of this seemingly promising theoretical framework lies in the fact that discussions of privilege can be too easily deployed to dismiss arguments of persons based on features of their personhood — claims that, in philosophy, are called *ad hominem* arguments.'

And he warned that 'the tendency toward ad hominem arguments [is] enshrined in all proto-totalitarian thinking'.

There is a connection between arguments and those who utter them, but it is not straightforward or preordained. It might be relevant information, another layer of analysis, but not the end of the story. Whatever an individual 'old white man' expresses might have blindspots, having not faced racism or patriarchal oppression in his life. But that does not mean that everything he says – including about patriarchy and racism – can be explained away by his presumed intent to maintain privilege.

The very term privilege has become so overused and criticised that it carries a connotation of suspicion. But in many situations, it is just a right that others should equally enjoy — not something which those who do should feel ashamed about or renounce. In our (still) patriarchal Western societies, for instance, men generally have the privilege – which women do not – to go out jogging in the dark without having to fear sexual assault. Yet, women would not gain anything if men also experienced the same fear and planned their exercise accordingly. What men can do, however, is to notice this problem, and advocate for safe and illuminated parks and against patriarchal violence.

Inclusive discourse

The German cultural sociologist Bernd Stegemann emphasises in his new book about identity politics that judging arguments solely by who puts them forward implies a claim to power. The proponents of this postmodernist left, he contends, question individuals' capacity to empathise with experiences they have not had and expect them to blindly follow the authority of those who see themselves as victims: 'The ability to empathise with others is rejected, and in its place is the demand that everyone submit to the experience of the victim.'

This disempowers and allows individuals to only listen in silence. While it is important to take experience seriously, including that of oppression, it hardly fits with an emancipatory project to deny others the opportunity to participate in the discussion about the shared reality and the politics to follow. This constant meta-debate, Stegemann argues, in which the right of others (with 'wrong' identities) to speak is routinely called into question, is a sign of how far the erosion of equality in this arena has gone.

The social scientist Aliaksei Kazharski wrote a remarkable article in July 2022 about the discourse around Russia's war in Ukraine and the widespread notion of 'westplaining' — mirroring 'mansplaining', the

way-too-common experience of women being subjected to male 'overconfidence and cluelessness' in 'situations when a man tries, in an authoritative manner, to explain to a woman something that she knows better than him anyway'. Similarly, Western scholars tend to lecture Eastern Europeans about the history or politics of the region, often without enough expertise.

We can reflect on our positionalities, as self-evaluation, rather than accepting a totalitarian command to public self-criticism and voluntary deference in line with presumed privilege.

Kazharski criticises the postmodernist relativisation of epistemology and is thus not denying Western scholars the right to participate in the expert discussion based on their personal background. Indeed, there are many Western scholars who are knowledgeable about the region. 'The point is not where you are from. Rather, it is whether you possess the necessary expertise and whether, before you decided to comment, you spent enough time following the region, learning the languages and gaining some intimate understanding of the countries involved.'

That could be a way forward without throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We can reflect on our positionalities, as self-evaluation, rather than accepting a totalitarian command to public self-criticism and voluntary deference in line with presumed privilege. We can listen to those who are more knowledgeable on a particular subject and take seriously the experiences of oppressed individuals without hoovering them up into homogeneous groups or reducing them to their oppression, and without thinking that such experience in itself leads necessarily to an uncriticisable social theory.

'Old white men' have produced remarkable things in intellectual history and politics and continue to do so. They have blindspots, as do we all, but that does not disqualify them from the politics of emancipation. So, let's go back to discussing whether an idea is emancipatory — rather than the positionality of its author.

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