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Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self

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No cover image available

url
https://doi.org/10.1093/0195137345.001.0001

publisher
Published: 2006 **Online ISBN:** 9780199785773 **Print ISBN:** 9780195137347

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CHAPTER

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1 The Pathologizing of Identity

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Content
url
https://doi.org/10.1093/0195137345.003.0001 Pages 11–19

publisher
Published: January 2006

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Abstract

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This chapter examines the idea that social identity itself is an a priori problem; that identities, under any description, pose dangers and commits one to mistaken assumptions when they are believed to be real and/or acted upon politically. It discusses identity politics and the theories of Arthur Schlesinger. Schlesinger's arguments demonstrate that the critique of identity politics often manifests ambivalence about the relevance of identity to politics. He does not really want to eradicate all identities, but to keep non-European identities from dominating American identity. Given this, one might think that what we need is simply a more consistent opposition to identities, pursued with equality across both the dominant and the subaltern. However, it is argued that such a plan is neither wholly possible nor necessary for social justice. The real danger is not the likelihood of balkanization resulting from identity politics, but the split that results from a wholesale critique of identity that then perceives minority agendas as a threat to progressive politics. It is this mistaken idea that is endangering the future of progressive alliances.

keywords
Keywords: identity politics, social identity, alliances, Arthur Schlesinger, American identity

Subject: Philosophy, Social and Political Philosophy

publisher
Collection: Oxford Scholarship Online

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The ethnic upsurge ... began as a gesture of protest against the Anglocentric culture. It became a cult, and today it threatens to become a counter-revolution against the original theory of America as "one people," a common culture, a single nation.

Arthur Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America*

There is too much group identification in our society and too little human identification.

Rudolf Giuliani, mayor of New York City, at a press conference on May 19, 2000, in answer to a question about whether his administration would change its attitude toward blacks and Hispanics in light of charges that it favored white racist police over their victims.

When Al Gore announced his choice of running mate in his ill-fated 2000 campaign for the presidency, the very first sentence aired on National Public Radio and CNN news was: "Al Gore has chosen a Jewish vice president." Before many of us knew Joseph Lieberman's name, we knew his ethnicity. And his identity was a topic of discussion for several weeks while news analysts and political pundits discussed whether his strongly felt Jewish identity would hinder his ability to lead a Gentile nation, and whether his Saturday Sabbath observance could be a liability for national security. Even within various Jewish communities there was criticism of Lieberman for emphasizing his Jewish identity too much: Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, was reported in the *New York Times* as saying that "hearing repeated professions of faith from a Jewish candidate" made him very uncomfortable. Fearing that his public profession of faith would incite anti-Semitism, the Anti-Defamation League advised Lieberman to "play it down."[1] In effect, Lieberman got it from both sides, not just in the sense of having both Jewish and Gentile critics, but in the sense that he was criticized for announcing his identity as if it *were* relevant, even while its *real* relevance was precisely what some were worried about. Lieberman's identity was taken as relevant to politics on the grounds, in part, that it might skew his political judgment; in light of this one could well interpret Lieberman's frequent reference to his Jewish identity as an attempt to put his own spin on the relationship between his heritage and his political office. In his view, being Jewish was relevant because it gave him insight ↳ into practices of exclusion and oppression and because it provided him a moral compass to temper and guide the necessities of pragmatic politics. Thus, in essence, Lieberman invoked his identity as a means of bringing universal considerations to the table.

As the Lieberman case might suggest, the critiques of identity politics that warn of separatism, particularism, and narrow group interest often exhibit a weird disconnection with the actual ways in which identities figure into political discourses and practices. There is often a significant disparity between the way in which identity is characterized by the critics of identity politics and the way in which identities are generally lived or experienced as well as how they actually figure in political movements.

There is also a strange contradiction between the amount of attention social identity is receiving today in academic inquiry—compared with the scant attention it received in previous eras, when it was all but ignored outside of anthropology and sociology departments—and the increasingly negative assessment identity is given in the academy. Identity is certainly enjoying a growth period in the academy, across the humanities and social sciences, reaching even into law and communication studies. There are sociological accounts of the work histories of various ethnic communities, political analyses of the voting patterns of racially defined groups, art and literature studies focused on the cultural production of marginalized groups, all meant to be correctives to previous practices of academic exclusion. It has been generally recognized that neither medical studies nor psychological studies nor virtually any other discipline of inquiry can claim universal application to all social identity groups when they are based in the experiences of, or experiments on, a single identity group. Thus, many theorists in diverse fields now understand that identity needs to be taken into account before one can claim reliable, general knowledge, whether it is a claim about nutrition, political participation, or poetics. And this has led to an increased study of identities themselves: alongside ethnic studies and women's studies, there are now whiteness studies and men's studies. Thus, it may seem as if identity is "in."

However, simultaneous to this focus and, one might say, commodification of identity, there is also an increasing tendency, especially in contemporary social theory, to view strongly felt identities as a political danger for democracy as well as a metaphysically erroneous view about the true or fundamental nature of the self. Some have even argued that the very belief in identity is a kind of social pathology. To an extent, this is an old idea, a remnant of universal and disembodied accounts of the self in modernism, and a continuation of longstanding suspicious and hostile attitudes toward nonwhite ethnic communities. But, as I shall shortly discuss, this suspicion of identity has received new formulations in recent work that takes into account the emergence of identity studies from the 1960s and thus provides a more sophisticated and

putatively plausible critique. The upshot is that, today, even while identity is receiving more theoretical focus than ever before, many theorists are troubled by the implications of the claim that identity makes a difference.

Our cultural anxiety about identity is revealed by the way in which identity is sometimes brought center stage inappropriately. The debate over racism in the United States, for example, has come to be formulated largely as a question about ↳ the appropriate or inappropriate relevance of identity. Debates over affirmative action have been reformulated as debates over the question "Is it ever legitimate to take into account identity categories of, say, race and gender in assessing job qualifications or district boundaries?" As a result, what could be a debate over alternative methods of reducing race discrimination, which would be a comparative analysis, is transformed into a decontextualized argument about the justifiability of taking identity into account under any circumstances. In this reformulation it is identity that takes center stage as the focus of political argumentation rather than race and sex discrimination, and the court is asked to rule on what is partly a metaphysical question about the salience of identity.

After I gave a talk recently on the issue of identity politics, an African American student came up to me and spoke passionately about Eurocentrism in the academy. Standing next to me was a white professor, who responded to the student with the sort of non sequitur that one finds extremely common today when discussions of race occur in mixed white/nonwhite groupings. The exchange went roughly as follows:

> *Student*: Eurocentrism is a huge problem in the university here, in the selection of required courses as well as the content of courses.
>
> *Professor*: My family was extremely poor, and I had a very difficult time even getting to college.

Obviously, the student's remarks had no connection whatsoever to the issue of the white professor's class background or the racial exclusivity of suffering. But the professor's response indicates that this is the way such charges of Eurocentrism are evidently heard, nonetheless, as if they imply that white identity is monolithically privileged in all respects.

Such responses are a constant problem besetting discussions of racism, inside and outside the academy. One tries to raise a reflective discussion concerning various forms of racism and cultural imperialism, and one is heard as assuming homogeneity, total culpability, and a whole variety of things about all people designated white. A parallel phenomenon still besets feminists routinely when a discussion of the oppression of women is heard as trashing all men or entailing a biologistic determinism about masculinity. Discussions about sexual violence and sexual harassment, in particular, at least in my experience, evoke charges of "male bashing" even when no causal analysis is even broached, much less developed and defended. In one lecture I gave to a religious group, my very reporting of the FBI statistics on rape was characterized as being anti-male. Such responses make us disinclined to speak about racism or sexism in any form unless we are in the mood for a fight. The statement made by Rudolph Giuliani that was quoted at the beginning of this chapter also indicates this strategy: in response to a question about the charges of racism made against his administration—charges based especially on his unconditional support for a police force that had gunned down unarmed black and Latino men—Giuliani deflects to humanism. But clearly, a concern with racism is not antithetical to humanism and should in fact be an integral part of any humanism.

p. 14 Despite these clear cases of strategic obfuscation, I want to acknowledge that the anxiety about identity has at times some legitimate motivations. That is, there ↳ have been unfair attributions and unrealistic ascriptions of homogeneity, to be sure, coming from within progressive social movements. The problems of enforced conformism within identity groups, and of what the left used to call narrow nationalism or narrow group politics, do exist and deserve critique. And essentialist constructions of cultural, ethnic, racial, and gendered identity are on the upswing, found on both left and right, not only among the less educated but

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among the highest academic elite, as in the work of Samuel Huntington, Peter Brimelow, Charles Murray, Allan Bloom, and many others. But my principal interest in this chapter and throughout this book is with the idea that social identity itself is an a priori problem, that identities, under *any* description, pose dangers and commit one to mistaken assumptions when they are believed to be real and/or acted upon politically. I want to differentiate this formulation of the problem of identity—as an a priori problem—from other kinds of formulations of the problem that express a concern *only* with overly homogenizing, essentialist, reductive, or simplistic constructions of identity. In my view, there are certainly serious difficulties with *some* constructions of identity, but I have been curious about the claim that identity itself, under any construction, is a problem and even a kind of mistake.

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Identity Politics

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If identity has become suspect, identity politics has been prosecuted, tried, and sentenced to death. Like "essentialism," identity politics has become the shibboleth of cultural studies and social theory, and denouncing it has become the litmus test of academic respectability and political acceptability. A partial list of the main liberal or progressive critics would include Todd Gitlin (1995), Eric Hobsbawm (1996), Nancy Fraser (1997), Betty Friedan (1996), Frances Fox Piven (1995), Paul Berman (1996), Arthur Schlesinger (1992), Richard Rorty (1998, 1999), Robert Hughes (1993), Jean Bethke Elshtain (1995), Wendy Brown (1995), and Jean-Luc Nancy (2000), but there are many others. In contrast, there has been a noticeable thaw regarding the concept of essentialism which has sustained such widespread feminist critique since the early 1980s. Christine Battersby, Elizabeth Grosz, and Teresa de Lauretis have pointed out that only the Aristotelian concept of essence has been used in the feminist debates—that is, the idea of a fixed and stable feature common to all members of a natural kind (Battersby 1998; Grosz 1995; de Lauretis 1990). On such an account, an essence is something "real" in a prelinguistic sense. But modern philosophers criticized Aristotle's concept precisely because it would seem to require us to know something that by definition we cannot know: the real as it exists hidden from perception and thus description (this is hardly, then, a contemporary critique). Hobbes and Locke then proposed a concept of nominal essences wherein "the essence of a thing is its verbal definition: it is no more than 'an accident for which we give a certain name to any body, or the accident which denominates its subject'" (Hobbes 1655, quoted in Battersby, 28). In this way, as Battersby argues, "a feminist advocacy of 'nominal essences' could deal comfortably with linguistic, historical, and cultural variations in the way that the female is defined" (Battersby, 29). Susan Babbitt has gone even further to defend a nondeterministic naturalist (and thus non-nominalist) account of essentialism as consistent ↳ with feminism's liberatory aims as well as with the heterogeneity of women's experiences (Babbitt 1996). She suggests that the problem for feminism is not the concept of essentialism but the deterministic account of gender, and neither essentialism nor naturalism commit us to a hard determinism about gender identity. On scrutiny it turns out, then, that the denunciations of essentialism were based on an inadequate exploration of the concept, its history, and its variable meanings. I believe it is time we reassess identity politics in the same light.

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One of the problems is that identity politics is almost nowhere defined—nor is its historical genesis elaborated—by its detractors. Identity politics *is blamed* for a host of political ills and theoretical mistakes, from overly homogenized conceptions of groups to radical separatism to the demise of the left. But what are its own claims? In what is undoubtedly its locus classicus, the Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" of 1977, identity politics emerges as a belief in the general relevance of identity to politics: "We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. ... This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression" (365). Such a claim does not assume that identities are always perfectly homogeneous or that identity groups are unproblematic. The very formation of the

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Combahee River Collective was motivated by the founders' concerns with the racism in the white-dominated wing of the women's movement, the sexism in the male-dominated wing of the black liberation movement, and heterosexism that was virulent everywhere. They knew that social identities are complex entities and that identity groups are always heterogeneous, but they argued that, in their experience of political work, identities *mattered*.

The Combahee River Collective argued that African American women needed to develop some organizational autonomy at that time in order to develop their analysis of the particular forms of subordination they faced as well as to articulate an effective agenda for change. Members of the collective did not see this call for autonomy as in any way rejecting the simultaneous need for coalition. They state, "We feel solidarity with progressive black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand" (Combahee River Collective, 365). They also declared themselves to be socialists who believed that overcoming oppression will require a movement of solidarity against capitalism and imperialism, but they argued that "although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that this analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as black women" (366). Thus, the collective was not supportive of a general separatism but simply insistent on the need for specific analyses.

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Nonetheless, for many theorists today, the belief articulated by the Combahee River Collective that identities are relevant to one's politics has had a devastating impact on progressive and democratic politics. Identity politics is often called "balkanization" and arguments are made that even the atrocities of ethnic cleansing we have witnessed elsewhere will become a reality in the West if we don't trounce ↳ this trend once and for all.[2] The eminent French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, for example, offers an amazing list of all the "places, groups, or authorities that constitute the theater of bloody conflicts among identities" (Nancy 2000, xii). His listing of identity-based conflicts run from the struggles for autonomy in Chiapas to the Islamic Jihad to the military conflict in Chechnya to "Chicanos" (without explanation), as if these struggles are essentially caused and motivated by clashing identities. In his analysis, it doesn't matter whether identities are religious, ethnic, cultural, mythical, historical, transnational, "independent or 'instrumentalized' by other groups who wield political, economic, and ideological power": he proposes to offer one analysis that can address the conflicts among the groups on this "endless list" (Nancy, xii–xiii).

My question is, How did the legitimate concern with specific instances of problems in identity-based movements become a generalized attack on identity and identity politics in any and every form?

Schlesinger's "America"

To begin to answer this question, we should surely look at one of the most powerful early salvos in the war on identity: the publication of Arthur Schlesinger's *The Disuniting of America* in 1991. In this short, readable book, Schlesinger paints a picture of a past "America" happily moving toward the melting-pot nation that Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur first described in the 1700s in his widely read *Letters from an American Farmer*. Crèvecoeur imagined a United States where individuals lost their old identities and formed a "new race of men." This was a good thing, not simply because a homogeneous nation would be a stronger nation, but because what these individuals left behind included "ancient prejudices and manners" or backward ways of life, in favor of a more advanced set of rules based on democratic ideals (Schlesinger 1991, 1). Schlesinger is well aware that nonwhite ethnicities were not initially included in this imagery of the new nation, but he argues that, by the 1800s, a new trend toward inclusiveness had emerged and was manifest in some of the most important representations of the "new race," such as the writings of Herman Melville and Ralph Waldo Emerson. There was also a nativist and racist countertrend, to be sure, such as the "American Party" of the 1850s, which opposed immigration and "political rights for the foreign-born" (9). But Schlesinger's principal narrative is one of constant, steady movement toward an inclusiveness in which ethnic differences would be left behind, and he neglects to consider the implications of the divergent treatment received by Northern European, Southern European, and non-European ethnic groups.

Schlesinger's main thesis is that the 1960s "cult of ethnicity" derailed this steady progress. He suggests that this cult had a precursor in the early 1900s, which was not a product of the grass roots but of intellectual elites who presumed a right of cultural and political leadership as "ethnic spokesmen" (34). These intellectual ethnic spokesmen were actually alienated from the groups for which they spoke but were "moved by real concern for distinctive ethnic values and also by real if unconscious vested interest in the preservation of ethnic constituencies" (34). Thus, their opposition to assimilation was neither an expression of the spontaneous ↳ will of the masses nor was it wholly motivated by their own selfless concern with principles of fairness. This is a charge that he continues to maintain against the political leadership of minority communities today.

Schlesinger considers Congress's passage in 1974 of the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program Act to be a key moment in the culmination of the identity problem. This act applied "ethnic ideology to all Americans" and thus "compromised the historic right of Americans to decide their ethnic identities for themselves," ignoring those millions who refused ethnic identification of any sort (he claims this latter group must surely represent the majority of Americans, but he does not consider whether there is a difference between white and nonwhite Americans in this regard) (17). Here, then, is the picture Schlesinger paints: authoritarian elites ramming ethnicity down the throats of gullible citizens for their own narrow purposes. And here is the effect:

> The ethnicity rage in general ... not only divert[s] attention from the real needs but exacerbate[s] the problems. The recent apotheosis of ethnicity, black, brown, red, yellow, white, has revived the dismal prospect that in happy melting-pot days Americans thought the republic was moving safely beyond—that is, a society fragmented into separate ethnic communities. The cult of ethnicity exaggerates differences, intensifies resentments and antagonisms, drives ever deeper the awful wedges between races and nationalities. The endgame is self-pity and self-ghettoization. (102)

Schlesinger believes that whites in the United States have shed their European legacy, that they have given up their European identities out of rational and progressive motivations, but that nonwhites are now refusing to follow suit. However, we also find him arguing against the multicultural agenda on the basis of what he calls the "facts of history": that "Europe was the birthplace of the United States of America ... [and] that the United States is an extension of European civilization" (122). Like Huntington, Schlesinger gives the

values of democracy and inclusiveness a European cultural identity, and on these grounds criticizes multiculturalism. Although he supports some of the multiculturalist proposals for a more inclusive history—for example, teaching children to imagine how it was to be on both sides of the Conquest—Schlesinger argues that the "crucial difference" between the Western tradition and other traditions is that the West produced antidotes to its problems. Every culture "has done terrible things," he claims, but "whatever the particular crimes of Europe, that continent is also the source—the *unique* source—of those liberating ideas ... to which most of the world today aspires. These are *European* ideas, not Asian, nor African, nor Middle Eastern ideas, except by adoption" (127, emphasis in original). So much for the transcendence of old ethnic identities.

Schlesinger, like Huntington, Pat Buchanan, Peter Brimelow, and other opponents of multiculturalism, falls into the contradiction of arguing that we should oppose the "cult of ethnicity" because, on the one hand, "America" is a melting pot where originary cultures are dissolved in favor of a new unity, but on the other hand, because it is the specifically European customs and values that have made this nation great and must remain dominant. Thus, his argument is baldly in favor of maintaining European American cultural hegemony. As Huntington points out (2004), this does not require maintaining the numerical or political dominance of European American people, but whoever becomes numerically dominant must accept and promote European cultural values and practices.

The remainder of *Disuniting America* "documents" the curricular battles fought out in U.S. educational institutions in the wake of the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program Act. Schlesinger quotes anti-bilingualism Latinos such as Richard Rodriguez and cites anecdotes reported by neoconservative Dinesh DeSouza (whose nickname in the days when he edited the infamously conservative *Dartmouth Review* was "Distort DeNewsa"). Schlesinger then takes the most extreme forms of Afrocentrism as propounded by Leonard Jeffries and contrasts these with the more moderate political views of Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois, neither of whom saw the need for school curricula that would teach black children about Africa (Cf. Eze 2001, chap. 4). Clearly, Schlesinger is not representing the pro-multicultural arguments in their strongest light or in their diversity. He contrasts reasonable-sounding, rational-minded critics who charge multiculturalists with monolithic portrayals of Europe with discredited ideologues who propound ahistorical deterministic theories of human difference, as if these represent our exclusive options. He quotes liberally from conservative people of color who attack multiculturalism. And he presents dire predictions of the effect of "the cult of ethnicity" run amok: balkanization and tribalism. This is a polemic, not a serious argument. Hence one should be curious about why Schlesinger's book became a bestseller and why the views he propounds seeped so quickly into the discourse of the mainstream public sphere.

Schlesinger is no Republican; he is one of this country's most well-known and well-respected liberals. But this is a liberal attack on multiculturalism.[3] This work and others like it have contributed centrally to the formation of the near consensus that identity is a problem. In the next chapter I will offer a rational reconstruction of the principal arguments against identity, endeavoring to put them in their best light by referring to some of their strongest and smartest adherents.

Schlesinger's arguments usefully demonstrate that the critique of identity politics often manifests ambivalence about the relevance of identity to politics. He does not really want to eradicate all identities, but to keep non-European identities from dominating American identity. Given this, one might think that what we need is simply a more consistent opposition to identities, pursued with equality across both the dominant and the subaltern. I will argue that such a plan is neither wholly possible nor necessary for social justice. In my view, the real danger is not the likelihood of balkanization resulting from identity politics but the split that results from a wholesale critique of identity that then perceives minority agendas as a threat to progressive politics. It is this mistaken idea that is endangering the future of progressive alliances. After all, the political movements based on identity politics have themselves been organized precisely against our own homegrown versions of ethnic cleansing, in the form of the histories of racist terror and

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disenfranchisement, differential police treatment and arbitrary immigration policies, and the ongoing, widespread, and severe political and economic disempowerment of many minority communities. The real challenge that identity politics must address in my view is ↳ the need to articulate its precise relation to class, a topic I address in chapter 2, and the need for a decolonized version of humanism that can ensure universal rights while conceptualizing justice across cultural difference, a topic I will address in the conclusion.

In the following two chapters, I divide the critiques of identity into two groupings, one primarily political, the other primarily philosophical. After assessing each of these critiques, in chapter 4 I develop a hermeneutically based account of identity and identity formation that I argue has greater plausibility and explanatory value in light of the actual ethnographic data of social movements. This different account is also less vulnerable to the charges made by the critics of identity and yet also demonstrates the critical relevance of identity to political mobilization, movements, and understanding.

My analysis and counterarguments are not put forward as exhaustive or fully adequate, given the complexity of this topic and enormity of the discussions that have taken place. But I do believe I can disable the most important lines of critique and convince the reader that there are serious grounds for doubting the widespread trend toward viewing identity in any form as a political problem and metaphysical mistake. Overall, then, my project is to critique and diagnose the fear of identity and to develop a more plausible understanding of what identities are. Only when we understand identities more accurately can we see where our true challenges lie.

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1. Clyde Haberman, “NYC: Whose God Is It, Anyway?” New York Times, Sept. 6, 2000.

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2. The “scare tactic” of invoking balkanization has been used to effectively silence any discussion of secessionist claims no matter how morally justifiable a given case may be. For a cool-headed look at the conditions under which arguments for secession and separation may be morally justifiable, see Jorge Valadez 2001.

footnote

3. Compare Nussbaum 1997 for a liberal defense of multiculturalism.