

What kind of politics are enabled by the study of white identity and/or white privilege?

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In the 1970s, four scholars participated in a panel discussion for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. They were asked to address questions about the social and academic value of ethnic *identity*.¹ In response, Orlando Patterson, a professor of sociology, wrote “The particularistic and divisive social philosophy of pluralism is, in my mind, one of the most tragic intellectual developments of our time” (p. 32). Taking a somewhat more sanguine perspective, University of Chicago sociologist Andrew Greeley lamented the lack of diversity within the academy and wrote, “The critical challenge is not - to eliminate or reject ethnic identity - that is a self-defeating effort - but rather to understand how diversity and the tensions it engenders can be integrated into some form of unity” (p. 25). In response to both, the Harvard sociologist and soon-to-be U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, told both Patterson and Greeley, somewhat snidely, to get over themselves. They should instead, he argued, accept the world as it is, which for Moynihan meant acknowledging that, “For too long, world affairs have been looked at from the viewpoint of Marxist economics or the traditional balance of power, with little attempt to understand the role of ethnic factors” (p. 33).

It seems that the concepts of identity and identity politics have beguiled, fascinated, troubled, frustrated, irked, and angered academics in the U.S. since at least the 1960s. Today is no exception. The study of group identity is flourishing in academia. A Google scholar search for the term “group identity” yields over 700,000 results. The term “identity politics” produces more than 600,000 results, nearly 33,000 of which have appeared since 2017. Despite overwhelming interest in the concept, however, it is not often that scholars take the opportunity we have been given—to step back from the

¹ Glazer, Nathan, Andrew M. Greeley, Orlando Patterson, and Daniel P. Moynihan. 1974. “What Is Ethnicity?” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 27(8): 16–35.

minutiae of our research to consider not just the normative implications of group identities, but also to reflect on the social and political implications of studying the concept in the first place.

From where I'm sitting, as a social scientist, it appears that my discipline often overlooks such opportunities. We largely see our academic work as taking a positivist approach that reveals the world simply as it is and not as we would like it to be. But some might argue that in studying group identities, we are breathing too much life into a problematic concept. The most common critique of identity politics is that it is fracturing society, allowing groups to make political demands that narrowly benefit their group at the expense of the greater good.² Some have argued, for instance, that the failings of the Democratic Party in the U.S. lie in its obsession with the rhetoric of diversity and the degree to which it has over-extended itself and alienated mostly white Americans by appealing explicitly to Black, Latino, and LGBT voters. Others have argued that identity politics is what drives support for far-right leaders, and it is the impetus for the rise of white nationalist and white supremacist groups. From these perspectives, there is little social utility to identity politics, and so far from being studied, it should be snuffed out.

Another, albeit less common, critique is that academics who study racial identity as part of a normative effort to achieve racial equality are misguided. It is not race, but rather class and economic inequality, on which our efforts should be focused. Undoubtedly, economic inequality is an enormous problem in a democratic society where citizens claim to value egalitarian norms. But this puzzling juxtaposition misses some fundamental points. The first is that racial identity is not merely a "celebration of difference," nor is it a distraction from efforts to achieve economic inequality. Suggesting that attending to identity politics is what keeps us from fighting growing inequality is just barking up the wrong tree.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html>

Both racial identity and economic inequality in the U.S. are the products of the construction and maintenance of the idea of *race* both as a somewhat inevitable feature of human psychology and as a politically, economically, and socially strategic project. This project dates back to European conquest, colonization, and slavery and is long rooted in the service of creating and maintaining the power and dominant status of people deemed white at the expense of other groups. When we understand race in this way, we can see that the question we should be asking today is not what politics we are enabling by studying racial identity, but instead what politics are we enabling by *not* studying racial identity.

One answer is that we are enabling the politics of colorblindness, which strategically dismisses the value of racial identities among subordinated groups to disempower them. What social science makes clear is that for black Americans and other marginalized groups, identity politics has been a tool to fight centuries of racial oppression. Identity politics is the foundation from which black Americans and other marginalized groups have fought for access to political, social, and economic power. It was the fuel for the Civil Rights Movement, which led to black Americans' democratic inclusion. If we pejoratively dismiss, for instance, "black identity" as merely self-absorbed, neoliberal theater, we make several mistakes. The first is that we miss the extent to which identities are ways that groups have reclaimed and preserved dignity in the face of centuries of being told their art and music and literature and so on is inferior because of the arbitrary concept of race. Second, and more to the point, we miss that racial identities are what members of marginalized groups use collectively to fight against an arbitrary distinction that makes them more likely to be denied a job or a mortgage, to be incarcerated, to be killed by a police officer, to be denied adequate medical treatment, and so forth. Put bluntly, supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement are not protesting on the streets because they feel black history month does not adequately celebrate their group; they are protesting to demand that police officers no longer murder members of their group

because of their race. And finally, by railing against identity politics among racial and ethnic minority groups, we undermine, dismiss, and insult the very tool marginalized groups have used strategically and effectively to fight for greater equality.

Among white Americans, by not studying identity, we also overlook an important reality: Racism comes not only from the irrational hostilities or prejudices harbored by some individuals, but also from a sense of solidarity many whites feel with their racial group.³ This sense of white identity exists in the service of maintaining the racial hierarchy—one that affords whites significant power, privileges, and resources. Racial identity for whites, then, is a tool for maintaining the status quo established via the long project of race-making. By ignoring this truth about the world, we enable the politics of strategic plausible deniability. We allow politicians and elites to claim that draconian immigration policies, colorblindness, ending affirmative action, denying reparations, and rejecting diversity are in the service of national unity. Instead, we should see them for what they typically are: efforts to maintain white dominance.

By studying the role of race and racial identities, we can be more clear-eyed about the extent to which elites use whites' status in the racial hierarchy as a way to distinguish working class whites from working class blacks. Similarly, we can recognize that the enduring political strategy of stoking whites' racial fears is meant to stymie the development of class solidarity. It also serves to motivate whites to vote against their own class interests in order to consolidate whites' social and economic power. One path to fighting economic inequality therefore comes not from criticizing the left for promoting identity politics, or scholars for studying it, but instead from working to dismantle the racial hierarchy that facilitates the need for identity politics in the first place.

³ Jardina, Ashley. *White Identity Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019.