

begin a national conversation that leads to a challenge of the seemingly unmovable forces that drive the nation. Amending the Constitution is a daunting prospect. It certainly won't happen anytime soon. The struggle to do so could, however, help build the political force we need to meet the real challenges that confront us every day. And, of course, building such a force would make the prospect less daunting.

From Naomi Klein, *Class War*
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• —Token Equality

For Bill Clinton, egalitarianism is a token issue. From Janet Reno, Henry Cisneros, and Ron Brown in the first Cabinet, through Madeleine Albright, Rodney Slater, and Alexis Herman in the second (with Federico Peña a telling holdover), Clinton has played photo-op politics. He's maintained his egalitarian bonafides with the identity-politics crowd by constructing a Cabinet to "look like America."

But what difference does it make what it looks like? All his appointees are centrist insiders, committed to his neo-imperialist foreign policy and his "bipartisan," pro-corporate retreat from a program of democratic redistribution.

Still, feminists actively lobbied for Albright's nomination as Secretary of State, and civil-rights groups threw their weight behind Herman as Labor Secretary, despite the fact that she is a longtime Democratic Party and White House functionary and hardly likely to be a forceful or independent advocate of labor's interests.

Clinton points up the limit of identity politics. The term refers most generally to a political approach that gives priority to advancing the perspectives and interests of specific groups defined in ethnic, racial, or cultural terms—that is, as explicit alternatives to class. And it implies a belief that asserting and demanding recognition of the distinctiveness and independent cultural legitimacy of one's group is a crucial political objective in its own right.

Identity politics is sometimes a term of scorn, suggesting a parochial, maybe even frivolous politics that either distracts from some more substantive focus or undermines the idea of common purpose. This perspective has adherents on both left and right.

Todd Gitlin is prominent among those on the left who complain that the turn to identity politics undermines possibilities for building broadly based progressive coalitions and diverts attention from fundamental class concerns in favor of demands for symbolic statements of group worth. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who apparently still thinks of himself as a centrist liberal, and a host of rightwing pundits kvetch about the threat that identity politics poses to our

“common culture”; they sound the tocsin against it as a harbinger of the new barbarism.

Others defend identity politics as an expression of the concerns of populations whose interests are otherwise submerged or ignored. From this perspective, the focus on identity is a necessary corrective to a long-standing tendency on the left to subordinate struggles against sexism and racism to a narrow, idealized notion of class politics. Historically, this tendency has declared such injustices to be “epiphenomena” of capitalism and therefore secondary to workplace-based struggles—or just plain outside the domain of radical politics.

Some defenders argue that identity politics constitutes the basis for “new social movements” that reflect the character of a post-industrial society. In this view, the breakdown of large-scale industrial production has rendered class less important as a primary identity, and people find other identities—like race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or age—to be more meaningful bases for political mobilization.

As is often the case, the debate about identity politics doesn’t provide much clarity. The contending positions are defensive or sanctimonious, and they’re too abstract; as a result, they talk past each other. For instance, it’s certainly true that there’s a long history in American politics—even on the left—of using calls for unity and solidarity to silence the concerns of women and minorities. At the same time, it’s difficult to believe that anyone committed to progressive political change would, as a matter of principle, oppose the idea of building broad-based movements.

So how are we to make sense of identity politics? How do the tendencies or movements that are summarized by that label connect with the strategic objective of building a progressive politics in the contemporary United States?

The ideological roots of what is now called identity politics lie in a sensibility that emerged during the New Left and the civil-rights movement, the sensibility captured pithily in the statement, “the personal is political.” It arose as part of a brief against sexism in the

movement itself, as women in SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) rebelled against the gender politics of those organizations. In this sense, it was part of a developing critique of the ways that larger patterns of oppressive and inegalitarian social relations can permeate every sphere of the society, even the movement. This critique was also part of the Black Power argument for the need to organize on explicitly racial lines.

The assertion resonated as well with those who believed in a kind of “prefigurative” politics: that radicals should seek to enact models of the world we would create. This strain emphasized the need to provide space for voices of relatively powerless groups and individuals who are typically pressed to the margins of public life. And it also evoked a call to value political action for its qualities of self-transformation and personal enrichment. To that extent, it connected with the period’s countercultural notions of personal liberation that stressed the political significance of pursuing and embracing alternative lifestyles, which is one of the reasons this radical sensibility was less radical than it appeared.

Lifestyle politics shared a mindset with youth-oriented consumerism and became the foundation for the hip, boutique-style capitalism associated with firms like The Body Shop, Benetton, or Whole Foods. Freedom to choose one’s own lifestyle slides easily into freedom to purchase the accoutrements of a merchandised lifestyle: freedom to express an identity becomes freedom to purchase commodities that symbolize an identity. The signs were already present in the 1960s, when styles of hair and dress and other paraphernalia—peace symbols, or red, black, and green buttons and patches—took on automatic significance and marketability as easily attainable and fashionable expressions of supposedly deep existential and political commitments.

During the 1980s and 1990s, we’ve seen stark evidence of the inadequacy of this kind of politics. Firms like Nike and Reebok go out of their way to project corporate images that advance, sometimes even provocatively, a multicultural sensibility—as they amass huge profits from the exploitation of nonwhite labor. In hip-hop

culture, we have a youth movement that collapses its notion of political critique and practice so completely into adolescent consumption that the movement's adherents often seem incapable of recognizing any other notion of politics.

One irony about identity politics is that it's nothing new: It's a form of interest-group activity that has been an organizational principle of the American political system for decades (a point lost in the overheated objections of the Gitlin-Schlesinger crowd). It has functioned in part to open up the political system to neglected populations. This is not to be sneezed at, of course, from the standpoint of expanding democratic interests; for example, the electoral empowerment of racial minorities through the enforcement of voting rights was a significant improvement. However, we should not gloss over the contingent and partial nature of the victories that come with greater inclusiveness.

At bottom, identity politics rests on problematic ideas of political authenticity and representation. These derive from the faulty premise that membership in a group gives access to a shared perspective and an intuitive understanding of the group's collective interests. This leads to two related beliefs that are wrong-headed and politically counterproductive: that only a group member can know or articulate the interests of the group, and that any group member can do so automatically by virtue of his or her identity.

Clarence Thomas should have been evidence enough to invalidate the premise linking group membership and perspective. Embarrassingly, people like Maya Angelou and Catharine MacKinnon initially cut Thomas slack based on the silly belief that because he's black and once was poor, putting him on the Supreme Court would turn out OK.

The simplistic belief that any credible member of a group can automatically represent that group's interest feeds a tendency to reduce political objectives to a plea for group representation on decision-making bodies or in other councils of power. That's the Clinton trick: to accept pleas for group representation or "access" while repudiating demands for an issue-based program. The dominant elites can happily satisfy such pleas; token egalitarianism is no threat at all.

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I've been startled by the reaction I've encountered to the Labor Party from many of those committed to identity politics and the "new social movements." They've objected to the Labor Party's formulation of our constituency as people who have to, or are expected to, work for their living. This is an explicit attempt to project a collective identity that can help to break down the ultimately artificial distinction between "economic" and "social" issues; it's an attempt to establish a broad and inclusive definition of the working class.

To be sure, some of the resistance reflects a healthy skepticism: The labor movement has hardly been always heroic and often has been just as bad as any other institution in American society with respect to racial and gender justice. But some of the resistance stems from the knee-jerk insistence on stressing distinctiveness and difference.

The claim that being a worker is not the most crucial identity for members of marginalized groups is debatable, to say the least. But even if that claim were true, what it means simply is that people see themselves in many ways simultaneously. We all have our own sets of experiences fashioned by our social position, our family upbringing, our local political culture, and our voluntary associations. Each of these goes into the mix, modifying, cross-cutting, even at times overriding identities based on race or ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

Our identities are fluid, and they encompass competing claims, each vying for the mantle of universality. There's no such thing as authenticity; it's only a marketing ploy. No coherent group perspectives are decreed automatically by nature or by social and economic "law," and this applies to class consciousness as well as identity politics. The fact of the existence of a capitalist economic order doesn't automatically tell us how people interpret their positions within it. Class consciousness, no less than other identities, is contingent, the product of political debate and struggle.

So, in the Labor Party, we are trying to offer an umbrella for all those who want to engage in class politics, no matter what their other identifications are. There doesn't seem to be anything wrong

with that, if you ask me. The view that it is wrong to identify on class grounds betrays a fundamentally conservative group outlook, which is a conceptual relative of racism. It has been disturbing to see this reflex in action, rejecting the premises necessary for building an effective political force that can challenge the juggernaut of corporate power.

That's the point, after all, of the Labor Party's broad definition of a working-class constituency. We need to establish the basis for an identity that unites us by showing how the same forces affect us all, albeit in somewhat different ways. This is not to diminish the reality of sexism, racism, or homophobia. But we have to come together to fashion a concrete alternative both to narrow, exclusivist forms of identity politics and to the false universalism that denies the reality of other forms of injustice. If we don't organize on a class basis, we'll be picked off one at a time, as we were with "welfare reform."

A few years ago, in seminars within weeks of each other at two different Ivy League universities, colleagues queried me about the difference between race and ethnicity. I was a little surprised by the genuine puzzlement that motivated their questions, but I was struck still more by the good-natured querulousness that greeted my answer.

I said that race and ethnicity are simply categories of social hierarchy; they are just labels for different magnitudes of distance from the most desirable status on a continuum of "okayness." The farther out a population is on that continuum, the more likely it will be seen as a "racial" group; if it's somewhat nearer in, it'll more likely be understood as an "ethnicity." Several people were skeptical and unsatisfied with this characterization, thinking that there must be something firmer that distinguishes race from ethnicity, that *racial* difference must be in some way objectively more extreme. Then came the old chestnuts: more dramatic phenotypic difference, more remote common ancestry, and so on.

I mentioned historian Barbara Jeanne Fields's exercise inducing Columbia undergraduates to note whether they're sitting in class next to individuals of their same race—usually they are—and then whether those individuals look just like themselves, which they don't. Fields's point is that human populations vary in myriad ways, only some of which become racialized, based on specific histories of political economy and the facts of political power. Some superficial differences, like skin color, stand out to us because we perceive them in a context in which they're already laden with significance as markers of social status, while others, like, say, eye color, height, or head shape, don't. W. E. B. Du Bois put it succinctly in 1940, in a hypothetical dialogue with a foreigner seeking a road map of American racial classification. After considering and rejecting all the usual biological or morphological criteria, Du Bois concluded that a black person is most accurately "someone who must ride Jim Crow in Georgia." My son, Touré (who insists that I note for the public