

Why Identity Politics is Toxic for Everybody

Speakers invited to Hillsdale College have been hitting home runs lately. Two talks in particular poignantly diagnose the toxic effects of identity politics: [one](#) by University of Pennsylvania law professor Amy Wax, who recounts her recent experience of it; [the other](#) by political journalist Matthew Continetti, who argues that it's counterproductive as well as un-American.

In a broad sense, of course, all politics can be called "identity politics." Elections are won by building coalitions of different groups that can be identified, and often identify themselves, for political purposes. Pollsters and political scientists call such a group a "demographic." Party tacticians devote much thought to how to target and appeal to this-or-that demographic. Gerrymandering is usually done by identifying which demographics within a given geographic area are likely to vote for the party doing the gerrymandering. District lines are drawn accordingly, at least when the opportunity arises.

But all of the above is not what is now generally meant by the phrase "identity politics."

These days, it means something more specific: the conduct of politics primarily by appeals to aspects of people's identity such as race, gender, and sexuality. People of color, women, and LGBTQ people are depicted as "oppressed" by the white patriarchy that controls the economy and therefore, supposedly, everything else. According to this point of view, such demographics are naturally seen to need laws and policies favoring and thus "liberating" them. Indeed, that entire picture has become a central trope of the national Democratic Party, not just of campus "social-justice warriors." Views

criticizing it, or not giving the oppressed what is believed to be their due, are often branded as a kind of bigotry: “racism, “sexism,” or, heaven forfend, “heteronormativity.”

Recently, Intellectual Takeout has published several articles about the philosophical origins and practical effects of identity politics. The former lie in [postmodernism](#) and [critical theory](#), two movements that have long since taken over most humanities and social-science faculties. The latter are too numerous and depressing to recount in much detail; IT has offered examples [here](#) and [here](#).

An especially interesting case of such effects, though, is what Prof. Wax underwent at the hands of her colleagues. As she learned, even the intellectual elite of the Left often fails to see any need for reasoned dialogue with honest critics such as herself. After all, bigotry is irrational; so why reason with bigots? Just call them out and marginalize them. That’s the treatment she got at the University of Pennsylvania and elsewhere, just for pointing out that the decline of such “bourgeois” values as marriage and hard work are largely responsible for the problems of working-class whites as well as inner-city blacks. That’s the kind of thing causing her to ask seriously, as the title of her speech: “Are We Free to Discuss America’s Real Problems?” To the extent identity politics reigns, we are not.

That is unfortunate for several reasons. It isn’t just that refusal to discuss real problems rationally allows them to fester. As Continetti argues, relying on identity politics ultimately doesn’t work for the Democrats and is incompatible with what makes the United States itself distinctive as a polity. It doesn’t work because it creates an understandable backlash from that majority of Americans who don’t subscribe to identity politics and are, for the most part, openly scorned by its practitioners both on and off campus. This backlash was a significant factor contributing to Donald Trump’s surprising victory in 2016, as well to a degree of

Republican control of state offices that hasn't been seen since the 1920s.

But identity politics is also incompatible with the cement that glues the diverse American polity together. It not only stresses what divides us from each other, but also eschews, as a mere power play, the natural-law rationale for inherent human rights that was cited in the Declaration of Independence. All that's left, then, is will-to-power, and the only question is how to gain power, which is now understood to include the power to define "reality." When everything becomes will-to-power, we end up with nothing but a war of all against all. Nobody wins that.

If we want to avoid that outcome, we had better reject identity politics.