


Contested Past, Contested Future: Identity Politics and Liberal Democracy

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Events in recent years have underscored the dependence of the liberal international order (LIO) on the domestic fate of liberalism in the countries that lead it. This connection is clearest and most consequential in the United States, where drastic changes vis-à-vis the LIO followed the 2016 presidential election—an outcome not merely favored but actively promoted by illiberal foreign powers, especially Russia. As a 2017 U.S. intelligence community assessment concluded, Russia’s pro-Trump intervention in the campaign aimed to “undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process” and marked a “significant escalation” in its “longstanding desire to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order.”¹ Its evident success suggests that the LIO’s future—and that of liberalism more broadly—may rest, at least in part, on the electoral fortunes of some American progressives.

Yet prominent critics like Mark Lilla and Francis Fukuyama maintain that those same progressives are sabotaging a liberal renaissance rather than leading one. They attribute this self-destruction to liberals’ embrace of identity politics, which (it is said) undermines solidarity, corrodes civil discourse, and energizes the illiberal right—effects that eerily mirror the goals of anti-liberals like Putin. In order for liberalism to survive, the argument goes, liberals must reject identity politics and focus on creedal, civic commonalities that can ground a “post-identity liberalism.”²

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Is this a plausible path for rescuing liberalism's domestic—and, by extension, international—future? There are reasons for doubt. Because they oversimplify liberalism's past, the critics of identity politics mistakenly treat “common” civic ideals as static objects, overlooking the fact that these ideals gain their meaning only within the very interpretive contexts that are currently being reshaped by identity-based movements. My aim here is not to deny that liberal democracy requires some common self-understanding among citizens: far from it. In fact, the importance of such shared self-understandings demands that we investigate how they might be generated under conditions of diversity, and why overconfidence in static liberal appeals might perversely endanger liberalism's future. Critics of identity politics should consider how the claims of identity might be an asset, not an obstacle, to revitalizing liberal democracy against its challengers.

THE CRITIQUE: IDENTITY POLITICS AS A TRAP FOR LIBERALISM

As G. John Ikenberry has noted, twentieth-century liberal internationalism “was closely tied to domestic progressive policy and movements” during the progressive, New Deal, and Great Society eras. From this, Ikenberry concludes that “if liberal internationalism is to thrive, it will need to be built again on these sorts of progressive foundations.”³ Yet many critics argue that since the 1970s, these foundations have been undermined by the American left's embrace of identity politics—in Lilla's words, “a pseudo-politics of self-regard and increasingly narrow and exclusionary self-definition” that has become the “de facto creed of two generations of liberal politicians, professors, schoolteachers, journalists, movement activists, and officials of the Democratic Party.”⁴ Fukuyama writes that while “twentieth-century politics” was “defined by economic issues,” identity has displaced materialism and is now “a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today.”⁵

While neither Lilla nor Fukuyama denies the validity of marginalized groups' claims for recognition, both contend that identity-based claims harm liberalism. Identity politics, writes Lilla, “is largely expressive, not persuasive”; it “never wins elections—but can lose them.”⁶ The goal is “to have a message that appeals to as many people as possible and pulls them together. Identity liberalism does just the opposite.”⁷ Fukuyama writes that while “there is nothing wrong with identity politics as such,” a focus on identity has distracted from socioeconomic inequality, undermined civic discourse, and—worst of all—“stimulated the rise of identity politics on the right.”⁸

Both Lilla and Fukuyama advocate resisting identity's destructive centrifugal force with a unifying politics of civic commonality. Lilla proposes an appeal to citizenship: "something that as Americans we all share but which has nothing to do with our identities"; "a *political status*, nothing less and nothing more."⁹ "We must re-learn how to speak to citizens *as citizens* and to frame our appeals—including ones to benefit particular groups—in terms of principles that everyone can affirm," he writes.¹⁰ Fukuyama similarly argues that while democratic "deliberation and consensus" is threatened by a shift toward "the protection of narrow group identities," the "remedy is not to abandon the idea of identity," but to "define larger and more integrative national identities."¹¹ He contends that the United States and other democracies "need to promote what political scientists call 'creedal national identities,' which are built not around shared personal characteristics, lived experiences, historical ties, or religious convictions but rather around core values and beliefs" and "foundational ideals," such as "constitutionalism, the rule of law, and human equality."¹²

THE LIMITS OF CIVIC APPEALS

This appeal to a politics of civic commonality both overestimates liberalism's historical appeal in the United States and oversimplifies the complex role of identity politics in a diverse liberal democracy. Liberal values are not as popular as Americans flatter themselves to think; nor are their implications as self-evident as they would need to be in order to transcend political conflict. This does not mean that appeals to those values should be abandoned, but it does suggest that they are unlikely to promote the liberal form of unity that critics of identity politics envision.

Fukuyama's endorsement of creedal nationalism, for example, is premised on the claim that "Americanism constitutes a set of beliefs and a way of life, not an ethnicity," a putative fact that legitimizes certain civic exclusions: "Americans respect those ideas; the country is justified in withholding citizenship from those who reject them."¹³ The underlying normative intuition here—that membership in the American polity ought to involve respect for constitutionalism and human equality, for instance—invites a closer look at Fukuyama's premise that Americans *do* respect such values. My suggestion is that the history of American citizenship tells a more complicated story. Many champions of "Americanism," historical and contemporary, have resisted the suggestion that their ideal is a "set of beliefs," or have promoted core tenets of Americanism

that break sharply with liberal values. This history suggests reasons to doubt the claim that citizenship is *merely* a political status, capable of straightforwardly grounding a politics of commonality.

“Over the past two centuries,” write the historians Michael Kazin and Joseph McCartin, “Americanism has been put to a variety of uses, benign and belligerent, democratic and demagogic.”¹⁴ Discourses of Americanism often predominated while ethnoracial conceptions of nationhood and citizenship were on the rise—including during World War I and the 1920s, when Congress enacted a series of restrictive immigration policies based on racial hierarchies,¹⁵ and when both public and private organizations pursued campaigns of “Americanization,” often coercive in form. While “Americanization was not necessarily incompatible with respect for immigrant subcultures,” notes Eric Foner, the onset of World War I “transformed Americanization into a government-sponsored campaign to instill undivided loyalty in immigrant communities and gave the concept ‘American’ a deeply conservative new meaning.”¹⁶

This history does not prove that Americanism is an unsalvageable concept, but it does suggest that its mobilization in the service of liberalism might be in tension with its mobilization in the service of unity. Fukuyama’s proposal arguably understates this tension: Lamenting not only “white nationalists” on the right but also left-wing “champions of identity politics” who seek to “undermine the legitimacy of the American national story,” he recommends that progressives “tell a different version of U.S. history, one focused on how an ever-broadening circle of people have overcome barriers to achieve recognition of their dignity.”¹⁷ But progressives attracted to this advice would do well to note Rogers Smith’s warning that such teleological narratives, in which “exclusions . . . were steadily eliminated,” obscure the reality that “American civic history has been far more serpentine.”¹⁸ Far from Fukuyama’s “ever-broadening circle,” American history actually presents us with persistent contractions of democratic inclusion: some African Americans who enjoyed citizenship status and voting rights in the 1820s actually *lost* them by the 1850s (a process of gaining and losing that would repeat itself during Reconstruction); starting in 1907, American women were for over two decades subject to expatriation for marrying certain foreigners; racial and ethnic restrictions on immigration did not appear until the late nineteenth century; and so on.¹⁹

In short, creedal nationalism, at least in its teleological guise, minimizes the sincere devotion to hierarchy and prejudice that has long been a central feature of American politics, including during eras of democratic reform. In turn, this

historical distortion calls into question creedal nationalism's claim to be justified on the basis of some universal consensus. Even the Declaration of Independence's phrase "All men are created equal" was explicitly rejected by many prominent Americans into the twentieth century; as one U.S. senator put it in 1854, the Declaration's "self-evident truth" of equality was a "self-evident lie."²⁰

Such oversimplification, stemming from a perceived imperative to (as Smith puts it) "insist that America's core values have always been democratic and egalitarian if they are to legitimate further reforms,"²¹ also encourages a costly misinterpretation of the nature of abstract values. In the teleological narrative, ideals such as equality and freedom unfold within history yet remain aloof from the changing interpretive contexts that ultimately transformed their meaning; put another way, only their scope changes, but never their substance. This is a conceptual mistake. Abstract values can be enacted in the world only through processes of interpretation, and their concrete expansion to cover hitherto unimagined groups and situations amounts to a *reinterpretation*, or a transformation in their meaning. As Seyla Benhabib writes, in "repeating a term or a concept, we never simply produce a replica of the original usage and its intended meaning; rather, every repetition is a form of variation. Every iteration transforms meaning, adds to it, enriches it in ever-so-subtle ways."²² This is true even of basic rights, which in the abstract are, in Jürgen Habermas's formulation, "unsaturated": "They must be *interpreted* and *given concrete shape*," and must be elaborated "by a historical legislator."²³ Or, as Anna Stilz has put it, a "minimal [moral] core still does not provide us with a full account of what equal freedom entails in a particular political context . . . every more concrete specification of the 'unsaturated' moral ideals that ought to guide legislation must come about in and through the deliberations of a well-ordered legal community."²⁴ The abstract values of creedal identity can be given concrete form only in particular contexts, in which their meaning will be subject to deep disagreements. A libertarian and a socialist can each endorse "freedom" as they understand it, with little overlap between their respective visions of the good society.²⁵ Such terms do not specify their own implications. That work is for citizens to do.

IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE FUTURE OF LIBERALISM

The expansion of "creedal" values in American history has almost always required a transformation in their commonly understood meaning, and these

transformations often begin when that meaning is challenged from an identity-based perspective. Frederick Douglass's 1852 address marking the Fourth of July provides an illustrative example. In that speech, Douglass sought to expand the reach of the Declaration of Independence by effecting a reinterpretation of its meaning, a task for which he explicitly adopted an identity-based perspective—examining the holiday “from the slave’s point of view.” From that perspective, Douglass reminded his white listeners that the same “sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me.”²⁶ This metaphor wraps an assertion of difference in a claim of commonality: The oppression of the slave and the freedom of the white American result from the *same* political institutions. It insists on Black Americans’ place in the national experience by redefining that experience. The consequence of that redefinition is that July 4 becomes a truly shared holiday, but one that, insofar as it is shared, can no longer be regarded with uncomplicated patriotic love.

Of course, Douglass’s practical point was that a nonhypocritical endorsement of American values required the abolition of slavery. That this was controversial illustrates two related senses in which common values may not actually be common: (1) They are not *endorsed* by all, and (2) they do not *apply* to all. The difficulty facing those who would seek to unify the nation under liberal values is that progress toward sense 2 often comes at the expense of sense 1. For American values to become more inclusive, their meanings have had to change in ways that were, and remain, controversial. Many invokers of liberty and equality did not believe themselves to be endorsing the abolition of slavery, universal suffrage, or other apparent consequences; others, fearing those very consequences, declined to endorse the ideals altogether. By obscuring this complexity, teleological narratives underestimate the number of Americans who would find themselves dissenters to any creedal nationalism that honored its ideals by applying them expansively.

Not only that; the teleological imperative to analyze creedal values in static terms makes it more difficult to recognize how identity-based claims can generate compelling new interpretations of those values. Consider, for instance, Ralph Ellison’s description of the political task facing African Americans: “And since we are an inseparable part of the American nation and its culture, let us accept the obligation of defining it from the perspective of our own backgrounds and insist that its values be brought in line with our own group’s aspirations and needs.”²⁷ Such redefinitions will often be divisive; commonality and comity may

turn out to part ways. Yet a liberal who seeks commonality should welcome this process, since (on this view) an expansive interpretation of creedal values can only be achieved through the generation of a composite perspective. If this is the case, then identity politics might play a constructive, not destructive, role as long as it pursues more representative self-understandings and resists the blunt insistence that mutual understanding among diverse citizens is a flat impossibility.

The evidence that identity politics is likely to take the latter path seems largely anecdotal. If the most prominent identity movement today is Black Lives Matter, there is little evidence that its members reject broader solidarities, or that its concerns are solely of interest to a small group of Leftist elites. In 2017, Lilla called Black Lives Matter “a textbook example of how not to build solidarity” because its “general indictment of American society, and its law enforcement institutions . . . played into the hands of the Republican right.”²⁸ But researchers estimate that the spring- and summer-2020 Black Lives Matter protests following the death of George Floyd, in which as many as twenty-six million Americans participated, was the largest protest movement in American history.²⁹ Moreover, those protests were unusually diverse³⁰ and reached into numerous smaller, whiter, more conservative communities.³¹ Although support for Black Lives Matter has waned since 2020, when two-thirds of American adults (including 60 percent of whites) expressed support for the movement,³² it has profoundly influenced public discourse and inspired reforms (however nascent and, as yet, limited).³³ Even today, it continues to enjoy support from a slim majority of American adults, as it consistently has since researchers began measuring its popularity in 2017.³⁴

These findings belie the claim that identity-based movements necessarily turn inward, undermine solidarity, and empower the illiberal right. Arguments based on the distinctive experiences of some social groups do not automatically divide citizens; rather, by unmasking the partiality of supposed universals, they often promote a more complete vision of the civic whole. As movement activists constantly remind skeptics, the phrase “Black Lives Matter” should not be understood as a rigidly particularist claim (*only* Black Lives Matter), but rather as a particular *manifestation* of a universal claim (Black Lives Matter, *too*). “Life,” the first self-evident, unalienable right listed in the Declaration, can hardly be considered a priority alien to America’s creedal self-understanding. That a movement calling for its protection should meet backlash says more about the status of creedal values, and their likelihood to promote national unity, than it does about the supposed myopia of the protestors. Lastly, as I have been emphasizing, it is unsurprising

from a historical perspective that such movements should face resistance. But whatever “divisiveness” they create cannot plausibly be attributed to a failure or refusal to speak the language of credal values; nor does controversy alone prove that voters will punish any politicians who endorse the movement.

There is little doubt that American liberalism is undergoing a period of change. Its renewal is not guaranteed, but neither is its demise. If it is to reemerge as a force that is both potent and inclusive, it will do so through accommodating the claims of identity, and generating from them a new, more complete sense of collective selfhood.

As a domestic priority for American progressives, this project is by extension vital to the future of the LIO. American liberals face (along with their peers in many democracies) a resurgent ethnoracial nationalism and its authoritarian political corollary. If they hope to preserve democratic self-rule against those forces, they will need to inspire citizens to collectively reimagine the democratic “We.” No institutional mechanism of democracy can force citizens to demonstrate this sort of solidarity; together, citizens must, as Elizabeth Anderson writes, transform each other’s preferences, “not just in the sense of changing individuals’ minds about what each wants, but of changing *our* mind of what *we* want when we act collectively as citizens.”³⁵ To *want* a society that respects the dignity of all its members is to interpret the nation’s history and its aspirational values in light of the perspectives of all social groups, including those who argue—by necessity—from the position of their identity. Such a process is unlikely to generate unity. It never has. But neither need it generate insurmountable divisions or benefit the forces hostile to liberal values. Liberalism today needs all the help it can get; its adherents would do well to seek allies rather than develop new enemies.

NOTES

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⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), pp. 6, xv.

⁶ Lilla, “The End of Identity Liberalism.”

⁷ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, p. 12.

⁸ Fukuyama, *Identity*, pp. 115, 118.

⁹ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, pp. 120, 121.

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- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 16.
- ²⁰ John Pettit, quoted in Pauline Maier, "The Strange History of 'All Men Are Created Equal,'" *Washington and Lee Law Review* 56, no. 3 (Summer 1999), pp. 873–88, at pp. 883–85. On the resurfacing of opposition to the declaration's language of human equality during the turn of the twentieth century, see Smith, *Civic Ideals*, pp. 416–17.
- ²¹ Smith, *Civic Ideals*, p. 26.
- ²² Seyla Benhabib, "Democratic Iterations: The Local, the National, and the Global," ch. 2 in Seyla Benhabib, with Jeremy Waldron, Bonnie Honig, and Will Kymlicka, *Another Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Robert Post (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 45–81, at p. 47.
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- ²⁵ See, for example, this explicit attempt by left-wing thinkers to reclaim the ideal of freedom from the right: Alex Gourevitch and Corey Robin, "Freedom Now," *Polity* 52, no. 3 (July 2020), pp. 384–98, www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/708919.
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Abstract: Events in recent years have underscored the dependence of the liberal international order (LIO) on the domestic fate of liberalism in countries like the United States—where, according to critics such as Mark Lilla and Francis Fukuyama, liberals have imperiled themselves through an unwise embrace of identity politics. These critics argue that identity politics undermines solidarity and empowers the illiberal right, and that it should be rejected in favor of a unifying creedal nationalism based on common liberal values. This analysis, I argue, overlooks the fact that “common” creedal values have expanded in American history when their meanings were being controversially reinterpreted from identity-based perspectives. If American liberalism is to emerge from its current crisis, it will need to incorporate the claims of identity into a sense of national belonging that can resist the authoritarian, ethnoracial nationalism promoted by the LIO’s enemies. The likelihood that such a process will be controversial is reason for liberal critics of identity politics to consider how the claims of identity might be an asset, not an obstacle, to revitalizing liberal democracy against its challengers.

Keywords: identity politics, democracy, liberalism, nationalism