(Un)Troubling Identity Politics: A Cultural Materialist Intervention

Abstract

This paper draws on the cultural materialist paradigm articulated by Raymond Williams to offer a radical historicisation of the idea of identity, with a view to clarifying and resolving some of the issues animating the 'identity politics' debates currently dividing left academia and activism. Firstly, it offers clarity on the concept 'identity politics', demonstrating that we should reserve the term to refer only to politics that mobilise specifically and meaningfully around the concept of identity. Secondly, and in virtue of this, it provides new insights into five central questions that have driven the identity politics debates: Do identity politics always tend towards essentialism? Do identity politics inevitably promote a politics of recognition over redistribution? Do identity politics inevitably create political cleavages rather than solidaristic forms of political action? What is the relationship between 'identity politics' and 'call-out culture'? And, are the problems of identity politics resolved by reference to intersectionality?

Keywords

Identity politics; cultural materialism; essentialism; recognition; intersectionality

'Identity Politics' is one of most divisive issues in contemporary politics, not only providing further fodder for the well-worn split between mainstream left and right politics, but also mapping onto and amplifying what have increasingly become bitter divisions in left academia and activism. While this conflict over questions of 'identity' is not new (Fraser, 1995; Butler, 1997; Bramen, 2002), it has gone through a resurgence in recent years, particularly in the fall-out from the election of Trump in the US and the vote for Brexit in the UK (Lilla, 2017; Haider, 2018; Nagle, 2017; Kumar et al., 2018; McCall and Orloff 2017; Streeck 2017).

On the right, identity pols are blamed for the dissolution and increasing irrelevance of politics for the 'ordinary man', who must contend with the idiocies of transgender bathrooms and liberal pandering to migrants, women and other 'minorities' rather than have his bread-and-butter concerns about employment, immigration, and law and order dealt with. Within this right-wing rhetoric, there is an increasing tendency to equate 'identity politics' with the *whole* of left politics, and to use the critique of the former to further discredit the activities and demands of the latter, whether associated with mainstream party politics, cultural institutions including universities, or popular social movements.

This sleight of hand, promoted by political and media ideologues of the right, serves to obscure the growing rift *within* the left, broadly understood, on the subject of identity politics. On one hand, what Fraser (1995) called the 'social left' – now disparagingly referred to as the 'brocialists' – blame identity politics for distracting attention from social class and capitalism, and for creating a divisive and hostile environment that is inimical to the kinds of solidaristic universalist politics deemed necessary for significant social change. From this perspective, the emphasis on identity politics is understood to have played into the hands of the new right populisms (Nagle, 2017), not least for its alienation of the 'white working class', who, disenchanted with the emphasis on gender and race in the US and on immigration and multiculturalism in the UK, are supposed to have voted for Trump and Brexit at least partly on this basis (Streeck, 2017; Virdee and McGeever, 2018). Meanwhile, what Fraser (1995) called the 'cultural left' – now disparagingly referred to as 'social justice warriors'– continue to pursue various struggles against sexism, racism and homophobia in a way that does not cede priority to questions of class or political economy, instead viewing such 'identity politics' as legitimate and proper goals of left-wing activism. From this perspective, right wing populism and left-wing brocialism exhibit a worrying convergence in their dismissal of issues around women's, LGBTQ, and minority rights as just silly, distracting identity politics (Penny, 2013).

The battleground for these conflicts is not contained within the liberal university campus, the scene of 'no-platforming' protests and an increasingly bitter 'call-out culture', but

extends beyond this in increasingly visible – and angry – ways. 'Identity Politics' is now seriously at issue in the online culture wars between the 'alt-right' and their left-wing antagonists or targets (Nagle, 2017); the popular punditry of 'public intellectual' Jordan Peterson, who has activated the 'alt-right'/'social justice warrior' fault lines for more traditional, middle class audiences with his (confused) critique of gender equality and 'Cultural Marxism' (Mishra, 2018); the growing popularity of neo-Nazi groups who are organising to defend 'identity politics for white people' in increasingly violent ways (Haider, S. 2017); and in incidents like the 'Cop-on Comrades' episode, where over 400 Irish feminists (all women) wrote a public letter to their (male) 'comrades' on the left, critiquing their support of the view that 'identity politics is good for nothing except dividing movements', and promotion of the narrative that 'straight white men are the new most oppressed group' (Feminist Ire, 2017).[1]

Efforts to adjudicate, never mind resolve, these rows are severely hampered by the radical multi-accentuality of the term 'identity politics', something that typically goes unnoticed by those embroiled in the debates. Already by the 1990s the term was being deployed in a range of incongruous if not incoherent ways to describe academic squabbling over the representation of minority groups in official curricula and on campus (D'Souza, 1991; Gitlin 1995); ethno-national conflict (Fox Piven, 1995); and the private struggles of individuals negotiating the discourses available for the constitution of their identities (Calhoun, 1994: 20). While Bernstein suggested in 2005 that the term was probably not salvageable, today the situation has gone from bad to worse. Even a cursory search on Twitter for 'identity politics' reveals that the term is now so expansive it can be and is used to refer to gender, racial and LGBTQ politics in toto; a particular variant of class politics; a new group-based 'culture' ('call-out culture'); strategic ruses by politicians to appeal to specific constituencies ('playing the race card' etc); the behaviour of a new self-obsessed, easily offended generation (the 'snowflake generation'); and a virulent form of liberal/neoliberal individualism.[2]

In what follows, I offer an intervention into this radical confusion, and in so doing, aim to clarify and resolve some of the issues animating the 'identity politics' debates currently dividing left academia and activism. I begin by drawing on the cultural materialist paradigm

inaugurated by Raymond Williams to argue that identity, as we now know it, is a relatively novel concept in western thought, politics and culture. I then argue that this historicisation of identity has particular consequences for how we understand and define identity politics, and offers a new point of departure from which to pursue five key questions in the identity politics debates today. Do identity politics always tend towards essentialism? Do identity politics inevitably promote a politics of recognition over a politics of redistribution? Do identity politics inevitably create political cleavages rather than solidaristic forms of political action? What is the relationship between 'identity politics' and 'call-out culture'? And, are the problems of identity politics resolved by reference to intersectionality?

A Cultural Materialist History of the Idea of Identity

It is perhaps surprising that in the significant furore over identity over the last decades, very little attention has been paid to the history of the idea, and in particular, its social history. Attention to this history reveals a startling fact – identity, as we now know it, is a relatively recent idea that emerged into the popular and political consciousness only in the latter half of the twentieth century (Moran, 2015, 2018). Previously used only within a narrow branch of philosophy to mean the sameness of an entity to itself or the persistence of that entity over time, by the 1960s the discourse of 'identity' in the sense with which we are now familiar had exploded across popular, political and academic domains of practice. Scholars who produce academic histories of 'identity' (Hall, 1992; Jenkins, 2014) routinely fail to notice that the writers they identify as the progenitors of identity theory never used the word themselves, except perhaps incidentally, as in the phrase 'an identity of interests'. The digitalisation of books makes this claim remarkably easy for the sceptical reader to check, as any of the usual suspects typically assumed to have discussed 'identity' before the middle of the twentieth century – including, for example, Woolf, Mead, Du Bois, Freud – are revealed, against contemporary common sense, to have never discussed 'identity' at all. What Raymond Williams (1983) pointed out about other keywords is certainly true here: The nominal continuity of the word identity has masked a radical variation of meaning over centuries.

Rather than treat this discovery as evidence merely of a cosmetic change in meaning or popularity of the word identity, the cultural materialist approach inaugurated by Williams insists upon viewing such changing meanings in the social and material contexts of their use, seeing them as intimately bound up with each other. Defined by Williams as the 'analysis of all forms of signification…within the actual means and conditions of their production' (1981b: 64-5), cultural materialism challenges the Marxist accounts of culture from which it also draws for failing to recognise the materiality of cultural processes themselves, and with that, 'the controlling power of ideas' (1977: 59). At the same time, and against idealist accounts of culture, Williams insisted ideas and meanings do not arrive 'from above', but are produced in and through the real practices and lived experiences of everyday life. Working between these two orientations, cultural materialism therefore reconsiders culture as a material, productive force, within which language exists as a special form of practical consciousness that enables and gives expression to new experiences of social reality (McGuigan and Moran, 2014). Furthermore, it insists on distinguishing culture as a 'realised signifying system' from the social order itself – not, Williams argued, 'to separate and disjoin these areas, but to make room for analysis of their interrelations' (1981a: 207).

Viewed from such a cultural materialist perspective, then, we see that the idea of identity did not emerge in a political or social vacuum, but in two specific contexts of use, where it evolved two distinct senses (Moran, 2015). The first of these contexts was the popular culture of newly 'consumerist' societies, where the word identity evolved its now familiar 'personal sense', to signify the experience of being a unique person, with distinctive characteristics. The second was the so-called new social movements of race and gender of the 1960s and 70s, particularly the Women's Liberation Movement and the Black Power Movement, where the word evolved its also now familiar 'social sense', to signify meaningful membership of a particular social group. We can trace the by now routine and taken-for-granted use of the phrase 'identities' to refer directly to the different social categories of 'race', gender, ethnicity and sexuality to this period of evolution of the term too, though this wasn't fully normalised until the study of 'identity' and 'identities' came to dominate work in social sciences and humanities from the 1980s onwards.

Why should it matter that the language of 'identity' came explicitly to be used to capture the experience of being a particular person, or a member of a particular group during this period? After all, neither are new experiences, so why should we think anything has changed with a new use of language to describe or access them? What a cultural materialist 'Keywords' analysis reveals, in the case of both 'personal' and 'social' identity, is that the older philosophical meanings of the word identity persisted such that the use of the word identity to describe these experiences was neither neutral nor innocent but performative, actively doing something to how we understood them. Specifically, identity, with its older connotations of one-ness and same-ness, offered a very particular way of conceptualising and framing what it means to be a distinct person, or part of a social group. It allowed or even prompted the classification of individuals or groups as of a particular, singular type, offering a way of saying 'I really am this kind of person', or 'you really do belong to that group'. This, of course, is what philosophers refer to as essentialism. Thus, while identity is most commonly treated as a substantive property of individuals or groups – 'my identity', 'Islamic identity' etc – what a cultural material analysis shows is that 'identity' is better understood as a modern classificatory device, that classifies according to what is considered essential to a particular person, type of person or group.

The value of such essentialising – indeed, what we now call 'identitarian' – thinking to capitalist economies on the one hand, and to the social movements which deployed it, on the other, is deserved of our attention, and presents an analytic challenge. *Why* was it that the idea of identity emerged when it did, explicitly articulating and emphasising an older and previously unexceptional essentialist mode of thinking about personhood and grouphood, and in fact rendering this the standard and normalised way of construing both?[3] Or, put in the cultural materialist terms of this study, what social and political motivations and pressures made the use of the word identity, in its personal and social senses, necessary, sensible or desirable in these contexts?

As detailed by Moran (2018), Black and Feminist activists during the 1960s were grappling with several issues, including the non-realisation of equality for oppressed groups even after the passing of equality legislation, and the acknowledgment of some (limited) forms of equality. It seemed to these activists that there was something specific about the sources of

their oppression that could not be properly addressed by universalist claims to equality based on the individual liberal subject. The idea of identity – and specifically what we now think of as social identity – emerged as a way for groups to understand the specificity of their oppression, but also a way to mobilise and restore pride and group cohesion without in the process re-invigorating old biologically essentialist notions. This was the birth of 'identity politics'. Significantly, as Nicholson (2008) has documented, group 'identity' was in this context not understood to come from shared biological features, but shared experience, culture, meaning and knowledge. Meanwhile the idea of identity was evolving its personal sense in contexts of consumption, where it became useful for elaborating a sense of individuality in a mass consumer society – ironically enabling an intensification of the mass marketing of the individual distinction and difference it touted, thereby undermining it.

Whereas the personal sense of identity dovetailed with the social logic of capitalism, the social sense was put to work in this period to challenge if not the structures of capitalism, then at least some of the significant inequalities that persisted for certain groups, even in the aftermath of equality and civil rights legislation, in patriarchal, racist, capitalist societies. Looking at these two tendencies in historical perspective, we see that under neoliberal capitalism, the individualistic impulses of the personal sense of identity have gradually come to dominate the solidaristic impulses of the social sense (Chasin, 2000; Duggan, 2003), giving rise to a situation where the political utility of identity for the Left is highly uncertain and contested. Such uncertainty has been emphasised by the economic crisis of 2008 – while women, immigrants, and people of colour suffered disproportionately in the austerity politics that followed (Runnymede Trust, 2017), academics and pundits from Left and Right doubled down on the (already in some circles attractive) notion that a politics of identity was either a luxury or a distraction in the face of more pressing economic concerns. By the 2016 Brexit and American presidential elections, the earlier, largely academic 'identity vs. class' debates had been re-opened for new social media saturated audiences, where what Dean (2010) terms the 'circuits of drive' of 'communicative capitalism' ensured an endless looping of repetitive and often highly scripted arguments and polarised positionings, and where, for the austerity-weary citizens of increasingly unequal societies, the stakes seemed so much higher.

This is the context in which many of the tensions around identity politics have arisen for the Left today – do any grounds remain for viewing identity politics as an appropriate or useful mode of practice or analysis for defeating multiple, intersecting inequalities in contemporary capitalist societies? This is the question to which the remainder of this paper is devoted. But first, however, it is necessary to settle a definition of identity politics with which to do this work.

Delimiting Identity Politics

The cultural materialist history outlined here has particular implications for how we should understand identity politics. Against the maelstrom of conflicting and over-inflated uses of the term, this account allows us to settle on a coherent and historically sound definition of identity politics as *any form of politics that mobilises specifically and meaningfully around the concept of identity*. This suggestion that the term should be reserved to refer only to those practices or movements in which the idea of identity does conceptual or organising work distinguishes 'identity politics' proper from both earlier phases of group-based activism, in which the idea of identity was meaningless, and later phases in which the idea, while generally meaningful, nonetheless does little or no ideational or mobilising work.

This move is key, for it challenges the anachronistic labelling of earlier forms of group-based activism as 'identity politics'. So, for example, when renowned social theorist Calhoun (1994: 22-3) finds in the existence of women's movements, communes, anti-colonial resistance and European nationalisms since the 1800s evidence of a two-hundred-year longevity of 'identity politics', we must question the grounds on which he feels justified in categorising these as 'identity politics' at all.[4] Instead, these examples arguably amount to an instance of what Bourdieu referred to as 'the scholastic point of view', where the categories of analysis of academics are imposed onto the practices they view, without regard for the meanings mobilised by the actors themselves. One of the '*scientific* mistakes that derive from what could be called the *scholastic fallacy'*, argues Bourdieu, arises when 'we apply beyond their conditions of historical or social validity (leading to anachronism or

to class ethnocentrism) concepts that, as Kant (1952) put it, seem to "pretend to universal validity" because they are produced in particular conditions whose particularity eludes us' (Bourdieu, 1990: 384-5, emphasis in original). This is surely at issue here.

But more importantly for the purposes of this paper, this move guards against two significant and routine slippages or errors within contemporary identity-politics discourse. Firstly, it allows us to distinguish gender, race- or sex-based politics *generally* from gender-, race or sex-based *identity politics specifically* by recognising the latter to be those forms of politics that mobilise explicitly around the category of identity – the idea of identity is central to and meaningful in these politics, where it is not in the former. So although it shouldn't need to be said, not all gender politics (for example) are identity politics. *Some* variants of gender politics (that is, politics that mobilise around gender issues) deploy the idea of identity in a meaningful and central way, and therefore offer a form of gender-based identity politics. By the same token, *other* variants of gender politics do not deploy the idea of identity *at all*, but rely on other conceptualisations such as equality and justice to build their self-understandings and make their claims. These cannot be considered an instance of identity politics. Just because gendered, sexual and racial social positions and self-understandings have recently come to be termed 'identities' in the social sciences and politics does not mean that any politics carried out on racial, gendered or sexual grounds or in pursuit of racial, gender or sexual equality are by definition 'identity politics'. But this is precisely the slippage that regularly occurs in political commentary and academic analysis, with unhelpful consequences for both theory and political practice.

Secondly, this move allows us to challenge the routine and mutually exclusive opposition of class politics to identity politics, since this is now revealed to rest on at least two misconceptions. The first is that class-based politics *are not* concerned with identity, by definition. This is not true, as some forms of 'class politics' *do* mobilise around the category of identity, where they, for example, rely on explicit notions of a shared working class identity in order to challenge a particular perceived injustice. We have seen this most recently in the emergence of a prominent discourse of the white working class male as the most oppressed minority – as evident from numerous American Men's Rights/Alt-right Organisations that promote this narrative, the category of identity is clearly at work here,

and meaningful to its protagonists. The second misconception concerns the inverse supposition; namely that all ostensibly *non*-class politics are concerned with identity. However, neither is this true – as already argued, not all gender, race, sex-based or other 'non-class' politics mobilise around the category of identity, nor indeed on what this is supposed to entail, namely, a focus on the specificities of what it means to be a member of that group. *Moreover*, many of them mobilise explicitly around issues of employment, income, economic inequality or other typically 'class' based concerns, as for example, in the 1963 African-American led March on Washington for jobs and freedom, or the well-known feminist campaigns for equal pay for equal work.

These analytical distinctions allow for some important ground-clearing in advance of the debates around identity politics. Firstly, they allow us to see that some of the accusations levelled at 'identity politics' are not really targeting identity politics in the specified sense, but something else that has been (mis)construed as identity politics. We can disregard these arguments entirely (or direct them where they ought to go, should we be so inclined). Secondly, they allow us to throw out arguments that depend on a conflation of group politics with identity politics, thereby allowing us to challenge those commentators on Left *and* Right who use their critique of identity politics to throw out all gender, race and sex-based politics. Thirdly, they allow us to see that *some* forms of racial or gender politics have a class basis or character rather than an identitarian one, and that *some* forms of 'class politics' can be properly understood as identity politics, thereby destabilising the class *versus* identity politics trope that unhelpfully predominates. But none of this is to defend identity politics (proper) against all their criticisms, as we shall now see.

The Debates

Do identity politics always tend towards essentialism?

Is it true that identity politics always tend towards essentialism, and if so, should they be eschewed on this basis? The cultural materialist analysis of identity described in the first part of this paper allows us to see that yes, identity politics, in the specified sense, do tend towards essentialism. This is because, as argued, the idea of identity is itself an intrinsically

essentialising idea insofar as the basic grammar of claims-making that it enables is the assertion of sameness, whether in a 'personal' sense, where it describes the continuity over time of the unique features of an individual, or a 'social' sense, where it describes the shared, constitutive features of a particular social group. This is the case whether it is a gender, race or class- based form of identity politics at stake as it is the concept of identity rather than the emphasis on class or gender that leads towards essentialism. It should be noted that such essentialising claims are not necessarily biological, as is regularly assumed, but is are often psychological or cultural in character – gender-based identity politics do not, for example, depend on asserting the category of womanhood through reference to nature, but may do so through reference to experience, power, socialisation and cultural norms.

There is a further point worth making here, which is that the backlash against essentialism that informs much of the critique of identity politics is not entirely warranted, either politically or philosophically. Philosophically, essentialism is a foundational analytic tool, and is not flawed by definition. Widely misunderstood, making an essentialist claim does *not* involve specifying that the characteristics at stake derive from nature, but simply that they are characteristics the entity in question must have in order to be classified as an entity of that kind (O'Neill, 1998). And politically, essentialism can be a necessary and useful device. As Gayatri Spivak (1987) has argued, *strategic* essentialism, which involves temporarily presenting the group of which one forms a part in essentialist terms in order to achieve some political goals, can be very powerful as a mobilising and claims-making force. Correspondingly, bell hooks (2001) has argued that the ongoing widespread academic antipathy to essentialism has served to undermine the claims for equality made by black, female and other 'minority' groups – claims that rely, of course, on essentialist appeals to identity as they seek to recover and positively re-evaluate identity categories that were historically repressed, delegitimated or devalued *as* identity categories in the first place. Of course, essentialist organising carries problems with it that are by now well-rehearsed – it can be reductive, stereotyping, othering, falsely homogenising, dangerously exclusive or punitive towards difference – but it is the activists who must decide whether engaging in such essentialising strategies – that is, engaging in 'identity politics' – is useful or damaging to their overall political goal. White supremacists might indeed decide that emphasising the intrinsic sameness of white men and their difference from other 'races' in order to persuade

of their more oppressed or more superior status is politically congruent with their overall goals, whereas socialist feminists might decide that the equivalent essentialising claims in their case are damaging to their overall goals of equality.

Do identity politics promote a politics of recognition over redistribution?

It is clear that identity politics, in the specified sense, certainly do promote a politics of recognition, understood in the philosophical sense of achieving respect for groups who have suffered disrespect in the form of invisibility, misrecognition, cultural imperialism, negative stereotyping, demeaning, belitting and more. That these are valid and legitimate political aims for leftist politics hardly needs to be said. A politics of recognition is deeply powerful and necessary for groups who have routinely had not just their 'identities' but also their very existence and social being maligned and despised, including, for example, women who learn they are the inferior 'other' of men, LGBTQ people in a heteronormative and homophobic world, and people of colour in a context of relentless and normalised white supremacy and racial profiling. But while we may accept that identity politics promote recognition as a legitimate aim of left wing politics, does this occur in a way that distracts from, undermines or actively works against redistributive efforts?[5]

The most cogent and persuasive expression of the argument that it *does* was provided by Nancy Fraser (1995), in her landmark discussion of what she calls the 'redistribution-recognition dilemma'. Fraser contends that since a politics of redistribution achieves its aims through a devaluation of difference in order to put into practice the idea that every person, being equal, deserves a certain level of material well-being, and since a politics of recognition focuses on the group's specific identity in order to attribute positive value to its previously devalued characteristics, the two approaches work directly against each other. Although Fraser implies recognition and redistribution are equally valid projects, the whole thrust of her argument is to rescue redistributive politics from the counter-productive effects of recognition politics (Alcoff, 2006; Butler, 1997).

Against this reading, others have convincingly argued that identity-based struggles for recognition certainly *can* and regularly *do* form part of a struggle for redistribution (Duggan, 2003), since the so-called 'despised' group has to be affirmed in order to achieve the 'social

esteem' and equal status required to justify redistribution (Honneth 2001), or more practically, because the groups in question rightly recognise that achieving 'what Fraser calls "recognition" is a means to the economic and social equality and freedom that she brings under the category of redistribution' (Young, 1997: 152). The potential redistributive successes of identity politics are also, we might note, widely recognised and feared by the right, who argue that according civil and political rights to immigrants will lead to a direct diversion of resources and jobs away from the national working class; or that women's equal recognition in the workplace will emasculate men and undermine the traditional male breadwinner and family.

But if 'identity politics' do not necessarily pull against redistribution, and may even promote some redistributive ends, how transformative are such identity-led redistributive politics likely to be? Firstly, there are grounds for arguing that an identity-led politics of redistribution are necessarily self-reproducing rather than transformative, since by reaffirming the existence of the identity category, they endlessly recreate the problem they seek to overcome. This is Fraser's (1995) case when she looks at 'affirmative' redistributive remedies, arguing that the repeated surface re-allocations they involve have the effect not only of reinforcing the identity category but of generating resentment towards it; and Brown's (1995) more general philosophical case when she argues that identity politics are a form of 'wounded attachment', which must reproduce and maintain the forms of suffering they oppose in order to continue to exist. Nonetheless, it is perhaps not as clear-cut as these critics make out, as people defined by racial, sexual or gendered 'identities' may have very good, immediate reasons for wanting to validate rather than undermine them, including because doing so may well enhance their material and not just psycho-social wellbeing as resources and power are redistributed their way.

It is, however, far more clear-cut in the case of social class. Crucially here, we need to recognise that if the category of identity is used to understand social class, in a context where a positive recognition of this identity is sought, the 'solutions' arrived at will settle on valorising that working class identity rather than under-cutting the grounds for its existence. While there will be many gains to achieving respect for working class people, who routinely suffer extreme forms of disrespect in the form of stereotyping, belittling, hypervisibility,

invisibility, scapegoating and more, we may question whether that is an appropriate political goal, since – as Terry Eagleton (1998: 229) put it – to be working class 'just *is* to be oppressed', and social class as a structural feature of political economy something we want to eradicate rather than celebrate and maintain.

The second reason for doubting the transformative potential of identity-led redistributive politics is that in focusing on surface reallocations between groups within an unequal system, they seem unlikely to do much to challenge the conditions that give rise to the unequal distribution in the first place. In her attempt to develop a 'transformative' as opposed to 'affirmative' politics that reconciles the demands of both redistribution and recognition, Fraser argues that this can only be achieved by combining radical restructuring of political economy with radical deconstruction of (oppressive) social categories within the socio-cultural order. Arguably, a political emphasis on identity would have no viable role in this bigger transformative project, as its essentialising impulse will tend towards the valorisation rather than break-down of or disregard for difference (and relatedly hierarchy) which is required by both forms of transformation. This point may be mitigated somewhat by the potentiality for those involved in solidaristic identity politics to forge coalitions as part of a broad-based, inclusive anti-capitalist politics. However, the very possibility of such coalition building is currently seriously at issue, as I shall explore next.

Finally, the analysis here has proceeded on the basis that it is the social sense of identity that is at stake; a more depressing vista presents itself when the personal sense is operational. Far from promote redistributive ends, the kinds of 'recognition' based politics engendered by 'personal identity' seem far more likely to pull identity-based groups into circuits of capitalist consumption, as marketers play deftly on aspirations of distinction, taste and lifestyle, or perpetuate the myth that visibility in the market place constitutes social inclusion and equality for previously marginalised or despised groups (the 'pink pound' here is a case in point, see Chasin 2000). Critics of 'identity politics' who make sweeping statements about the alliance between identity-based recognition politics and a corporate, consumerist neoliberalism would do well to remember the important historical and practical distinctions between the personal and social senses of identity in making their case.

Do identity politics always and inevitably create political cleavages rather than solidarities?

This third critique of identity politics ranges from the more routine and understandable accusation that since identity politics are by definition concerned with particularity rather than universalism, they are ill-suited to building a broad-based political movement (Mohandesi, 2017; Kumar et al., 2018), to more mean-spirited critiques that view identity politics as indulgent, petty squabbling that have given rise to an intrinsically factional form of politics and ultimately, the dissolution of the left (Nagle, 2017; Lilla, 2017). Either way, it is certainly true that identity politics from the 1960s to today have been characterised by a deep – and not wholly unwarranted – suspicion of claims to universality or appeals to the 'common man'. As Gitlin (1995: 100) noted, '[t]he very language of commonality…[has come] to be perceived by the new movements…as an ideology to rationalize white male domination.' The validity of this perspective resonates today in the cynical countering of the identity-based activism of 'Black Lives Matter' with the sham universalism of 'All Lives Matter'. Nonetheless, a suspicion of universalist claims does not in itself lead to a divisive or factional politics. How, then, should we judge identity politics, in the specified sense?

Firstly, it is true that while the social sense of identity has fundamentally been used to create solidarity, it is a kind that promotes *in-group* cohesion rather than inter-group unison or universal political subjects. But as Alcoff (2006) argues, this does not necessarily mean that identity-based collective political action towards a common goal or set of goals, including the radical transformation of class societies, is impossible. Specifically she argues that the neutral liberal or universal subject with no ties, to which the particularist subject of identity politics is contrasted, is a myth, as *all* people enter political action with allegiances, interests, biases and histories – the contribution of identity politics is to make these visible. For Alcoff, this means that identity politics are a necessary part of the participatory democracy – based on inclusive, positional dialogue – that she views as the cornerstone of any transformative class politics. The sets of interests presumed to be attached to particular 'identities', whether a broad category like 'women' or an intersectional category like 'black, lesbian women', are no more and no less exclusivist or particularist than those attached to any other vantage point on the world (including the supposedly neutral but in reality white,

male, middle class figure of liberal theory). Recognition of this arguably represents an advance over those accounts which, by assuming a universal voice and ignoring or depreciating 'identity', may end up failing to recognise the diversity of experiences shaped by capitalism, and, therefore, crucially, the full range of potential points of resistance to the system. Furthermore, acceptance of this point means opening up radical opportunities for inter-group alliances, coalition building and forms of 'strategic pluralism' (Baker et al, 2008), since social transformation is understood to follow from a radically inclusive, multi-constituency politics rather than from a false because exclusive universalism. But does this mean eschewing the universalist principle altogether in projects for egalitarian social change?

A spate of work exploring race and class together has emerged recently to effectively make the case for a 'strategic universalism', that according to Haider (2018: 113) 'does not exist in the abstract, as a prescriptive principle which is mechanically applied to indifferent circumstances', but as something that is created in popular solidaristic forms of political action 'which does not demand emancipation solely for those who share my identity but for everyone; it says that no one will be enslaved'. From a similarly (strategically) universalist perspective, Johnson (2017) has argued that it is a mistake to equate racial identity with political constituency, claiming that only inter-group (in his case, cross-'race') organising, deriving from 'shared historical interests', 'solidarity around commonly felt needs' and 'common interests', can build the popular power necessary for far-reaching social transformation (2017: 16, 21-22). Although this could be – and sometimes *is* – read as an argument for expelling 'identity' entirely from politics, and focusing instead on social class, given what I have just argued, this is surely unwise. In this respect we may return to Gilroy's (1998) argument that 'identity should be the basis for our politics, not our politics in-itself.' Pace Alcoff, Kumar et al take this to mean that 'it is being *racialised* as black, and all that it brings, that provides the basis for [a] radical anti-racist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist politics' (2018: 14, emphasis added). That is, the identitarian experience provides a point of entry to a potentially radical politics, but such potential will only be realised if its protagonists move beyond that identitarian point of entry to challenge interlocking systems of oppression that generate the inequalities shaping not only their lives, but others' too. Significantly, this approach builds on an understanding of capitalism and racism as

historically and materially intertwined and co-evolutionary (Fields and Fields, 2014). This means that it is impossible to articulate a truly anti-racist politics that isn't also anti-capitalist, and an anti-capitalist politics that isn't also anti-racist (Roediger 2017).

But it is in envisioning what such a comprehensive anti-capitalist, anti-racist (and presumably anti-patriarchal) politics would look like that the limits of an identity politics become apparent. Such a political project must proceed by seeking equality of condition for all groups – a necessary universalism that undermines rather than emphasises differences, on the grounds that many differences are the *effects* of inequality rather than something prior that needs protection. As Haider (2018) has so effectively argued, if whiteness doesn't pre-exist but is the *expression* of an historically embedded power differential, then freedom and justice comes from dismantling that power differential and in virtue of this, dismantling whiteness – and therefore blackness – itself. But in the current context of a powerful attachment to and defence of identity as the core of politics, this seems a tall order. It is to the supposed epitome of this form of politics – 'call-out culture' – that I now turn.

What is the relationship between 'identity politics' and 'call-out culture'?

For its protagonists, the practice of 'calling out oppressive actions, acknowledging and expressing our real, in the moment pain, in the place where it is happening, is intensely powerful. And, especially in the absence of certain privileges, we need that power to fuel the change we seek' (Stryker, 2015: unpaged). But for certain elements of the left, 'call-out culture' is viewed as morally and strategically problematic. The language- and tone-policing is seen as illiberal in the sense of shutting down debate; the excessive virtue-signalling and public shaming is regarded as morally manipulative; the fetishization of 'lived experience' as the only valid source of knowledge is viewed as epistemologically suspect as well as politically silencing; and the emphasis on toilet facilities, safe spaces and micro-aggressions is deemed a distracting waste of time and energy. But what is the relationship of identity politics to call-out culture, and how should we evaluate this?

As argued, the cultural materialist intervention I have advocated guards against the move – happening on both right *and* left – where a valid or even semi-valid critique of call-out culture is used to dismiss all race-, gender- and sex-based activism simpliciter. But it also

allows us to examine honestly and accurately the relationship between call-out culture and identity politics in the specified sense. Here we see there *is* an affinity between both modes of political practice, because within identity politics, people are incentivised to valorise a specifically defined group according to their collective self-understandings and experiences, so the impetus is to challenge people (politically and morally) for a misconstrual here, on the understanding that this is not just offensive, but the very source of their oppression. Although it is largely the social sense of identity that animates this discourse, where the personal sense is at play, there is an increased tendency to emphasise personal injuries, 'trigger warnings' and micro-aggressions over questions of safe spaces, group respect and collective naming rights, as the identity in question is imagined to reside in a (vulnerable) individual's body rather than in a social group. In both cases, however, call-out culture is a logical corollary of Brown's (1995) 'wounded attachments'.

At the same time as we can identify an affinity, it is difficult to understand why every instance of challenging some person or group for an abusive use of language, racist behaviour, or the creation of unsafe spaces, should be construed as an instance of identity politics in the specified sense. These tactics have always been part of anti-racist, feminist and other progressive organising, and do not always depend on the language or concept of group identity. It is also worth remembering that the 'social left' have always had their own version of 'calling out', today mainly directed at the much maligned 'liberals' who are – if their critics are to be believed – blissfully unaware of their privilege or the putative fact that their patronising solutions reproduce the very structural inequalities they are imagined to overcome.

Furthermore, it is not clear why 'calling out' others should always be a problem per se. In fact, it seems reasonable to suggest, both epistemologically and strategically, that it is not 'calling out' in itself that is the problem, but rather 'calling out' as an isolated tactic, divorced from broader theorisations and practices of social change. Epistemologically, where the calling out derives from an identity-based version of standpoint theory, only those who have experienced the hurt are deemed equipped to understand, analyse or speak to it. While this has a certain validity, it runs up against the insights of critical theory which recognises that power routinely operates in such a way that peoples' own best

interests may be obscured from them, or that their view of the world is shaped if not distorted by dominant class interests and social norms. The role of critical theory here is to reveal these workings of a power in a way that can lead to the emancipation of all groups. This suggests that calling out based on experiential knowledge is not the problem, but rather the refusal to situate this experiential knowledge within a critical analysis of relations and systems of power that cannot all be understood as a function of experience.

Strategically, too, it seems the problem is not so much that call-out culture happens as that often it is the *only* thing that happens; that the politics of a group get stuck at the point of calling out. Again, if identity is the dominant trope in organising, this seems more likely to happen than if it is incidental or secondary, or combined with other values, principles and logics. Either way, the power of calling out could be both limited and enhanced by combining it with other tactics, especially those concerned with building solidarity, forging alliances and establishing the relatedness of seemingly diverse forms of inequality. But often this broader project is not realised by the group doing the 'calling out', partly, we might charitably conjecture, because of the hostile environment in which they find themselves, where justifying their position against aggressive and repetitive critiques from right and left within the relentless 'circuits of drive' of social media dominated communicative capitalism (Dean 2010) has led to a defensive batten-down-the hatches kind of politics.[6] Something in short supply on the left these days, it seems to me, is a willingness to engage *in good faith* with projects for equality or justice that are articulated in terms other than one's own, free from both aggressive 'calling out' and supercilious sneering at a presumed faux or careerist moralism. As Roediger (2017: 4) emphasises in his efforts to overcome such divisions, 'tone matters'. In this spirit, he urges 'a respect for the ways in which those from whom we differ from are working to address difficult problems in hard times' (2017: 6). Such respectful engagement would surely promote the progressive building of popular power far more than either the incessant calling-out of others, or the equally incessant damning of it that we are saddled with today.

Are the problems of identity politics resolved by reference to intersectionality?

Already by the 1990s, identity politics had come in for significant criticism for creating new totalising fictions in which

> a single category of experience, say gender, will over-determine any number of cross-cutting simultaneous differences such as race and class …Feminists of color charge that feminist identity-theories focusing exclusively on gender oversimplify their situation, because gender is just one of a number of fundamental facets of identity and difference, such as poverty, class, ethnicity, race, sexual identity and age. (Somers, 1994: 610)

The concept of intersectionality, originally developed as a legalistic intervention by Crenshaw (1989), was promoted as one of the answers to this problem. The classic position is that qualitatively new categories and experiences of identity are created at the discursive and lived point of their intersection, such that the experience of being a white, middle class woman cannot be derived from looking additively at the experiences of being white, a woman and middle class – it is a wholly new 'identity'. Thus intersectionality presents a definitive challenge to the totalising fictions of any one identity. But does the concept of intersectionality challenge the tendencies of identity politics towards essentialism, recognition, particularism and call-out culture, where these are understood to be problematic?

On essentialism, the challenge of intersectionality has tended to have the effect of reinforcing rather than dismantling the basic essentialist logic of identity, as claims of reductionism to a single 'voice' are met with a search for ever-finer identity categories which are imagined to more properly capture the experience of a given constituency. As Walby (2006: 11) argues, an emphasis on intersectional identities 'has a tendency towards an incipient essentialism that operates to rigidify the categories under analysis … [and which overstates] the stability and internal coherence of the communities that are the basis of the postulated identities'. In an effort to overcome this, some theorists of intersectionality promote what McCall (2005) refers to as the 'anti-categorical' approach – that is, one that challenges the very constitution of identity categories in essentialist terms, and emphasises fluidity and change over categorical stability. But these theorists run into the same problems that beset the original postmodern identity theorists who insisted on retaining the (essentialist) language and concept of identity to describe an anti-essentialist conception of

subjectivity and grouphood. No more than the classic approach, the 'anti-categorical' approach to intersectionality will not overcome the essentialism it opposes if it retains an emphasis on identity as the locus or source of the 'intersections', for as argued, it is the category of identity that has essentialising tendencies, and viewing them as intersectional does not counter or disrupt that. However, if what are viewed as intersecting are not peoples' 'identities', but rather complex inequalities, social structures or forms of oppression, the problem of essentialism disappears.

Does the emphasis on intersectionality challenge the tendency of identity politics to promote recognition over redistribution, most obviously by including social class as a core element of all social identities? Here, too, the answer is no. As previously argued, if the category of identity is used to understand social class, in a context where a positive recognition of this identity is sought, the 'solutions' arrived at will settle on valorising that class identity rather than under-cutting the grounds for its existence. So including class as a component of the intersectional identity does not in itself imply a redistributive politics will follow. However, it may make it more likely that issues of wages, welfare, economic deprivation and other 'class issues' will be placed on the table as one of the demands that follows from 'recognition' of the class identity. But what a circuitous, indirect and contingent route this is. Far better to directly pursue such aims as part of a politics of equality rather than of identity. As before, the issue rests with the concept of identity rather than the concept of intersectionality – an analysis and politics that focuses on the intersecting systems producing inequality, rather than on the intersecting 'identities' that result, has far greater potential to achieve redistributive ends for groups defined by their 'race', gender and sexuality, as well as their class.

Does the emphasis on intersectionality help build alliances and promote solidaristic political action, thereby countering the tendencies of identity politics towards factionalism? There is more room for optimism here. It seems that the emphasis on intersectionality does focus attention on the many and varied ways in which people can experience oppression. To take an example, when introduced as a guiding principle into feminist organising, as happened in the 2018 mobilisation for abortion rights in Ireland, it certainly prompted active efforts to include trans, gay, migrant, disabled and Traveller women, who may not otherwise have

necessarily had a central place in such activism, but for whom abortion rights were an equally important issue. The strong alliances built in this campaign have led some to speak of a reinvigorated intersectional women's movement in Ireland. Note, however, that the category of identity does precious little work in this operationalisation of the principle of 'intersectionality' – rather, what seemed to be the focus was the multiple and often intersecting oppressions, and the attempt to conceive of and mobilise a very broad-based constituency with a vested interested in enhanced reproductive rights. Where the concept of identity explicitly came into play was in the associated representation politics, where people with different 'representative' identities were anxiously sought to speak for the movement on a range of platforms. This, of course, brings us to the issue of 'call-out culture'. Does an emphasis on intersectionality diminish any of the dangers that exist here?

In many respects, intersectionality is the holy grail in the conversations and debates associated with call-out culture. As the mantra goes, always be intersectional! Never assume to speak for some undifferentiated group – always remember the cross-cutting identities of class, gender, race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality and so on. The logic here is that if speakers were attentive to these differences and made no assumptions, there would be no need for 'calling out'. However, it may be the case that an emphasis on intersectionality – again where it is connected to identity specifically rather than, say axes of oppression or inequalities generally – intensifies rather than reduces the pressures associated with call-out culture, precisely because it is the sin of speaking for or making (harmful) assumptions about others that is at issue here. Since every identity position leaves out some others, no matter how intersectional, we may reach a logical conclusion where it becomes impossible to speak from any general position at all – you can only ever speak for yourself. While this *may* be philosophically and ethically sound, it does not provide much of a basis for political action and change, which is, after all, the main concern of all the social justice politics – identitarian and class-based – with which this paper has been concerned.

Notes

1. A short note on the new terminology of these debates: 'Brocialism' is a pejorative slang term that refers to the promotion of socialist politics by (assumed) white working class men

('brothers' or 'bros'), who demote issues of race, gender and sexuality in their purportedly masculinist prioritisation of social class and the economy. 'Social Justice warriors' is a slang term that describes activists concerned with social justice for women, LGBTQ people, and people of colour, but which – through the appendage of 'warriors', calling up the more established notion of 'keyboard warriors' – cynically positions such activists as moralising, disingenuous, self-serving and egotistical; the 'wars' they are fighting, it is implied, are not really for justice for oppressed groups, but for moral supremacy in internet and public fora. 'No platforming' refers to the political effort to block a speaker from speaking on a topic – being given a 'platform' – where their views are deemed morally offensive to certain communities. Regularly subject to no platform protests are members of the 'alt-right' ('Alternative right'), who are credited with repackaging far right views for new, internet-savvy audiences, who are receptive to the subversive forms of humour and expression of 'controversial' viewpoints they promote. Many have objected to the use of the term 'alt-right' on the grounds that such apparently benign terminology disguises and legitimises deeply offensive racist, white supremacist, misogynistic and xenophobic views. Finally, the phrase 'cultural Marxism' is increasingly used interchangeably with the term 'identity politics' – presumably as a shorthand to refer to leftists (the 'Marxism' bit) who are concerned with race, gender, sexuality (the 'cultural' bit). But this is deeply misleading, especially where it is reproduced uncritically on the Left. Whereas cultural Marxists including Gramsci, Williams and the Frankfurt school deployed concepts of ideology, hegemony and the culture industry to explain the accommodation of the working classes to capitalism – a valuable development of Marxist thinking – they had precious little to say about race, gender, or sexuality.

2. There are many other examples too that were difficult to parse into a single category, including using the phrase to refer to a 'jealousy tax', 'tribalism', 'Anti-Americanism', 'anti-Semitism', and more.

3. It is now very hard to think outside the 'identity' paradigm, to consider that there may be other ways of conceptualising grouphood and selfhood that emphasise, say, non-substantive process or flow, as in the Buddhist *anatta-vada*, or radical difference and discontinuity, rather than oneness or sameness. Partly in recognition of this, many broadly 'poststructural' accounts of identity rail against such essentialist thought – while

nonetheless inconsistently retaining the concept of identity as the central organising category in their conceptualisation of personhood and grouphood.

4. Honneth (2001: 53) repeats these claims almost verbatim and also without challenge a few years later.

5. A caricature of this position was captured in a Simpsons meme that circulated in 2018, depicting a generic working class Simpsons character (with a portrait of Marx on wall behind him) pronouncing gloomily, 'We now live in a world where the richest 8 men own more than the poorest 3.6 billion' – to which Lisa Simpson responds, 'That's an outrage! At least 4 of them should be women of colour'.

6. In this respect it is curious that it is 'call-out culture' that has been identified as the 'real problem' by mainstream media and commentary, when, as many digital media analysts have shown, the 'weird', offensive and sometimes abusive online culture of those who systematically attack women's and minority rights is at least as prominent, if not more so (Phillips and Milner 2017). A cultural materialist perspective reminds us that new social media – like the public sphere generally – is not a frictionless space in which all groups have equal weight to speak and be heard, but is deeply variegated in terms of material power relations, including ownership of the means of discursive production, authority to speak, and audience reach. In such a context, and given the circuits of flow between social media, mainstream media and academic discourse, it is worth considering critically the production of a public discourse around online behaviours, including which are deemed problematic and which are not.

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