



# ULTIMATELY, IDENTITY DOESN'T MATTER: OVERCOMING THE TIRESOME FIGHTS IN CULTURE WARS REQUIRES FIGHTING A MATERIAL WORLD WHERE IDENTITIES ARE REASONABLE MEANS

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## Repeating Arguments...

The entire discussion of identity, privileges, and discrimination is situated between two fiercely contested positions.

On one side, there are those who identify and criticize existing privileges as unjustified and therefore illegitimate advantages. To overcome these *unjustified* advantages, they propose the implementation of *justified* advantages for those who are subject to discrimination. Here, identity politics is taken as an emancipative project. As Karsten Schubert declared in his contribution to the Culture Wars Series, “[identity politics is fundamental to democracy](#),” since the articulation and inclusion of hitherto suppressed voices and particular standpoints leads to a permanent and never-ending revision of democratic universalism—a dynamic that is taken to be the very core of democracy as an ideal that is always “to come” (Derrida). In Schubert’s view, “Disruptively breaking through established understandings of universal discourse through particular identity politics is central to the further democratization of democracy.” The same line of argument—adjusted appropriately—is used in the field of science: more diversity—especially by including the subaltern—gives rise to a more robust or “strong objectivity” ([Harding 2015](#); for a meditation on the entanglement of the political and the academic, see [Speck/Villa](#)). From this standpoint, any opposition to identity politics, whether in the political or scientific sphere, appears as a form of [backlash](#).

On the other side of the debate, there are those who do not consider identity politics a progressive tool that serves to democratize democracies by disrupting our conventional understandings of universalism, common sense, and objectivity by recognizing hitherto excluded standpoints. Rather, they see the identification of (others’ unjustified) privileges and the claiming of (justified) privileges (for themselves) as a tool by which for those who are allegedly discriminated against, excluded or oppressed to get their hands on (mostly public) resources or positions and thereby gain illegitimate advantages. By constantly making up new and more bizarre types of discrimination and oppression, the “discriminated against” seek not merely to level the playing-field or open up/widen the space for democratic deliberation. Rather, they—or so these critics allege—want to

establish a new social order that would make “ordinary people” the new, oppressed minority. Identity politics does not serve to compensate powerlessness but—as in Nietzsche’s famous story about the genealogy of morals—is a trick played by the oppressed to become the new masters. In our “[postheroic](#)” times with their “[victimhood culture](#),” this self-positioning as powerless finally gives rise not only to neoliberalism, but also to a “competition of victims” that sees “[marginalized groups struggling primarily to be recognized as oppressed and thus affirming rather than challenging the social hierarchy](#).” This leads—for example, in DEI departments—to a “[tacit hierarchy of rights](#)” where some identities are prioritized at the expense of others (and being discriminated against intersectionally is the ultimate trump card). The critics of identity politics claim that it has caused things to become weirdly distorted and perverted: defensive weapons like minority rights and anti-discrimination legislation, originally designed to protect minorities from falling behind, are now used to attack and oppress the majority (an argument that is mostly brazen exaggeration on the part of conservatives who seek to conserve or retain the pole position of declining elites).

To question the unquestioned standards of our societal order is indeed one of the aims of identity politics. In earlier (“normal”) times, the argument goes, deviations from the standard of the white, male, heterosexual citizen needed to be reduced, leveled out or lifted up until the normative standard was reached. Today, however, the normative standard of the white, straight, male citizen is being deconstructed as Eurocentric, heteronormative, and patriarchal—that is, a particular standpoint only pretending to be universal.

### ...in a Ritualized Conflict

The two sides fight each other in a highly formalized, stereotyped and almost ritualized manner, as in a scripted reality TV show. By repeating and varying a well-known set of “conflict rhetoric” claims—like calling the opponent hegemonic and themselves marginalized—a specific “[form of culture wars](#)” is reproduced and maintained. Already, the performative speech act of reducing a complex social situation to *one* new cleavage—the “simple and self-righteous opposition between a good, liberal, open-minded, and progressive culture, on the one hand, and a bad, racist, close-minded, and regressive culture, on the other hand”—must be deciphered as part of the game, as [Biskamps](#) has shown.

### Identity Politics as Ordinary Politics

Since “everything is already said, but not by everyone,” as the German saying goes, I will not repeat the arguments for and against identity politics. It is in any case nonsensical to say that one is *for* or *against* identity politics as such: politics is always connected with actors who speak out or represent specific ideas, interests or norms. As Zora Hesová put it in her contribution to this series, “[Conflicts about identity, values, and norms are part of ordinary politics](#).” Nor will I emphasize once again the immanent ambivalence of identity politics, its status as an empty signifier and essentially contested concept that different actors can charge with different and even opposing meanings. Nor will I deal with the phenomenon of reification and play out the (good) “strategic essentialism” (Spivak) of a “[constructivist identity politics](#)” against the (bad) ontologization or hypostasis of identities as a perversion of the original idea—made possible by acts of [elite capture](#) and in the [interest of \(academic\) elites](#). Nor will I join in the (radical) left critique that the normative horizon of identity politics is a bourgeois form of “equal opportunity and performance” justice, as already guaranteed in the formal rights of liberal states, and in this respect does not exceed “progressive neoliberalism” (Nancy Fraser).

## Materialistic Questions

Instead of engaging in the debate on one side or the other, I would like to step back and interrogate the socio-economic conditions that made identity politics not only possible but likely.

I am especially interested in the question of why the German left is so engaged in a discourse that has its roots in the political right. It was the political right that rediscovered (collective) identity and community as antidotes to the crises of the 1970s ([Marquard/Stierle 1979](#), [Vobruba 1983](#); for a historical overview of the trajectory of the concept of identity, see [Giesen 1993](#), [Giesen 1999](#), and [Niethammer 2000](#), and for the thesis that the right and the left have changed places, see [Koschorke 2023](#)).

As [Perinelli](#) rightly stated in his contribution to this series, the contemporary left in Germany is a product of the decay of the various Maoist and Leninist K-Groups and their program of an avant-garde party politics. Wanting to liberate themselves from the “economical” materialist theory, the “undogmatic” [Spontis](#) and the [\(left-\)alternative milieu](#) turned toward spontaneous, unorthodox forms of political practice and post-Marxist or poststructural theories ([Felsch 2021](#)). However, while undoubtedly playing an important role in revealing the many deficiencies of the Marxist theory of the 1960s and 1970s, they threw the baby out with the bathwater. What was intended to break out of the orthodox Marxist paradigm ended up as a “[new left orthodoxy](#)” with its own dogma, rituals, and culture of confession ([Kirchick 2023](#), [Kováts 2023](#)).

One key element of this New Left Orthodoxy is the focus on intra-class conflicts and cleavages, i.e., the many forms of oppression and domination within the working class (to which belong all those who do not own any means of production). The almost [obsessive concern with dominance and subordination within the working class](#)—instead of the exploitation of one class (workers) by another class (capitalists)—must be understood and deciphered as the result of the many advancements, improvements, and adjustments of the “traditionalist” Marxist account in the 1970s and 1980s, among them the dependence theory, the concept of Racial Capitalism, and the Social Reproduction Theory. All of these accounts claimed that “normal exploitation” (by privileged white males in the West) is based on the un- or underpaid work done in the Global South, by black people, or by women outside “regular” production. Because of its internal dynamic of self-destruction, the stabilizing resources for capitalism must come from (local or social) spheres outside the productive center of capitalism. Here, black people, women, and other minorities are super-exploited on the basis of racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination so the regular exploitation “in the center” can continue. Because (white) people in the West benefit from the transfer of wealth from the (deprived) peripheries to the (privileged) center (and therefore have no interest in ending capitalism), the emancipation of the south, black people or women is—this argument goes—the only remaining way to overthrow capitalism. From this it follows that the anti-imperialist, anti-racial or feminist fight is inherently anti-capitalist, since it undermines and withdraws the external but necessary supports for capitalism.

## Identity as Symbolic Capital...

While it is true that capitalism depends structurally on various separations—between economic and political, private and public, production and reproduction—for the transfer of resources of one sphere to another, it is not true that, in doing so, capitalism prefers one particular group over another ([Mau 2023 \(Chapter 7\)](#), [Lange 2021](#) and [Cicheria 2022](#)). It is irrelevant who plays the role of the “external.” Capitalism, being a mode of production, does not care who is the actor behind the “character mask.” In addition to Ellen M. Wood’s famous statement that capitalism “[is uniquely indifferent to the social identities of the people it exploits](#),” we can say it is also indifferent to the social identities of the people it super-exploits (for this argument, see [Chibber 2022](#):

[128-142](#)). For the capital (and its representatives and agents), it does not matter who fulfills its systematic functions. [For the individual worker, however, it makes a huge difference where in the internal division within the working class he or she is located/positioned.](#) And this is where identities, privilege talk, and discrimination come in: they are used by competitors in a market-based society to achieve a better position. To make a long story short, the concept of identity is bound up with—and restricted to—the question of who is (morally) justified in filling or (historically) entitled to fill the existing roles, which are already set before any of the competitors steps onto the market (for jobs, housing, education, funding, and so on). Referring to discrimination and the entitlement derived from it is a strategy to improve *individuals'* positions in a predetermined situation of conflicts of interests ([Chibber 2022: 62-67](#)). Being discriminated against is thus, following Bourdieu, symbolic capital that can be transformed into other forms of capital. Against this background, it is understandable why the concept of [intersectionality](#) and the combination of multiple oppressions has become so prominent of late. To point out experiences of (multiple) discrimination and/or to exaggerate the privileges of others is a way to create what Andreas Reckwitz calls "[singularity](#)": a state of originality or uniqueness that increases someone's market value by allowing them to stand out from the masses.

### ...for Middle Classes

But here we have to be more precise. Identity can only be played as a trump card for gaining access to jobs, funding, housing, and so on, within the specific social milieu of the—mostly academic—[middle classes](#). Privileges do not play a role in situations with little or no rivalry. Referring to discrimination when applying for a low-paid job at McDonald's or Uber makes no sense—there are plenty of them. And skin color, sexual orientation, and gender discrimination are not an issue when one is forced to move to a poor neighborhood where no one wants to live and landlords or owners are happy to rent or sell to anyone, regardless of their sex, age or skin color. The same is true on the other end of the social spectrum: since cash is "printed freedom," one is free to be whatever he or she wants if one can afford it. In general, identity politics only plays an important role in situations of competition or rivalry, for those who are looking for new alliances or (at least) security through belonging to a peer group. Comparable to the appearance/emergence of questions of meaning—which only comes up when the subject's involvement in unquestioned and "meaningful" social relations dissolves—identity only becomes an issue when someone's existence is contested. In this respect, we should take identity politics as a sign of (expected or actual) more severe competition within the middle classes. As Chibber puts it:

In a situation of generalized labor market competition, the easier means for increasing one's security is not building formal organizations for collective action—since this inevitably runs into conflict with the employer—but relying on the informal networks into which workers are born. These most commonly are networks of kin, caste, ethnicity, race, and so on. Since workers essentially inherit these connections ready-made, they become a natural source of support in normal times and especially in times of dearth. It is an irony of bourgeois society that, far from dissolving these extramarket ties, as Marx announced with such flourish in *The Communist Manifesto*, its pressures incline workers to cling to them with a desperate ferocity ([Chibber 2022: 64](#)).

This is not the place to scrutinize in detail the socio-economic conditions and recent developments that have made the hype of identity politics (as the form of politics), privilege talk (as its content), and moralizing (as the preferred rhetoric) increasingly relevant (for more on this, see the debate on classes in [Leviathan 2021/1-4](#)). But let me give you one example of what an argument might look like: a reason for the rise of identity politics could be the conjunction of the politics-fostered trend of academization and the social rise of second- or third-generation immigrants. Despite working hard to get into higher education, many young professionals with a migration background find themselves stuck in a situation where they are paid less, despite having the same

university degree as their non-migrant counterparts. Those affected blame this unfair situation on society and its racist institutions.

### Material Base for Ideas

I cannot prove this claimed causal connection between the general academization of Western societies, educational climbers (German: *Bildungsaufsteiger*) with a migration background rushing into the universities, the denial of opportunities to everyone in a situation where there are many graduates, and identity politics as a reaction to this situation. Instead, my goal is to emphasize that ideas must rest on material interests to become relevant. Without a material base, ideas, concepts or claims arise and vanish but do not become an accepted and repeated element of the public discourse. In other words, ideas have to correspond to or mesh with practices in the social reality to persist. The capacity for ideals and ideas to shape/transform the real world, if not covered by material interests and mighty actors who can push them through, is very limited. They must not only meet someone's interests and needs, but also have powerful representatives in order to gain traction in the public sphere. As the rise of postcolonial theory in globalized academia reflects the shifts in global economy, so too does the rise of identity politics reflect (expected or feared) shifts within the social structure of Western societies (the same is true for populism, as [Manow 2021](#) shows). When covered by material—i.e., economic or political—power, ideas are not (or no longer) means to compensate for one's own impotence by asserting moral superiority, but a medium for ascending subalterns to articulate claims. Without reflecting the needs of a group and having supporters who have the power to realize them, ideas would just be free-floating hopes, dreams, and wishes—as can be seen in [human rights talk](#).

Understanding ideas as the constitutive element of the social reality in which we live is ideology as defined by [Althusser](#): “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (p. 109). Yet while ideology might justify and rationalize why people have to go to work every day, it does not create the economic situation. As Vivek Chibber in *The Class Matrix* and Søren Mau in *Mute Compulsion* have recently elaborated in detail, ideology—i.e., having the wrong beliefs about the world—is just a minor element in the multicausal explanation of capitalism's stability. Whatever people might think about a given class structure, “they have to participate in the forms of interaction called for by the class structure just to maintain body and soul. A society's class structure is therefore a source of social stability because the social agents are inclined to reproduce it as the precondition for their well-being” ([Chibber 2022: 2](#)). This does not mean that other elements, like violence and ideology—or, as Søren Mau puts it, “coercion and consent, dominance and hegemony, repression and discourse” ([Mau 2021: 4](#))—are completely unimportant. On the contrary. Structural class theory and its emphasis on the independent force of economic structures does not ignore the role of meaning, culture, and identity, nor does it neglect the role of the state—it puts each in its right place.

### Identity Is an Individual and Contingent Way to Deal with Material Preconditions

Ideology and culture, for example, play an eminently important role in justifying the class structure. But contrary to the claims of radical democracy theory and poststructuralist theory, they do not alone constitute social and economic structures. From the insight that it is not culture, ideology or discourse, but primarily material interests and economic structures, that are responsible for the stability of unjust class societies, it follows that the critique of false beliefs and prejudices as a source of consent is secondary. Of course, meanings, symbols, concepts, and ideas play an important role when it comes, for example, to class formation—the transition from a class in itself to a class for itself. But because capitalism reproduces itself through economic necessities regardless of what people may or may not think about them, the economic structures must be seen as an independent power that is—once again—supplemented and reproduced, but not constituted or set up, by

culture (for this argument in length, see [Chibber 2022: 29-41](#)). So the whole project of critiquing ideology with the aim of transforming social order is—to break it down—misguided, since it attacks the wrong opponent. It is not the case that people live under the inescapable influence of ideology and therefore act ideologically. The problem is not the lack of reflexivity or knowledge (about economic structures and the roles they imply) nor the active affirmation of an unjust social and economic order. People *do* know, but act as if they do not know because another mindset would not change structures (on consent, coercion, and resignation in this context, see [Chibber 2022: 78–116](#)). The whole poststructuralist account, which claims that institutions and structures are the outcome of contingent discourses and practices, could therefore be interpreted as a regressive movement: retreating to insights about the materialistic character of the social world. Of course, reality is also shaped by language and culture, but language and culture are not spontaneous and autonomous entities floating above the social reality. Since discourses are attached to the society in which they appear, the transformation of thinking, speaking, and acting is blocked by structures that limit the range and contingency of transformations.

From this perspective, identity politics is just another—and contingent—way of dealing with structures. To criticize identity politics is to criticize a society that needs identities (for many reasons).

### Welcome back to Reality...

At the same time, we should thank identity politics, since its shrill “[hyperpolitics](#)” has pushed politics beyond the boundaries of the neoliberal paradigm of post-politics. While institutionalized modern party politics pretended to be universal and overcome clientelism by merely speaking in the name of the common good, by simply realizing the public interest, or doing what is necessary because “there is no alternative,” identity politics can be taken (as in radical democracy theory) as the rebirth of the political. This is why it is so often decried as a threat to mature democracy: with identity politics, the argument goes, we get a revival of the overcome and outdated concept of pressure group politics from the early days of democracy—one which, moreover, harms the interest of the general public by insisting on privileges for particular groups. This reproach (although often repeated) is hypocritical. Politics is and has always been—explicitly or implicitly—about interests. Clientelism never disappeared from modern democratic states. It just took different forms, for instance, pretending particular interests are in the interest of everyone. In this regard, the shameless and direct insistence on individual self-benefit through identity politics must be understood as a sign of progress, since it reveals what politics in a capitalist state has always been: a way to exploit power and get one’s hands on public resources. In this respect, identity politics speeds up the “[radical politicization of everything](#)” and is therefore as revolutionary as the bourgeoisie has been. Identity politics has drowned such political illusions as the harmonic or even idyllic ideal of the state as the neutral administrator of the common good “in the icy water of egotistical calculation,” as Marx wrote in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

### ...which Is Misunderstood in Political Terms

At the same time, identity politics and the struggle for (justified) or against (unjustified) privileges remains ideological, since it confounds (material) interests with (immaterial) ideas. Solid and tangible interests are articulated as issues of visibility, inclusion/exclusion, discrimination, domination, participation, recognition, and representation. For this reason, Hannah Arendt is the main reference for identity politics in Germany today. The absolutely understandable and legitimate wish for a societal order in which one could be “different without fear” (Adorno) is articulated in this context not as a call for a profound transformation of our economic system and its foundations in private property, but—following Hannah Arendt—as the (general) right to (particular) rights for specific groups. But with the transposition of human needs into the juridical realm (since identity

politics is not just about respect and symbolic gratification, as critics of identity politics often assert), a transformation of the original intention takes place: a material issue is taken as a political problem. This is the reason why the conflicts in the realm of culture wars will go on: because a material problem is shunted into the political sphere, where it cannot be solved and will thus repeat endlessly—at least until we change the material conditions that make such conflicts possible.