

Identity, Politics, and Anti-politics: A critical perspective

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2010

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Introduction

I am a _____ who seeks the destruction of class society. That blank can be filled with a variety of words, from worker to queer to individual to mixed-race person to anarchist. What each of these terms has in common is that they each signify a certain identity. While identity politics have gained traction in both anarchist/radical scenes and society more generally, the very idea of identity politics is a problem. Identity politics, as a political force, seeks inclusion into the ruling classes, rather than acting as a revolutionary force for the destruction of class society. However, this does not mean we should dismiss identity or identity-based organizing and action. The institutions that create and enforce class society (capital, work, the state, police) rely on identities in their strategy of control, by attacking some identities and not others, or by pitting various identities at odds to compete for access to the privilege of acceptance by the dominant classes. In their use of repression based on identities, those in power also create affinity among the dominated. Let this be made clear: I do not contend that every person who identifies with or is identified by a particular social identity has a common experience. Similarly, I do not argue that these identities are anything other than socially constructed. However, I do argue that people who share an identity can find stronger affinity with others who share that identity. This is due to the ways that capitalism and the state enforce identities. While these identities are socially constructed, this does not lessen their importance or their reality. Indeed, it is critical in the struggle for total liberation to understand the ways identities are constructed to subjugate people.

The academics have been speaking for years of “the Other” as the most abstract identity, defined in opposition to the dominant forces. While this abstraction works in the most general comparisons of various identities, it is in the specificities of distinct identities that affinities are built. A discussion of every socially-enforced identity would be impossible; instead, I will focus on an analysis of queer identity. Specifically, I will attempt to articulate an anti-assimilationist and anarchist/communist perspective on queer identity, with implications for other identities as well. This is a perspective critical of identity politics as well as a false unity under any one identity (citizen, human race, proletariat). It is critical of assimilationist politics and practice, and perhaps most importantly, it is explicitly anti-state and anti-capitalist.

1: Social construction and social facts

To understand identity in the context of the present social order, one must understand the concept of social construction. This concept, in short, refers to the ways in which social institutions establish, regulate, and enforce various identities. One especially telling example is the way in which those labeled “insane” are then forced into institutions which serve only to reaffirm a supposed insanity. Homosexuality was once considered a mental disorder, after all.

The term socially constructed carries an unfortunate connotation, however. It is assumed that if an identity is socially constructed, then it differs in some way from a more authentic, natural identity. This assumption resembles religious dogma in that we are asked to accept an unchanging human nature as defined by someone else. In reality, to say identity is a social construction means that identities are defined and enforced by social institutions such as governments and businesses. Thus, identity becomes social fact in the sense that it materially affects people. From

queer-bashing to abortion bans, certain identities carry with them material disadvantages. From property rights to Jim Crow, certain identities carry with them material advantages. These identities are socially constructed, and thus become social facts. These inequalities are not expressions of some pre-existing natural order. Instead, the cause of these material inequalities can be traced to the socio-economic context in which they existed. This context is determined by the dominant social order, which continues to be that of capitalism and state power.

Not every act of discrimination or oppression, however, can be considered a direct act of the state or capital. This is particularly true when one considers specific manifestations of patriarchy. Sexual assault and domestic violence are often considered interpersonal disputes, rather than having a larger meaning in the context of a deeply patriarchal social order. However, even if there is not an agent of the state or an agent of capital directly involved, one cannot ignore the social framework which normalizes such behavior. One must only consider the fact that the institution of marriage was originally a property relationship, and even until recent decades rape was acceptable, as long as it was in the context of marriage. This is not to say that perpetrators have any excuse. They still enforce the social system of patriarchy, despite (usually) not acting in an official capacity on behalf of the state or capital.

We can thus trace identity-based oppression to either the official business of state power and capitalism, or else to the power of the statist, capitalist social order. The distinction, however, becomes academic. The problem clearly lies in this society, in the social order and the institutions that create, maintain, and enforce it. Much as identity is social, so is the oppression around it: it is a result of human interactions, not any sort of higher power.

The term social construction means also that identity is not fixed, but rather changes according to a variety of factors. Particularly, there exists a tension between those who benefit from inequality, and those who are oppressed by inequality. In the United States, this tension is demonstrated by the range of identity-liberation movements that have been active in the United States. With a few notable exceptions (women's suffrage being one), identity-movements rose to prominence in the 1960s, as chants of black power, gay is good, and sisterhood is powerful became fixtures at demonstrations and protests. These demonstrations and conflicts were sites of struggle over what was meant when the terms black, gay, or woman were used. To be assigned any of these terms meant that one was not fully human, that there was a defect that nobody could correct. The Black Power, Queer Liberation, and Women's Liberation movements contested the idea that people were to be defined by these identities and thus undeserving of equality. These contestations (as each movement was, to a large degree, focused only on one specific identity) meant that not only could political inequality be challenged, but also the very definitions of identity. In other words, people began to actively and consciously construct their identities and explore identity in relationship to the larger social structure.

The initial exploration of identity proved useful, providing a greater understanding of the ways in which domination and its specific manifestations (racism, sexism, homophobia) are connected to the state and capitalism. The 1960s were also years of resistance and uprising more generally. These events did not happen separately; instead, they were a part of a larger discontent with society as a whole. However, much as the energy of the 1960s was dissipated into the traditional, rigid forms of activism and managed dissent, so was the revolutionary potential of exploring identity.

Over time, these movements have left us with organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Human Rights Campaign (HRC), and National

Organization for Women (NOW) as the self-proclaimed leaders in the struggle for equality under the law. However, what is interesting to note is that these organizations serve as explicitly political organizations, seeking political equality through political processes. These groups can thus be understood to engage in identity politics.

2: Identity Politics and Anti-Identity Politics

Given the political effectiveness of these organizations, their model has been emulated by others seeking to reform the current socio-economic order. This has led to identity politics becoming a central part of the contemporary United States political order. This is especially true in the liberal reformist movement, where organizations such as the NAACP, HRC, and NOW are prominent. With their successes in political reform, they (and many other identity-politics organizations) have become embedded in the dominant political discourse. It is here that we encounter one of the main problems of identity politics: the groups which sought to challenge identity-based oppression have instead merely entered into a partnership with those who benefit from oppression. This partnership concerns the ability to define the political agenda for a certain identity. This is clearly demonstrated in the queer community by the HRC, with their push for hate crime laws, marriage, and military service. These demands show that the HRC has accepted the logic of and requested partnership in the government and the marketplace. Essentially, the HRC is fighting for assimilation into, rather than the destruction of, a system that creates and enforces the very oppression they are allegedly struggling against.

However, even identity politics does not have unfettered power in the political mainstream. Even the appearance of altering power relations in this society is, to some, a threat. These reactionaries claim that identity politics seeks special rights for certain groups. This flawed logic rests on the idea that, since people are guaranteed equality under the Constitution, then the problem of legal inequality is non-existent. Even if one accepts the logic of the state, the discrepancy between legal/political equality and social equality is telling.

Another reaction to the Left's adoption of identity politics is the rise of hard-Right identity politics. This leads to absurdities such as men's rights movements, white rights movements, and groups dedicated to preserving Christian culture and identity. One can see a connection between these two reactionary positions, despite their apparent contradictions. Each position represents a different tactic towards the same goal: maintaining a class-based society along with the homophobic, white-supremacist, and patriarchal structures that uphold it. This stands in contrast to identity politics, which seeks to mildly reform class society and its institutions.

In short, there today exists a tension between progressive identity politics and reactionary anti-identity politics. The failure of both rests in their reliance on the state and capitalism as basis for their vision of society. Both seek to better manage the present order. It is clear: there exists a subset of people in this society that benefit from the current social order. These people include queer people, people of color, women, and every identity. Politicians, police, prison guards, landlords, and bosses: these are our enemies. They come in all forms.

It is equally clear that queer-bashers, rapists, and racists are similarly enemies of liberation. While in some cases these are not people with access to and the backing of institutional power, the violence they inflict is no less real or important. Indeed, their tactics are taken directly from the state, and uphold systems of control even after the formal powers officially abandon them.

Identity is meaningful in that it marginalizes us in different ways, and the affinity that comes from similar or shared experiences is powerful. However, it must always be remembered that such affinity is rendered useless when it is integrated in a system of domination and control. Such affinity ought to be encouraged, as it strengthens our bonds to one another and promotes conflict with the social order, be it bombing police cars or expelling rapists from one's community.

3: Identity Anti-Politics: One mixed-race queer's perspective

A specific sort of affinity is generated between people who are faced with similar oppression based on socially constructed identities. However, problems arise when this affinity is expanded to mean something else, such as an idea of racial unity or gender unity. Affinity cannot be reduced to mere identity: for example, simply because I am mixed-race does not mean I have affinity with all people of color. While we are likely to share similar experiences, merely having such experiences does not constitute affinity. The question of "what constitutes affinity?" is a large one, and well beyond the scope of this work. What is clear, however, is the problem of identity politics to those of us who seek total liberation.

By working within the political arena, identity-politicians work within accepted notions of power, change, and struggle. They become another lobby, another special interest that some politicians are beholden to while others rail against them. The people that constitute these identities are lost in all of this, become a voting bloc to be traded around rather than people.

This model fails us. Our lives are not political questions, positions to be taken, or votes to be won. We cannot be reduced into discrete categories of identity, each with its own set of lobbyists to win over the bourgeois politicians. This is the dead-end of assimilationism. This is the dead-end of politics. Rather than more politics, more money for lobbyist, and more ad campaigns, we need an end to the political process.

It is, after all, the politicians who had us criminalized or killed. It is the capitalists who make us work to survive, or sometimes keep us out of work. Why do we petition those who marginalize us for an end to our marginalization? They are interested in expanding their power over us, or at the least maintaining it. It is true that they occasionally allow moderate concessions, but these concessions should not pacify us. These concessions are not liberation, and sometimes they're not even liberating. The expansion of marriage rights? Being allowed to fight in the military? These goals are useless because they are simply political goals; they seek to alter the way the political system functions.

The point is not to achieve equality by the political process. The point is to destroy the political process, and with it the apparatus that props up class society. This requires an anti-political outlook. Identity must be treated not as a political concept, but as a facet of our everyday lives. My experiences have convinced me that the current socio-economic order has to be destroyed. I find stronger affinity with other queer people because of my understanding of homophobia, but I will not vote for gay marriage. I find stronger affinity with other mixed-race people because of my understanding of racism, but I will not vote for harsher hate crime laws.

It is clear that, because identities shape our experiences, we cannot write off identity as unimportant. However, it is equally clear that we cannot afford to maintain the identities imposed upon us. Thus, an apparent contradiction arises between the necessity of recognizing socially constructed identity while simultaneously trying to destroy the class society that enforces those

identities. This contradiction proves difficult, with a range of responses from a disregard for the destruction of class society to a disregard for identity, and many other arguments somewhere between these two positions. The problem is that there is no contradiction. Indeed, the former necessitates the latter. In order to destroy class society, an analysis of how it functions is critical. In short, we must know our enemy. However, it is important to avoid the pitfall of essentialism; it must always be understood that these identities are constructed by the larger socio-economic structure. The oppression that affects people with various identities is enforced by state power and the power of capital. Understanding this is generates a premise for solidarity, as those marginalized find affinity within their communities with those who face similar struggles. Additionally, the understanding of connections between one's experience with identity and one's experience with the larger socio-economic order allows for a solidarity that goes beyond any specific identity.

The importance of identity lies not in identity politics, but rather in the fact that identity is socially constructed by the dominant system in order to maintain capitalism and state power. In turn, the oppression that follows is an integral part of the social order as a whole, whether the violence is on an interpersonal, institutional, or structural level. Oppression also helps build affinity, through shared experiences or through shared struggle. Recognizing identity and identity-based oppression as social facts allows for stronger affinity, and the connections between one's experiences and the larger social order similarly allows for a solidarity between people who want to abolish the state, abolish capitalism, and abolish the domination that both maintain over our lives. This abolition requires not political negotiation, but anti-political organizing and action.

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Retrieved on April 4, 2023 from
<http://anarchalibrary.blogspot.com/2011/09/identity-politics-and-anti-politics.html>
Originally published in Pink and Black Attack #4

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