Identity Politics, Past and Present

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Abstract

Burgmann has produced an interesting analysis of the liberating potential of the Seattle Movement. However, "identity politics," as the term is currently employed, does not provide a useful framework for understanding the recent past, and therefore it cannot help academics in their attempts to analyze the meaning of current trends. Instead of using the flawed framework of "identity politics," scholars should look to the opportunities and limitations inherent in all modern social movements.

The Seattle Movement, as Verity Burgmann argues in her lucid article, presents a significant opportunity to return issues of resource distribution to the forefront of national and global politics. I share Burgmann's optimism over the potential of this framework to reshape politics in the twenty-first century. However, if this movement is going to avoid the "mistakes of the past" as so many commentators (myself included) hope, we academics must more clearly and accurately interpret that past. In framing her analysis of the Seattle Movement, Burgmann argues that "during the last three decades of the twentieth century the labor movements of the western world were less successful in mobilizing their constituencies than were the new social movements propounding the politics of identity, whether of gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation." Burgmann's attempt to distinguish Seattle from social movements of the second half of the twentieth century suffers from the interpretive flaws of much recent work on this period. "Identity politics," as the term is currently employed, does not provide a useful framework for understanding the recent past, and therefore it cannot help academics in their attempts to analyze the meaning of current trends.

"Identity" and "group identity" are extremely important sociological constructs with a history that goes back as far as civilization. Scholars have only begun to systematically study these phenomena in the past half century, and the past three decades have seen a flourishing of several fields that examine group formation. This body of work has been extremely influential in our understanding of the past. Group identity, like all social constructs, has been, and remains problematic. It has supported significant achievements (the creation of the "American" nation) and societal disasters (Nazism).

By contrast, "identity politics," a term created sometime in the past two decades, is a straw man concocted by writers dissatisfied with the path of modern politics, particularly the path of the left during the second half of the twentieth century. As Professor Burgmann's application of this framework to the Seattle movement shows, the term is so vaguely defined as to be meaningless.

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As currently understood, there cannot be a "class identity politics." We must find a different language to describe political activism in the twenty-first century.

In addition, to make their case about the causes of liberalism's decline, critics of what they call identity politics have had to overemphasize some aspects of the recent history of social movements while ignoring others. They have underemphasized the complicated interaction between class and other types of identity in the years before the rise of 1960s, overemphasized the "break" that happened towards the end of that decade, and ignored the significant class aspects of many modern social movements. The past thirty years have certainly witnessed an expansion of social activism focused on racial or sexual subordination, and it is not difficult to find particular groups or theorists that give exclusive attention to these aspects of political debate. However, many of the movements which emerged out of the 1960s—I will later discuss one in particular, the community development movement—have given specific attention to the issues of redistribution.

Instead of using the flawed framework of "identity politics," scholars should look to the opportunities and limitations inherent in modern social movements. Large scale coalitions for change, composed of people whose different experiences lead them to different answers to social problems, inevitably confront contradictions. Some movements are more successful than others in overcoming these contradictions. While the civil rights model of the 1960s no longer holds the same power, other successful frameworks emerged out of its decline in the 1970s. Looking at the longer process of change provides a more nuanced context for assessing the state of politics today.

During the past twenty years, the term "identity politics" has been used often but defined infrequently. Todd Gitlin argues that, in the United States, identity politics emerged out of the decline of the civil rights movement. "One group after another demanded the recognition of difference and the protection of separate spheres for distinct groupings," he states. It was, Gitlin argues, "a whole way of experiencing the world."[1] Gary Gerstle, in his sweeping narrative of twentieth century America, argues that the emerging movements "saw in racial, ethnic and sexual identities preferable modes of social and political organization."[2] Despite much ink on the topic, identity politics remains undefined. The term is primarily a way of lumping together groups that share claims to discrimination by broader society. By definition, whites—the majority—cannot play "identity politics," a distinction that ignores much of twentieth-century history and the current state of American politics.[3]

Critics of identity politics argue that it prevents the reemergence of a "universalist" politics best represented by the civil rights movement. "The academic left has lost interest in the commonalities," Gitlin claims, as he argues for a return of the values represented by the left of the early 1960s.[4] Nancy Fraser, cited approvingly by Burgmann, asserts that these movements for "recognition of difference" prevent greater attention to the questions of redistribution that should be the concern of all on the left. She further argues that the intense focus on group identification tends to stultify the recognition of difference within groups.[5]

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Burgmann herself argues that "by the last decade of the twentieth century, 'class' and 'identity' had become concepts in opposition and 'identity' had become the central concern of new social movement theory and action."[6] Eric Hobsbawm claims that "identity groups are about themselves, for themselves and nobody else."[7] The focus on identity, critics agree, prevents the creation of a more holistic movement of leftist activists and intellectuals.

Defenders, when they respond to the critics, argue that the critique misrepresents the goal of identity politics. "By definition," argues legal scholar Jerome Culp, "there is an infinite number of ways to organize our interrogation of society. Those of us worried about connecting our politics to identity issues do not claim that these are the only concerns. . . . The claimed need to engage in some form of identity politics is not a claim of exclusivity. All of us have multiple identities and belong to multiple communities." Because race, gender, and sexual orientation are central questions of modern politics, and since many modern social theories have ignored them, defenders argue that these issues are due serious, but not exclusive, consideration.[8] "Identity politics has critically appraised grand narratives and found them not only wanting but also prone to silencing significant discourses and important oppositional constituencies," Grant Farred argues.[9]

It is appropriate that ILWCH hosts this debate over identity politics, since the journal only three years ago hosted another "controversy," over "whiteness studies" that revealed how crucial group identity has become to modern historical studies. However, this debate over identity politics is somewhat ironic, considering that David Roediger, Alexander Saxton (some thirty years ago), and other scholars have shown how "identity politics" is as old as this nation.[10] Saxton's *The Indispensable Enemy* reveals that "whiteness" was central to working-class self-conception in the late nineteenth century, and Roediger traces this phenomenon back further. While a survey of the historical role of identity politics is beyond the purview of this comment, I must note that historians of earlier social movements (the Populist movement comes to mind), have argued that the focus on race obscured issues of class/redistribution, to the detriment of the people seeking social change.[11] The debate over the interaction of class and race (or other identities) is not new.

More recently, scholars like Tom Sugrue, Arnold Hisrch, and John McGreevy have shown that racial identification shaped the understandings of other social phenomena such as "community" and "neighborhood" to varying degrees during the twentieth century.[12] Critical Race Scholars have also shown how legal categories have been historically racialized to the detriment of African-Americans and other minorities.[13] Some critics of identity politics are certainly aware that racialized politics are not new, but they appear to believe that this "new wave" is somehow different. The specifics of the difference remain unclear.

As Eric Hobsbawm has recently argued, people have many identities. "In real life," he states, "identities, like garments, are interchangeable or wearable in combination rather than unique, and, as it were, stuck to the body. For, of course, as every opinion pollster knows, no one has one and only one identity."[14]

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In my research on the Brooklyn neighborhood of Brownsville during the twentieth century, I found that identity and group identification played important, though shifting roles throughout the 1900s.[15] In the early twentieth century, Brownsville Jews viewed themselves as socialist, working-class, American, Brownsville residents AND Jewish. Residents' focus on a particular aspect of their identity fluctuated over time and according to social and economic factors. How else could people look so fondly backward upon a community that Alfred Kazin argued "measured all success by our ability to get away from it."[16]

The new arrivals to the neighborhood in the 1940s and 1950s, like black migrants across the country, saw themselves as poor (most had only recently entered the industrial sector), American AND Black. These new residents wanted to engage fully in American society, to have access to jobs, to be able to participate in social events without discrimination, but they also wanted the freedom to go to black churches on Sunday to worship. They saw no contradictions between these goals, as some writers do today.[17]

During some periods of the neighborhood's history, the social-political-economic context made cooperation possible in spite of these competing identities. For example, during the Second World War, the argument that "we're all Americans" provided the rhetoric necessary to create new organizations for neighborhood improvement. In the years immediately following the Second World War, concerns over the decline of the community enabled residents to join together to push for improved services to the neighborhood.[18]

However, such alliances were always fragile. In the 1950s, as American came increasingly to be defined as suburban, middle-class, and white, many Brownsville residents changed their opinion about the neighborhood. While Brownsville organizations continued to work for area improvement and racial understanding, more and more residents, at least those with the financial wherewithal, left. It could be argued that "racial identity" trumped their "class identity in the search for the good life, but even this simplifies the story. The 1950s are generally understood as the period of "white flight" from racially changing neighborhoods. In Brownsville, the departees were predominantly white, but those blacks who could also moved to greener pastures.[19] Racial identity, class identity (along with religious identity, gender identity, and other forms of identity) interacted in complicated and shifting ways.

Class and race continued to intersect during the tumultuous sixties. A generation of scholars examining the 1960s has argued that while the early sixties were a period of liberal achievement, the coalition that sought racial justice AND class equality collapsed in the second half of the decade. This framework, however, relies on an idealized history of a very short period in the early 1960s when the significant contradictions of this coalition were overcome. The reality of that decade, like life, is much more complicated.

While few question the major achievements of the civil rights movement, recent work on these institutions has revealed their significant limitations and contradictions.[20] Activists described their goals as universal, but the rights-based framework that they promoted had significant, class-based, limitations. It

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is now generally-accepted that civil rights laws benefited middle-class minorities more than the poor.[21] It is also well understood that civil rights laws, when implemented, raised serious objections from working-class whites. The three-decade-old conflict over affirmative action is not the result of "identity politics." It is the outcome of intense competition for limited economic resources. The civil rights movement did not overcome class and racial distinctions; rather, these identities were balanced in a short-lived equipoise that changing social, political, and economic factors disrupted.

According to many students of the period, the late 1960s witnessed the demise of the liberal coalition and the rise of racial division. The paradigmatic symbol of this crisis is the New York Teachers' Strike of 1968, where residents' demands for "community control" of schools, conflicted with the recently-won privileges of New York's school teachers.[22] Analysts argue that the strike hardened racial divisions by pitting black and Latino parents against white teachers and forcing the rest of New York to choose sides. This method of understanding the struggle was successfully used by United Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker in garnering support for his position, but it doesn't begin to capture the reality of the conflict. It is true that the battle attracted racial separatists, but the activists directly involved in the attempts to alter the education system rejected such a framework. Community control proponents, white, black, and Latino, were more concerned with shifting economic resources to their troubled schools than they were with rhetorical debates over black power. Recent commentators on the strike have argued that the racial aspects of the struggle were overemphasized.[23]

It is certainly true that the late 1960s were a period of heightened racial conflict and that civil rights leaders became only one of a multitude of voices demanding to be heard. The demise of the civil rights coalition, however, was the result primarily of its dramatic successes in changing the law, but also the result of its internal contradictions—contradictions that were laid bare by the economic and political crises of the period. The decades following the Second World War were a time of dramatic social change. Class, race, gender, and sexuality all played intersecting and changing roles in this process. Trying to explain this story through the lens of identity politics requires critics to drastically simplify modern American history.[24]

There are several other problems with the framework. It is certainly true that the number of scholars focusing on questions of identity has risen in the past three decades. And it is also true that many of these scholars, as well as some political and institutional leaders, have argued that group identity provides a complete framework for understanding, and solving the problems of society. I share Burgmann's (and others') criticisms of this approach, but in framing the question this way, critics give far too much importance to the people who Gary Gerstle describes as the "hard multiculturalists."[25]

Secondly, critics of identity politics attempt to create a causal connection between its "rise" and the "fall" of class politics, but this relationship is tenuous at best. Working-class identification declined in the United States and Western Eu-

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rope for several reasons—-the rise in living standards, the rise of mass media that gives the false impression that all citizens are of equal status, and changes within political parties are among the factors. Crucial to this decline, as Burgmann lucidly explains, was the metamorphasis (in England) or outright decline (in the US) of labor unions as significant institutions of class-based politics. The only problem I have with Burgmann's analysis here is that identity politics had nothing to do with the transformation of labor unions, which anyway began before the period when identity politics allegedly again became important.

Furthermore, the hope that the fall of identity politics will lead to the rise of class identification is problematic, as there is no reason to assume that one will replace the other. Class identification will rise when institutions are created, or revitalized, that make arguments about working-class exploitation central to their program. Burgmann argues for a reconceptualization of social movements to add a greater focus on class issues. "The central problem is not identity politics per se, but the comparative absence within contemporary political culture of a politics of class identity." Echoing other scholars, (particularly Nancy Fraser) she calls for a "class identity politics." While I again share the hope that issues of redistribution receive the crucial attention they deserve, Burgmann's new term contradicts the original meaning of identity politics.

Moreover, it is not necessary to "reconceptualize" current social movements, because the argument that they have ignored issues of class is contradicted by many examples. While much of the academy has debated the merits of identity politics, in the "real world" activists have been struggling to deal with specific societal problems that are intimately related to economics. One example of such activism is the "community development" movement which emerged out of the defunded (not failed, as some have argued) community action program in the early 1970s. These organizations, some of which were created during the War on Poverty, serve as focal points for social and political activism in poor neighborhoods across the country. During the last thirty years, they have built several hundred thousand units of housing, provided social services to millions of residents, and served as a means of political empowerment to the poor in many communities. In Brownsville, many of the organizations most active in the 1968 Teachers Strike now promote community empowerment through such organizations. At present, there are over 3,600 Community Development Corporations (CDCs) in the United States.[26]

CDC's have become "establishment" organizations in the twenty-first century, which might explain why they receive so little attention from students of the left. They provide housing, social services, education, drug treatment, and other programs in working-class and lower-middle-class neighborhoods. While the CDC movement has received a great deal of attention from public policy academics, it has been almost completely ignored in the debate over American politics.[27]

Most CDCs reject the mantle of identity politics and focus on the concrete goal of community improvement. There is no question that many CDCs are segregated organizations, because they work in the typically segregated neighbor-

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hoods of America. But there are a large number of CDCs that have worked to bridge racial gaps within neighborhoods. In addition, while the CDC movement is diffuse and does not have strong national representation (a situation similar labor unions or the civil rights movement in their early years), broader institutions have begun to emerge that also reject the idea of identity politics as defined by the critics.

In many cities, CDC's wield significant political power. Molefi Asante has many followers at Temple University and other parts of the academy, but his influence in the poor black neighborhood that surrounds his employer pales next to that of the Advocate Community Development Corporation, the Renaissance Community Development Corporation, the Cecil B. Moore Community Development Corporation, and the many other activist groups in the area.

In addition, many CDC leaders use class-based rhetoric to argue for improved resources and services to working-class and lower-middle-class neighborhoods. While others reject this rhetoric, the reality is that the CDC movement is an effort to shift resources towards poorer people in America. Like all social movements, this one has flaws. It is neighborhood-based, and therefore can be used to promote parochialism (a criticism of early labor unions). The CDC movement is not workplace-based, and therefore it is limited in its ability to achieve economic power for its constituents, though that is changing as more and more CDCs shift their focus from housing and social services to economic development.[28] But the movement still has the potential to be a means for redistribution of resources to the poor.

The environmental movement is another example which emerged in the 1960s that does not fit into the identity politics mode. It has brought about significant progress in environmental regulation and is directly responsible for improvements in the quality of life (at least in the US and Western Europe).[29] While people certainly identify as "environmentalists" this group cannot be considered an example of identity politics without making the term meaningless. Of course, critics would not want to include this movement anyway, because its (relative) success weakens their arguments. In addition, while during the 1970s the movement did not give much attention to the class-based aspects of environmental degradation, more recently these issues have become a central concern, as the rise of the "environmental justice" movement reveals.[30]

Which brings us back to Seattle. Burgmann argues that Seattle represents a revitalization of class identity politics. I believe that Seattle represents an opportunity to form coalitions among groups focused on particular aspects of inequality in the world. It's not that the environmental, antiglobalization, indigenous peoples, and other movements have all BECOME class movements, but that (perhaps) they have realized that their concerns share in common the fact that unregulated corporate expansion is a common cause of many problems, and that to solve the specific problem that concerns their group most (not the only problem, just their focus), a broader movement is necessary. This was the basis for the coalition among civil rights workers, labor unions, and student groups in the 1960s that so many identity politics critics want to emulate.

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Like previous coalitions, the Seattle Movement arises in a time of social change. The fall of the Soviet Block, the changes in China and other Asian societies, and the dramatic expansion of global economic relations represent major transformations in the economy and social order, and they have created opportunities for coalition building around common concerns. If they are able to create such a coalition, movement leaders may be able support lasting institutions for social change. In their efforts to do so, they should be aware of the constantly changing nature of such movements, and should not rely on simplistic understandings of a complicated past.

NOTES

1. Todd Gitlin, "The Rise of Identity Politics," *Dissent,* (Spring 1993), 172, 175–176. Grant Farred traces the rise of identity politics in Great Britain to the 1950s, and in United States to the 1960s. Grant Farred, "Endgame Identity? Mapping the New Left Roots of Identity Politics," *New Literary History,* Vol 31, (2000), 627–648.

2. Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the 20th Century* (Princeton, 2001), 348.

3. Gerstle does devote a great deal of attention to the role of race in establishing boundaries for political debate throughout the twentieth century. Certainly other critics of modern identity politics acknowledge this fact, but they argue that the new framework is different. The way in which it is different is unclear to me.

4. Gitlin, "The Rise of Identity Politics," 177. Todd Gitlin, "Organizing Across Boundaries: Beyond Identity Politics," *Dissent* (Fall 1997) 38–40.

5. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," *New Left Review* 3 (May/June 2000), 107–120.

6. Burgmann, 3.

7. Eric Hobsbawm, "Identity Politics and the Left," in Steven Fraser and Josh Freeman, eds., *Audacious Democracy: Labor, Intellectuals, and the Social Reconstruction of America* (Boston, 1997), 44.

8. Jerome Culp, "The Woody Allen Blues: "Identity Politics," Race and the Law, *Florida Law Review,* Vol. 51 (1999), 511–528.

9. Grant Farred, "Endgame Identity?" 627–648.

10. David Roediger, The *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991); Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1971).

11. See for example, C. Van Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (Oxford, 1963).

12. Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago,* 1940–1960 (Cambridge, 1983); Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, 1996); John McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the 20th Century North* (Chicago, 1996).

13. See, for example, Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review,* Vol. 106 ((1993), 1707–1791.

14. Hobsbawm, "Identity Politics and the Left," 41.

15. Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago, 2002).

16. Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in the City* (New York, 1951), 12.

17. Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn,* 81–103.

18. Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn,* 81–103

19. Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn,* 105–145

20. See, for example, Risa Goluboff, "'We Live in a Free House Such as It Is:' Class and the Creation of Modern Civil Rights," Paper Presented at the Conference on Law & the "Disappearance" Class in Twentieth Century America (2002); Kevin Kruse, "Integration for Everyone but the Rich, High & Fancy: Court-Ordered Desegregation and the Class Divide," Paper Presented at the Conference on Law & the "Disappearance" Class in Twentieth Century America (2002). Wendell Pritchett, "Where Shall We Live: Class and the Limitations of Fair Hous-

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ing Law, *The Urban Lawyer* 35 (2003). Derrick Bell made similar arguments twenty years ago. Derek Bell, "Brown v. Board and the Interest Convergence Dilemma," *Harvard Law Review* 83 (1980) 518-

21. William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago, 1980).

22. Gerstle, *American Crucible,* 328–331. Johnathon Kauffman, *Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times between Blacks and Jews in America* (New York, 1995); Jerald Podair, *The Strike that Changed New York: Blacks, Whites and the Ocean-Hill Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven, 2002).

23. Pritchett, *Brownsville Brooklyn,* 237; Interviews with Irving Levine, Paul Chandler, and Maurice Reid, in *Brownsville Black and White: A Film By Richard Broadman* (2002).

24. Two excellent recent examinations of the complicated relationship of race and class during this period are Heather Thompson, *Whose Detroit: Politics, Labor and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca, 2001); Robert Self, "To Plan Our Liberation: Black Power and the Politics of Place in Oakland, California, 1965–77," *Journal of Urban History,* Vol. 26 (2000), 759–792.

25. Gerstle, *American Crucible,* 348–350

26. On the CDC movement, see Alexander Von Hoffman, *House by House, Block by Block: The Rebirth of America's Urban Neighborhoods* (Oxford, 2003); Paul Grogan and Tony Proscio, *Comeback Cities: A Blueprint for Urban Neighborhood Revival* (Boulder, 2000); Herbert Rubin, *Renewing Hope Within Neighborhoods of Despair: The Community-Based Development Model* (Albany, 2000).

27. For an exception, see Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portnoy, and Ken Thomson, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy* (Washington, D.C., 1993).

28. William H. Simon, *The Community Economic Development Movement; Law, Business and the New Social Policy* (Durham, NC, 2001).

29. On the environmental movement, see Samuel P. Hays, *A History of Environmental Politics Since 1945* (Pittsburgh, 2000); Hal Rothman, *Saving the Planet: The American Response to the Environment in the 20th Century* (Chicago, 2000). On the connections between the environmental movement and social change in the 1960s, see Adam Rome, "'Give the Earth a Chance:' The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," *Journal of American History* 90 (2003), 525–554.

30. Sheila Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York, 2001).

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