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The Promises and Perils of Identity Politics

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Abstract

Identity politics is primarily an outgrowth of the black nationalist, Black Power, and women's liberation movements and has since come to dominate the public square. It combines a focus on race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other identitarian categories with a politics of victimization. The cornerstone of the identitarian worldview is the claim that America, contrary to its egalitarian professions of faith, is at its core a supremacist regime that oppresses certain groups. Ultimately, identity politics should be rejected not because it demands justice for those who have been unjustly treated, but because it poses a threat to republican self-government by corroding patriotic ties, fostering hatred, promoting cultural separatism, and demanding special treatment rather than equality under the law.

In the beginning, only straight white men were free. And the earth was without social justice; and whiteness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of bigotry reigned. But then MLK said: Let there be equality. And so did Betty Friedan, César Chavez, and Harvey Milk. And there was equality—at least more than before.

So goes the conventional story of identity politics. So is history retold in almost every textbook, museum, and movie today. So we are all taught to look at the world through the lens of race, sex, sexual orientation, and now gender identity. And so we all learn to distinguish the victimized groups who should be honored from the oppressor groups who must perpetually atone for the sins of their forefathers.

There are still, of course, other ways of looking at reality in America today, but none so thoroughly dominates the public square as identity politics. While it has not fully conquered the public's mind, it does reign almost unchallenged among the elites. Politicians, professors, producers, pundits, *Fortune* 500 CEOs, tech gurus, journalists, and the coterie of other famous, credentialed, and successful people who comprise our ruling class all worship at the altar of diversity. Some do so out of sincere conviction, others simply to curry favor with their peers. Whatever the motive, in this Platonic cave, all puppeteers carry statues of oppressed identity groups.

Even though it permeates our public life, identity politics remains a somewhat nebulous and contentious concept.[1] As the editors of *The Nation* recently asked, "[W]hat the hell does that term even mean?"[2] Indeed, there is no agreed-upon definition of what actually constitutes identity politics, how it should be thought of, and whether it is in fact any different from other types of democratic politics. To further complicate matters, most identitarians—defined

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simply as those who subscribe to identity politics—do not even use the term "identity politics" to describe themselves.[3] Some even object to the term, preferring instead to speak of the politics of difference or the politics of recognition. There is also no agreed-upon canon of core identitarian works and "no author or text to turn to for a systematic formulation of the tenets of identity politics."[4] As a result, the term gets tossed around in any number of ways by academics, journalists, and politicians alike.

Many claim that identity politics is just a pejorative way to describe a fundamental feature of all politics. "If by identity politics we mean the idea that politicians should consider—'cater to' is the usual phrase—identifiable (or self-identified) groups, well, it is hard to identify a time when that hasn't happened," Adam Gopnik writes in *The New Yorker*. "Identity politics seem simply to be interest-group politics pursued by groups with whom you happen not to identify."[5] In this view, what the Jews, the Italians, the Irish, and the Poles did a century ago, women and minorities are now doing. Some scholars go further back in time and see identity politics at play throughout Western history in the various "political struggles between religious groups (e.g. between Catholics and Protestants in Belgium), between linguistic groups (e.g. between Flemish and French in Belgium), between racial groups (e.g. between whites and blacks in the United States), and between European settlers and indigenous peoples (e.g. between British colonizers and Aboriginal peoples in Canada)."[6]

These accounts are not convincing insofar as they only do justice to one of the two salient features of identity politics: namely, its focus on identity groups (rather than classes as in traditional progressive politics). But identity politics is not just an Americanized version of tribalism. Straightforward political tribalism does not celebrate victimization.[7] Nor does it deny purported victimizers the right to have their own tribe.

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Yet under the reign of identity politics, "it is strategically advantageous to be recognized as disadvantaged and victimized," James Jacobs and Kimberly Potter remark. "The greater a group's victimization, the stronger its moral claim on the larger society."[8] To which one must add: The greater a group's privilege and power, the weaker its moral claim and the greater ought to be its self-loathing. In the world of identity politics, it turns out that not all identities are created equal: Certain identities—like white or male—are forced to bear the nation's sins.[9]

Identity politics thus combines a focus on race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and any other number of identitarian categories with a politics of victimization. It is a uniquely Western phenomenon

1. Cf. Paul Lichterman, who calls identity politics "a slippery term." Paul Lichterman, "Talking Identity in the Public Sphere: Broad Visions and Small Spaces in Identity Politics," *Theory and Society*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1999), p. 136.
2. "What Is the Left Without Identity Politics?" *The Nation*, December 16, 2016, https://www.thenation.com/article/what-is-the-left-without-identity-politics.
3. Some use the term "identitarian" to refer to white nationalist movements in America and Europe. In this essay, I use the term simply to denote those who espouse the core tenets of identity politics.
4. Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 80.
5. Adam Gopnik, "The Democrats and the Seesaw of Identity Politics," *The New Yorker*, December 2, 2016, available online at https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-democrats-and-the-seesaw-of-identity-politics.
6. Avigail Eisenberg and Will Kymlicka, "Bringing Institutions Back In: How Public Institutions Assess Identity," in *Identity Politics in the Public Realm: Bringing Institutions Back In*, ed. Avigail Eisenberg and Will Kymlicka (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), p. 1.
7. Quoted in "How Trump's Election Shook Obama: 'What If We Were Wrong?'" *The New York Times*, May 30, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/30/us/politics/obama-reaction-trump-election-benjamin-rhodes.html.
8. James B. Jacobs and Kimberly Potter, *Hate Crimes: Criminal Law and Identity Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 5.
9. For the same reason, identity politics should not be confused with multiculturalism, a term which implies that all cultures are created equal—a claim that identity politics rejects.

and a relatively new one at that, finding its roots in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Given the towering presence of identity politics in contemporary America, it is imperative to understand it more clearly by retracing its origins and correctly situating it within the broader tradition of American political thought.

In particular, there is an urgent need to demarcate the boundaries of identity politics so as to distinguish it from just attempts by women and minorities to petition their government for a redress of legitimate grievances. The main reason identity politics exerts such powerful pull in America is because it claims to speak—exclusively, one should note—on behalf of those who have been mistreated (to varying degrees) in the past. It appeals to our sense of justice. It suggests that we can either embrace identitarianism or remain callously indifferent to the well-being of fellow citizens of a different race, sex, or sexual orientation.

That, in truth, is a false choice. One can sympathize and feel solidarity with African Americans, women, and any other minorities who are pressing just claims without embracing the poisonous ideology of identity politics. Identity politics should be rejected not because it demands justice for those who have been unjustly treated, but because it poses a threat to republican self-government by corroding patriotic ties, fostering hatred, promoting cultural separatism, and demanding special treatment rather than equality under the law.

The Combahee River Collective Statement

Given the lack of agreement on the nature of identity politics, it is necessary to begin at the beginning and examine the first known use of the term. The formulation "identity politics" first appears in the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement (CRCS). The statement was issued by the Combahee River Collective, a black lesbian feminist organization founded in 1974 as the Boston chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization.[10] The CRCS not only uses the term, but espouses it. And its understanding of identity politics still shapes the broad contours of identitarian thinking to this day.[11]

Contrary to what the term would seem to indicate, identity politics is first and foremost a politics not of identity, but of oppression. This is readily apparent in the CRCS's only use of the term—"This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics"—as well as in the opening paragraph:

> The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class *oppression*, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of *oppression* are interlocking. The synthesis of these *oppressions* creates the conditions of our lives.[12]

Identity politics thus grows out of the realization that society is comprised of multiple interconnected systems of oppression which decisively shape—and perhaps even determine—the lives of the oppressed. In this retelling, "the American political system (a system of white male rule)" is characterized by the "pervasiveness" of "racial-sexual oppression" and of class oppression.[13]

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Given the depth and breadth of oppression, one would think that the repressive nature of America would be readily apparent to all the women, racial minorities, and workers who suffer under its yoke.

10. The group chose its name in honor of the Combahee River Raid during the Civil War, in which Union soldiers, accompanied by Harriet Tubman, freed some 700 slaves during a nighttime raid on June 1–2, 1863. The statement was drafted by Combahee River Collective members Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier, and Beverly Smith.

11. Identity politics, as we will see, ultimately predates the CRCS by more than a decade, but since none of its early practitioners use the term, it is necessary to begin by studying the CRCS to know what to look for in earlier expressions of identity politics.

12. "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 264 (emphasis added). Hereafter cited as CRCS.

13. CRCS, pp. 264–265.

Paradoxically, it is not. The pervasiveness of oppression somehow stands as a formidable impediment to understanding the systemic nature of oppression in America. Without identity politics, oppression is merely felt but not understood. Before their embrace of identity politics, the members of the Combahee River Collective "had no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we knew was really happening."[14]

Only once they began to see the world through the lens of sexual, racial, and class oppression did they come to understand properly the full extent and nature of their own oppression. And only after having done so did they finally turn their attention to awakening women, lesbians, black people, and others from their oppressive slumber. Understanding oppression gave way to "sharing and growing consciousness" among the oppressed.[15]

In this account, identity only emerges after gaining awareness of the interlocking systems of oppression. Identity is thus forged in the crucible of oppression. Its basis is found neither in culture nor in blood.[16] This focus on oppression explains why the CRCS says nothing about what it means to identify as a black, lesbian woman. Identity is asserted but never described in positive terms. It grows out of oppression, is defined by oppression, and is reinforced by the "continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation."[17] The CRCS contains 28 references to oppression but only five to identity.

The Marxist echoes running through this analysis are unmistakable, whether it be the promise of liberation from oppression or the confrontation with the problem of false consciousness. The members of the Combahee River Collective, in fact, identify as "socialists" who "realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism."[18]

They see the need, however, to go beyond Marx. Marx promised liberation from oppression but, it turns out, only partially understood the nature of oppression. As the CRCS explains:

> We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation.... Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.[19]

In this retelling, black women become the equivalent of the proletariat, whose liberation will usher in an age of freedom for all mankind. "If Black women were free," the CRCS explains, "it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."[20] The ultimate goal is thus "to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression."[21]

In the CRCS, one sees the broad contours of what we today still call identity politics: politics as a struggle for the liberation of various oppressed identity groups from a common oppressor group—generally, white heterosexual males who occupy the commanding heights of American society and whose oppressive rule is foundational to the American regime. This struggle requires the identity groups to study the manifold ways in which they are oppressed and to struggle, in concert with other oppressed identity groups, to end their oppression through a revolutionary transformation of the existing American order. Oppression of women and minorities, in this view, does not mark a departure from American republican ideals. Rather, it reveals the repressive nature of the regime.

One also sees in the CRCS the origins of what would later be called "intersectionality," the

14. Ibid., p. 266.
15. Ibid.
16. Indeed, the Combahee River Collective rejects "any type of biological determinism" as "a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic." Ibid., p. 269.
17. Ibid., p. 265.
18. Ibid., pp. 267–268.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p. 270.
21. Ibid., p. 266.

recognition that people can be oppressed along multiple axes at the same time.[22] Identities overlap and cannot be readily disentangled. As the members of the Combahee River Collective explain, we "find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously."[23]

The cornerstone of the identitarian worldview is the claim that America, contrary to its egalitarian professions of faith, is at its core a supremacist regime that oppresses certain groups.

The CRCS also indirectly reveals that the origins of identity politics are not to be found in early Progressivism or mid-century liberalism, but instead in radical second-wave feminism—the women's liberation movement—and in the Black Power and black nationalist movements. The members of the Combahee River Collective assert their identities as women oppressed by men on the one hand and as black people oppressed by whites on the other.[24]

The original statement on identity politics is not, of course, the definitive statement on identity politics. In the tumultuous years preceding the Combahee River Collective Statement, other activists and advocacy groups formulated identitarian critiques of America. Though they do not use the term "identity politics" and disagree with one another in certain crucial regards, they all significantly overlap with the CRCS and unfold within a shared horizon. Together, they give us a clearer picture of the identitarian worldview.

The Identitarian Worldview

The cornerstone of the identitarian worldview is the claim that America, contrary to its egalitarian professions of faith, is at its core a supremacist regime that oppresses certain groups. The oppressed groups vary according to the different identitarian movements—black people, women, Chicanos, Asians, or homosexuals—although most recognize the oppression of other groups and proclaim solidarity with them. The various identitarian movements denounce America in different terms—America is a white supremacist country for the race-based identity movements and a patriarchy for the sex-based movements—although here too, most look beyond their own oppression and see in America a sham democracy in which real power lies with white, straight men. This struggle between the oppressors and those whom they oppress on the basis of their identity is the most fundamental dimension of reality.

In this sense, Malcolm X represents the beginnings of identity politics in America.[25] In his fiery speeches and interviews, the world is divided between the evil whites and their nonwhite victims. Malcolm X denounces white people—who "are born devils by nature"—for "having oppressed and exploited and enslaved our people here in America." "Any white man," he insists, "is against blacks." By contrast, he

22. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Vol. 1989, Issue 1, Article 8 (1989), pp. 139–168.

23. CRCS, p. 267.

24. Oddly enough, although they are lesbians, they do not explicitly claim to be oppressed by heterosexuals. Their focus is only on developing a politics that is "anti-racist" and "anti-sexist."

25. Prior to his conversion to Sunni Islam in 1964, Malcolm's X worldview was that of the Nation of Islam, a black nationalist movement whose origins can be traced to the Moorish Science Temple of America, founded by Noble Drew Ali in 1913. Earlier leaders of the movement, like Ali, Wallace Fard Muhammad, and Elijah Muhammad, lacked Malcolm X's rhetorical brilliance and never developed a national profile. The ideas of the Nation of Islam only gained national prominence via Malcolm X. The connection between the Nation of Islam and Marcus Garvey should be noted too. "Drew Ali had written and published his Koran, a slim pamphlet consisting of a curious mixture of the Mohammedan holy book of the same name, the Christian Bible, the words of Marcus Garvey, and anecdotes of the life of Jesus—the whole bound together with the prophet's [i.e., Ali's] own pronouncements and interpretations. Garvey was eulogized at every meeting as the John the Baptist of the Movement." Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, *They Seek a City* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1945), p. 175. In the final chapter of this Koran, Ali writes: "In these modern days there came a forerunner of Jesus, who was divinely prepared by the great God-Allah and his name is Marcus Garvey, who did teach and warn the nations of the earth to prepare to meet the coming Prophet; who was to bring the true and divine Creed of Islam, and his name is Noble Drew Ali who was prepared and sent to this earth by Allah, to teach the old time religion and the everlasting gospel to the sons of men." Noble Drew Ali, *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple*, in *The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States*, ed. Edward E. Curtis IV (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 63.

sees a natural affinity and solidarity between all nonwhites: "[T]he red, the brown and the yellow are indeed all part of the black nation. Which means that black, brown, red, yellow, all are brothers, all are one family. The white one is a stranger. He's the odd fellow."[26] This division is evident in America, a country which exists to keep nonwhites down: "That's what America means: prison."[27]

With the exception of the literal demonization of the oppressor group, one finds equally Manichean analyses in the more radical second-wave feminists and in the early movements for Black Power, Chicano Power, Yellow Power, and gay liberation.

Radical feminists like Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone see society as a patriarchal system in which men subjugate women (and children).[28] Advocates of Black Power condemn "the white power structure" for imposing "institutional racism on the black masses."[29] The Chicanos denounce their oppression in "the white man's world" at the hands of "gringos," "foreign Europeans," and "the Anglo."[30] For the Asians, it is "white America" that "subordinates them on the basis of non-whiteness."[31] And in his seminal "Gay Manifesto," Carl Wittman condemns "Amerika" as an exploitative and repressive society in which "Straight (also white, English, male, capitalist) thinking" is imposed on homosexuals, women, and racial minorities.[32] He calls for "a coalition with other oppressed groups" because "Chick equals nigger equals queer."[33]

The oppression of these groups takes many forms, from "the unjustifiable internment of 110,000 Japanese into detention camps"[34] to the subjection to "a barrage of straight propaganda,"[35] but one in particular is common to all groups: false consciousness. Some of the oppressed have internalized their oppression to such an extent that they actually defend the existing system and are wary of revolutionary change—if not outright hostile to it. Wittman calls this "self-oppression":

> As gay liberation grows, we will find our uptight brothers and sisters, particularly those who are making a buck off our ghetto, coming on strong to defend the status quo. This is self-oppression: "don't rock the boat"; "things in SF are OK"; "gay people just aren't together"; "I'm not oppressed." These lines are right out of the mouths of the straight establishment. A large part of our

26. Malcolm X, "The Playboy Interview," *Playboy Magazine*, May 1963, http://www.malcolm-x.org/docs/int_playb.htm. Cf. Malcolm X, "God's Judgment of White America," in *The End of White World Supremacy: Four Speeches by Malcolm X* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1989), p. 137: "the struggle of nonwhites of this earth against their white oppressors." After his conversion to Sunni Islam, Malcolm X, now Malik Shabazz, stopped referring to white people as devils.

27. Malcolm X, "Message to the Grassroots," in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1990), p. 8.

28. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969), and Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow, 1970). Cf. Robin Morgan, "Redstockings Manifesto," in *"Takin' It to the Streets": A Sixties Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 412–414, and Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman," in *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, ed. Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 396–399. The earlier second-wave feminism of Betty Friedan, by comparison, is more moderate. The word "patriarchy," for example, does not appear once in *The Feminine Mystique*.

29. Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 10 and p. 51. Cf. SNCC Chairman John Lewis, who declared that black people across the world were united in "a struggle against a vicious and evil system that is controlled and kept in order for and by a few white men throughout the world." Quoted in Allen J. Matusow, *The Unravelling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 352.

30. Armando Rendon, *Chicano Manifesto: The History and Aspiration of the Second Largest Minority in America* (New York: Collier Books, 1971), p. 322 and p. 320, and "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," in *"Takin' It to the Streets,"* p. 139 and p. 140.

31. Amy Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," *Gidra*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (October 1969), p. 8, https://ddr.densho.org/media/ddr-densho-297/ddr-densho-297-7-mezzanine-935a019453.pdf.

32. Carl Wittman, "Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto," in *We Are Everywhere*, p. 382.

33. Ibid., p. 387 and p. 382. Cf. Millett's call at the end of *Sexual Politics* for "a coalition of expropriated groups—blacks, youth, women, the poor"—to effect a change in fundamental values across society. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 507. For a contemporary expression of the sentiment, see Paul Von Blum, "In Defense of Identity Politics," *Tikkun*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Fall 2013), p. 27: "The great promise of identity politics is its ability to raise powerful consciousness among oppressed groups of people and also build bridges among those groups."

34. Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," p. 8.

35. Wittman, "Refugees from Amerika," p. 384.

> oppression would end if we would stop putting ourselves and our pride down.[36]

In its more mild form, false consciousness is present among those who have successfully assimilated. For America, it turns out, oppresses different groups differently: While it persecutes homosexuals, segregates blacks, and subjugates women, it offers Asians and Chicanos the opportunity to assimilate. Assimilation, however, comes at the price of their authentic identity. In his *Chicano Manifesto*, Armando Rendon retells the story of his assimilation into "the white man's world" and the eventual rediscovery and revival of his "Chicano soul":

> I owe my life to my Chicano people. They rescued me from the Anglo kiss of death, the monolingual, monocultural, and colorless gringo society. I no longer face a dilemma of identity or direction. That identity and direction have been charted for me by the Chicano—but to think I came that close to being sucked into the vacuum of the dominant society.[37]

Given the power and lure of "Amerika," as well as the pervasiveness of false consciousness among women and minorities, there is an urgent need to awaken the consciousness of the oppressed. The "vital first step," Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton argue in *Black Power*, is the forging of "a new consciousness."[38] The struggle for liberation must begin by liberating the mind of the oppressed.

Oppression and the Basis of Identity

Across all identitarian movements, identity is to a considerable extent shaped and defined by the consciousness of oppression.[39] "We unite around our oppression," the transvestite and transsexual liberationists proclaim, "as all oppressed groups unite around their particular oppression."[40] Only those who understand all that America has done and continues to do to their people and to other marginalized people can claim to be in touch with their authentic identity. Although this is rarely made explicit by the authors here examined, the assuming of one's identity will inevitably be bound up with a sense of victimhood and with a growing alienation from America, as the spread of identitarian thinking in the ensuing decades has made undeniably clear.[41]

The primacy of oppression in defining identity accounts for what is surely the least compelling aspect of contemporary identity politics: namely, the artificial nature of its constructed identities. Identitarian identities generally do not align with the actual identities of those on whose behalf they claim to speak. For example, both black Americans who are descended from slaves and Africans who have immigrated to America are viewed and labelled as African

36. Ibid. Cf. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 75; Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman," in *We Are Everywhere*, p. 398.

37. Rendon, *Chicano Manifesto*, pp. 324–325. Cf. Uyematsu, who claims that "Asian Americans suffer the critical mental crises of having 'integrated' into American society." Integration, however, comes at the price of their authentic identity: Asians are "giving up their own languages, customs, histories and cultural values." And still, they never fully integrate as racial prejudice "restricts them to the margins of the white world." They thus face "a serious identity problem." Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," p. 8.

38. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 40. Cf. Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," p. 8: "Yellow consciousness is the immediate goal of concerned Asian Americans"; Radicalesbians urge "the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other which is at the heart of women's liberation." Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman," in *We Are Everywhere*, p. 399.

39. Gary Lehring, "Identity Politics," in *Encyclopedia of Government and Politics*, 2nd ed., ed. Mary Hawkesworth and Maurice Kogan (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 576: "Identity politics historically stems from the recognition that one's deepest sense of personal identity is shaped by one's membership in groups that have been oppressed on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation."

40. "Trans Lib," in *Documenting Intimate Matters: Primary Sources for a History of Sexuality in America*, ed. Thomas A. Foster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 173. Cf. Malcolm X, "Message to the Grassroots" in *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 5: "[O]nce we all realize that we have this common enemy, then we unite on the basis of what we have in common. And what we have foremost in common is that enemy—the white man. He's an enemy to all of us. I know some of you all think that some of them aren't enemies. Time will tell." For a contemporary expression of the view, see Von Blum, "In Defense of Identity Politics," p. 25: "African Americans, Latinos, women, gays, and other oppressed groups… Each of the various oppressed identity groups."

41. For an early expression of the sentiment, see Uyematsu, who opens her essay on "The Emergence of Yellow Power" by declaring that Asian Americans "are also victims…of the white institutionalized racism." Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," p. 8. She later describes the mood of adherents to Yellow Power: "disillusionment and alienation from white America, race pride and self-respect." Ibid., citing the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*.

Americans by identitarians. Given the purported systemic nature of white racism, both presumably experience the same oppression and should be expected to unite around that shared experience. And yet the two groups of African Americans have very little in common—to say nothing of the great diversity within each group, in particular the African immigrants. "Sharing the common physical characteristics of skin color has not ensured cultural and economic unity between African immigrants and American born blacks," John Arthur concludes in his study of the African diaspora in America.[42] One study found that only "10 percent of African immigrants and 20 percent of African Americans said they have similar cultures."[43]

The primacy of oppression in defining identity accounts for what is surely the least compelling aspect of contemporary identity politics: the artificial nature of its constructed identities.

The two groups not only have different identities; they do not appear even to get along all that well. "Black immigrants, see black Americans as lazy, disorganized, and obsessed with racial images, and having a laissez-faire attitude toward family life and child raising," Arthur writes. "On their part, native-born American blacks view black immigrants as arrogant and oblivious to the racial tensions between blacks and whites."[44] There is evidence that black Americans resent African immigrants and their children for taking advantage of affirmative action programs designed for them.[45] The two groups also do not intermarry at high rates.[46]

A similar analysis could be applied to other identitarian identities, from LGBT to Asian American. It is rather telling that the only people who would label both a Filipino American and a Chinese American "Asian" are identitarian ideologues and actual racists. Identitarians, in effect, look at the world through the eyes of a white racist (or misogynist or homophobe).[47] Their justification for doing so is of course different, but the end result is the same: People are defined by their looks (or by their sexual preference)—not by their religious faith, beliefs, accomplishments, interests, or cultural traditions. The only glue that binds together the vast, diverse, and at times amorphous identitarian identities is what they are not, rather than what they actually are. All Asians are not white, in the same way that all lesbians, gays, and bisexuals are not heterosexual.

Given the long shadow cast on identitarian thinking by oppression, identity primarily comes to be defined in opposition to the dominant oppressor culture. To be Chicano is to reject the norms and values of the gringo in the same way that to be authentically black is to turn one's back on white society or that to be a liberated homosexual is to "*Stop mimicking straights*."[48] All identitarians therefore reject assimilation and integration. Given what they claim is the fundamentally oppressive nature of American society, they could hardly do otherwise: Only those whose minds have been corrupted by the oppressive American regime would want to belong to it. Malcolm X likens integrationists to Frankenstein: "They are a black body with a white brain."[49]

This wholesale rejection of American society accounts for the utopian streak in early identitarian movements, in particular the widespread embrace of socialism. Capitalism is associated with the white man's oppression and must therefore give way to a world in which cooperation has replaced competition. Chicanos will "defeat the gringo dollar value system

42. John A. Arthur, *Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), pp. 77–78.
43. Foday Darboe, "Africans and African Americans: Conflicts, Stereotypes and Grudges," *PSU McNair Scholars Online Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2006), p. 15.
44. Arthur, *Invisible Sojourners*, p. 78. See also Darboe, "Africans and African Americans."
45. Darryl Fears, "In Diversity Push, Top Universities Enrolling More Black Immigrants," *The Washington Post*, March 6, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/05/AR2007030501296.html.
46. Daniel T. Lichter, Zhenchao Qian, and Dmitry Tumin, "Whom Do Immigrants Marry? Emerging Patterns of Intermarriage and Integration in the United States," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 662, Issue 1 (2015), p. 68.
47. Consider the following observation by Wendy Brown in *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 53: "Just when polite liberal (not to mention correct leftist) discourse ceased speaking of us as dykes, faggots, colored girls, or natives, we began speaking of ourselves that way."
48. Wittman, "Gay Manifesto," p. 382. Emphasis in original.
49. Malcolm X, "The Playboy Interview." Cf. Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," p. 8: "They have become white in every respect but color."

and encourage the process of love and brotherhood."[50] Black Power will emphasize "the dignity of man, not the sanctity of property."[51] And the feminist revolution will "create a paradise on earth anew" by ushering in "a society in which the interests of the individual coincided with those of the larger society."[52]

The turn against America also explains one of the most disturbing features of identity politics: its open hatred of perceived oppressors, whether they be whites, males, or straights.[53]

In a position paper he wrote on "The Basis of Black Power" after he became president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Carmichael calls on his fellow blacks to "fill [themselves] with hate for all white things" and "to vent the rage they feel about whites."[54] While Malcolm X insists that "The Honorable Elijah Muhammad doesn't teach hate," he admits that he does teach the devilish "true nature of the white man" and concludes that "if the present generation of whites would study their own race in the light of their true history, they would be anti-white themselves."[55] Blacks, presumably, would all the more so be justified in reaching the same conclusion. Pamela Kearon, one of the founding members of Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement, published an essay on the virtues of "Man-Hating."[56] The version of "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" cited by Rendon in his book concludes with the following lines: "To hell with the nothing race. All power for our people."[57] And while Wittman does not call on homosexuals and bisexuals to hate straight people, he does repeatedly refer to them as "enemies."[58]

This spirit of wrathful vengeance and hatred is, by contrast, absent from the nonidentitarian movements working to improve the lot of women and black Americans. The civil rights movement, led by Martin Luther King, Jr., was of course suffused with the Christian language of love. "Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that," he wrote in his last book criticizing the Black Power movement. "We can no longer afford to worship the God of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation."[59] In his "I have a Dream" speech, King had already warned that the "marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to distrust all white people" and called on his fellow Americans "to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood."[60]

For her part, Betty Friedan, whose *Feminine Mystique* launched second-wave feminism, became very critical of the later women's liberation movement,

50. "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," in *"Takin' It to the Streets,"* p. 141.

51. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 41. In their book, Carmichael and Hamilton stop short of endorsing socialism, and Carmichael explicitly rejected it, along with Communism, the following year in favor of "an African ideology which speaks to our blackness." Quoted in Matusow, *The Unravelling of America*, p. 370. Prior to the publication of *Black Power*, Carmichael had described the black struggle as a "total revolution in which we propose to change the imperialist, capitalist and racialist struggle of the United States." Quoted in ibid., p. 366. Cf. Carmichael, "What We Want," *The New York Review of Books*, September 22, 1966: "The society we seek to build among black people, then, is not a capitalist one. It is a society in which the spirit of community and humanistic love prevail."

52. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, p. 274 and p. 270. Cf. Revolutionary Lesbians, "How to Stop Choking to Death Or: Separatism," in *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*, ed. Sarah Lucia-Hoagland and Julie Penelope (London: Onlywomen Press, 1988), p. 24: "*REVOLUTIONARY LESBIANS* see their struggle as a total one, as a struggle for a non-exploitive communist society."

53. For a contemporary expression of the sentiment, see Suzanna Danuta Walters, "Why Can't We Hate Men?" *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-cant-we-hate-men/2018/06/08/f1a3a8e0-6451-11e8-a69c-b944de66d9e7_story.html?utm_term=.e39e470060a8.

54. SNCC, "We Want Black Power," in *The Times Were a Changin': The Sixties Reader*, ed. Debi Unger and Irwin Unger (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1988), p. 146.

55. Malcolm X, "The Playboy Interview."

56. Pamela Kearon, "Man-Hating," in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*, ed. Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, 1970, pp. 83–85.

57. Rendon, *Chicano Manifesto*, p. 337.

58. Wittman, "Gay Manifesto," p. 387. He does admit that "not every straight is our enemy." Cf. "Queers Read This: I Hate Straights," in *We Are Everywhere*, pp. 773–786.

59. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), p. 65 and pp. 211–212. Cf. SNCC's Founding Statement in *"Takin' It to the Streets,"* p. 21: "Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear. Love transcends hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Faith reconciles doubt. Peace dominates war. Mutual regards cancel enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes immoral social systems."

60. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," August 28, 1963, http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/i-have-dream-1.

in particular its hatred of men. "As women were the scapegoats before, so now man is becoming the new scapegoat, the monster," she explained. "I'm quite disturbed by it. I think the whole trend is highly diversionary. It builds up a straw-man enemy by packaging together all the negative characteristics in man and making him the main enemy, the oppressor."[61]

All identitarians reject assimilation and integration, believing that only those whose minds have been corrupted by the oppressive American regime would want to belong to it.

The Revolutionary Politics of Identity

While the negative aspect of identity predominates, it is not exhaustive. The race-based identity movements also define themselves positively by appealing to a distinct culture which they claim predates their encounter with the white man. The Asians and Chicanos worry that their kinsmen are abandoning that culture—"giving up their own languages, customs, histories, and cultural values"—for the false promise of assimilation into the dominant white American culture.[62] Black Americans, whose ties to their past were radically severed, speak instead of the recovery of an authentic African culture stamped out by slavery. As Carmichael and Hamilton write:

> More and more black Americans are...becoming aware that they have a history which pre-dates their forced introduction to this country. African-American history means a long history beginning on the continent of Africa, a history not taught in the standard textbooks of this country. It is absolutely essential that black people know this history, that they know their roots, that they develop an awareness of their cultural heritage. Too long have they been kept in submission by being told that they had no culture, no manifest heritage, before they landed on the slave auction blocks in this country. If black people are to know themselves as a vibrant, valiant people, they must know their roots.[63]

An important split does occur among the early identitarian movements on the question of whether their identities are also defined by appeals to nature and to ties of blood. The members of the Combahee River Collective, following in the footsteps of their radical feminist sisters who viewed gender as social construct, reject "any type of biological determinism."[64] So does Wittman, for whom homosexuality "is not genetic."[65] By contrast, El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán is anchored in racial ties.[66] The Chicanos *"declare* that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny." Their motto is "Por La Raza todo. Fuera de La Raza nada" (For the race, everything, outside the race, nothing).[67] And for Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, humanity is divided into two distinct races, the white and the black (which, as already noted, includes all nonwhite races).[68]

The political implications of this disagreement are far-reaching. If our identity is defined in part by ties of blood which set the races apart from one another, some go so far as to argue that racial coexistence is impractical and that the races should separate. Thus,

61. Betty Friedan, *It Changed My Life: Writings in the Women's Movement* (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 161–162.
62. Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," p. 8.
63. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, pp. 38–39.
64. Cf. Millett who, drawing from the work of Robert Stoller and John Money, distinguishes the biological reality of sex from the psychological and cultural construct of gender. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, pp. 36–44. The most radical promise of the women's liberation movement is to "free women from their biology." Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, p. 234.
65. Compare with Paul Goodman, who in "The Politics of Being Queer" refers to "my choice, or compulsion, of a bisexual life." Quoted in *Come Out Fighting: A Century of Essential Writings on Gay and Lesbian Liberation*, ed. Chris Bull (New York: Thunders' Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2001), p. 87.
66. Cf. Rendon, *Chicano Manifesto*, p. 319: "I am a Chicano because of a unique fusion of bloods and history and culture" and p. 320: "To be a Chicano...is a new way of knowing your brown brother and of understanding our brown race. To be a Chicano means that a person has looked deeper into his being and sought unique ties to his brothers in la raza."
67. "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," in *"Takin' It to the Streets,"* p. 140. Emphasis in original.
68. Nonwhites, in his view, are united not only by blood, but by faith too. "The Honorable Elijah Muhammad says that a black man is born a Muslim by nature," Malcolm X explains in "The Playboy Interview."

Malcolm X favors the establishment of a sovereign black homeland in America. As compensation for slavery, America would cede several states to create this black nation and provide it with all materials and money to get it started. Ultimately this would pave the way for the return of all black Americans to their "African homeland."[69] That is the "only permanent solution to America's race problem." Black people, in short, do not belong in America.[70]

If our identity is defined in part by ties of blood which set the races apart from one another, some go so far as to argue that racial coexistence is impractical and that the races should separate.

Along similar lines, El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán culminates in a call for Chicano independence in the northern land of Aztlán (the Southwestern part of the United States): "A nation autonomous and free—culturally, socially, economically, and politically—will make its own decisions on the usage of our lands, the taxation of our goods, the utilization of our bodies for war, the determination of justice (reward and punishment), and the profit of our sweat."[71]

By contrast, radical feminists and gay liberationists hold out the promise of coexistence and harmony, albeit in a radically transformed America. They do so, paradoxically enough, by promising to transcend altogether the identities that currently define them. Millett, for example, envisions the rise of a new androgynous human type through "an integration of the separate sexual subcultures, an assimilation by both sides of previously segregated human experience."[72] Male and female will remain biologically different, but the differences in status, temperament, and societal role that have separated them throughout history will be effaced. The patriarchy will give way not to a matriarchy, but to what may be called an "androgynochy." For this to happen, the family will have to be abolished, and eventually, so will natural reproduction, lest women continue to be burdened with childbearing.[73]

Wittman also envisions a future in which the current repressive gay–straight dichotomy gives way to "a new pluralistic, role-free social structure" in which adults and children freely express their sexuality. "Nature," he claims, "leaves undefined the object of sexual desire." Straight and gay are both repressive societal constructs.[74] He suggests that bisexuality, as well as sex with animals, consensual sex with children, and other types of sexual practices currently viewed as perversions, are in fact natural expressions of healthy, unrepressed urges. Sex, he says, is like music. It is capable of "infinite and varied" expression. It is only because society forces people to see themselves as either straight

69. Malcolm X, "A Declaration of Independence," in *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 20.

70. In his autobiography, which he wrote after his conversion to Sunni Islam, Malcolm X suggested the possibility of interracial harmony. He said he wanted to build "an all-black organization whose ultimate objective was to help create a society in which there could exist honest white-black brotherhood." Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X (As told to Alex Haley)* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 381; cf. ibid., p. 383.

71. "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," in *"Takin' It to the Streets,"* p. 142. Cf. Among the priorities adopted at the 1972 La Raza Unida Party national convention were "Complete political independence." "La Unida Convention Announces Its Priorities," in *Major Problems in Mexican American History*, ed. Zaragosa Vargas (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), p. 417. These priorities would then form the basis of the party's platform. In the early 1970s, separatist movements were also found among radical lesbians. One such group, based in Seattle, promised to create an "egalitarian matriarchal society" and eventually "rid the world of men." Alice, Gordon, Debbie, and Mary, "Separatism," in *For Lesbians Only*, p. 33.

72. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 86. Cf. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, p. 236.

73. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, pp. 86–87. Cf. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, pp. 233–234. Compared to Millett and Firestone, Betty Friedan, the mother of second-wave feminism, is rather tame—one might even say conservative. She does not propose to abolish the family, only to allow women to find fulfilling careers and balance their work and family lives. Whatever one may think of her book, she should be distinguished from her more radical epigones and should not be considered an identitarian. Scott Yenor does, however, argue that "her radical principles were more influential and lasting than her moderation." Scott E. Yenor, "Betty Friedan and the Birth of Modern Feminism," Heritage Foundation *Makers of American Political Thought* No. 18, October 12, 2018, p. 9, https://www.heritage.org/gender/report/betty-friedan-and-the-birth-modern-feminism.

74. Cf. Millett's call in *Sexual Politics*, p. 86, for "a permissive single standard of sexual freedom"; Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, p. 237: "In our new society, humanity could finally revert to its natural 'polymorphously perverse' sexuality—all forms of sexuality would be allowed and indulged. The fully sexuate mind realized in the past in only a few individuals (survivors), would become universal"; Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman," in *We Are Everywhere*, p. 387: "In a society in which men do not oppress women, and sexual expression is allowed to follow feelings, the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality would disappear."

or gay and imposes norms of exclusivity that so few people can experience the full natural range of sexual possibilities.[75]

Regardless of whether they want to preserve, recover, or transcend their identity, gay liberationists, radical feminists, and Chicano and black nationalists all agree that freedom must be found beyond America as it is constituted, either in a sovereign homeland or in a radically transformed America. America, as it is constituted, offers no hope of justice for women and minorities. Unlike earlier critics of sex-based and race-based discrimination in America like the first-wave feminists, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King, Jr., the identitarians do not think that America, in mistreating certain groups, is falling short of its ideals. Rather, they view America as unjust and racist at its core, the empty rhetorical professions of the Declaration of Independence notwithstanding. "The entire American economy is based on white supremacy," inveighs Malcolm X. "Even the religious philosophy is, in essence, white supremacy.... The 'Uncle Sam' political foundation is based on white supremacy, relegating nonwhites to second-class citizenship. It goes without saying that the social philosophy is strictly white supremacist."[76]

It is this claim about the nature of America and the concomitant refusal to assimilate or even to integrate—not the demands by women and minorities for a redress of grievances—which sets the identitarians apart from other movements fighting for justice for all. Indeed, one can recognize that America has at times grossly mistreated certain people—black people more so than anyone else—and work to address these wrongs within a constitutional framework without embracing the identitarian critique of America. America's founding principles and its constitutional protections (with the passage of the Civil Rights and Progressive amendments) promise equal rights and the equal protection of the law to all its citizens. Nowhere in the Declaration of Independence or in the Constitution are people classified according to race, ethnicity, sex, or sexual orientation.[77]

America has, of course, at times fallen short of these ideals and, in the case of slavery, betrayed them. The question is whether the ideals should be invoked to condemn the unjust practices or whether the unjust practices should be invoked to give the lie to the ideals. Does the existence of slavery prove that the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence were not meant to apply to black people? Or does the proclamation that all men are created equal stand as a permanent rebuke to race-based slavery?

The identitarians, like Stephen Douglas and Chief Justice Roger Taney before them, believe the former. The Constitution, Malcolm X explains, "was written by whites for the benefit of whites and to the detriment of blacks, and when a black man stands up talking about his constitutional rights, he's out of his mind."[78] Carmichael and Hamilton dismiss the "Constitutional niceties (really, they quickly become irrelevancies)" that

75. Wittman, "Gay Manifesto," p. 385.

76. Malcolm X, "The Playboy Interview." Cf. Carmichael and Hamilton, who denounced "the very nature of this nation's political and economic system, which imposes institutional racism on the black masses if not upon every individual." Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 48.

77. The reference to the "merciless Indian Savages" in the Declaration of Independence is about their "known rule of warfare," not their skin color or race. Contrary to a widespread misconception, the infamous three-fifths clause in the Constitution does not say that a black person is worth 60 percent of a white person, but that "Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons"— a euphemism for black slaves. Free blacks were counted as one for purposes of apportionment and were voting in as many as 10 states at the time of the Founding. The first references to sex and race in the Constitution are found in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments; the former prevents states from denying "male inhabitants" the right to vote, while the latter states that the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." The Nineteenth Amendment supersedes the clause of the Fourteenth Amendment just cited and guarantees that the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."

78. Interview with Malcolm X at the University of California, Berkeley, October 11, 1963, https://archive.org/details/CSPAN3_20150301_161000_1963_Interview_With_Malcolm_X/start/60/end/120. After his conversion to Sunni Islam, Malcolm X revised his views on the matter. The founding charter of his Organization of Afro-American Unity includes the following statement: "Persuaded that the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights are the principles in which we believe and that these documents if put into practice represent the essence of mankind's hopes and good intentions." Malcolm X, "The Founding Rally of the OAAU," in Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1992), p. 63.

do not in any way undermine structures of oppression.[79] American practices reveal that the words of the American creed "*were not even originally intended* to have applicability to black people."[80] The identitarians therefore dismiss America's founding documents to justify their liberationist struggles.[81]

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Martin Luther King, Jr., by contrast, anchored his dream of racial comity "in the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence" and called on the country "to rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'"[82] Frederick Douglass, in the same Fourth of July oration in which he excoriated America's "revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy" and condemned her for crimes "which would disgrace a nation of savages," also drew encouragement "from 'the Declaration of Independence,' the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions" and argued that "interpreted, as it ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a glorious liberty document."[83] A few years before he gave that speech, the Seneca Falls Convention issued its famous feminist "Declaration of Sentiments," which was modeled on the Declaration of Independence and culminated in a demand for "immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them [i.e., women] as citizens of the United States."[84]

MLK, Douglass, and earlier feminists could denounce the injustices committed by America as fiercely as anyone else, and they were just as committed to justice for oppressed groups as the identitarians are. But unlike the identitarians, they framed their struggle as a vindication of American ideals, and in so doing, they held out the promise of integration, assimilation, civic friendship, and equal citizenship under the law.[85]

79. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 9.

80. Ibid., p. 77. Emphasis in original.

81. The Black Panther platform, "What We Want, What We Believe," appeals to the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution and ends by quoting the first two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence. Its demands, ranging from an exception for all black people from military service to government-sponsored housing, are at odds with the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. More important, the Black Panthers, at least in their public presentation, did not follow the identitarian script. They appealed to the rights of man and expressed solidarity with white people. Consider, for example, Huey Newton's essay on "The Black Panthers" in *Ebony*, August 1969, pp. 106–112.

82. Cf. King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963, https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html: "those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence." King was emphatic in rejecting any calls for a black return to Africa. As he explained in an interview with Robert Penn Warren: "The Negro is an American. We, we, we know nothing about Africa, although our roots are there in terms of our forbearers. But I mean as far as the average Negro today, he knows nothing about Africa. And I think he's got to face the fact that he is an American, his culture is basically American, and one becomes adjusted to this when he realizes what, what he is. He's got to know what he is. Our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America." Quoted in Garance Franke-Ruta, "Martin Luther King Jr.'s Amazing 1964 Interview with Robert Penn Warren," *The Atlantic*, August 26, 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/08/martin-luther-king-jrs-amazing-1964-interview-with-robert-penn-warren/279014/.

83. Frederick Douglass, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," in *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, Vol. 2, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950), p. 192, p. 203, and p. 202. Cf. "The Dred Scott Decision," in ibid., p. 415: "The Constitution, as well as the Declaration of Independence, and the sentiments of the founders of the Republic, give us a platform broad enough, and strong enough, to support the most comprehensive plans for the freedom and elevation of all the people of this country, without regard to color, class, or clime."

84. "Declaration of Sentiments," Seneca Falls Convention, 1848, in Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *A History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. 1 (Rochester, NY: Fowler and Wells, 1889), pp. 70–71, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/senecafalls.asp (December 11, 2018).

85. One sees a similar assimilationist push among the homophile movement in America in the 1950s and 1960s. The Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian organization in the country, defined themselves as "a women's organization for the purpose of promoting the integration of the homosexual into society." Daughters of Bilitis, "Statement of Purpose," in *We Are Everywhere*, p. 328. In a letter to Members of the House of Representatives, the Washington chapter of the Mattachine Society, the first homophile organization in the U.S., appealed to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and "basic American principles" to demand "the realization of full civil rights and liberties for all." Franklin Kameny, "Letter to the U.S. House of Representatives," in *We Are Everywhere*, p. 307.

By contrast, the identitarians, because they reject America, categorically refuse to assimilate to its way of life and denounce those who have assimilated or aspire to do so. Rendon's *Chicano Manifesto* and Uyematsu's "The Emergence of Yellow Power" are particularly revealing in this regard. Both admit that to a considerable degree, assimilation is possible. In fact, Rendon retells the story of his successful assimilation into America.[86] Assimilation, however, means adopting the "Anglo mind-set."[87] It means "denying [one's] yellowness." It means forsaking one's genuine identity for a "mistaken identity." However successful the assimilation, this will lead to "serious identity problems" and even to "extreme self-hatred" as nonwhites who assimilate come to despise their physique and try to ape "white beauty standards."[88]

The conclusion to which this analysis points is clear: America is a white country in which nonwhites can never be at home. It is "the very nature of this nation's political and economic system," Carmichael and Hamilton argue, that "imposes institutional racism."[89] On the question of race, the identitarians, in essence, agree with the white supremacists: America is for whites only.[90] In their indictment of America, the nonrace-based identitarian movements follow the same script and simply adapt it to their purposes. Neither women, according to the radical feminists, nor homosexuals, according to the gay liberationists, can ever be genuinely free in America as it is constituted.

Black Power and the Way Forward for Identity Politics

If identity politics was ever going to have a future and penetrate mainstream consciousness, it would have to *somewhat* moderate itself. The calls for revolution and the embrace of Marxist socialism—to say nothing of the demonization of white people—would have to give way to a more pragmatic approach which culminated in more reasonable demands than a radical reconfiguration of the country or secession without, however, going so far as to embrace integrationist ideals.

Black Power proved to be this third way between integration and revolution, which has come to define contemporary identity politics. Advocates of Black Power share the identitarian critique of America as a fundamentally oppressive regime. Yet unlike other identitarians who seek justice beyond it, they accept America for what it is and focus their energies on working within the system to advance their own sectarian interests.[91] Their goal is not to create a just society, either in America or elsewhere, but to fight more effectively for black people "by whatever means necessary," as Carmichael and Hamilton put it in the very last words of *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*.[92]

Advocates of Black Power share the identitarian critique of America as a fundamentally oppressive regime. Their goal, however, is not to create a just society, but to fight more effectively for black people "by whatever means necessary."

The starting point of their analysis is the recognition not only of pervasive "institutional racism"[93]—a

86. In "The Emergence of Yellow Power," Uyematsu, by contrast, claims that even those who have integrated most successfully are restricted "to the margins of the white world" because of "subtle but prevailing racial prejudice." Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," p. 8.

87. Rendon, Chicano Manifesto, p. 322.

88. Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," p. 8.

89. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 51. Carmichael and Hamilton admit that some degree of assimilation is possible for certain blacks but argue that it can never be complete and must be purchased at the price of their authentic identity. It therefore ought to be rejected. Ibid., p. 30.

90. This explains Malcolm X's shocking statement in "The Playboy Interview": "As between the racists and the integrationists, I highly prefer the racists. I'd rather walk among the rattlesnakes, whose constant rattle warns me where they are, than among those Northern snakes who grin and make you forget you're still in a snake pit."

91. Contrast with Wittman, "Gay Manifesto," p. 387: "[W]e know that the system we're living under is the direct source of oppression, and it's not just a question of sharing the pie. The pie is rotten."

92. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 185. The term Black Power appears to have first been used in its modern sense by Carmichael on June 16, 1966, in Greenwood, Mississippi. Carmichael shouted, "We want black power!" five times, and "each time the younger members of the audience shouted back, 'Black Power'." Quoted in Matusow, *The Unravelling of America*, pp. 354–355.

93. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 4.

term they coined—but, more fundamentally, of "the ethnic basis of American politics as well as the power-oriented nature of American politics."[94] America, in this presentation, is not a country, but a federation of ethnic groups competing against one another to maximize their power and, by extension, their wealth and status. White people, of course, have the most power and use it to keep black people down. Carmichael and Hamilton liken black people in America to colonial subjects. The man in the ghetto is "faced with a 'white power structure' as monolithic as Europe's colonial offices have been to African and Asian colonies."[95]

Carmichael and Hamilton follow the famous international relations theorist Hans Morgenthau in reducing all politics, both global and domestic, to a struggle for power.[96] Politics, in this view, aims not at justice or the common good, but at raw power.[97] Black Power thus looks at America through the cold lens of *realpolitik*. It claims that all people—black and white alike—are moved by group interest alone. All appeals to "Morality and sentiment" are thereby rejected.[98] In an essay he wrote by himself, Carmichael drives home the point even more bluntly: "[T]his country does not function by morality, love, and nonviolence, but power."[99] He and Hamilton thus entertain no hope of convincing white people of the justice of their cause. Rather, they aim to "make it in the self-interest of the white society to act morally."[100]

In effect, Carmichael and Hamilton abandon the pretension of fighting for justice, at least as the term is commonly understood. Because power rules the world, justice is redefined as whatever increases power for one's own ethnic group. Black power thus combines Thrasymachus' definition of justice in *The Republic* as "the advantage of the stronger" with Polemarchus's "doing good to friends and harm to enemies"—except that the friend–enemy distinction is applied to domestic politics.[101]

In this world, ultimate power lies with those who have the power to define reality. They "are the masters of the situation." To make their point, Carmichael and Hamilton cite Lewis Carroll:

> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
>
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."
>
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."[102]

Words do not correspond to an objective reality. Rather, they mean whatever those in power say they mean. Hence the need to gain sufficient power to at least resist the imposition of the definitions of others and, ultimately, to impose one's definitions on others. "Law is the agent of those in political power; it is the product of those powerful enough to define right and wrong and to have that definition legitimized by 'law'," Carmichael and Hamilton conclude.[103]

Given their unvarnished take on America, Carmichael and Hamilton make no grand promises to reform it. They "offer no pat formulas in this book for ending racism."[104] They claim their only goal is to "contribute to the development of a *viable* larger society"—not a just society or a harmonious one, but merely a viable one.[105]

94. Ibid., p. 44.
95. Ibid., p. 10.
96. Ibid., p. 35.
97. Cf. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 31: "The term 'politics' shall refer to the power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another."
98. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 76; cf. p. 75 and p. 96.
99. Carmichael, "What We Want."
100. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 172.
101. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd ed., trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 338c and 332d.
102. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 36.
103. Ibid., p. 95.
104. Ibid., p. vii.
105. Ibid., p. vii (emphasis added). Later, they write that the "goal of Black Power is positive and functional to a free and viable society," suggesting their society would remain a free one. Ibid., p. 48.

Their immediate concern lies with avoiding a "prolonged destructive guerrilla warfare" between whites and blacks. Such a war may in fact be inevitable. "But if there is the slightest chance to avoid it," they conclude, "the politics of Black Power as described in this book is seen as the only viable hope."[106]

A race war may be avoided, but there can be no comity between the races. White racism, in their view, is ineradicable. "But how fully can white people free themselves from the tug of the group position—free themselves not so much from overt racist attitudes in themselves as from a more subtle paternalism bred into them by the society and, perhaps more important, from the conditioned reaction of black people to their whiteness?" Carmichael and Hamilton ask. "For most whites, that freedom is unattainable."[107] Freedom from racism may also prove unattainable for blacks. "In the end, we cannot and shall not offer guarantees that Black Power, if achieved, would be non-racist," they bluntly write. "The final truth is that the white society is not entitled to reassurances, even if it were possible to offer them."[108] Ultimately, the long-term interests of blacks and whites are fundamentally at odds with one another.[109]

As the book unfolds, one does find a smattering of passages that seem to offer some hope for racial reconciliation. At one point, Carmichael and Hamilton seem to soften their claims about fundamental racial antagonism when they write that "race is an overwhelming fact of life *in this historical period*," thereby implying that it may not be at a future time. They do not categorically rule out the possibility that "this or the next generation will witness the time when race will no longer be relevant in the conduct of public affairs and in public policy decision-making." They seem open to the idea that "color blindness *may* be a sound goal ultimately." They just deem it "unlikely."[110]

In two striking passages, Carmichael and Hamilton actually hold out the promise of transforming America. They call for an alliance between poor blacks and poor whites to attempt to build "a free, open society—not one based on racism and subordination."[111] Even more surprisingly given the overall tone and tenor of the book, they conclude by claiming that the new black consciousness they are forging is "vital to Black power and to the ending of racism."[112] Given the *realpolitik* underpinnings of their ideology and their bleak view of America, it is hard to put much stock in these hopeful statements. They may perhaps be strategic overtures to reassure readers, in particular white readers, that Black Power holds out the promise of racial reconciliation.

This "studied ambiguity" on the ultimate ends of the movement very much remains a feature of contemporary identity politics.[113] In his best-selling and widely lauded book *Between the World and Me*, America's most prominent identitarian, Ta-Nehisi Coates, advises his son to abandon any hope of ever being able to "raise your body to equality with your countrymen."[114] He admits that it "is truly horrible to understand yourself as the essential below of your country" and to accept that the "birth of a better world is not ultimately up to you," but that such a realization is both true and necessary.[115] The only advice he can give his son is to choose "struggle over hope" because "[p]erhaps struggle is all we have because the god of history is an atheist, and nothing about this world is meant to be."[116] And yet, in

106. Ibid., p. vi.

107. Ibid., p. 28; cf. p. 61, p. 142.

108. Ibid., p. 45.

109. Ibid., p. 79.

110. Ibid., p. 54. Emphases in original.

111. Ibid., p. 82; cf. p. 84. Cf. Charles V. Hamilton, "An Advocate of Black Power Defines It," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 14, 1968, p. 83.

112. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 184. Consider too the passing claim made that political modernization must take place "if the society is to be rid of racism." Ibid., p. 39. In the beginning of Chapter III, Carmichael and Hamilton criticize the tactical decisions of those who favor building coalitions for undermining "their central goal" of "rid[ding] the system of racism." Ibid., pp. 60–61. They do not, however, endorse that goal themselves.

113. The description comes from Randall Kennedy's essay "Reflections on Black Power" in *Reassessing the Sixties: Debating the Political and Cultural Legacy*, ed. Stephen Macedo (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 248.

114. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), p. 96.

115. Ibid., p. 106 and p. 71.

116. Ibid.

making "The Case for Reparations" in the pages of *The Atlantic*, he offers hope that compensating the descendants of slaves would force "a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal."[117] Abandon hope all ye who enter here—except when making your demands.[118]

Black Power and the Demands of Identity Politics

The very term "Black Power" leaves no doubt as to what Carmichael and Hamilton are after. Since all of political life is reduced to a factional power struggle, there can only be one aim: more power for one's own identity group (and, given the zero-sum nature of power, less power for other groups). As their number relative to the population at large is small, African Americans, as they will now be called, will not, of course, aspire to seize all levers of powers. They will rather be content with "an effective share in the total power of the society" so as "to gain substantial benefits for the group."[119]

The daunting task before Carmichael and Hamilton is twofold: They must first explain how their fellow African Americans—who "stand as colonial subjects in relation to the white society"[120]—are to acquire power and, having done so, to provide guidance on how they ought to use it. Their strategy would prove influential not only with black Americans, but with the other identitarian movements, all of whom have since essentially adopted it.[121]

Carmichael and Hamilton's immediate priority is "to define and encourage a new consciousness among black people."[122] African Americans must develop "a sense of peoplehood: pride, rather than shame, in blackness, and an attitude of brotherly communal responsibility among all black people for one another."[123] As noted, this new identity will find its roots in Africa rather than America and will in fact be premised on a rejection of the fundamentally racist American society.[124]

Black self-identity will thus give rise to black solidarity, which must then lead to black self-determination. Black Power calls on its people "to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations and to support those organizations."[125] They must, when they can, seize the levers of political power. They must start their own businesses, hire their own, reinvest profits in their community—all with a view to freeing "as many people as possible from economic dependency on the white man."[126] Ultimately, "[t]he concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise," Carmichael and Hamilton explain: "*Before a group can enter*

117. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631.

118. Contrast with King's closing exhortation in his "I Have a Dream" speech: "This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brother-hood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

119. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 47 and p. 12.

120. Ibid., p. 5.

121. What Randall Kennedy observed 20 years ago remains true to this day: Black Power "established the premises, tone, rhetoric, and style that many of the most prominent black activists of the past thirty years have embraced and adopted" and also "deeply tinctured American politics, culture, and society." Kennedy, "Reflections on Black Power," in *Reassessing the Sixties*, p. 240 and p. 242. Cf. Kruks, *Retrieving Experience*, p. 88: "Contemporary identity politics in the United States recognizably began with the Black Power movement."

122. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. viii.

123. Ibid., p. viii.

124. Carmichael and Hamilton are adamant that "while we endorse the procedure of group solidarity and identity for the purpose of attaining certain goals in the body politic, this does not mean that black people should strive for the same kind of rewards (i.e., end results) obtained by the white society. The ultimate values and goals are not domination or exploitation of other groups, but rather an effective share in the total power of the society." Ibid., p. 47. That being said, they readily admit, as already noted, that Black Power may well remain racist to the end: "In the end, we cannot and shall not offer guarantees that Black Power, if achieved, would be non-racist.... The final truth is that the white society is not entitled to reassurances, even if it were possible to offer them." Ibid., p. 45. In the end, then, Black Power may well try to dominate and exploit other ethnic groups. Here again, is Black Power's "studied ambiguity" in its presentation of its program: It both aims to emulate the values of its society and to transcend them.

125. Ibid., p. 44.

126. Hamilton, "An Advocate of Black Power Defines It," p. 80.

the open society, it must first close ranks."[127] Only when a group has become "so tightly organized, so strong, that—in the words of Saul Alinsky—it is an 'indigestible body' which cannot be absorbed or swallowed up" can it then negotiate from a position of strength and fight to benefit its own members.[128]

What the advocates of Black Power want is for African Americans to have what other ethnic groups in America appear to have: unity of purpose and control of their communities. They call on black people to form strong, independent, and tightly knit communities that can "articulate goals in the interest of black people *first*."[129]

Given the abject treatment of black Americans at the time and their general political, social, and economic marginalization within American society, this part of the Black Power agenda is laudable. All well-intentioned Americans would support the goal of stronger communities that strengthen the fabric of civil society. Many will have reservations about the separatist tendencies of Black Power, but it is important to remember that America does not demand conformity from all. Being a liberal regime in the classical sense of the term, it leaves people generally free to live as they see fit and to associate with whom they please. It not only allows for hyphenated Americans; it even allows some—like the Amish and Hasidic Jews—to live largely apart from mainstream society. The long-term health and stability of the republic requires a considerable degree of assimilation and integration of all citizens, but the state cannot go too far in mandating either lest it encroach on civil society.

The problem with Black Power, as with all other identitarian movements then and now, instead lies elsewhere. It is found first in the scathing indictment of America as a fundamentally oppressive society which, as previously noted, fosters alienation and victimization while also destroying the possibility of patriotism and civic friendship. Loyalty, in this view, is owed to the members of one's identity group (although one may feel solidarity for other oppressed identity groups). The oppressor group—whether it be whites, men, or straights—becomes an object of hate. It is one thing to preach brotherly love among members of a particular community but quite another to hate other citizens from different communities.

The problem with Black Power, as with all other identitarian movements, is found in the scathing indictment of America as a fundamentally oppressive society which fosters alienation and victimization while also destroying the possibility of patriotism and civic friendship.

This condemnation of America is then coupled, paradoxically enough and just as problematically, with demands for recognition, special treatment, and active government intervention in the economy and civil society to eliminate disparities. One would think that the advocates of Black Power would expect nothing from a country as hopelessly racist as America, and yet they, like the identitarian movements that followed in their wake, in fact expect quite a lot. Black Power begins with a commendable call for blacks to form stronger communities, but it ends with demands that society at large bestow upon these communities various benefits and privileges. Its aim is not to secure equal rights under color-blind laws, but rather to obtain respect and to receive federal dollars. These demands, admittedly, are neither spelled out in great detail nor pressed too far in the writings of Carmichael and Hamilton, but later identitarians developed them at length. Today, they form the core demands of identity politics.

127. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 44. Emphasis in original.

128. Ibid., p. 80.

129. Ibid., pp. 64–65. Emphasis in original.

The first set of demands relate to what advocates of Black Power call respect and what has since come to be known as "recognition."[130] In his position paper on "The Basis of Black Power," Carmichael argues that black people must be given "their proper due and respect."[131] This must begin with a reappraisal by blacks of "the contributions that we have made in shaping this country."[132] Textbooks will have to be rewritten and history will have to be taught differently so as to emphasize "the historical achievements of black people."[133] This revised curriculum, along with other pedagogical reforms, will "become a major vehicle for fashioning a sense of pride and group identity."[134]

The justification for these demands, which have since only grown in magnitude among proponents of identity politics, is the claim that the denial of respect is itself a form of oppression, and a particularly crippling one at that, since it makes self-respect "almost impossible."[135] These demands reveal one of the fundamental aims of Black Power (and of identity politics more generally): the desire for what Carmichael calls "psychological equality."[136] He and Hamilton quote at length the psychologist Kenneth Clark, whose famous doll experiment in the 1940s was cited by the Supreme Court in its landmark desegregation ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).[137] "Human beings who are forced to live under ghetto conditions and whose daily experience tells them that almost nowhere in society are they respected and granted the ordinary dignity and courtesy accorded to others will, as a matter of course, begin to doubt their own worth," writes Clark. "These doubts become the seeds of a pernicious self and group-hatred, the Negro's complex and debilitating prejudice against himself."[138]

Carmichael and Hamilton do not go so far as to call for the banning of speech that demeans black people, or what today would get called "hate speech." Such a demand, however, is a legitimate inference from the logic of respect undergirding their argument, and it is not hard to see why identitarian movements have since increasingly come to demand that hate speech be forbidden.[139] Carmichael and Hamilton do, however,

130. See in particular the widely influential essay by Charles Taylor on "The Politics of Recognition" in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25–73. It is important to note that in keeping with identity politics' rejection of universal principles, identitarian movements demand recognition not on the basis of their humanity or citizenship, but rather on the basis of their particular identity. As Kruks astutely observes: "What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identitarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is *qua* women, *qua* blacks, *qua* lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of 'universal humankind' on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect 'in spite of' one's differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself *as* different." Kruks, *Retrieving Experience*, p. 85. Emphasis in original.

131. Stokely Carmichael, "The Basis of Black Power," in *"Takin' It to the Streets,"* p. 125. As K. Anthony Appiah points out in "Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction," there is an obvious contradiction between the demands for recognition and the rejection of America: "If, in understanding myself as African-American, I see myself as resisting white norms, mainstream American conventions, the racism (and perhaps, the materialism or individualism) of 'white culture,' why should I at the same time seek recognition from these white others?" *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, pp. 153–154.

132. Carmichael, "The Basis of Black Power," in *Takin' It to the Streets*, p. 125. Such efforts, in and of themselves, are not problematic and could in fact strengthen the bonds of civic friendship by teaching white and black students about black contributions to American history. For Carmichael and Hamilton, however, the aim is not for blacks to feel more American, but rather to feel more black and more closely connected to faraway Africa.

133. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 9; cf. p. 38.

134. Hamilton, "An Advocate of Black Power Defines It," p. 82. Cf. Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," p. 8: "Since the yellow power is thus far made up of students and young adults, it is working for Asian-American studies centers on college campuses such as Cal and UCLA. The re-establishment of ethnic identity through education is being pursued"; "El Plan de Santa Barbara: A Chicano Plan for Higher Education" (Oakland: La Causa Publications, 1969), p. 10, which calls for "a curriculum program and an academic major relevant to the Chicano cultural and historical experience."

135. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 29.

136. Carmichael, "What We Want."

137. Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

138. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 29.

139. The earliest statement I could find is the "Statement of the Male Homosexual Workshop" by the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention in 1970, which demanded "That organized religions be condemned for aiding in the genocide of gay people, and enjoined from teaching hatred and superstition." *We Are Everywhere*, p. 403. For the contemporary argument, see Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

warn against holding the oppressed responsible for their actions. Given the endemic nature of racism in America, they claim that "it becomes ludicrous to condemn black people for 'not showing more initiative'": "Black people are not in a depressed condition because of some defect in their character."[140] As he is wont to do, Carmichael goes even further and blames black violence on white America: "Responsibility for the use of violence by black men, whether in self defense or initiated by them, lies with the white community."[141]

All in all, the identitarian focus on respect, recognition, and pride in one's identity has led to the creation of a regime dedicated to "promoting victim self-esteem."

This line of reasoning has since become a pillar of identity politics, displayed, for example, in the now familiar exhortation not to blame the victim.[142] All in all, the focus on respect, recognition, and pride in one's identity has led to the creation of a regime dedicated to "promoting victim self-esteem."[143]

The second set of demands calls on the government—usually the federal government—to actively intervene on behalf of African Americans in a variety of ways. "There must be reallocation of land and money," Carmichael writes. "Ultimately, the economic foundations of this country must be shaken if black people are to control their lives."[144] In his essay on Black Power, Hamilton calls for "[b]illions of dollars" each year to support "Black Power structures at the local level."[145] He calls for the federal government to disburse these funds directly to the black community, thereby circumventing "insensitive, unresponsive, city halls."[146]

Direct transfers can ultimately do only so much. "There are, of course, many problems facing black people which must be dealt with outside the ghettos: jobs, open occupancy, medical care, higher education," Hamilton admits.[147] Given Black Power's embrace of a "by any means necessary" philosophy and its dismissal of "constitutional niceties," no measure—including racial preferences—can *prima facie* be ruled out. Black Power, in fact, explicitly rejects a color-blind approach to public policy. As Hamilton explains:

> It must be clear by now that any society which has been color-conscious all its life to the detriment of a particular group cannot simply become color-blind and expect that group to compete on equal terms. Black Power clearly recognizes the need to perpetuate color consciousness, but in a positive way—to improve a group, not to subject it. When principles like egalitarianism have been so flagrantly violated for so long, it does not make sense to think that the victim of that violation can be equipped to benefit from opportunities simply upon their pronouncement. Obviously,

140. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 23.

141. Carmichael, "What We Want." *The New York Times's* Charles Blow comes close to expressing this view today when he writes that "personal choices are made within a social construct, and that construct is heavily influenced by oppressive forces—interpersonal biases, structural inequities, aversion to otherness." He is therefore reluctant to condemn black-on-black violence since "there is no way to separate structural violence from community violence." Charles M. Blow, "Black Lives and Books of the Dead," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/09/opinion/charles-m-blow-black-lives-and-books-of-the-dead.html.

142. Consider, for example, Michelle Alexander's bestselling book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, rev. ed. (New York: The New Press, 2012). The most notable revision in the second edition is her pronounced denial of responsibility for black youth: "The genius of the current caste system, and what most distinguishes it from its predecessors, is that it appears voluntary. People choose to commit crimes, and that's why they are locked up or locked out, we are told. This feature makes the politics of responsibility particularly tempting, as it appears the system can be avoided with good behavior. But herein lies the trap. All people make mistakes. All of us are sinners. All of us are criminals. All of us violate the law at some point in our lives." Ibid., p. 215.

143. Paul Gottfried, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 61.

144. Carmichael, "What We Want." Cf. Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention, "Demands of the Lesbian Workshop," in *We Are Everywhere*, p. 404.

145. Hamilton, "An Advocate of Black Power Defines It," p. 83.

146. Ibid. Compare with Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 183: "It is our hope that the day may soon come when black people will reject federal funds because they have understood that these programs are geared to pacification rather than to genuine solutions."

147. Hamilton, "An Advocate of Black Power Defines It," p. 79. Cf. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 155.

> some positive form of special treatment must be used to overcome centuries of negative special treatment.[148]

Such arguments for preferential treatment on behalf of previously oppressed groups have, of course, since become a mainstay of identity politics.[149]

Beyond Black Power: White Guilt

One thus finds in Black Power the core components of what we now call identity politics: the indictment of America as a fundamentally and irredeemably racist country; the hostility, bleeding into hatred, toward whites; the rejection of assimilation and integration in favor of cultural separatism; and the demands for color-conscious recognition, preferential treatment, and positive rights rather than equal rights under color-blind law. Other identitarian movements all follow the same script, simply adapting it to their purposes (e.g., America is fundamentally and irredeemably sexist for the radical feminists, and it is men who are the target of hate). Only the expression of solidarity with other oppressed identity groups is absent from Black Power (although it is present, as noted, in the other early identitarian movements and remains a salient feature of contemporary identity politics).[150]

Identity politics thus ultimately proves to be a misnomer. Because it is primarily a politics of oppression rather than identity, not all Americans are entitled to an identity of which they can be proud. Not all identities, it turns out, are created equal.

Since identity politics first took shape in the 1960s and 1970s, there has been only one notable development in identitarian thinking, but it is an immensely important one, as it is *the* development that has allowed identity politics to gain the power it today possesses. In the original iterations of identity politics, the oppressor group—whether it be whites, men, or straights—is simply castigated, vilified, and denounced. For the most part, the identitarians did not think their enemies had any constructive role to play in advancing their interests.[151] In fact, given the lens of competitive ethnopolitics through which Black Power sees the world, whites, like all other ethnic groups for that matter, should be expected to fight fiercely for their own and remain indifferent to the plight of other groups. As Carmichael and Hamilton ask in the beginning of their book:

> Can whites, particularly liberal whites, condemn themselves? Can they stop blaming blacks and start blaming their own system? Are they capable of the shame which might become a revolutionary emotion? We—black people—have found that they usually cannot condemn themselves; therefore black Americans must do it.[152]

Carmichael and Hamilton were wrong. Whites, particularly liberal whites, have been quite adept at condemning not only themselves and their own system, but also their own country, their own past, their own civilization, their own religion, their own race, and their own gender.[153] Indeed, they now agonize endlessly over their purported privileges, white or otherwise. They speak of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in the language of original sin.[154] They have imbibed the identitarian critique of America and redefined their identity accordingly. Writing in *The*

148. Hamilton, "An Advocate of Black Power Defines It," p. 82. Cf. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 54, p. 83, and p. 167.

149. For a contemporary critique of color blindness, see Jennifer C. Mueller, "Producing Colorblindness: Everyday Mechanisms of White Ignorance," *Social Problems*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (2017), pp. 219–238.

150. According to the realpolitik underpinnings of Black Power, genuine solidarity across ethnic groups is in fact not possible, though it will be prudent occasionally to form tactical alliances to further one's own sectarian interests.

151. Uyematsu's words proved to be prophetic: "It is quite apparent that the complete success of the black power and yellow power movements will not be possible without the co-operation of white America." Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," p. 10.

152. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. ix.

153. In so doing, they have gone well beyond the modest expectations of Carmichael and Hamilton, who thought "white people of good will" could play a supportive role in the struggle for Black Power. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, pp. 81–84.

154. See Gottfried's discussion of the "Religious Foundations of the Managerial Therapeutic State" in *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt*, pp. 39–70.

New York Times Magazine about "White Debt," Eula Biss, a liberal white author, tortures herself over "what is owed—and what can never be repaid—for racial privilege." Upon reflection, she develops "the uncomfortable suspicion" that her good suburban life is "built on a bedrock of evil." "For me, whiteness is not an identity but a moral problem," she ultimately confesses.[155]

Identity politics thus ultimately proves to be a misnomer. Because it is primarily a politics of oppression rather than identity, not all Americans are entitled to an identity of which they can be proud. Not all identities, it turns out, are created equal. The identities of those who do not belong to one of the recognized classes of victimized identity groups are recognized only in order to be excoriated. In a fawning review of Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman*, *The New York Times*'s A. O. Scott writes: "Maybe not everyone who is white is a racist, but racism is what makes us white." This, he claims, is "a stark and discomfiting truth."[156] "Black is beautiful" has now given way to "White is ugly." It is, in fact, nearly impossible to think of a single generalization about white people or males for that matter—no matter how offensive, violent, or untrue—that cannot be made with impunity in the public square.

While such public self-flagellation is not without its pleasures—"Self-denigration," in Pascal Bruckner's biting words, "is all too clearly a form of indirect self-glorification"[157]—it is a privilege denied to the majority of Americans whom identity politics puts into an untenable situation. They are not only denied an ethnic or sexual identity worthy of admiration; they are not even permitted to fall back on patriotism and affirm an American identity, America being a wretched country unworthy of any attachment.

As such, identity politics is bound to generate a backlash. That pushback may take one of two forms: the reembrace of the patriotic, assimilationist, color-blind creed which promises "liberty and justice for all" or the rise of white identitarianism. Should the latter ever come to pass, then the identitarians will have actually produced that which they claim to oppose.

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155. Eula Biss, "White Debt," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 2, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/magazine/white-debt.html.

156. A. O. Scott, "Review: Spike Lee's 'BlacKkKlansman' Journeys into White America's Heart of Darkness," *The New York Times*, August 9, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/09/movies/blackkklansman-review-spike-lee.html.

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