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Identity Politics: A View from Sweden

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The concept of identity has undergone such a major revision that it is difficult to know where one might begin discussing it. Generally, with movement across borders of all kinds, especially the geopolitical, identities are now considered problematic. Earlier views of individuals as self-determined and integrated human beings have been replaced by more complex notions that people comprise multiple subjectivities, sometimes described as fractured or split. This notion also relates to a political function in devaluing shared experience and shared identities. In recent decades, European political culture has increasingly emphasized neo-liberal economic gain and fast turnover, with the result that historical ties and collective identities come to mean less and less. Collectivity has been transformed into a plethora of individual confusion disguised as 'choice'. Is there anything left to rebel against when everything is said to be open to all?

What role does egalitarian identity politics play in the current political landscape? In Sweden, we are now confronted with the remains of a social-democratic tradition that long has had the welfare state as its main idea and the (imagined) community that this would create as its guiding principle. Although not without complications in the past, today, when European politics have taken such a scary right-wing political turn, this notion can still be regarded as a grand attempt to create social justice for as many as possible, something that very few societies have succeeded in doing.

Although I may bluntly state my solidarity with a social-democratic vision, one of its 'mis-steps' has been the idea of national unity. Identity politics became the other policies: women, children and minorities, questions that were not immediately identified as belonging to the central sphere of politics. For a long time, the Swedish left has been sceptical of what it perceived as a political identity division based on gender, ethnicity and sexuality, aspects that did not obviously fit in the class policy framework. While those espousing identity politics have generally (but not always) had left-wing sympathies, the left has not always received them enthusiastically. In a historical context, however, identity politics has done its share to promote good results in the legislative and legal system.

Weakened experience and loss of empathy

The problem identified by identity politics is the development in modern usage of basic concepts, where concrete plural forms and narratives have been replaced by the abstract and the singular. Many stories have been transformed into one story. A second problem,

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I would suggest, is a weakened emphasis in recent theorizing on experience, which has contributed to a loss of empathy. More and more of society's activities take place within the symbolic realm. It becomes a political problem when it is easier to approach images and representations than real life. We have far greater skills in looking at rather than being immersed in something real.

It is thus mediated experience that is now becoming a problem in terms of political action. Cultural simulations and representations seem to be the prerequisite for both reality and self-esteem. It does not seem possible to embrace reality if reality does not first become an image. Representation's reality is more real, and above all more familiar, than reality itself. The verbal linguistic monopoly on human communication is almost total, and through media such as the Internet, mobile telephones and television, emotional and communicative worlds become easier to manage than the real world with all its crises and troubles. The more our daily life is drained of the experience of a living environment, the more actual and self-sufficient the parallel universe of symbols seems. Identity politics has strong roots in the experience of sexism, racism and homophobia and it requires some form of experience of these phenomena, or at least an empathetic understanding of them, in order to be efficient.

Identity-political understanding still required

If identity politics has mainly been about the other(s) and about hidden stories, it cannot only be limited to things that are positively charged. In the Nordic countries, xenophobic parties have been successful in promoting their racist Nordic identity politics and activism. Even worse, they appropriate pseudo-feminist and gay-friendly arguments in their islamophobic political rhetorics primarily lamenting that the Christian, white and truly Nordic culture has been sacrificed on the altar of social democracy and multiculturalism. Unfortunately, these negative identity politics have been successful lately and reveal that identity politics can be effectively (mis)used.

It has become clear that we no longer can embrace identity politics in the way we did in the past. Political action is not only a choice between different options existing in a predefined order, but rather an intervention that redefines societal rules in a more democratic and inclusive direction. Although the economy remains the base upon which society rests, the symbolic order is still the matrix where the decisive battle takes place. To strive for collective liberation today means to stand up against a development where everything, even digital space, is privatized.

Neither scholars nor other citizens can grasp global reality in its complexity, and yet it must be one of our objectives to try to make sense of the fragments and, above all, the voices that would otherwise be silenced, and the stories that would be ignored. It is the researcher's task to be an attentive and respectful listener, who then tries to analyse these stories in a larger social and political context. Dialogic politics (as well as art) aims at social change, even on a small scale. In politically coherent communities a common need for change would create a political consensus in the group. However, what would also be needed in this case is the insight gained from identity politics, given the problems

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that arise when a political or intellectual (often white, straight and middle-class) male takes on a subordinate group.

The belief that dialogue will solve all problems is surely naive because the situation many people face is too desperate (poverty, war, hunger) for any dialogue even to be conceivable. Wherever people come together power relations are activated, and social injustice undermines the ability to live freely (whatever that means). 'Free' relations are fundamentally problematic because being human means being interdependent. It is sad that we must repeat sexist, racist and homophobic structures, even though we see through them intellectually and can dismantle them verbally and theoretically. In order to do something about this *Wiederholungszwang* ('compulsion to repeat'), we still need the insights that identity politics of a more progressive kind can offer us.

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