



Political tribalism has reached a new peak, and it leaves the US in a new perilous situation.

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Fifty years ago, the rhetoric of pro-civil rights, Great Society liberals was, in its dominant voices, expressly group transcending, framed in the language of national unity and equal opportunity.

In his most famous speech, Dr Martin Luther King Jr proclaimed: “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men – yes, black men as well as white men – would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

King’s ideals – the ideals of the American Left that captured the imagination and hearts of the public and led to real change – transcended group divides and called for an America in which skin color didn’t matter.

Leading liberal philosophical movements of that era were similarly group blind and universalist in character. John Rawls’s enormously influential *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971, called on people to imagine themselves in an “original position”, behind a “veil of ignorance”, in which they could decide on their society’s basic principles without regard to “race, gender, religious affiliation, [or] wealth”.

At roughly the same time, the idea of universal human rights proliferated, advancing the dignity of every individual as the foundation of a just international order.

Thus, although the Left was always concerned with the oppression of minorities and the rights of disadvantaged groups, the dominant ideals in this period tended to be group blind, often cosmopolitan, with many calling for transcending not just ethnic, racial, and gender barriers but national boundaries as well.

But in recent years, whether because of growing strength or growing frustration with the lack of progress, the Left has upped the ante. A shift in tone, rhetoric, and logic has moved identity politics away from inclusion – which had always been the Left’s watchword – toward exclusion and division. As a result, many on the left have turned against universalist rhetoric (for example, All Lives Matter), viewing it as an attempt to erase the specificity of the experience and oppression of historically marginalized minorities.

The new exclusivity is partly epistemological, claiming that out-group members cannot share in the knowledge possessed by in-group members (“You can’t understand X because you are white”; “You can’t understand Y because you’re not a woman”; “You can’t speak about Z because you’re not queer”). The idea of “cultural appropriation” insists, among other things, “These are our group’s symbols, traditions, patrimony, and out-group members have no right to them.”

For much of the Left today, anyone who speaks in favor of group blindness is on the other side, indifferent to or even guilty of oppression. For some, especially on college campuses, anyone who

doesn't swallow the anti-oppression orthodoxy hook, line, and sinker – anyone who doesn't acknowledge “white supremacy” in America – is a racist.

When liberal icon Bernie Sanders told supporters, “It's not good enough for somebody to say, ‘Hey, I'm a Latina, vote for me,’ ” Quentin James, a leader of Hillary Clinton's outreach efforts to people of color, retorted that Sanders's “comments regarding identity politics suggest he may be a white supremacist, too”.

Once identity politics gains momentum, it inevitably subdivides, giving rise to ever-proliferating group identities demanding recognition.

Today, there is an ever-expanding vocabulary of identity on the left. Facebook now lists more than fifty gender designations from which users can choose, from genderqueer to intersex to pangender.

Or take the acronym LGBTQ. Originally LGB, variants over the years have ranged from GLBT to LGBTI to LGBTQIAAP as preferred terminology shifted and identity groups quarreled about who should be included and who come first.

Because the Left is always trying to “outleft” the last Left, the result can be a zero-sum competition over which group is the least privileged, an “Oppression Olympics” often fragmenting progressives and setting them against each other.

Although inclusivity is presumably still the ultimate goal, the contemporary Left is pointedly exclusionary.

During a Black Lives Matter protest at the DNC held in Philadelphia in July 2016, a protest leader announced that “this is a black and brown resistance march”, asking white allies to “appropriately take [their] place in the back of this march”.

The war on “cultural appropriation” is rooted in the belief that groups have exclusive rights to their own histories, symbols, and traditions. Thus, many on the left today would consider it an offensive act of privilege for, say, a straight white man to write a novel featuring a gay Latina as the main character.

Transgressions are called out daily on social media; no one is immune. Beyoncé was criticized for wearing what looked like a traditional Indian bridal outfit; Amy Schumer, in turn, was criticized for making a parody of Beyoncé's Formation, a song about the black female experience. Students at Oberlin complained of a vendor's “history of blurring the line between culinary diversity and cultural appropriation by modifying the recipes without respect for certain Asian countries' cuisines”. And a student op-ed at Louisiana State University claimed that white women styling their eyebrows to look thicker – like “a lot of ethnic women” –was “a prime example of the cultural appropriation in this country”.

Not everyone on the Left is happy with the direction that identity politics has taken. Many are dismayed by the focus on cultural appropriation. As a progressive Mexican American law student put it, “If we allowed ourselves to be hurt by a costume, how could we manage the trauma of an eviction notice?”

He added: “Liberals have cried wolf too many times. If everything is racist and sexist, nothing is.

This brings us to the most striking feature of today's right-wing political tribalism: the white identity politics that has mobilized around the idea of whites as an endangered, discriminated-against group.

In part this development carries forward a long tradition of white tribalism in America. But white identity politics has also gotten a tremendous recent boost from the Left, whose relentless berating, shaming, and bullying might have done more damage than good.

One Trump voter claimed that “maybe I’m just so sick of being called a bigot that my anger at the authoritarian left has pushed me to support this seriously flawed man.” “The Democratic party,” said Bill Maher, “made the white working man feel like your problems aren’t real because you’re ‘mansplaining’ and check your privilege. You know, if your life sucks, your problems are real.” When blacks blame today’s whites for slavery or ask for reparations, many white Americans feel as though they are being attacked for the sins of other generations.

Or consider this blog post in the American Conservative, worth quoting at length because of the light it sheds:

I’m a white guy. I’m a well-educated intellectual who enjoys small arthouse movies, coffeehouses and classic blues. If you didn’t know any better, you’d probably mistake me for a lefty urban hipster.

And yet. I find some of the alt-right stuff exerts a pull even on me. Even though I’m smart and informed enough to see through it. It’s seductive because I am not a person with any power or privilege, and yet I am constantly bombarded with messages telling me that I’m a cancer, I’m a problem, everything is my fault.

I am very lower middle class. I’ve never owned a new car, and do my own home repairs as much as I can to save money. I cut my own grass, wash my own dishes, buy my clothes from Walmart. I have no clue how I will ever be able to retire. But oh, brother, to hear the media tell it, I am just drowning in unearned power and privilege, and America will be a much brighter, more loving, more peaceful nation when I finally just keel over and die.

Trust me: After all that, some of the alt-right stuff feels like a warm, soothing bath. A “safe space,” if you will. I recoil from the uglier stuff, but some of it— the “hey, white guys are actually okay, you know! Be proud of yourself, white man!” stuff is really VERY seductive, and it is only with some intellectual effort that I can resist the pull ... If it’s a struggle for someone like me to resist the pull, I imagine it’s probably impossible for someone with less education or cultural exposure.

Just as the Left’s exclusionary identity politics is ironic in light of the Left’s ostensible demands for inclusivity, so too is the emergence of a “white” identity politics on the right.

For decades, the Right has claimed to be a bastion of individualism, a place where those who rejected the divisive identity politics of the Left found a home.

For this reason, conservatives typically paint the emergence of white identity as having been forced on them by the tactics of the Left. As one political commentator puts it, “feeling as though they are under perpetual attack for the color of their skin, many on the right have become defiant of their whiteness, allowing it into their individual politics in ways they have not for generations”.

At its core, the problem is simple but fundamental. While black Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Jewish Americans, and many others are allowed – indeed, encouraged – to feel solidarity and take pride in their racial or ethnic identity, white Americans have for the last several decades been told they must never, ever do so.

People want to see their own tribe as exceptional, as something to be deeply proud of; that’s what the tribal instinct is all about. For decades now, nonwhites in the United States have been encouraged to indulge their tribal instincts in just this way, but, at least publicly, American whites have not.

On the contrary, if anything, they have been told that their white identity is something no one should take pride in. “I get it,” says Christian Lander, creator of the popular satirical blog Stuff White People Like, “as a straight white male, I’m the worst thing on Earth.”

But the tribal instinct is not so easy to suppress. As Vassar professor Hua Hsu put it in an Atlantic essay called “The End of White America?” the “result is a racial pride that dares not speak its name, and that defines itself through cultural cues instead.”

In combination with the profound demographic transformation now taking place in America, this suppressed urge on the part of many white Americans – to feel solidarity and pride in their group identity, as others are allowed to do – has created an especially fraught set of tribal dynamics in the United States today.

Just after the 2016 election, a former Never Trumper explained his change of heart in the Atlantic: “My college-age daughter constantly hears talk of white privilege and racial identity, of separate dorms for separate races (somewhere in heaven Martin Luther King Jr is hanging his head and crying) ... I hate identity politics, [but] when everything is about identity politics, is the left really surprised that on Tuesday millions of white Americans ... voted as ‘white’? If you want identity politics, identity politics is what you will get.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/mar/01/how-americas-identity-politics-went-from-inclusion-to-division>