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Communal solidarity and individual freedom:
antagonists or allies?

The poet, Nick Laird, observed in the *New York Review of Books*, ‘We already did identity politics in Northern Ireland, it didn’t work out so well.’ Yet, today it seems identity is the fundamental driver of our politics. Our freedoms, our values, our political affiliations, all are intimately tied up with who – or what – we are.

Clearly this has a general, inescapable logic: up until the last century, your right to vote and to hold property would have been determined in large part by your sex; the likelihood of you being enslaved in recent centuries would have been decided by matters of race; the likelihood of your sexual proclivities landing you in trouble with the law would chiefly have been determined by whether your partner was the same sex as yourself. However, while a focus on identity may have helped minority groups secure freedoms denied us, arguably it has done so at the cost of individual freedom, as well as social cohesion. To focus on what differentiates us diminishes a sense of a communal solidarity founded in our shared humanity. As Laird went on, ‘the rest of the world turned into Northern Ireland: partisan, oppositional, identity-focused.’

I was reminded of this a couple of years ago, at the height of a campaign by gay men in the UK for the health service to fund PrEP (or pre-exposure prophylaxis). PrEP prevents the transmission of HIV infection without the need for a condom. However, it does not protect against other STIs and, at the time, cost £4,800 per person a year.

I was thirty-five years old and could hardly walk. I suffer from psoriatic arthritis, the same autoimmune condition that plagued Dennis Potter and famously featured in his work *The Singing Detective*. Each morning, I would wake, stiff and in severe pain. It would take a good half hour or so to get out of bed, bent over, with my head almost between my legs, before I'd shuffle to the bathroom. There, I would have a long hot bath, instead of a shower, as heat has been shown to ease morning stiffness. Sometimes it would take me a while to struggle back out of the bath, and then I would contend with dressing myself: unable to reach my feet to put on my socks, unable to manage the mobility required to get my arms into my shirtsleeves. On the worst days it could be three hours before I was able to leave the house. At the time, my doctors were waiting for funding approval for a new drug, one they hoped would suppress my immune system and render my symptoms non-existent.

Few issues so starkly illustrate conflicts between the freedom of the individual and the public good than health, as current experience of the coronavirus has shown. With a limited budget the NHS will always have to juggle an array of competing demands. To my ear, the campaign for PrEP was deaf to this fact, deaf to the other calls upon NHS funding and the need to situate their argument within this context.

Representative of the tone of the campaign, and the many opinion pieces, was one by *Guardian* columnist, Owen Jones, with the headline 'The NHS must show it cares about gay men's lives – and roll out PrEP HIV drugs'. Rather than making the argument

solely about why PrEP should be funded, its necessity and efficacy relative to other treatments, Jones and others claimed that the very identity of those campaigning was what made its cause worthy of support. By making the issue one of freedom and rights, campaigners made it personal and claimed a degree of exceptionalism relative to others.

Individuals and minority groups need to engage with public discourse to advocate for our rights. In his novel, *Adolphe*, the philosopher, Benjamin Constant, explores the risks for the individual who tries to live outside the public sphere. Drawing upon the argument made in his 1816 lecture ‘The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns’, Constant argues that Moderns cannot lead a solely private life of individual freedom. To live truly privately, to have real individual freedom, paradoxically one must engage with the public realm, if only to protect the privacy one values. James Baldwin understood this, saying that his novel *Giovanni’s Room*, ‘made a public announcement that we’re private, if you see what I mean.’

Identity politics has been very good at securing rights, but less so when situating them within the common good. The campaign for gay marriage was a rare exception, framing its argument around the idea that all love and relationships should hold equal weight. The danger is identity politics finds solace in a narrower sphere than the communal. Individuals find comfort and solidarity only with their own kind. These groups and their characteristics become ever smaller, ever more atomised (look at the growing plethora of letters in LGBT+) but never to the point of focusing on the

particular, the individual. This way, the communal is reduced to the sectarian. Yet, wider, communal society doesn't disappear.

As Constant knew, the public must be engaged with. On an episode of *BBC Question Time*, at the start of 2020, Laurence Fox argued with an audience member over whether the treatment of Meghan Markle by the UK press was racist. The audience member, a woman of colour, challenged his assertion that the UK is not racist because Fox is, 'a white, privileged, male' and therefore had not experienced the same kind of discrimination. This was met with widespread groans from the audience. However, there was no indication the audience agreed with Fox's assertion – they just resented the attempt to close down debate. Rather than explaining why Fox was wrong, how the treatment of Markle is different from the treatment of white celebrities or royals, the questioner used identity as a means of refusing further dialogue.

As Constant argued in his lecture and demonstrated in the character of Adolphe, we will have to have these arguments anyway. A politics of identity that finds strength in the artificial security of a sectoral solidarity ignores this reality. It expects its values to be translated to the communal, but without the dialogue or work that drives social change.

This results in a society atomised into competing sectoral interests. By making the argument in favour of PrEP about the rights of a particular group, campaigners immediately pitted themselves against other groups also waiting for drug funding. The language became about a hierarchy of need and privilege: I felt myself more deserving

than a gay man wanting PrEP because the drug I needed was not about choice and merely preventative but would enable me to walk; yet a cystic fibrosis sufferer is arguably more deserving than either of us because the drug they were waiting for would enable them to live for longer.

The consequence of a focus on identity over consensus is a politics that is wholly individualistic and ignores the needs of others. In criminal justice, the individual wants of the victim and perpetrator are subordinated to the, perceived, greater objectivity of the community. However, identity politics does not allow for this. Instead, our sense of solidarity with others and trust in the community is secondary to our individual place in an imperfect hierarchy of difference and resultant grievance. Yet the rights and freedoms of the individual can only be secured by consent. The individual has to recognise their place and duty to the wider community, just as the community must to the individual.

One pernicious consequence of the left's adoption of identity politics has been the far-right's rebranding of racism as white identity politics. However, one could view this as inevitable: if you tell people that their only route to a hearing is to emphasise their identity, or in some instances that their identity is what denies them a hearing, then why are we surprised if those who feel persecuted, forgotten and side-lined, feel the need to assert their difference as the only means of being heard? Identity politics disenfranchises those – particularly the poor and weak – who cannot brandish one of the limited, appropriate identity traits as qualification.

Phoebe Matz-Bovy takes this further, in *The Perils of Privilege*, observing how the language of privilege creates conditions in which people are forced to reveal things about themselves in order to gain a hearing. If society mandates that only those with a certain identity or experience are able to speak to certain issues – the phenomenon of ‘*speaking as a...*’ – then only those who reveal all aspects of themselves are qualified to speak. Furthermore, this creates a hierarchy in which the validity of an argument is predicated on what you are, rather than what you say.

Wherever one stands in relation to the recent furore over J.K. Rowling and trans rights, there is surely something invidious about a situation in which a woman feels forced to reveal her past as a victim of domestic violence in order to qualify her right to speak on the issue of women’s refuges and spaces. For advocates of free speech and free expression, a reasonable question in this instance might be: in what circumstances should J.K. Rowling’s views be heard? For some, it would seem the answer is: never.

The foundations of identity politics are themselves reductive. Baldwin claimed, ‘There’s nothing in me that is not in everybody else, and nothing in everybody else that is not in me.’ However naming people based on an attribute – their gender, their race, their sexuality – rejects our shared humanity in favour of an objectifying otherness. This speaks to its origins in the reactionary right. As writer and academic Kenan Malik observes, ‘The

original politics of identity was that of racial difference, the insistence that one's racial identity determines one's moral and social place in the world.'

And yet, there are those who would wish to counter Baldwin: that there definitely is something in me, not in you – that what I share is shared only with a select group, that my identity characteristics make me special. For advocates of identity politics to elevate their group identity over communal solidarity is to concede the very ground reactionaries use to oppress. It undermines our claim to equality while also undermining our solidarity with others.

The freedom of identity politics is a reduced one, one that comes at a loss of complexity in favour of specific identity traits. It presumes that anyone in this 'group' shares the same experience of oppression and thus the same aims. Your sectoral solidarity trumps your individual complexity. To fail to conform with all aspects of sectoral dogma is not taken as evidence of the failure or limits of such a politics, but lack of allyship or false consciousness on your part.

When I disagreed with the tactics of the PrEP campaign, in spite of being a bisexual man, I was accused of being a traitor to the cause. Yet, in response to cries that the NHS needed to show it cared about the health of men who have sex with men, I could have replied, 'Well yes it can, by giving me drugs that will allow me to walk.' Which men, I wondered, was the NHS meant to care about? The gay men who'd watched their loved ones die in the AIDS pandemic, now entering old age and needing greater

medical interventions themselves? Gay men in need of cancer drugs? Or the gay man terrified for the future of his nephew, suffering from cystic fibrosis, unable to get treatment that will keep him alive because the NHS deemed it too expensive?

Identity politics is a form of predestination in which our actions are predetermined by our group membership. Perversely, your actions are secondary to your identity: what I do matters far less than what I am. Yet failure to accord with your group challenges your legitimacy within it. Being a man who has sex with men is not enough, you are expected to hold certain positions and ideals too. Otherwise you can be labelled a ‘fake-gay’, like tech-billionaire Peter Thiel. Or, as Joe Biden said to an interviewer, ‘if you have a problem figuring out whether you’re for me or Trump, then you ain’t black.’

My error was holding the ‘wrong’ view, one that did not accord with my group belonging. But then again, I arguably did have the right view to accord with my membership of a group of disabled people. This is the point: each of us are made up of multiple points of belonging and conflicting interests. What of the individual whose identities contradict? Or whose wishes don’t intersect? Identity politics does not allow for these complexities. It erases our particularity, while demanding we adhere to a limited group-think.

Who is really free in such a scenario; in which what you do no longer matters, your actions are unimportant, because what you do is dictated by what you are? If the price of your limited freedom is to have your humanity reduced to a series of traits that

determine your values and actions, then you are not free. It denies agency. It's determinist, limited and has origins in far-right discrimination, seeing individuals only as the product of their caste.

Part of the mistake is the equating of solidarity with accord, or sameness. We can be united around a cause, yet with a variety of differing views and values. For example, in the United States, the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) was passed with unanimous Congressional support – unprecedented in recent US history. It was sponsored in the Senate by Republican Jeff Sessions and Democrat Ted Kennedy, and supported by evangelical Christian Republicans as well as left-wing, socialist Democrats. Their values and aims were diametrically opposed but they all agreed that rape in prison was bad. Just Detention International, the human rights organisation that led the campaign for PREA, managed such unanimity by focusing on common principles and goals, as opposed to the identities of the parties concerned.

Yet, how do individuals and groups secure their rights, their freedoms, in such a way that does not antagonise the wider community? An unlikely place for a better alternative is Martin Buber's work *I and Thou*, which emphasises both the universal and the particular. Buber argues that most of the time our experience of the world, and each other, is that of subject and object, or an I-and-It relationship. However, what we should aspire to is a relationship of I-and-Thou, one that *meets* the other. Many have struggled to

define what Buber means in a way that is not still relational, that doesn't fall into the language of subject and object. One way might be to regard it as a dynamic relationship – both dynamic, and *a* dynamic, in that it is an encounter that changes all concerned. This can be observed in practice when opposing sides are brought together and meet their antagonists, rather than merely dealing in abstract argument. For example, a shift in attitudes towards gay people has come with greater visibility and engagement with gay lives.

Part of Buber's premise is echoed in Catholic theology, that we are all equal in the eyes of God, while also all being unique. This results in the interesting paradox of a universalism coupled with the particular. It is about a call for equality across identity lines – for those lines seed difference and exceptionalism – and a recognition that difference comes at the individual level.

Politics is forced to speak in language of generalisations. However, a language that is grounded in I-and-Thou refuses to objectify, it does not reduce people to categories or presumed special interests, instead recognising that we all have particularities of experience, of pasts, of present advantages and difficulties and will handle them differently. It sees all of us as part of a universal whole, entitled to the same rights and freedoms. To reduce you or me to an attribute erases our particularity, it denies that all of our stories are different. If I-and-Thou affirms difference it is at the level that we are all different – it meets me as I am, in all my complex contradictions.

Identity politics results in communities that are fractured, partisan, oppositional. The freedom it secures is a limited one and grounded in the very objectification that foments discrimination. It does not seek to convince or persuade; it rejects allies and seeks antagonists.

Ultimately, its conception of who and what we are is limited. When we think of who we are it is likely that we will think of both our close, intimate ties – even those individual traits peculiar to us – as well as our place in the wider world. Sat here at home right now, I'm mulling news of my mother's advancing cancer. I remember being told as a child: You are your mother's son, which I took to mean I had her eyes, her colouring and, probably, her tendency to the dramatic. I also remember being told: You are your father's son, which I took to mean I clearly liked a drink, or my eyes shone as I was about to make a joke at someone's expense. Right now, these are the traits that feel meaningful to me.

None of us are siloed into only one form of general, group belonging. I'm also a writer, I think of myself as on the political left, I'm a child of the west country, I live in London, I'm a citizen of the United Kingdom and Europe. All of these traces, particular and individual to me, exist within a context, within a wider community. I cannot forget my duty to that community, a duty that includes advocating for the freedom of myself and others within it. I can only be sure of my community's solidarity with me by

committing myself to it, by remaining in dialogue with others. They understand this in Northern Ireland, and they learnt the hard way.