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Identity Politics and the Left

My lecture is about a surprisingly new subject.* We have become so used to terms like 'collective identity', 'identity groups, 'identity politics', or, for that matter 'ethnicity', that it is hard to remember how recently they have surfaced as part of the current vocabulary, or jargon, of political discourse. For instance, if you look at the International *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, which was published in 1968—that is to say written in the middle 1960s—you will find no entry under *identity* except one about psychosocial identity, by Erik Erikson, who was concerned chiefly with such things as the so-called 'identity crisis' of adolescents who are trying to discover what they are, and a general piece on voters' identification. And as for ethnicity, in the *Oxford English Dictionary* of the early 1970s it still occurs only as a rare word indicating 'heathendom and heathen superstition' and documented by quotations from the eighteenth century.

In short, we are dealing with terms and concepts which really come into use only in the 1960s. Their emergence is most easily followed in the USA, partly

because it has always been a society unusually interested in monitoring its social and psychological temperature, blood-pressure and other symptoms, and mainly because the most obvious form of identity politics—but not the only one—namely ethnicity, has always been central to American politics since it became a country of mass immigration from all parts of Europe. Roughly, the new ethnicity makes its first public appearance with Glazer and Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot* in 1963 and becomes a militant programme with Michael Novak's *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* in 1972. The first, I don't have to tell you, was the work of a Jewish professor and an Irishman, now the senior Democratic senator for New York; the second came from a Catholic of Slovak origin. For the moment we need not bother too much about why all this happened in the 1960s, but let me remind you that—in the style-setting USA at least—this decade also saw the emergence of two other variants of identity politics: the modern (that is, post suffragist) women's movement and the gay movement.

I am not saying that before the 1960s nobody asked themselves questions about their public identity. In situations of uncertainty they sometimes did; for instance in the industrial belt of Lorraine in France, whose official language and nationality changed five times in a century, and whose rural life changed to an industrial, semi-urban one, while their frontiers were redrawn seven times in the past century and a half. No wonder people said: 'Berliners know they're Berliners, Parisians know they are Parisians, but who are we?' Or, to quote another interview, 'I come from Lorraine, my culture is German, my nationality is French, and I think in our provincial dialect'.[1] Actually, these things only led to genuine identity problems when people were prevented from having the multiple, combined, identities which are natural to most of us. Or, even more so, when they are detached 'from the past and all common cultural practices'.[2] However, until the 1960s these problems of uncertain identity were confined to special border zones of politics. They were not yet central.

They appear to have become much more central since the 1960s. Why? There are no doubt particular reasons in the politics and institutions of this or that country—for instance, in the peculiar procedures imposed on the USA by its Constitution—for example, the civil rights judgments of the 1950s, which were first applied to blacks and then extended to women, providing a model for other identity groups. It may follow, especially in countries where parties compete for votes, that constituting oneself into such an identity group may provide concrete political advantages: for instance, positive discrimination in favour of the members of such groups, quotas in jobs and so forth. This is also the case in the USA, but not only there. For instance, in India, where the government is committed to creating social equality, it may actually pay to classify yourself as low caste or belonging to an aboriginal tribal group, in order to enjoy the extra access to jobs guaranteed to such groups.

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[1] M.L. Pradelles de Latou, 'Identity as a Complex Network', in C. Fried, ed., *Minorities, Community and Identity*, Berlin 1983, p. 79.

[2] Ibid. p. 91.

But in my view the emergence of identity politics is a consequence of the extraordinarily rapid and profound upheavals and transformations of human society in the third quarter of this century, which I have tried to describe and to understand in the second part of my history of the 'Short Twentieth Century', *The Age of Extremes*. This is not my view alone. The American sociologist Daniel Bell, for instance, argued in 1975 that 'The breakup of the traditional authority structures and the previous affective social units—historically nation and class . . . make the ethnic attachment more salient'.[3]

In fact, we know that both the nation-state and the old class-based political parties and movements have been weakened as a result of these transformations. More than this, we have been living—we are living—through a gigantic 'cultural revolution', an 'extraordinary dissolution of traditional social norms, textures and values, which left so many inhabitants of the developed world orphaned and bereft.' If I may go on quoting myself, 'Never was the word "community" used more indiscriminately and emptily than in the decades when communities in the sociological sense become hard to find in real life'.[4] Men and women look for groups to which they can belong, certainly and forever, in a world in which all else is moving and shifting, in which nothing else is certain. And they find it in an identity group. Hence the strange paradox, which the brilliant, and incidentally, Caribbean Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson has identified: people *choose* to belong to an identity group, but 'it is a choice predicated on the strongly held, intensely conceived belief that the individual has absolutely no choice but to belong to that specific group.'[5] That it is a choice can sometimes be demonstrated. The number of Americans reporting themselves as 'American Indian' or 'Native American' almost quadrupled between 1960 and 1990, from about half a million to about two millions, which is far more than could be explained by normal demography; and incidentally, since 70 per cent of 'Native Americans' marry outside their race, exactly who is a 'Native American' ethnically, is far from clear.[6]

So what do we understand by this collective 'identity', this sentiment of belonging to a primary group, which is its basis? I draw your attention to four points.

First, collective identities are defined negatively; that is to say against others. 'We' recognize ourselves as 'us' because we are different from 'Them'. If there were no 'They' from whom we are different, we wouldn't have to ask ourselves who 'We' were. Without Outsiders there are no Insiders. In other words, collective identities are based not on what their members have in common—they may have very little in common except not being the 'Others'. Unionists and Nationalists in Belfast, or Serb,

[2] Daniel Bell, 'Ethnicity and Social Change', in Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, eds., *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, Cambridge, Mass. 1975, p. 171.
[3] E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes. The Short Twentiety Century,* 1914–1991, p. 428.
[4] O. Patterson, 'Implications of Ethnic Identification' in Fried, ed., *Minorities: Community and Identity*, London 1994, pp. 28–29.
[5] Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, New York 1995, pp. 162, 109.

Croat and Muslim Bosnians, who would otherwise be indistinguishable —they speak the same language, have the same life styles, look and behave the same—insist on the one thing that divides them, which happens to be religion. Conversely, what gives unity as Palestinians to a mixed population of Muslims of various kinds, Roman and Greek Catholics, Greek Orthodox and others who might well—like their neighbours in Lebanon—fight each other under different circumstances? Simply that they are not the Israelis, as Israeli policy continually reminds them.

Of course, there are collectivities which are based on objective characteristics which their members have in common, including biological gender or such politically sensitive physical characteristics as skin-colour and so forth. However most collective identities are like shirts rather than skin, namely they are, in theory at least, optional, not inescapable. In spite of the current fashion for manipulating our bodies, it is still easier to put on another shirt than another arm. Most identity groups are not based on objective physical similarities or differences, although all of them would like to claim that they are 'natural' rather than socially constructed. Certainly all ethnic groups do.

Second, it follows that in real life 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. Human beings cannot be described, even for bureaucratic purposes, except by a combination of many characteristics. But identity politics assumes that one among the many identities we all have is the one that determines, or at least dominates our politics: being a woman, if you are a feminist, being a Protestant if you are an Antrim Unionist, being a Catalan, if you are a Catalan nationalist, being homosexual if you are in the gay movement. And, of course, that you have to get rid of the others, because they are incompatible with the 'real' you. So David Selbourne, an all-purpose ideologue and general denouncer, firmly calls on 'The Jew in England' to 'cease to pretend to be English' and to recognize that his 'real' identity is as a Jew. This is both dangerous and absurd. There is no practical incompatibility unless an outside authority tells you that you cannot be both, or unless it is physically impossible to be both. If I wanted to be simultaneously and ecumenically a devout Catholic, a devout Jew, and a devout Buddhist why shouldn't I? The only reason which stops me physically is that the respective religious authorities might tell me I cannot combine them, or that it might be impossible to carry out all their rituals because some got in the way of others.

Usually people have no problem about combining identities, and this, of course, is the basis of general politics as distinct from sectional identity politics. Often people don't even bother to make the choice between identities, either because nobody asks them, or because it's too complicated. When inhabitants of the USA are asked to declare their ethnic origins, 54 per cent refuse or are unable to give an answer. In short, exclusive identity politics do not come naturally to people. It is more likely to be forced upon them from outside—in the way in which Serb, Croat and Muslim inhabitants of Bosnia who lived together, socialized and intermarried, have been forced to separate, or in less brutal ways.

The third thing to say is that identities, or their expression, are not fixed, even supposing you have opted for one of your many potential selves, the way Michael Portillo has opted for being British instead of Spanish. They shift around and can change, if need be more than once. For instance non-ethnic groups, all or most of whose members happen to be black or Jewish, may turn into consciously ethnic groups. This happened to the Southern Christian Baptist Church under Martin Luther King. The opposite is also possible, as when the Official IRA turned itself from a Fenian nationalist into a class organization, which is now the Workers' Party and part of the Irish Republic's government coalition.

The fourth and last thing to say about identity is that it depends on the context, which may change. We can all think of paid-up, card-carrying members of the gay community in the Oxbridge of the 1920s who, after the slump of 1929 and the rise of Hitler, shifted, as they liked to say, from Homintern to Comintern. Burgess and Blunt, as it were, transferred their gayness from the public to the private sphere. Or, consider the case of the Protestant German classical scholar, Pater, a professor of Classics in London, who suddenly discovered, after Hitler, that he had to emigrate, because, by Nazi standards, he was actually Jewish—a fact of which until that moment, he was unaware. However he had defined himself previously, he now had to find a different identity.

The Universalism of the Left

What has all this to do with the Left? Identity groups were certainly not central to the Left. Basically, the mass social and political movements of the Left, that is, those inspired by the American and French revolutions and socialism, were indeed coalitions or group alliances, but held together not by aims that were specific to the group, but by great, universal causes through which each group believed its particular aims could be realized: democracy, the Republic, socialism, communism or whatever. Our own Labour Party in its great days was both the party of a class and, among other things, of the minority nations and immigrant communities of mainland Britainians. It was all this, because it was a party of equality and social justice.

Let us not misunderstand its claim to be essentially class-based. The political labour and socialist movements were not, ever, anywhere, movements essentially confined to the proletariat in the strict Marxist sense. Except perhaps in Britain, they could not have become such vast movements as they did, because in the 1880s and 1890s, when mass labour and socialist parties suddenly appeared on the scene, like fields of bluebells in spring, the industrial working class in most countries was a fairly small minority, and in any case a lot of it remained outside socialist labour organization. Remember that by the time of World War I the social-democrats polled between 30 and 47 per cent of the electorate in countries like Denmark, Sweden and Finland, which were hardly industrialized, as well as in Germany. (The highest percentage of votes ever achieved by the Labour Party in this country, in 1951, was 48 per cent.) Furthermore, the socialist case for the centrality of the workers in their movement was not a sectional case. Trade unions pursued the sectional interests of wage-earners, but one of the reasons why the relations

between labour and socialist parties and the unions associated with them, were never without problems, was precisely that the aims of the movement were wider than those of the unions. The socialist argument was not just that most people were 'workers by hand or brain' but that the workers were the necessary historic agency for changing society. So, whoever you were, if you wanted the future, you would have to go with the workers' movement.

Conversely, when the labour movement became narrowed down to nothing but a pressure-group or a sectional movement of industrial workers, as in 1970s Britain, it lost both the capacity to be the potential centre of a general people's mobilization and the general hope of the future. Militant 'economist' trade unionism antagonized the people not directly involved in it to such an extent that it gave Thatcherite Toryism its most convincing argument—and the justification for turning the traditional 'one-nation' Tory Party into a force for waging militant class-war. What is more, this proletarian identity politics not only isolated the working class, but also split it by setting groups of workers against each other.

So what does identity politics have to do with the Left? Let me state firmly what should not need restating. The political project of the Left is universalist: it is for *all* human beings. However we interpret the words, it isn't liberty for shareholders or blacks, but for everybody. It isn't equality for all members of the Garrick Club or the handicapped, but for everybody. It is not fraternity only for old Etonians or gays, but for everybody. And identity politics is essentially not for everybody but for the members of a specific group only. This is perfectly evident in the case of ethnic or nationalist movements. Zionist Jewish nationalism, whether we sympathize with it or not, is exclusively about Jews, and hang—or rather bomb—the rest. All nationalisms are. The nationalist claim that they are for *everyone's* right to self-determination is bogus.

That is why the Left cannot *base* itself on identity politics. It has a wider agenda. For the Left, Ireland was, historically, one, but only one, out of the many exploited, oppressed and victimized sets of human beings for which it fought. For the IRA kind of nationalism, the Left was, and is, only one possible ally in the fight for its objectives in certain situations. In others it was ready to bid for the support of Hitler as some of its leaders did during World War II. And this applies to every group which makes identity politics its foundation, ethnic or otherwise.

Now the wider agenda of the Left does, of course, mean it supports many identity groups, at least some of the time, and they, in turn look to the Left. Indeed, some of these alliances are so old and so close that the Left is surprised when they come to an end, as people are surprised when marriages break up after a lifetime. In the USA it almost seems against nature that the 'ethnics'—that is, the groups of poor mass immigrants and their descendants—no longer vote almost automatically for the Democratic Party. It seems almost incredible that a black American could even consider standing for the Presidency of the USA as a Republican (I am thinking of Colin Powell). And yet, the common interest of Irish, Italian, Jewish and black Americans in the Democratic Party did not derive from their particular ethnicities, even though realistic politicians paid their

respects to these. What united them was the hunger for equality and social justice, and a programme believed capable of advancing both.

The Common Interest

But this is just what so many on the Left have forgotten, as they dive head first into the deep waters of identity politics. Since the 1970s there has been a tendency—an increasing tendency— to see the Left essentially as a coalition of minority groups and interests: of race, gender, sexual or other cultural preferences and lifestyles, even of economic minorities such as the old getting-your-hands-dirty, industrial working class have now become. This is understandable enough, but it is dangerous, not least because winning majorities is not the same as adding up minorities.

First, let me repeat: identity groups are about themselves, for themselves, and nobody else. A coalition of such groups that is not held together by a single common set of aims or values, has only an ad hoc unity, rather like states temporarily allied in war against a common enemy. They break up when they are no longer so held together. In any case, as identity groups, they are not committed to the Left as such, but only to get support for their aims wherever they can. We think of women's emancipation as a cause closely associated with the Left, as it has certainly been since the beginnings of socialism, even before Marx and Engels. And yet, historically, the British suffragist movement before 1914 was a movement of all three parties, and the first woman MP, as we know, was actually a Tory.[7]

Secondly, whatever their rhetoric, the actual *movements* and *organizations* of identity politics mobilize only minorities, at any rate before they acquire the power of coercion and law. National feeling may be universal, but, to the best of my knowledge, no secessionist nationalist party in democratic states has so far ever got the votes of the majority of its constituency (though the Québecois last autumn came close—but then their nationalists were careful not actually to demand complete secession in so many words). I do not say it cannot or will not happen—only that the safest way to get national independence by secession so far has been not to ask populations to vote for it until you already have it first by other means.

That, by the way, makes two pragmatic reasons to be against identity politics. Without such outside compulsion or pressure, under normal circumstances it hardly ever mobilizes more than a minority—even of the target group. Hence, attempts to form separate political women's parties have not been very effective ways of mobilizing the women's vote. The other reason is that forcing people to take on one, and only one, identity divides them from each other. It therefore isolates these minorities.

Consequently to commit a general movement to the specific demands of minority pressure groups, which are not necessarily even those of their constituencies, is to ask for trouble. This is much more obvious in the

[7] Jihang Park, 'The British Suffrage Activists of 1913', *Past & Present*, no. 120, August 1988, pp. 156–7.

USA, where the backlash against positive discrimination in favour of particular minorities, and the excesses of multiculturalism, is now very powerful; but the problem exists here also.

Today both the Right and to the Left are saddled with identity politics. Unfortunately, the danger of disintegrating into a pure alliance of minorities is unusually great on the Left because the decline of the great universalist slogans of the Enlightenment, which were essentially slogans of the Left, leaves it without any obvious way of formulating a common interest across sectional boundaries. The only one of the so-called 'new social movements' which crosses all such boundaries is that of the ecologists. But, alas, its political appeal is limited and likely to remain so.

However, there is one form of identity politics which is actually comprehensive, inasmuch as it is based on a common appeal, at least within the confines of a single state: citizen nationalism. Seen in the global perspective this may be the opposite of a universal appeal, but seen in the perspective of the national state, which is where most of us still live, and are likely to go on living, it provides a common identity, or in Benedict Anderson's phrase, 'an imagined community' not the less real for being imagined. The Right, especially the Right in government, has always claimed to monopolize this and can usually still manipulate it. Even Thatcherism, the grave-digger of 'one-nation Toryism', did it. Even its ghostly and dying successor, Major's government, hopes to avoid electoral defeat by damning its opponents as unpatriotic.

Why then has it been so difficult for the Left, certainly for the Left in English-speaking countries, to see itself as the representative of the entire nation? (I am, of course, speaking of the nation as the community of all people in a country, not as an ethnic entity.) Why have they found it so difficult even to try? After all, the European Left began when a class, or a class alliance, the Third Estate in the French Estates General of 1789, decided to declare itself 'the nation' as against the minority of the ruling class, thus creating the very concept of the political 'nation'. After all, even Marx envisaged such a transformation in *The Communist Manifesto*.[8] Indeed, one might go further. Todd Gitlin, one of the best observers of the American Left, has put it dramatically in his new book, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*: 'What is a Left if it is not, plausibly at least, the voice of the whole people? . . . If there is no people, but only peoples, there is no Left.'[9]

The Muffled Voice of New Labour

And there have been times when the Left has not only wanted to be the nation, but has been accepted as representing the national interest, even by those who had no special sympathy for its aspirations: in the USA, when the Rooseveltian Democratic Party was politically hegemonic, in

[8] 'Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must raise itself to be the national class, must constitute itself the nation, it is itself still national, though not in the bourgeois sense.' Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto,* 1848, part II. The original (German) edition has 'the national class'; the English translation of 1888 gives this as 'the leading class of the nation'.

[9] Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, New York 1995, p. 165.

Scandinavia since the early 1930s. More generally, at the end of World War II the Left, almost everywhere in Europe, represented the nation in the most literal sense, because it represented resistance to, and victory over, Hitler and his allies. Hence the remarkable marriage of patriotism and social transformation, which dominated European politics immediately after 1945. Not least in Britain, where 1945 was a plebiscite in favour of the Labour Party as the party best representing the nation against one-nation Toryism led by the most charismatic and victorious war-leader on the scene. This set the course for the next thirty-five years of the country's history. Much more recently, François Mitterrand, a politician without a natural commitment to the Left, chose leadership of the Socialist Party as the best platform for exercising the leadership of all French people.

One would have thought that today was another moment when the British Left could claim to speak for Britain—that is to say *all* the people—against a discredited, decrepit and demoralized regime. And yet, how rarely are the words 'the country', 'Great Britain', 'the nation', 'patriotism', even 'the people' heard in the pre-election rhetoric of those who hope to become the next government of the United Kingdom!

It has been suggested that this is because, unlike 1945 and 1964, 'neither the politician nor his public has anything but a modest belief in the capacity of government to do very much'.[10] If that is why Labour speaks to and about the nation in so muffled a voice, it is trebly absurd. First, because if citizens really think that government can't do very much, why should they bother to vote for one lot rather than the other, or for that matter for any lot? Second, because government, that is to say the management of the state in the public interest, is indispensable and will remain so. Even the ideologues of the mad Right, who dream of replacing it by the universal sovereign market, need it to establish their utopia, or rather dystopia. And insofar as they succeed, as in much of the ex-socialist world, the backlash against the market brings back into politics those who want the state to return to social responsibility. In 1995, five years after abandoning their old state with joy and enthusiasm, two thirds of East Germans think that life and conditions in the old GDR were better than the 'negative descriptions and reports' in today's German media, and 70 per cent think 'the idea of socialism was good, but we had incompetent politicians'. And, most unanswerably, because in the past seventeen years we have lived under governments which believed that government has enormous power, which have used that power actually to change our country decisively for the worse, and which, in their dying days are still trying to do so, and to con us into the belief that what one government has done is irreversible by another. The state will not go away. It is the business of government to use it.

Government is not just about getting elected and then re-elected. This is a process which, in democratic politics, implies enormous quantities of lying in all its forms. Elections become contests in fiscal perjury. Unfortunately, politicians, who have as short a time-horizon as journalists, find

[10] Hugo Young, 'No Waves in the Clear Blue Water', *The Guardian*, 23 April 1996, p. 13.

it hard to see politics as other than a permanent campaigning season. Yet there is something beyond. There lies what government does and must do.There is the future of the country. There are the hopes and fears of the people as a whole—not just 'the community', which is an ideological cop-out, or the sum-total of earners and spenders (the 'taxpayers' of political jargon), but the British people, the sort of collective which would be ready to cheer the victory of any British team in the World Cup, if it hadn't lost the hope that there might still be such a thing. For not the least symptom of the decline of Britain, with the decline of science, is the decline of British team sports.

It was Mrs Thatcher's strength, that she recognized this dimension of politics. She saw herself leading a people 'who thought we could no longer do the great things we once did'—I quote her words—'those who believed our decline was irreversible, that we could never again be what we were'.[11] She was not like other politicians, inasmuch as she recognized the need to offer hope and action to a puzzled and demoralized people. A false hope, perhaps, and certainly the wrong kind of action, but enough to let her sweep aside opposition within her party as well as outside, and change the country and destroy so much of it. The failure of her project is now manifest. Our decline as a nation has not been halted. As a people we are more troubled, more demoralized than in 1979, and we know it. Only those who alone can form the post-Tory government are themselves too demoralized and frightened by failure and defeat, to offer anything except the promise not to raise taxes. We may win the next general election that way and I hope we will, though the Tories will not fight the election campaign primarily on taxes, but on British Unionism, English nationalism, xenophobia and the Union Jack, and in doing so will catch us off balance. Will those who have elected us really believe we shall make much difference? And what will we do if they merely elect us, shrugging their shoulders as they do so? We will have created the New Labour Party. Will we make the same effort to restore and transform Britain? There is still time to answer these questions.

[11] Cited in Eric Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left*, Verso, London 1989, p. 54.