



# THE THREAT OF IDENTITY POLITICS

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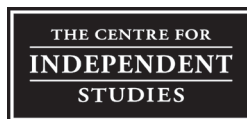


# The threat of identity politics

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# The threat of identity politics

IT is increasingly impossible to navigate through any discussion of thought or ideas in the western world today without quickly tripping over the term 'identity politics'. The murder of George Floyd by a policeman arresting him in Minnesota last year triggered an international obsession with the subject. Floyd's death represented many things to many people; the toxic consequences of racism and police brutality prime among them. On an intellectual level, they demonstrated the polar opposite of the ideal relations between the state and the individual in a free, democratic and civilised society.

However, were that not disturbing enough, the tsunami of identity politics this killing occasioned has had what — for most people — were largely unintended consequences: causing rancour, division, loathing and self-loathing across many societies in which white people form the ethnic majority, but in which people from what in those societies constitute 'ethnic minorities' live in significant numbers. This has been especially true in societies where people of black African descent form a considerable minority – not just in the United States of America, but in, for example, the United Kingdom too.

Floyd's killing caused global outrage, and it was a natural civilised response to deplore it, and the cast of mind that (according to the evidence before the court that convicted his murderer, Derek Chauvin) enabled it to happen.

However, many of those who expressed their human decency at this affront to humanity and justice did not imagine that this widespread empathy with the victim would be harnessed by political activist

groups quite as it was: to support demands for cultural and social upheaval that went far beyond making racial equality a reality and not merely an aspiration. Nevertheless, such consequences were desired by some for whom Floyd's killing could be used to further a political agenda broader than that of equality and justice irrespective of race.

Some who fly under the flags of anti-capitalism and anarchism saw Floyd's death as an opportunity to renew their activism by manipulating this episode of human misery for their own ends, and have spread international acrimony and civil mistrust as a baleful consequence. However, another such consequence is that they start to militate against aspects of the majority culture that — far from being harmful — are essential to the maintenance of a truly free, liberal society that benefits all its members, again irrespective of race: notably freedom of speech.

Further, identity politics is not just about countering the long record of oppression that black people in America have experienced from the white majority who first enslaved them, then after emancipation denied them basic civil rights, and who continue to impose injustices of varying degrees of severity on them even now. It, and especially its weapon of seeking to close down freedom of expression, is now being harnessed by minority groups of all descriptions around the world, and sometimes with far less cause than that of those who straightforwardly protest that police officers should not kill their black fellow citizens — even those they have a legitimate reason to arrest — with impunity.

### **What is identity politics?**

Going to Google to seek a definition of 'identity politics' – as any bemused person might – one of the first it throws up is from Dr Vasiliki Neofotistos, an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University at Buffalo, the State University of New York. It is as serviceable an explanation as any, and it provides much scope for further discussion:

Identity politics, also commonly referred to as the politics of identity or identity-based politics, is a phrase that is widely used in the social sciences and humanities to describe the deployment of the category of identity as a tool to frame political claims, promote political ideologies, or stimulate and orientate social and political action, usually in a larger context of inequality or injustice and with the aim of asserting group distinctiveness and belonging and gaining power and recognition. Additionally, identity politics refers to tensions and struggles over the right to map and define the contours and fixed “essence” of specific groups. The phrase has become increasingly common in political anthropology since the second half of the 20th century with the emergence of a wide diversity of social movements, including the women’s movement, the African American civil rights movement, and the gay and lesbian movement, as well as nationalist and postcolonial movements. Central to the practice of identity politics are the notions of sameness and difference, and thus the anthropological study of identity politics involves the study of the politics of difference.

The opening of the definition makes it clear, first, that identity politics, as deployed (or, sometimes, manipulated) by activists, exists to serve the interests of minorities. In a free and just society, such minorities must of course have the right to a political voice, and by whatever lawful means that voice can be obtained. But the definition implies that identity politics is a weapon that (with one important recent exception, which I shall describe in the next section) can be credibly deployed *only* on behalf of minorities.

When it is, society becomes vulnerable to its deployment by those whose agenda is to undermine interests they deem to have power (whether political, social or financial) that is denied to the minority and deemed to be used against their interests. Any attempt by political,

social or financial elites to play identity politics would attract either ridicule or hostility: these are not sections of society that naturally attract the public compassion or sympathy that elevates a cause to a point where orthodox political power has to recognise its significance. These powerful elites are precisely those that minorities, and those who purport to speak for minorities, claim have been stacking the odds against them for generations, even centuries.

Identity politics therefore becomes a means of putting the boot on the other foot: the elites have shown throughout history that forming a club of common interests can get them a long way, so it is hardly surprising that others with hitherto less power — but with their own common interests defined by their identities as minorities — are now choosing to do the same thing.

Of course, this is not new. The owners of capital in Britain, who were then represented in parliament while the rest of society was not, had their representatives pass the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800, prohibited much trade union activity; notably striking and collective bargaining. Trade unions were themselves a form of identity politics, the “category of identity,” as Dr Neofotistos puts it, being a working class denied the right to organise and to withdraw its labour.

In the present time, to run a political platform on the grounds that one is black or a member of any other race that has been historically a victim of racism and discrimination is a highly effective way of what Dr Neofotistos identifies as orientating political action. It is human nature, especially in traditionally Christian societies, to side with the underdog and to work against oppression and injustice. Identity politics says, clearly, that specific identities are associated with being oppressed and enduring injustice. When a white policeman who would probably have restrained a white man without kneeling on his neck for nine minutes until he is unconscious (and possibly dead: two post-mortems concluded Floyd probably died at the scene), is seen around the world restraining a black man by kneeling on his neck, oppression and injustice are easily evoked — and justifiably so, as the court that convicted Chauvin effectively concluded.



Then the definition talks of gaining ‘power and recognition’. An undisputed and grave wrong was done to Floyd, notwithstanding that he was a career criminal for whom arrest was, therefore, an occupational hazard. Arrest should not have meant death. Around the globe, what happened to him occasioned guilt among white people who would never have dreamt of behaving towards another human being as Chauvin did, even if they were a hardened police officer arresting a suspected criminal. Because of their shared identity with Chauvin — their ‘whiteness’ (a word that those who practise identity politics have made synonymous with privilege) — they felt a share of collective shame and guilt at Floyd’s murder. Many experienced this simply out of fellow-feeling with Floyd, fuelled by disgust that another member of their race had behaved in an abominable way to a member of another race; Chauvin’s conduct apparently motivated by the racial difference and, worse, Floyd’s race was one Chauvin might have considered inferior to his own.

However, there were some white people who were doubtless sincerely appalled by Floyd’s death, but also used it as an opportunity for virtue signalling. It has become clearly apparent that, among a certain section of society — and notably in callings such as the mass media, academia and of course politics — there is no faster or more certain way to gain the approval of one’s peers than by announcing one’s anti-racism. And to do so with a degree of ostentation and vulgarity that would be considered shocking in any other field of activity is considered quite normal and acceptable.

For example, no civilised and decent man beats his wife, but such men do not feel required to make regular gestures that protest their abhorrence of such a practice. However, the gesture (which pre-dates Floyd’s murder) of ‘taking the knee’ to show abhorrence of racism against black people proved uniquely popular — not so much because of its expression of solidarity with victims, but because of what it said in social and moral terms about the person doing it. And with it came an element of coercion, especially for those in public life. Once one public figure of a certain political stamp or in a certain sporting

context, for example, took the knee, the spotlight fell on those who — for whatever reason — did not. In those circumstances, those who rejected gesture politics required considerable moral courage to hold to their position.

Much of the power of identity politics is to make otherwise rational people who consider themselves part of an oppressor majority behave in an irrational, obsequious and self-hating way. They do this in order to distance themselves from appalling behaviour that it would never occur to them to engage in; but also for fear of being seen not to conform and thereby attract obloquy. The latter is in especially plentiful supply thanks to social media — which itself generally bypasses rationalism and reasoned debate, and whips up hostility against those who do not conform to the ideals or standards dictated by the mob.

But the willing self-abasement and conformity of people traditionally regarded as ‘privileged’ inevitably wins recognition for the standing of those before whom they decide to abase themselves. It is a transfer of power from the oppressor to the oppressed: what it means for the long-term relations between black and white people cannot be computed, given the ideal that in any society there should be neither oppressors nor oppressed.

It is not only by our contemporary standards that the slave trade was disgusting: it disgusted many at the time, and until the Civil War ended it, it disgusted the half of America that did not participate in it. So pernicious was it, and so hideous is its legacy, that one wonders whether it can ever cease to be an issue in race relations between black and white people in the United States.

In Britain, where there was no enslavement of black people, and where campaigners ensured the end of the trade within the British Empire 58 years before the South lost the American Civil War, it was nonetheless evoked after the death of George Floyd. Predominantly white groups started to attack the statues and memorials of those they knew to have participated in the trade two or three hundred years ago or, failing that, to have engaged in ‘colonialist’ behaviour in the era

after the trade was abolished. That the behaviour of such people was entirely contrary to a rational concept of history was the least of the offences against the intellect that this represented.

As already noted, rationalism plays little part in questions of identity politics. Emotion and grandstanding are everything, which is not least why the phenomenon is so damaging, and so hard to control. For those white people sincerely motivated by horror at Floyd's death, the episode has taken on an air of prolonged moral panic. For those cynically exploiting it to make wider ideological points, and to try to undermine a society with which — for political reasons — they are entirely out of sympathy, the absence of rationalism among others is an essential part of their armoury.

### **Beyond race**

Completing her definition of identity politics, Dr Neofotistos emphasises quite rightly that it is not just available to those with a specific racial identification. It is a weapon any closely-defined group can deploy if it feels it is not being treated equally with those who do not share its characteristics. This has been mentioned above in the context of the British trade union movement of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, which engaged in the identity politics of class.

However, Dr Neofotistos's reference to the African American civil rights movement reminds us of segregation and the denial of other rights to black people in America for a century after the Civil War won slaves their freedom. The civil rights movement made positive use of identity politics to gain equality before the law by the mid-1960s, thanks to Rosa Parks's resistance to Alabama bus segregation laws in 1955-56, and then in March 1965 (after the 1964 Civil Rights Act that supposedly bestowed equality) the Selma to Montgomery marches, which protested the state's white officials' obstruction of black people's attempts to exercise their right to register to vote.

One of Martin Luther King's most enduring remarks has been seen, however, as an encouragement to move on from identity politics: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation

where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.” Inevitably, those who have interpreted this line in this way have been accused of misinterpretation, claiming that King was not seeking to make America ‘colour blind’ or to eradicate ‘blackness’. Many of King’s successors possess a militancy that he knew would be divisive and no longer operate by his standards of reasonableness. Times, for better or worse, have changed, but King’s intelligent thought and subtle behaviour cannot always be adapted to fit in with them.

The correction of the obvious injustices in civil rights — and then in the enforcement of the law guaranteeing them — proved the power of identity politics, and forced recognition of the legitimacy of black people seeking the enforcement of those rights. But then, in more ways than one, identity politics went far beyond that.

First, its deployment sought to remove other injustices that had affected other groups that had been discriminated against; usually, but not exclusively, by white, privileged men. And so, as mentioned in Dr Neofotistos’s definition, this gave rise to the women’s movement (though as John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* made clear, this was already evident in the 1860s in Britain). Dr Neofotistos mentions the movement for homosexual equality, which having achieved the legalisation of same-sex relations in many countries where they were banned, has continued to campaign for a fundamentalist view of equal rights, including marriage between people of the same sex, and with considerable success.

Nationalist movements may include campaigns by the Scots and the Catalans to break away from the United Kingdom and Spain respectively; but where these tend to differ from identity politics as practised today is that they have a definite end in sight — independence — rather than an ongoing programme of subversion of some established cultural order. It is often forgotten that there has been one clear example of what might best be termed ‘clean break’ identity political movements in recent years, in which once the aim was achieved the movement shut down: and that was the successful

campaign by those who saw British sovereignty as an essential part of their identity to have the country leave the European Union. This was the exception I referred to earlier in talking about the credibility of identity politics; though admittedly it involved a mass of predominantly white people (not the usual clientele of identity political movements) taking on a privileged political elite, also largely composed of white people.

At time of writing, the vogue identity political movement is those standing up for transgender rights, their aim being to fight against what they call ‘transphobia’. (A phobia, as is widely known, is a fear. Those who campaign against ‘transphobics’ do not, however appear to be campaigning against anyone who fears people who have changed, or who are— or are contemplating — changing their gender. They seem to be campaigning against those who they believe engage in acts of hatred towards them, which is a very different matter altogether. The word ‘homophobe’ is equally misapplied.) Acts of transphobia seem most commonly to be committed by women, many of them ardent feminists, who argue that someone cannot through surgery become the same type of human being as a human being who is biologically born female. This is deemed an act of hatred against those who have had surgery, because it affronts them in their estimation of themselves. Biologically-born females also complain with some justification about a variety of offences committed towards them, such as men who choose to identify as women (but have not yet had the operations needed to complete the process of making them, in their estimation, women) using women’s lavatories, or changing rooms, or being put in women’s prisons.

Perhaps more worrying is the determination of many in this particular identity movement to allow under-age children, who are deemed by the law not to be responsible for themselves, to have full access to counselling and medical services that allow sex-change operations to take place. Such things have caused enormous disquiet, not least in the medical profession and those who work professionally in the field of mental health.

However, mention of the unwisdom of any of these things by a concerned woman, her husband or partner, parent or teacher, or medical professional is deemed transphobic and a potential hate crime. One obvious consequence of this is that the matter is not discussed as frankly or as openly as it should be; a clear example of identity politics being deployed to close down freedom of discourse. Pressure — if not to conform, then to maintain silence — also handicaps those social conservatives who wish to argue for conventional families and for the contribution they make to the stability of societies in all cultures. To argue for the conventional family is seen as reactionary, exclusive and treated as though bordering on a hate crime; which also has its effects on freedom of speech.

### **Forging identities**

It was in the wake of the Floyd murder that much of the world heard for the first time about Black Lives Matter, a group that has become the established church of identity politics. The group began in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a white man (who identifies as Hispanic) who the previous year had shot a black youth, Trayvon Martin, whom he found in his gated community in Florida. Zimmerman pleaded self-defence.

To begin with, BLM was simply a Twitter hashtag; the following year — after a black man was shot by a policeman in Ferguson, Missouri, and a black suspect died after being held in an illegal chokehold by a New York city policeman — the movement grew and, in America, acquired national recognition.

However, the movement is decentralised and therefore no-one, or no central committee, settles policy. The original and entirely admirable aim — that black people merit in all circumstances treatment equal to that given to white people — could not but be a form of identity politics, though the movement claims to be non-party political. The aims have, thanks not least to the decentralised nature of BLM, expanded considerably to absorb many views that are most certainly

associated with political parties, and inevitably parties of the left. As a movement, it has been strongly reliant on social media.

The killing of George Floyd gave it its greatest boost: in the immediate aftermath of Floyd's death, the *New York Times* estimated that between 15 and 26 million people in America took part in protests about the killing. The Pew Research Center found in June 2020 that 67 per cent of Americans supported the movement: by September the support had fallen to 55 per cent. This may have been a consequence of the emotions of the moment passing; or it may have been the result of some sections of the decentralised movement using the prominence and popularity it had suddenly acquired to air some other views that it felt would be helpful to the cause of racial equality — such as defunding the police, a view expressed in the height of the emotion after Floyd was killed but which BLM lacked anyone with the authority to contradict.

Inevitably, some views expressed by sections of the movement are not shared by others; but if they shout loudly enough, and if the mass media suspend disbelief while seeking themselves to grandstand about their own commitment to anti-racism, these views are broadcast widely. And given the loose structure of the organisation — not just in America, but also in the United Kingdom — control of such views is impossible. As a result, BLM has ended up being perceived to stand for a range of leftist beliefs, not just to value black lives as much as white ones. Defunding the police has long been a demand of (predominantly white) anarchist groups, for example.

BLM has exported its campaigns to countries with very different cultures from that of America, where racist behaviour by the police has long appeared to be an incontestable fact. There is no question that police forces in America have used, and continue to use, methods (and not exclusively, but apparently disproportionately, towards black people) that would never be tolerated in many other western democracies.

Yet BLM rapidly got a foothold in Britain after Floyd's death, though the main targets of its rage — in the absence of murderous, racially-motivated police officers — appeared to be long-dead beneficiaries of the slave trade. The website of Black Lives Matter UK makes no secret of its wider aims: "We're guided by a commitment to dismantle imperialism, capitalism, white-supremacy, patriarchy and the state structures that disproportionately harm black people in Britain and around the world. We build deep relationships across the diaspora and strategise to challenge the rise of the authoritarian right-wing across the world, from Brazil to Britain."

It adds: "Our commitment to all black lives means that we lift up the experiences of the most marginalised in our communities, including but not limited to working class queer, trans, undocumented, disabled, Muslim, sex workers, women/non-binary, HIV+ people." It has also said that "prisons and detention centres should be abolished", that Britain's borders are enforced "by extreme violence", that it wants the "abolition" of the police and condemns charities doing relief work abroad as "colonisers". It also has an interesting view of history. Inevitably, it has condemned Winston Churchill as a 'racist', but perhaps less predictably has attacked the women's suffrage movement for having "sought to advance white power".

This is the movement in whose name many innocent people felt they should 'take the knee'. But it was notable how many modified their view when they realised BLM was just another anarchist front organisation, many of whose spokesmen and women, when they appeared on news broadcasts, appeared to be remarkably white.

The treatment of Australian Aborigines also gave the movement some traction in Australia, inviting innocent Australians to take what was deemed to be their share of the guilt. Similarly, the movement mobilised itself in Canada to protest about the treatment of indigenous people there. In New Zealand, activists raised allegations of police brutality against Maoris and Pacific Islanders.

Wherever it manifested, the process was the same: find evidence of appalling injustice — preferably in the present but, failing that,



in the past (to which today's standards will, without the slightest embarrassment, be applied) — and use it to attack the cultural mainstream. This attack causes divisions and then promotes conflict. And the leftist movements that thrive on conflict reap the rewards of that publicity and destabilisation. Inevitably, those who attempt to protest about this divisiveness and cynicism are accused of racism, which proves — rather like a weapon of mass destruction — an effective, if anti-intellectual, means of closing down the argument.

The same applies to those who seek to criticise the arguments of any other minority that portrays itself (either rightly or wrongly) as beleaguered, who rapidly find themselves branded as phobics of one sort or another, and suspected of hate crime. Freedom of speech is what we thought it was.

### **Football crazy**

There have been numerous instances in recent months of the toxic effect of identity politics on supposedly free societies. In England in July 2021, its national football team reached the final of the European Championships. Various sports in Britain jumped on the virtue-signalling bandwagon in 2020 after Floyd's killing, and football was one.

However, some Premier League football teams jumped off that bandwagon within weeks when their plutocratic owners realised that the British arm of Black Lives Matter had an active belief in destroying precisely the sort of capitalism that was so dear to their hearts and essential to their way of life. Some footballers, notably black ones, continued to 'take the knee' before matches; obviously not to signal virtue but to express solidarity with black people who were targets and casualties of racism.

Among British Conservatives, and increasingly in the mainstream of public opinion, the gesture of taking the knee came to be regarded at best as a fashion that had passed — at worst (among the more politically sophisticated) as an act of deference not towards equality but towards the tenets of extreme leftism held dear by those who had

manipulated the reaction to Floyd's death for their own ends. One of those who felt discomfort at the gesture was Priti Patel, the British Home Secretary, herself a woman of colour, a Hindu and of Indian descent.

At the beginning of the European Championships, Ms Patel was asked for her views on footballers taking the knee before matches. She said, quite reasonably, that she did not support such gesture politics. She was asked what her opinion would be of football fans who booed players who did take the knee before matches: she replied that it was up to the fans to decide. Of course it was, and such an exercise of free speech — however rude — must be permitted in a free society.

However, to those practising identity politics, such behaviour is not merely rudeness but, because they choose to interpret it as an affront to black people and towards those who defend the rights of black people, it is a hate crime. Perhaps Ms Patel spoke incautiously, given her position. Sadly, she has attempted herself to make no detailed defence of freedom of expression, and neither has any of her senior colleagues. The present British government is top-heavy with mediocrities, and it certainly lacks the sort of intellectual clout required to make such a case cogently and coherently.

However, one must also question whether, in the present climate, even if it were full of fine minds, it would overcome the fear of countering the identity politics that has so constrained normal freedom of expression. After all, some of the people who had been booing those taking the knee might conceivably have been expressing their legitimate annoyance at the intrusion of far-left anti-capitalist, anarchist politics into their sport. It is too easy, and convenient, for others to assume they are all racists.

Among leftists in Britain, Ms Patel is regarded with great disdain, and was before the remarks quoted above. She was a supporter of Brexit and purports to be hard line on immigration (which is one of her departmental responsibilities). However, her credibility has suffered greatly as a result of that. Illegal immigration into Britain is at a record high and Ms Patel seems powerless to stop it; the summer

of 2021 was, she appears to have felt, a time for her to try to recoup some of her lost popularity. With much of the English nation obsessed with the fortunes of the football team, showing her interest in the game appeared a way of doing it, and her line about gesture politics played well with most Conservatives.

England reached the final, against Italy and lost it after a penalty shoot-out. Three young black players were asked to take penalties and missed them. Social media — which seems increasingly to be the smallpox of the 21<sup>st</sup> century — was quickly filled with racial abuse of the players concerned (it little matters that much of this was later traced to Russia, and launched in an attempt to cause destabilisation). Ms Patel, quite appropriately given her occupation of a great office of State, said she was “disgusted” by the “vile racist abuse” showered on the players. This, however, provoked outrage from one of the abused footballers, Tyrone Mings. He said: “You don’t get to stoke the fire at the beginning of the tournament by labelling our anti-racism message as ‘Gesture Politics’ and then pretend to be disgusted when the very thing we’re campaigning against, happens.” Because of the sentimental determination of many in England to take more seriously the political views of an unelected 28-year old professional footballer than those of the Home Secretary in an increasingly unpopular government, Ms Patel found her attempt to say the right thing had monumentally backfired.

However, Mings was almost certainly wrong to assert that Ms Patel’s repudiation of gesture politics had ‘stoked the fire’ of racism. The type of person who went after the black footballers needed no encouragement in their vileness from Ms Patel; and her intentions in repudiating gesture politics can be attributed to higher motives in any case. The problem of racism — particularly in a society such as America, where the state’s agents in the police feel they can treat a human being who is black with greater brutality and less care than they would usually deploy towards a white man — will not be solved by gestures. Senior politicians such as Ms Patel should know such things, and by her repudiation of gesture politics, she signalled that.

Mings was also almost certainly unfair in saying that her disgust at the racial abuse he and his teammates received was a pretence. And if Mings thinks that the entire team taking the knee from now until kingdom come would have stopped the sort of people who frequent social media for the purposes of engaging in gratuitous abuse, he is naïve in the extreme. His football club, Aston Villa, pay him (according to the latest figures) £4.16m (\$7.88m) a year, and good luck to him. But it provides a lifestyle that would do well to survive the abolition of capitalism that is the stated aim of his friends in the Black Lives Matter movement.

The whole episode proves, again, that when politics becomes about identity, rationality goes out of the window. Communities divide; suspicions grow; enmities breed; and the divided groups — in their hostility to each other — fragment society in a way that serves the purposes of those political factions that thrive on discontent.

### **Useful idiots**

Thriving on discontent has long been a feature of various political movements. It is not peculiar to the left, but it has featured, and will continue to feature, in totalitarian movements of all colours. Not all such totalitarian movements have thrived on the exploitation of racial differences; but some have. When Black Lives Matter activists present themselves as an avowedly Marxist movement, no one from inside the organisation rushes to contradict them, though that may simply be a function of the organisation's lack of organisation. Its policy aim to defund the police is consistent with the Marxist aim of permanent revolution.

When people mock commentators who draw attention to this fact, and ask whether it could really be the case that major commercial brands, or such luminaries as the manager of the England football team, would so willingly have associated themselves with such an extremist movement, they unwittingly make two points. The first is about the cynicism of commercial enterprises who believe they cannot

lose by hitching themselves to what the general public know to be an anti-racist movement, for anti-racism is laden with sweetness and light and, apparently, nothing else. Perhaps they understand that in this instance anti-racism has been recruited to the service of those with a wider political agenda but, having done a moral cost/benefit analysis, they simply don't care. Or — and this brings us on to the second point — they simply have not lifted up the stone and looked underneath, and therefore are guilty of wilful ignorance.

In America, division has become rampant as a result of BLM. Movements such as All Lives Matter, which forsakes racial compartmentalisation, have started; as has White Lives Matter, which has all the appearances of an aggressively racist group akin to the Ku Klux Klan; and Blue Lives Matter, which argues that those convicted of killing police officers should be classified as having committed a hate crime and therefore punished more severely.

As George F Will, the distinguished conservative columnist, argued in recent remarks at a CIS event, the emphasis should be on the individual and not on any form of group identity. But the various minority movements that thrive on the exploitation of identity — be they racial, or about sexual orientation or about the increasingly vexed issue of gender — have no interest in the advancement of individuals. This is because (and this takes us back to Dr Neofotistos's definition of identity politics) the acquisition of power and recognition through identity politics must depend on the creation and promulgation of 'group distinctiveness'. And while no man (or woman) is an island, neither is he (or she) a group.

The emergence of identity politics proves many things; none of them edifying. It proves above all how no element of human misery or misfortune is above being exploited by political agitators for their own ends, and how people who have suffered unquestionable injustices — and the people of goodwill who sympathise with them — become the victims of confidence tricks by those who use identity politics to make progress with extreme political aims that would otherwise be hopeless to secure.

Only by making the wider public aware of what such groups really stand for, will this cynicism be countered. The mass media have a huge responsibility in purveying these truths, but for the moment seem in many cases too afraid to throw themselves before the mob in doing so. If they are not careful, they would, if such political forces ever obtained power, soon find themselves under a degree of control that would make freedom of speech redundant. Identity politics is but the latest weapon in a war that is being fought for very high stakes.



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# The threat of identity politics

Global outrage over the killing of George Floyd by a white policeman in America last year has been harnessed by activist groups such as Black Lives Matter to support demands for social and political upheaval that go way beyond making racial equality a reality. This has led to the weaponisation of identity politics across much of the Western world, causing rancour, division and distrust in societies with white majorities and ethnic minorities.

In this paper, UK historian Simon Heffer argues that much of the power of identity politics is to make normally rational people who consider themselves part of an oppressor majority behave in an irrational and self-hating way. They do this in order to distance themselves from appalling behaviour that it would never occur to them to engage in, but also for fear of being seen not to conform and thereby attract public condemnation. The latter is in especially plentiful supply thanks to social media, which itself generally bypasses rationalism and reasoned debate, and whips up hostility against those who do not conform to the ideals or standards dictated by the mob. This threatens freedom of speech and the marketplace of ideas in free and liberal societies.



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