

# A critique of Identity as a political programme

Martin Suchanek Fri, 12/03/2021 - 00:00

Martin Suchanek

'We believe that the most profound and potentially radical politics come directly from our own identity.'  
(Combahee River Collective, 1977)

This sentence, coined by a group of radical Black feminists in the 1970s, represents a kind of credo for what is understood today as 'identity politics'. In recent decades, a variety of social movements, ranging across the political spectrum from feminist to radical left, reformist, bourgeois-liberal and even right-wing populist have come to embrace the concept. Thus, as identity politics has become increasingly influential, its content has become more and more politically ambiguous.

This article will seek to analyse the evolution of 'identity politics' as a concept and political strategy and discuss why it has come to simultaneously define opposing class forces, beginning with a look at its origins.

## Origins

Identity politics claims that one's individual identity is the decisive basis of a radical politics for liberation or the elimination of injustice and inequality. Identity represents the individual or collective consciousness that arises from one's personal or shared experience. The members of a particular group of exploited, oppressed, and discriminated people (women, black people, workers) are assumed not only to share common experiences but to have access to a unique understanding of the causes of these injustices and the strategy for overcoming them.

The statement of the Combahee River Collective contains the first explicit expression of this idea: 'We recognise that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are ourselves. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community that allows us to continue our struggle and our work.'

Unlike most later proponents of 'identity politics', the Combahee River Collective saw itself as a revolutionary organisation. The group understood capitalist exploitation, patriarchy and racism as systemic structures that shape society, in an approach similar to the triple oppression theory formulated by Claudia Jones in the late 1940s. Unlike later critiques of mainstream feminism - for example, queer feminism - early proponents of identity politics did aim to build a collective identity or mass movement to eliminate the structural causes of oppression.

They concluded that these oppressive systems must be overcome through the formation of a radical, revolutionary identity of the oppressed, occurring when members of an oppressed group begin to articulate their common experiences through collective organisation. This perspective emerged as part of a new wave of Black liberation movements in the USA of the 1970s, including the growth of the Black Panther Party and black nationalism. Internationally, anti-colonial liberation struggles, including the defeat of the US in the Vietnam War formed a historical background that not only gave rise to revolutionary optimism, but also nurtured the idea that the most oppressed in society would spontaneously achieve revolutionary consciousness and lead a new wave of revolutionary movements.

Against this background, Combahee River Collective statement was primarily shaped by the Black

feminists? experiences of 1970s social movements, pointing to the reproduction of social oppression among the oppressed themselves, particularly the racism within the mainstream feminist movement dominated by white middle-class women, and sexism within anti-colonial and anti-racist organisations like the Black Panther Party, which were dominated by men. Although similar dynamics had long been at work in the bureaucratically controlled workers? movement and in national liberation movements, the concept of identity politics was - due to the legacy of Black feminism - for a long time applied mainly within women?s movements.

### Essentialising oppression

As soon as the central premise of identity politics is accepted and becomes a determining ideology of a political current, its inner contradictions also unfold. If one?s individual identity is declared to be the source of the ?most profound and potentially radical politics?, it follows logically that non-members of oppressed groups are inherently lacking such special insights. Non-members of the affected group can empathise, offer solidarity, and try to comprehend oppression, but they can never draw on this experience themselves. Although this idea intends to establish a unity in struggle based on common experience, and draw attention to the multiple or more severe oppressions experienced by some, it frequently ends up essentialising oppression, and in its extreme forms turns into a reactionary relativism. If identity springs directly from common experience, then it is not a historically constituted social relation, but rather a ?characteristic? of a certain group of people, which is produced biologically, naturally or spontaneously through shared culture or location. Thus identity appears as an unquestionable absolute.

Of course, common experience of oppression has an important emancipatory element, without which there can be no progressive or revolutionary political movement. But the limits of identity as the basis for an emancipatory strategy must be understood. If one?s own or collective experience becomes the decisive criterion for the truth and correctness of politics, it is ultimately impossible to reasonably argue about this claim to truth and the politics derived from it. Every policy based on identity politics tends to absolutise the individual or group experience of ?the? women, ?the? blacks, ?the? factory workers, and so on.

The absolutisation of individual or collective experience confronts us in various forms. The concept of a ?natural? and constant identity of a particular oppressed group can take the form of a conservative biological essentialism cloaked in the language of progressivism, as when women appear as the ?peaceful? gender that is innately more ?communication-oriented?. This also applies to the politics of radical feminism which insists on an essentialist understanding of natural sex and gender identity (?women are women?) in opposition to trans activists.

The same underlying premise - the unquestionable truth of someone?s experience of oppression - leads to an adherence to absolute partiality in matters of alleged discrimination or assault, where any accusation is taken as proof that such an act has occurred. The accused is deprived of any right of defence - a regression even from bourgeois civil law. The problem with this approach also becomes strikingly apparent as soon as different oppressed people insist on their respective power of definition, e.g. when a racially oppressed man accuses a white woman of racism, who in turn accuses the man of sexism.

The same contradictions occur when experience of oppression is made the decisive criterion of truth for the correctness of political strategy. We find this in the ideas of postcolonialism, according to which people from the imperial metropolises who are not members of oppressed nations cannot judge the politics of a national liberation movement ?from the outside?, or that postcolonial movements or cultures cannot even be analysed using ?Western? categories. Leaving aside the fact that even solidarity with a liberation movement or political current implies a judgement ?from the outside?, this identity-political idea regularly amounts to an absolute defence against any political criticism, inevitably favouring the dominant bourgeois class forces within these movements.

In the end, these contradictions cannot be resolved on the basis of identity politics, where different claims

oppose each other with equal right to authenticity. Any questioning of the political conclusions drawn from someone's experience of oppression can be denounced as a negation of the identity of the person or group concerned. Thus taken to its logical conclusion, identity politics turns into a relativism that rejects the struggle against reactionary ideologies and organisations among the oppressed or plays down their repressive character.

From the point of view of revolutionary class politics, an acceptance of identity politics in the women's movement means an adaptation to petty-bourgeois and bourgeois, mostly feminist ideologies, and in the case of national liberation movements to various varieties of nationalism. In short, the relativism that accompanies identity politics leads involuntarily to the political subordination of the proletariat to petty-bourgeois, bourgeois, and in extreme cases even directly reactionary class forces.

#### Development

Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the growing popularity of identity politics in feminist and anti-racist movements was frequently accompanied (perhaps contrary to the intentions of some of the concept's originators) by the presentation of a common, cross-class identity for the chosen oppressed group. This represented a departure from the anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist critiques of early proponents of identity politics, replaced by an emphasis on the unique common experience of women or black people (vis-a-vis men or whites). This process was conditioned and reinforced by the defeats of the working class in the face of the neoliberal offensive of the 1980s, and the restoration of capitalism in the former Soviet Bloc, which for the intelligentsia in particular appeared to be the 'end of Marxism'.

One doesn't need to look far for real-world examples of this kind of politics in the mass movements of today. For example, in the Women's March against Trump in 2017, Tamika Mallory, a left-wing activist and representative of Black Lives Matter, was accused of 'antisemitism' because she stood in solidarity with the Palestinian resistance and participated in a Nation of Islam event. Despite clear evidence that she was speaking out against antisemitism in the Black community, the accusations did not go away and a split in the event's coordination committee eventually followed.

In her defence, Mallory drew attention to a point that highlighted the double standards of her critics. While she had to constantly justify an appearance at the Nation of Islam, Republican Meghan McCain was never asked if she was distancing herself from her party's policies or her father's misogynistic statements. On the contrary, she was welcomed as a participant because, as a prominent Republican, she would help to popularise the movement, whereas Mallory would 'divide women' with her anti-Zionism and anti-colonialism.

Here we see how 'identity-political' unity, the unity of 'all' women regardless of class affiliation and oppression, serves as an ideological cover for the assertion of particular - usually bourgeois or petty-bourgeois - class interests. This example also elucidates how an identity politics which articulates above all the interests of middle-class women has spread far beyond the radical feminist movement and has found its way into bourgeois civil society, in particular being taken up by bourgeois and reformist political parties in order to appeal to women (or other oppressed groups) as voters.

We do not wish to deny that there are indeed common experiences of oppression that affect members of all classes. However, through this kind of identity politics, the fundamental conflicts between the interests of bourgeois women and working-class women, as well as the special interests of women from the petty-bourgeoisie and middle classes are put aside or deliberately obscured. It is no coincidence that the proponents of identity politics often come from petty bourgeois or middle class backgrounds. Their position between the main classes of capitalist society is a social breeding ground for the spread of ideologies which blur class antagonisms.

Left feminists like Nancy Fraser in the manifesto *Feminism for the 99%* have subjected this 'liberal feminism' to a sharp critique, arguing that feminism has in fact formed an alliance with representatives of 'enlightened' capitalism against the imagined patriarchal (proletarian) white man, but also of all other

subaltern strata and classes. In doing so, it has made it easier for Trump and similar right-wing populists to pose as defenders of the 'working class', 'hard-working Americans', in the face of the 'culture war' being waged by liberal elites.

However, this entirely justified accusation does not go far enough. While Fraser exposes the political capitulation of liberal feminism, she does not attack the notion underlying all identity politics that one's experience would lead directly to progressive, liberating and society-changing consciousness. On the contrary, identity politics itself pervades the manifesto 'Feminism for the 99%', namely when the formation of a transformative 'revolutionary' subject is understood as an alliance of cross-class movements of the subaltern and the oppressed, i.e. as a convergence of oppressed identities (for a detailed critique, see Urte March, *Feminism for the 99% - A Critique*, in: *Fight 8*, March 2020).

### Left identity politics

The representatives of a 'left' version of identity politics try to solve the problems associated with its 'essentialisation' by justifying a non-essentialist identity politics. Their efforts are frequently influenced by Simone de Beauvoir or Frantz Fanon, whose ideas it is useful to examine to make it clear that even this variety of identity politics cannot escape its inherent contradictions.

### Simone De Beauvoir

In her work *The Other Sex*, de Beauvoir deserves credit for radically questioning 'womanhood'. 'One is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman,' she summarises. In doing so, she points out - similarly to the Marxist-materialist explanation of women's oppression - that gender roles, i.e. 'being a woman', female sexuality (or its denial) are not 'natural', innate characteristics of women, but socially produced phenomena.

Though de Beauvoir was not the first to point out the social constitution of gender roles and identities, her book popularised these striking ideas and made them accessible to millions. But because of its philosophical basis, existentialism, her theory can only grasp the essence of the human being, 'man', in an individualistic and abstract way. For existentialists (Sartre and others), the existence of 'man' precedes his social being; i.e. the individual is understood ontologically as a human being who is thrown into the world, made an individual, by being forced to decide. Man is what he decides for, what he decides to do. For de Beauvoir, this is closely linked to the pursuit of freedom.

It is true that here a real moment of human and political action is identified. But it abstracts from the historical determinacy of human decision-making and striving for freedom. 'Decision' and 'freedom' are not understood as historically constituted and changeable variables in different societies at different times, but as basic characteristics of 'man'.

In de Beauvoir's works, the limits of these abstract determinations of the individual, existing for herself or himself, repeatedly become clear. Her philosophical starting point allows social and historical factors to flow into them only as an afterthought. These do relativise the fundamental errors of existentialism, but without overcoming its actual foundations, namely not understanding 'freedom' or 'decision' as historical, evolving phenomena that first emerge with the development of social formations and the productive forces themselves, and are subject to a process of change.

These problems arise in all 'non-essentialist' identity politics, as well as in queer and difference feminism. To avoid the pitfalls of 'essentialism', the latter take refuge in subjective idealism. Woman, gender, identity appear as purely discursive constructions in which 'the woman' or 'the gender' is 'made'. The price for this 'solution' is, of course, that every such collective identity becomes suspect and tends to become repressive. Difference or queer feminism therefore logically lead to a purely idealistic, individualistic politics - identity itself is a construction.

For example, 'difference feminism' targets liberal feminism's call for equality as meaning women must assimilate to what is, in reality, a male identity. Or formulated differently: on the basis of a deconstruction of an apparently natural being, only a purely individual, negatively determined identity of the oppressed can

be derived. Liberation is thus stripped of its collective aspects and becomes focused exclusively on self-determination, self-empowerment of the individual and on shifting discourses, i.e. language politics. Queer and difference feminism with its focus on the individual thus not only represents an idealistic individualism, but also corresponds to the class situation of the majority of its representatives among the a waged middle classes; especially those who have been academically educated.

#### Limits

?Non-essential? identity politics, on the other hand, seeks to escape not only the problem of ?essentialism? but also falling into bourgeois individualism. It therefore resorts - like ?essentialism? itself - to regarding a common experience as a basis for common politics. However, to avoid the latter?s mistakes and tendencies towards making such identities absolute, it attempts to reflecting on possible moments of own identity that ?exclude? others who are oppressed. A whole range of techniques have been developed for this, including intersectionalism, a kind of repair shop for identity politics.

The problem that repeatedly arises in the justification of a ?non-essentialist? identity politics is related to the following. In order to justify the identity of a mass movement, a purely abstract, merely negative or purely discursive definition of identity is not sufficient. A collective identity must therefore be based on reality. Common ?experience? is to be used for this. But experience presents itself as a contradictory phenomenon in bourgeois society. Even that of oppression (or even more so of being ?exploited?) does not directly express the real social conditions, but in an ideologised way that sometimes even turns the real conditions on their head or hides them.

If, in the formation of a collective identity, a liberating subject is to be derived directly from one?s own experience, there is an involuntary tendency to fall back on socially dominant forms of consciousness of the oppressed. The fact that, for example, the family appears to the masses of women as a ?natural? and desirable form of living together arises from the social conditions in capitalism itself (just as commodity production appears natural to the owners of commodities, including owners of the commodity labour power).

Let us illustrate this with an example. In capitalism, most of the reproductive work is done by women. This gender-specific division of labour leads to the fact that they not only develop corresponding abilities and forms of consciousness based on them more than men. Because this division of labour has shaped the entire history of class societies over generations, in various forms, it appears that not only are women ?naturally? better suited for reproductive and care work, but also ?naturally? adopt attitudes towards other people associated with this. They will thus be more caring, more compassionate, more cooperative, more peaceful, more willing to compromise....

While a feminism based on identity politics certainly attacks the role attributions and gender inequalities prevalent in bourgeois society, it also adopts certain seemingly natural character traits of ?the woman?. Instead of understanding these as results of a gender-specific division of labour, they are also claimed in identity politics as natural characteristics of women, albeit with positive connotations. Thus, women should be more decisive because they are the inherently more peaceful, more solidary, more caring sex.

Non-essentialist? identity politics understands this problem. It recognises that the identity politics movements of socially oppressed people would reach a dead end if different oppressed people (e.g. ?the women?, ?the racially oppressed?, ?the youth?) made their oppression absolute in relation to others. But the limitation to absoluteness through mediation between movements and reflection of one?s own ?blind spots? ? by ?privilege checking? for example- actually falls short of achieving this

This is because it loses sight of the ideological, contradictory, inverted character of the ?spontaneous? identity of the oppressed themselves. In order to break the boundaries of identity politics and at the same time build a mass movement (e.g. of proletarian women or of the racially oppressed), it is not enough to contain the exclusionary tendencies of ?spontaneous? identity politics movements. Rather, the idea that one?s own experience of oppression could spontaneously lead to the correct realisation of the causes and

ways to overcome oppression must be problematised.

Frantz Fanon

We also want to illustrate this with a second role model of 'non-essentialist identity politics': Franz Fanon. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, (1961) he repeatedly sharply criticises the adaptation of the black intelligentsia to colonial rule and bourgeois-democratic ideologies, but also a black nationalism that romanticises traditional African societies and wants to revive their past. Fanon himself characterises this as reactionary and folkloristic sentimentality, a distraction from the struggle for liberation.

In this sense, Fanon is 'anti-essentialist'. But in order to establish a mass movement in the anti-colonial liberation struggle, he does not resort to Marxism and Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, which alone can theoretically and programmatically link the struggle for democratic rights to a socialist revolution. Rather, he stands in the tradition of Soviet Russian Stalinism and Maoism and the stages theory they shaped, according to which the revolution in the semi-colonies must lead to national liberation first before the socialist tasks can be addressed.

He does, however, lend it its own elements. Firstly, Fanon regards the urban working class in the colonies as a bought-off, closely linked to colonialism, and it is thus ruled out as a revolutionary force; indeed, like large sections of the urban population, it may appear positively regressive. No wonder, then, that Fanon seeks the revolutionary force in the countryside rather than in the centres, and that he prefers a liberation struggle organised from there.

Secondly, he makes a sharp distinction between the 'national culture' as it exists and the 'nation', as it is developing first in the liberation struggle. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes of colonial destruction a national consciousness is emerging, which for him is also the highest form of revolutionary consciousness. 'International events, the spreading collapse of colonial empires, the contradictions within the colonialist system entertain and strengthen the readiness to fight, give rise to a national consciousness and give it strength'. (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 202)

And further: 'If culture is an expression of national consciousness, I do not hesitate to say for our case that national consciousness is the most developed form of culture.' (Ibid, p. 208)

He tries to establish a 'revolutionary nationalism' which, according to him, is qualitatively different from old-style European nationalism in that it has an 'international dimension'. Unlike Marxism, which also considers and criticises the nationalism of oppressed nations as a bourgeois ideology and therefore sharply demarcates the struggle for national liberation from all concessions to nationalism, Fanon imagines an 'international' nationalism, one of liberation. He wants to find points of contact for this in reality, to draw it from the 'positive' traditions of the national struggle. In the concrete case of the liberation struggle in Algeria, these were the left-wing, bourgeois-nationalist liberation front the FLN (*Front de libération nationale*,) and the emerging pan-African movement.

The generalisation of an 'identity' gained from direct experience, even if it is distinguished from the outset from problematic traditional forms, thus also leads Fanon to have recourse to a real, discovered identity shaped by society.

For the formation of a collective subject, a purely negative definition is ultimately not sufficient, even in the case of 'liberation nationalism'. It must be linked to something that 'spontaneously' arises in the conflicts, experiences, which then forms the common identity. This can either be found 'essentialistically' in the biological essence, in the nature of the human being, or must be taken from apparently spontaneously occurring, but in reality socially mediated objective forms of consciousness. In Fanon's case, the latter is militant nationalism. However ultimately, this 'non-essentialist' identity politics does not escape the problems of its counterpart either. Rather it ideologises the class interest of the bourgeois leaderships of the liberation movements of the 1960s.

Economism

In addition to authors like de Beauvoir or Fanon, some defenders of a left identity politics also present the

oppression of workers and their movements in the same light.

?For all those practical as well as theoretical attempts to form class consciousness among the wage earners (and beyond them) are also forms of identity politics: after all, it was not least a matter of individuals identifying themselves collectively through work and through their class position.? (Sussemichel and Kastner, p. 13)

The problem with this view, however, is precisely that the ?spontaneous? consciousness produced within the framework of the wage-dependent relationship and the identification with labour is by no means yet class consciousness ? certainly not for Marx, Lenin and other theoreticians and builders of the revolutionary Marxist workers? movement. On the contrary, Marx refers to the problems involved in spontaneous workers? consciousness in *Capital*. In the chapter on wages, for example, he shows that the form of wages necessarily produces an inverted consciousness of the class and exploitative relationship among capitalists and workers alike.

In the capitalist mode of production, the value of the commodity labour power must necessarily take the form of the labour?s wage. It does not appear as if the capitalist buys labour power, but pays for all the work done for him by the labourer. Therefore, along with the wage form, surplus labour and surplus value, and thus actual capitalist exploitation, disappear from the consciousness of capitalists and waged workers. As Marx shows, this disappearance of the basic exploitative relation in the consciousness of antagonistic classes is a necessary result of the capitalist mode of production itself, a reversal that is inseparable from the value form of commodities. The wage form is thus an objective thought form, but a mystification of the essential relationship.

The immediate experience of the working class and the pure trade union struggle between wage labour and capital moves within this thought-form, and even reinforces it to a certain extent. In the everyday consciousness of worker this is expressed, for example, in the fact that only poorly paid, precarious work appears as ?exploitation,? at a starvation wage, while a wage that covers the costs of reproduction or is even paid somewhat higher than these is perceived as ?fair? ? a fair days work for a fair days pay. Thus the purely economic (trade union) class struggle, as Lenin, following Marx, makes clear in *What Is To Be Done* (1902), remains on the level of negotiating the conditions of sale of the commodity labour power. Such disputes can and do reach a level of sharpness that it makes workers extremely receptive to revolutionary agitation and propaganda, e.g. when certain struggles such as strikes, which are suppressed by the state, raise questions that go beyond the horizon of the consciousness of trade union disputes. However, this does not change the fact that political class consciousness does not arise spontaneously in these disputes. Rather, as Lenin puts it, ?it can only be brought to the worker from outside, that is, from a sphere outside the economic struggle, outside the sphere of relations between workers and entrepreneurs.? (Lenin, *What Is To Be Done*, Collected Works vol. 5, p. 436)

If the workers? movement is understood, even fixed, as an example of identity politics, i.e. based on the spontaneous, naturally arising identification with work, being a worker engaged in the wage struggle, then the mistake of economism (limiting the class struggle to what develops spontaneously out of the economic sphere) is simply repeated. Even extending the trade union struggle into the of legislative sphere of trade union rights, or to struggle against social inequality stops short of a fully class struggle.

The problem is precisely that spontaneous workers? consciousness does not constitute a revolutionary class consciousness, indeed it remains a form of bourgeois consciousness. The same applies to any ?workers? identity? shaped in this way. If we look, for example, at the culture and identity produced by powerful reformist movements like Austro-Marxism, the welfare state, etc., but also the states ruled by Stalinist parties, their ?workers? culture? and corresponding identities remained bourgeois. These went hand in hand with the recognition of workers as a social force with a certain pride in identification with ?labour?, but also a ?being a worker? was integrated into a social context, which then did not aim at the abolition of the working class (or even the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism or the rule of a state

bureaucracy).

On the contrary, social democracy, the trade union bureaucracy and Stalinism strove to perpetuate a certain 'workers' culture' which went hand in hand with an adaptation to bourgeois culture, even an adoption of its reactionary elements, such as an idealisation of the bourgeois family, of reactionary gender roles, but also of their respective national cultures. Like identity politics, reformism and economism take 'workers' identity' as something given, something static.

For revolutionary Marxism, on the other hand, how revolutionary consciousness arises is fundamentally different from how the present consciousness of the working class develops on the surface of society. The spontaneous consciousness is a bourgeois one. Marxism is concerned with leading the workers' movement in a direction that can fight for relations within which not only can these forms of consciousness be abolished, but above all the conditions that necessarily produce them.

In the introduction to the 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', Marx formulates the demand to 'overturn all relations in which man is a degraded, a subjugated, a contemptible being' (MEW 1, p. 385). The revolutionary power of the working class does not consist in simply positively affirming the identity that the current condition produces, but rather in understanding itself as a subject in the process of becoming. However, this requires that the working class (as well as the socially oppressed) must not be understood merely as an existing group of people with similar experiences (or even a common opponent), but must also be understood by the goal necessary for its liberation, by its destiny as a revolutionary force. The essence of the working class, which makes it a revolutionary class in the first place, is therefore not how it is now, but what it can and must become in order to liberate not just itself but all of humanity from all from of exploitation and oppression.

Identity politics, on the other hand, represents a static concept of identity derived from the here and now, be it 'essentialist' or 'non-essentialist'. Since it understands identity as something given, static or constructed, it becomes entangled in the dialectic of essence and cannot come to a suspension of found identities. Here, the philosophical insistence on empiricism, pragmatism, existentialism, postmodernism or even a mechanical materialism proves fatal.

Compared to these ultimately anti-dialectical theories, the progress in Hegel's definition of the concept of essence consists precisely in the fact that it is itself conceived as something only in the process of coming into being, something non-finished, which is central to the overall movement precisely and despite this indeterminacy and openness of development in the context of the whole. As it says in the Phenomenology: 'The whole, however, is only the being that completes itself through its development.' And further: it is 'essentially the result that it is only in the end what it is in truth; and therein precisely consists its nature of being real, subject or becoming-itself.' (Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, Works, vol. 3, p. 24)

The subject of liberation is therefore not ready-made in this sense. Rather, its reality and experiences are necessarily contradictory and only in the process of formation. The deconstructivist critique of 'essentialism' deprives the subject of precisely that which is a prerequisite for its becoming a historical subject - its collectivity, its mass character - while ultimately every form of identity politics fails to recognise that the subject has to be formed in the first place.

It is precisely this point that Marxism takes up when it speaks of the development of the class in itself into one for itself. As a class in itself, however, the working class only forms itself as revolutionary when it constitutes itself as the historical subject of the upheaval and establishment of a new social order, i.e. when it creates the conditions for the stripping away of all reactionary, retrogressive elements of being and consciousness and its abolition as a class, its emergence into a humanity liberated from the yoke of class domination. The goal of the revolutionary movement of the working class does not consist in its post-revolutionary perpetuation as the ruling class, but in the overcoming class division itself and the creation of a classless society, in which people will finally have abolished the legacy of their humiliation, enslavement and one-sidedness.

## Roots of identity politics among the oppressed

Finally, we would like to summarise some essential conclusions of our observation and critique:

First, a Marxist critique of left identity politics must understand why it has been able to become so ideologically formative. To a large extent, this is also due to the traditionally dominant currents and ideologies in the working class. Stalinism, social democracy and trade union bureaucracy ultimately negate the subjective experiences of wage earners as acting subjects. Therefore, many oppressed, including socially oppressed sections of the working class, experience with the encrusted, bureaucratised and reformist leaderships that their oppression, their intensified exploitation is not taken seriously even by the labour movement. They are put off - often not much differently than in bourgeois society - to a 'later' point in time, because now there are supposedly more important things on the agenda. They are treated paternalistically and benevolently, as objects that will be taken care of. Their subjectivity, especially an active, rebellious one, is considered suspect. The fact that the workers' bureaucracy also keeps all other parts of the class passive and under control cannot console them.

On the contrary, the workers' bureaucracy is usually based on the relatively privileged wage earners in the imperialist countries, on the workers' aristocracy, which itself is often male, white, heterosexual. Of course, their forms of consciousness are also often shaped by reactionary ideologies - chauvinism, sexism, sometimes even racism. The dominant policy of trade unions and reformist parties to limit themselves to purely economic struggles or electoral battles and social reform means that the socially dominant state of class consciousness is not only accepted. Often, trade union apparatuses and reformist parties rely directly on these forms. The desire to win the votes of more backward workers and the middle classes becomes an excuse for adapting to their prejudices. In the worst cases, they are passive towards struggles of the oppressed or represent forms of chauvinism, nationalism, racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia that are also prevalent in the bourgeois mainstream.

Therefore, a political confrontation with identity politics in progressive movements requires an irreconcilable struggle against all forms of repressive, oppressive politics in the workers' movement itself. Only in this way will the best militants be convinced of the internal limits and the necessity of breaking with identity politics. Only in this way will they be convinced that the Marxist critique of the bourgeois character of this ideology has nothing to do with a passive attitude towards its oppression and its personal and collective experiences.

On the contrary, revolutionaries have to fight for them to be heard, for this force to find its way into the struggle. After all, one manifestation of all social oppression, as well as capitalist exploitation, is that their experiences (and even more so spontaneous forms of rebellion, revolt and resistance) are marginalised in this society.

Marxism recognises that becoming conscious as a truly class subject also involves a much broader, comprehensive articulation of experiences of all forms of exploitation and oppression. Workers' correspondence in the newspapers of the Second and Third Internationals also highlighted how important these were for the formation of a fighting movement and collective exchange. The emphasis on this experience in identity politics thus includes a correct moment that the workers' movement as a whole needs to push for, not only in terms of the experience of wage-earners, but of all the oppressed.

Secondly, the workers' movement must support all progressive struggles of the socially oppressed, be it against the employers, the state or the right, be it against imperialist exploitation and occupation, without ifs and buts. The fact that identity politics may play a significant, if not dominant, ideology in many disputes and movements does not change this. After all, it is not a question of supporting a false political conception, but legitimate resistance. If the workers' movement and especially its revolutionary wing really wants to show that it understands every uprising against oppression as an integral part of the class struggle for a different, socialist society, it must also show this in practice to activists in the women's movement, in anti-racist struggles, refugees, the sexually oppressed, for example.

## Critique of identity politics

However, this practical politics must go hand in hand with an irreconcilable critique of identity politics itself. This ultimately starts from a bourgeois understanding of subject formation. Basically, it does not consider the individual or identity and thus consciousness as a product of social, historical changeability.

Either it does so in the crude form of drawing conclusions directly from one's own experience/feeling to the correctness of the social assessment (parts of feminism, anti-colonialism, economism) or this politics is thought and justified in a more complex way. Thus, it is recognised that the consciousness of the oppressed can also be 'distorted', shaped by the relation of oppression. But instead of grasping the contradictory character of personal and collective experience itself, recourse is made to an actual but underlying, less immediate experience, which in a sense only needs to be exposed, or a certain relativisation is made, as in intersectionalism, when different experiences are weighed against each other.

Even if one's own or collective experience is an indispensable starting point for action, rebellion, questioning of apparent self-evident facts for the struggle against exploitation or oppression, the correctness of an analysis, an understanding of the overall context can certainly never be derived from it. On the contrary, under capitalism a false understanding can, indeed will, necessarily and spontaneously be reproduced among the oppressed. This is what bourgeois feminism does, for example, by reducing women's oppression to a question of equality; this is what the nationalism of liberation movements does, because nationalism is still a bourgeois ideology even then; this is what economism does by seeing workers' politics as an extension of the pure and simple union class struggle.

For Marxism, on the other hand, the human being represents an 'ensemble of social relations'. This means that individuality, even the identity of the individual, for example, is itself a historical product. This does not only mean that we are born into a certain world with certain possibilities. Specific class societies also produce different class individuals and, depending on the type, specific objective forms of thought and consciousness, thus also certain forms of identity.

But identity presents itself specifically in capitalism. And it presents itself in a double way as a bourgeois (commodity owner) and class individual (class in itself).

Consciousness, certain forms of individual consciousness, are already shaped in such a way that social relations in them are disguised, appear inverted or their essence disappears altogether - and this by necessity. For example, in the wage form - and this also has an impact on the question of domestic work, private work, and thus also the relationship between the sexes.

For example the identity of the exploited and oppressed is not simply 'formed' in the sense that they, for example, follow stereotypes that conform to the rule (e.g. obedience, moral values, gender norms), but also in the sense that their spontaneous moral goals (equality, justice,...) themselves represent ideological forms and an identity is formed that corresponds to the system itself, even if it contains huge contradictions. This involves conscious and unconscious components and also inherently contradictory moments - not least because the society whose subjective reflection it represents is also contradictory.

A non-societal view leads to the inequality of men and women in the social division of labour appearing as an effect of biological 'natural' differences or as an effect of a discourse, narrative.

This biologism, like identity politics and queer feminism, is based on phenomena on the surface of society. It takes identity (or in the case of the latter, discourse), i.e. a conscious reflection of the social division of labour, as its point of departure, not the material, everyday foundations of society: the prevailing relations of production.

But if the social conditions (exploitation, oppression) can only appear mediated, ideologised in consciousness and in role 'assignments', it is also not possible to draw conclusions directly from one's own experience about the roots or social significance of one's own oppression/exploitation.

The relationship of capitalist exploitation to women's oppression cannot be deduced from direct experience. Thus, the capital relation (and thus the exploitation of wage labour) constitutes the

fundamental social one. However, this does not always mean that the situation of the working class is the worst. In some countries or whole periods, the situation of small farmers and the landless can be much worse. Nevertheless, they are not able to constitute a consistent revolutionary force because of their social situation as parts of the petty bourgeoisie, albeit in the process of dissolution.

Nor can the difference between the relations of exploitation and oppression be recognised and understood from experience, cannot be derived from the identity of the exploited or oppressed, because identity itself is objectively socially shaped, that is, it produces 'functional' under capitalism specific objective forms of consciousness, fetish forms (not only in the sense of false attributions).

Identity politics does not start from the human being as an 'ensemble of social relations?', but from the individual. The social relations are not introduced as constitutive, but are only added in the analysis afterwards (e.g. in the form of critique of privileges, discursive attributions, etc.) and even then usually on the level of distribution relations, not of the underlying capitalist production relation and an understanding of the totality of the bourgeois social formation.

This takes note of and emphasises real manifestations, but on a false methodological basis in which, for example, class relations appear only as another attribute of discrimination and (authoritarian) domination, not as a fundamental relationship of exploitation.

Therefore, a programme based on identity politics can at best be eclectic, not revolutionary.

Therefore, Marxism must reject identity politics in principle and in any form, especially the idea of understanding class politics as a form of identity politics. This would mean reducing Marxism to economism.

Rejecting identity politics does not mean rejecting the importance of personal experience and the importance of collective identity. On the contrary, emphasising these is an important element of revolutionary politics. But this cannot spontaneously lead to revolutionary politics. Rather, revolutionary class consciousness requires a linking of collective experience with Marxism. This in turn means the building of a revolutionary party and international, an international fighting federation of the most determined and conscious sections of the working class and all the oppressed, on the basis of a programme that is based on a scientifically grounded generalisation of historical experience.

---

**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/critique-identity-political-programme>