The Uses of Identity

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Identity politics has a therapeutic function. As much as it is used to protect existing social groups from ostracization or outright attack, it is also used to create the identities it defends. Populists like Donald Trump, for instance, do not merely seek to protect the white working class from powers and people inimical to its common good; they rhetorically forge that white working class into being, uniting disparate people with various grievances into single a family bound by a common enemy: a Once-Great America known in and through the globalizing market forces and elitist exclusions that have smothered its greatness.

Here, violence does not simply afflict a given group of people, it confirms them as a group, affirms them as a particular culture, and lends to each member a profound sense of belonging. Oppression becomes creative, and so the identity group comes to need its oppressor. This coronation of violence as the creator of identity was literalized in a recent argument within feminist thought, which argued there was no unity to the identity "woman" besides the particular experience of violence and oppression which women have historically experienced at the hands of men. This would seem to exclude so-called trans identities from the identity of "woman," insofar as "trans women," prior to their transition, had no experience of this identity-forging violence. The common rebuttal to this view was not, as one might imagine, that "woman" was an identity constituted by some definite content besides the violence turned against its members. Rather, it was that "trans women" experienced their own oppression by a "cisgender" and heteronormative culture, uniting both oppressed groups into a singular social category. What remains vital, in either case, is that for the broad identity category "woman" to exist, a definite, oppressing force was required to craft it, uniting its various members into a single, collective, lived experience.

If identity politics has a therapeutic effect—and it certainly appears as a life-giving source of meaning, power, and purpose for those who take it up—then what is the disorder? In her book *Primal Screams*, Mary Eberstadt argues that "our macropolitics have become a mania about identity, because our micropolitics are no longer familial." The therapeutic need to bind oneself against an enemy and to an identity *is* the political activity of *genuine* victims, in this case, victims of a larger cultural monster than the particular monsters they cry foul against: the devastation of the family following the sexual revolution of the sixties.

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The argument makes a good deal of sense. Historically, the family has answered the question "Who am I?" with as much force as the nation or the Church. The capacity to point to one's relations, to one's status as a daughter to a father, a daughter to a mother, a sister to a brother, and so forth—all of this fixes the individual in a place and with a people, the networks of which ultimately encompass the entire human family and, indeed, the entire cosmic order. With the advent of contraception, abortion, easy divorce, and reproductive technologies—to pick a few from the usual litany—these constitutive relations become weak, reduced in number and variety. Children born today are more likely than ever before to grow up not knowing their father or never having a sibling of the opposite or same sex. If it is the case that the individual is a singular point, constituted within a web of relations, then more and more people are trying to find and express their individual selves with less and less of a relational web through which to do it. To cite an especially poignant, representative example, Eberstadt shows that about two-thirds of children conceived through sperm donation "agreed with the statement, 'My sperm donor is half of who I am.'" As the author perceptively notes, "That is half a self left hanging in limbo." The survey yielded other surprising results: "'More than half say that when they see someone who resembles them, they wonder if they are related. Almost as many say they have feared being attracted to or having sexual relations with someone to whom they are related.'"

The children of sperm donation are unique, but their loss of identity is not. We live in a world in which brothers are replaced by half-brothers, fathers by live-in boyfriends, mothers by surrogates, and extended families by a passing crowd of acquaintances halfheartedly miming the positions, and often the names, of "uncle," "aunt," and "cousin." When identity is so split between multiple and often oppositional families, it is hardly a jump to argue that the therapy of identity politics may salve a deeper wound than whatever racism, sexism, or transphobia the patient declares himself to suffer, however real and painful the latter may be. Finding a political identity feels like finding a name, a fact often lost on those who already have such warm, familial belonging, which, as a real and holistic security, is rarely noticed as a "need."

To the degree that this therapeutic goal is a real motivation within the practitioners of identity politics, it is a doomed exercise. The achievement of recognition, and the protection of a particular group's dignity that it entails, might secure the goals of justice, but in doing so, fails to shore up a secure sense of identity. For, even as tolerance and acceptance rids a group of the affliction of injustice, it also rids that group of a clear enemy, and thus whatever identity a common enemy granted it. If, for instance, people were not sexist, "women," considered as an oppressed identity, would no longer exist. If we stopped being racist, those who feel their racial identity in oppositional terms would be disappointed to find their identity watered-down into near-nothingness. In short, if group identity isn't grounded in a substantial, positive reality, it is insecure.

Success, within identity politics, always seems to inaugurate a "changing of the guard." Those who participate because they despise injustice are satisfied at the destruction of whatever they perceived as unjust, while those who need that injustice to continuously lend them their identity begin to take pains to show how, despite appearances, the injustice remains. This latter group includes the former in its antagonistic purview: whites who protested against racism yesterday are transformed into the

unwitting promoters of white supremacy today, a fall which does not occur by any particular sin, but by the academic postulate that they are still, by virtue of being white, complicit in systemic racism—an accident of color which assures their continued presence as the enemy, however friendly they may seem. This retention of the enemy has been more obviously seen within the politics of sexual identity, where those who advocated for gay and lesbian rights have become, as Andrew Sullivan has noted, pariahs within the diversifying LGBT+ scene: "Suddenly we're not just being told homosexuality is 'problematic' by the religious right, we're being told it by the woke left," for whom the categories of "male" and "female," which make homosexuality intelligible, have become *verboten*.

Of course, such an internal splintering can be described at face-value as a difference in opinion between generations of thinkers. But this difference seems to be relentlessly repeated, whether in feminist, antifeminist, racist, or antiracist thought. A coalition constituted in their identity by their opposition to an apparently unjust enemy tends to divide itself into smaller and smaller units who claim for themselves a special degree of purity vis-à-vis the unjust other, which grows larger and larger as it appears to envelop and corrupt more and more would-be radicals; not just the heterosexuals, but sexual-difference presuming gays, lesbians, and bisexuals swell the ranks of the beast, dwindling the number of the elect.

The result is apparent: identity politics tends towards weakness and typically terminates, not in developing alternative communities, building fair and just cities, or crushing whatever institutional injustice it sets itself against, but in demanding various recognitions from entities that really do hold power, especially, the state and its corporate constituents. In this way, identity politics serves the political and economic status quo, even as it defines itself in its radical opposition to it. Insofar as it remains a hidden, therapeutic act by which the member of a lost family attains a new identity, acts of political identification place a ceiling on their potential radicalism: they may only become so large and act with so much strength as to retain the unjust enemy who unites and binds their oppressed group into this or that identity. Thus constrained, they always remain in the mode of the petitioner, never the powerful.

Eberstadt limits the scope of her work, defining identity politics and arguing, quite plausibly, that its therapeutic aspect responds to family breakdown, even while its explicit goals sometimes respond to real injustice. But her work opens the door to a critique of capitalism which she seems reluctant to give. As much as one may describe the sexual revolution in moral terms, as a rejection of the wisdom of socially instilled chastity, these terms are limited. A fuller analysis would attend, for instance, to the economic dimension of the problem—as the technocratic management of human reproductive life for the sake of producing a more effective transfer of global wealth from its naturally common state into the hands of fewer and fewer men. That the destruction of the family is necessary for such a mighty work is obvious, insofar as families, after a certain size, tend to reduce the mobility and availability of their members for production, especially via motherhood; tend to create islands of communal sufficiency in which the consumption of mass-produced goods becomes less possible and less necessary; tend to desire ownership, rather than rent, of both home and productive property; and, most broadly speaking, tend towards the creation of worlds governed by personal authority, enjoying a unique culture, and dependent on friendships rather than purchases. The sexual revolution was a transformation of the family into a temporary reproductive unit, achieved by law, preaching, and technological devices, for the sake of the accumulation of the power and property that families would otherwise attain for themselves. Eberstadt's description is a true description, and one that helps to locate the place of identity politics in our modern world, as the "political" side of familial destruction. But it is not simply in politics, but economics that the family is subjected to a crisis of identity resolved by deeper attachments to quasi-familial institutions, which, carried out on a broad enough scale,

cements those institutions in power.

Whereas Eberstadt's book is aimed at the root of identity politics, Francis Fukuyama's book *Identity* cautions against the stuff from a rote, liberal perspective, arguing that identities established at levels lower than that of the national identity risk undermining the stability of liberal democracies. He argues that identity politics is a threefold phenomenon combining the desire for recognition, an anthropology of expressive individualism, and the power of victimhood into an explosive method for making political demands. The first ingredient of this identitarian cocktail is found in the part of the human soul called *thymos*, "the spirit," by which human beings "crave positive judgments about their worth or dignity." Within a society which values *external* acts, *thymos* drives men to acquire honor through the societal recognition of noble actions or shame through ignoble actions. Not so in a culture imbued with an anthropology of expressive individualism, the "notion of an inner and an outer self, and the radical view that the inner self [is] more valuable than the outer one." Here, *thymos* drives men to desire societal recognition, not of this or that action, but of the true self that persists (somehow) beneath all human action.

Though Christianity is largely opposed to the practice of identity politics, this much must be admitted: the Scriptures revealed the dignity of each individual and preached a doctrine of an "inner man" that changed the world, allowing *thymos* to find its satisfaction in the sheer fact of one's being, rather than in the performance of noble actions or the accident of noble birth. The doctrine that each individual is uniquely created by God, ordered to his own particular vocation and perfection, and bound for eternal happiness, allows the slave to say to the master: "You redound with power and glory, but I too am a child of God. In Christ Jesus there is neither servant nor free, Greek nor Jew, male nor female, or, to say it by assertion rather than negation: You and I are brothers of equal dignity."

But it would be wrong to stretch a red thread from the Christian celebration of the Father of All, to the Christian doctrine of the Church (that familial unity which relativizes all would-be distinctions between its members) and tack it to some adolescent demand that all of society recognize the inherent dignity of whatever newly minted, post-sexual identity has been rendered appropriable by something posted on Tumblr. Christianity did draw a distinction between the goodness and common destiny of each of God's children, and the unequal honors, shames, and glories that accrued to them by virtue of action and accident, but it did not set this inherent dignity over and against "society." The opposite is the case: the human creature is a social creature. There is no "true self" outside of or extrinsic to one's constitutive relations. Society, far from being a force which suppresses the inner man, is the inescapable, communal mode of being in and through which one receives existence, consciousness, intellect, language, and, indeed, the very self which one would vainly attempt to set against the society that gives it life. Christianity is not reducible to the role that Fukuyama would give it, as a chapter in a narrative that ends with liberal modernity—a mere stepping-stone towards the "invention" of the individual. Christianity was never about such an awkward, atomizing task. Christianity is a social movement aimed at transforming all the world into a particular society, usually called the Kingdom, membership in which confers and reveals the inherent dignity of each of its members, not as atoms theoretically separable from that virtuous society, but as members of one body. Practically speaking, this means that, within the identity politics of Christianity, one's identity is recognized precisely to the degree that it is always already embedded in the polity, for the sake of the whole.

While Fukuyama does not seem to intend any critique of the Protestant Reformation, he does identify it as the force which created the modern individual. Martin Luther "understood that the Church only acted on the outer person," but that only the inner man was the object of Christ's redemption, which "in one stroke undercut the raison d'être for the Catholic Church." The inner was no longer in constitutive

relation with the outer; the soul intertwined with the body; faith with works. Rather, the inner man, and not the Kingdom, became the distinct object of God's intervention in human history, leading to "a whole series of social changes in which the individual believer was prioritized over prevailing social structures." Whether one boos, cheers, or nuances it, this narrative seems basically correct, and it is a rather short conceptual leap from Luther to Rousseau, who secularized the concept, arguing that the original experience of man, and one available to everyone today, is "a feeling of plenitude and happiness that emerges as an individual seeks to uncover the true self hiding beneath the layers of acquired social sensibilities."

The trouble with attempting to express the worth and dignity of the individual, disembedded from society, is that expression itself is a social operation, as is the language with which an individual demands recognition. Every expression is an expression-to-someone. Every demand for recognition is a tacit acknowledgment that no individual identity exists outside of the gaze of others which do the recognizing. The concepts and language we use to articulate "who we are" are received from others and can never be utilized as private concepts, as if a word could express and define just *this* individual rather than always serving as universals, as categories to which particularity and singleness is subordinated. It makes sense, then, that identity politics, insofar as it is driven by the need to affirm the individual over and against society, is a tortured politics. Because we are social creatures, the demand to affirm the individual as over and against his society can never be met. At best, we can make smaller societies, set against other societies, larger societies, or society considered as a whole.

Identity politics cannot realize the promise of the individual which began in the Reformation; it cannot affirm the individual *as* individual any more than faith can be affirmed apart from works. It can only affirm such an unreal, asocial creature insofar as it creates and sustains it as a negative subtraction from society, cursing the whole to clearly establish the worth and dignity of the part. In this sense, it is not true to say that the Reformation evolves into expressive individualism, as if nature shifted in its course, and every child born after Luther was born as an atom for whom "family" is an odd, eighteen-year embarrassment. Rather, the Reformation is a scene that must be *repeated* in order to forge each individual anew. Ironically, the would-be individual receives the narrative of being set-against-society—from society. The individual is not freed from the social forces suppressing him, the individual *needs* the suppressing social force in order to appear as an individual, defined as a being set apart from society. To live as an individual, one must have a Catholic Church, the negation and accusation of which defines the individual. One is only an individual as a Protestant, that is, as one in protest against a society in which one is embedded. Were one to defeat and remove the object of protest, the individual would be removed along with it.

But Fukuyama's recommendations are only superficially critical of identity politics. By making the Church into the stepping-stone along the way to liberal modernity, he loses the possibility of a universal framework, in which the individual's particular identity is constituted by membership within a single, holy body, oriented toward the conversion of the entire world. Instead, Fukuyama advises that the energies of identity politics be diverted to identification with larger entities, particularly liberal nation states: "We need to promote creedal national identities built around the foundational ideas of modern liberal democracy and use those public policies to deliberately assimilate newcomers to those identities."

These national identities are larger than the identities of our contemporary contentions, but they remain just as disembedded from any familial identity, on the one hand, and any universal identity, on the other. It is unclear why placing such a ceiling of belonging over the human person would not lead to the same need for an enemy, the same endless fragmenting and ideological purifying that seems to

constitute the practitioners of identity politics; though while the latter plays out within more modest goals of justice, the coronation of national identity over all others would lead to the same fragmentation, even if on a larger, national, scale. Obviously, this is to predict a future that has already taken place in our recent past. Nationalism, wherever tried, leads to the constitution of national identities in and through war and "rumors of war," that is, through a castigated foreign nation utilized to shore up and unify an otherwise divided body politic. If Eberstadt is right, and our need for identity stems from the destruction of strong families, a return to nationalism without the restoration of the family would hardly generate a sane, tempered, "attachment to the principles and ideals of the Constitution," but to a jingoism which sees in "nation" what it lacks in the family and clings to it with all the panic and irrationality of a child in search of a missing father.

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