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Sexual Politics

# Identity Politics Can Only Get Us So Far

- Debate -

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### Let's give identity politics its due, but let's also be clear about why we need universalist politics.

I first encountered the assertion that “all politics is identity politics” some time in the 1990s. The claim seemed tailor-made for that decade, when Judith Butler was portraying all identity as performance and politics as a slow, staid, and distinctly non-revolutionary adjustment of social norms.

This idea has persisted, no doubt because the wider political conjuncture that shaped it still remains in force. It reverberates in current debates about the 2016 election and in discussions about the relationship between post-1960s social movements and a renewed socialist left.

At first glance, the idea looks like a useful shorthand for how politics really works. For instance, in [Imagined Communities](#), Benedict Anderson showed how a certain kind of identity shaped the modern world. After Gutenberg, books, newspapers, schools, and other emergent institutions undermined ancient axioms, coaxed people to join different communities, and thus prepared the ground for the spread of nationalism and the rise of nation states.

Likewise, we might read Karl Marx as an identity-politics theorist. When his followers define class consciousness as the development of a class-in-itself into a class-for-itself, they effectively describe a process whereby members of a class become aware of themselves as a class and forge a collective identity.

However, categorizing Anderson and Marx as identity thinkers misrepresents their work. Anderson does not base his analysis on general assertions about the timeless mechanisms of identity formation. Rather, he takes converging political-economic factors — especially the rise of what he calls print capitalism — into meticulous account.

And, as [E. P. Thompson suggested](#), aligning class consciousness with identity abstracts class from the historical conditions and struggles of its production.

*Once this [approach] is assumed it becomes possible to deduce the class-consciousness which “it” [the working class] ought to have (but seldom does have) if “it” was properly aware of its own position and real interests. There is a cultural superstructure, through which this recognition dawns in inefficient ways. These cultural “lags” and distortions are a nuisance, so that it is easy to pass from this to some theory of substitution: the party, sect, or theorist, who disclose class-consciousness, not as it is, but as it ought to be.*

In fact, the claim that all politics is about identity is so general that observers can use it to give a flyover view of almost any political phenomenon. After all, every movement positions an “us” against a “them” and builds support by enlisting people to join a group and to *identify* with a cause.

That this assertion can apply to so many cases is not a strength. The paradigm rejects an analysis of the particular in order to feign expertise in the general, erases the historical specificities of given struggles and movements, and paints everything with the same brush.

## Weaponized Identities

A scrupulous review of what socialist and working-class movements have usually demanded — universal health care, free education, public housing, democratic control of the means of production — doesn't easily square with how identity politics are typically understood. In its strictest sense, identity politics describes how marginalized people embrace previously stigmatized identities, create communities on the basis of shared attributes and interests (which are typically held to be essential and unchanging), and rally either for autonomy or for rights and recognitions. I would take this argument a step further and say that even the new left social movements that gave birth to the term identity politics have not always fit this mold.

Consider the gay movement. In its late-1960s upsurge, gay politics had less to do with the pageantry of identity than with urgent demands to end violence and oppression. Activists first called for the cops to get out of our bars, the institutions to get off of our backs, and the shrinks to get out of our lives.

Identity comes up early, of course, usually in discussions of coming out. In this context, however, activists gave no hint of seeking what Nancy Fraser calls “recognition,” nor did they reify homosexuality as a person's unchanging essence.

Surveying his research on the early history of gay liberation, [Henry Abelove argues](#) that today, blinkered by post-Stonewall preconceptions, we fundamentally misunderstand the relationship early gay activists had to identity. “I find little to suggest,” he writes, “that [the early liberationists] saw coming out as the result of a truth-seeking journey deep into a supposed interior self. They thought of it rather as a release from a quite deliberately assumed reticence.” That is, they considered publicly identifying as gay as an “indispensable means” for building a political movement, a gentle and persistent weaponization of the individual in homosexuals' collective struggles.

Among other things, this means that the liberationists generally took a dialectical approach to sexual categories. From the start, they maintained that labels like heterosexual and homosexual would be cast aside after liberation.

Carl Wittman's influential broadside, “[A Gay Manifesto](#),” published in 1970 by the Red Butterfly brigade of the Gay Liberation Front, gives us useful insight into the early militants' thinking. Far from celebrating the gay ghetto, Wittman treats San Francisco as a “refugee camp.” Rejecting gay marriage as a political goal, he calls instead for alternatives to matrimony. And while stressing the political necessity of coming out, Wittman underscores the tentativeness of identity with glances at a liberated, bisexual future: “We'll be gay until everyone has forgotten that it's an issue.” Likewise, Dennis Altman's 1971 polemic, [Homosexual Oppression and Liberation](#), concludes with a chapter titled “The End of the Homosexual.”

Under the rubric of *liberation*, activists embraced identity in order to abolish it. Marxist ideas about class struggle — which similarly culminate with the abolition of social classes — influenced their ideas. They rallied around demands for adequate income, housing, medical care, ecological well-being, and meaningful employment. Their liberation struggle was ultimately a revolutionary call to action with a universalist view of freedom.

The turn to identity as the key political trope, as well as the whittling-back of demands to fit this narrower concept, came in the wake of the original political upsurge, as urban gay communities were growing, as gay was emerging as a niche market, and when the political discourse shifted from social to personal liberation. In this context, increasingly reified identities would step out of closets to claim their rights, each vying for recognition under increasingly elaborate acronyms. A complex history of separatisms, nationalisms, and intersectionalities follows.

## Universal Liberation

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All of the new left social movements trace similar trajectories. Over the course of the 1970s, the women's movement, the black movement, and the gay movement all retreated from their original, radical outlooks to take on essentially liberal worldviews. As political imaginaries contracted, each began to dwell more comfortably in the house of identity. This process dovetailed with post-Fordism's and neoliberalism's new forms of lifestyle consumerism. Periodic upsurges in radicalism occasionally interrupted this trend, but these outbreaks were quieted, domesticated, and reabsorbed back into the main movement.

Identity politics, from this perspective, is neither coterminous with politics nor the form invariably taken by new left social movements; rather, it describes the form that these movements took under changing circumstances.

This evolution has had important results. We owe the fact that the United States has become more tolerant and inclusive to identity politics' successes and to the liberal reforms they have won.

But this kind of political engagement has failed to address the types of social inequalities around which earlier liberationists centered their activism. And now, as class inequalities have dilated, establishment politicians ally with identity groups to shore up neoliberalism against any resistance to it.

Let's give identity politics its due but let's also be clear about its limitations. We can learn from the past, but not from potted histories that make terms like identity into abstractions. And we deceive ourselves if we think the path forward will involve the accumulation of minorities into a majority, the mere amalgamation of pre-constructed identities into a socialist movement.

The Left must now discover how to win over the publics currently being represented by identity brokers with an inclusive and universalist socialist program.

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Source [Jacobin](#).

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