

Debating the prickly notion of identity: It's different depending on your ideology

In 2020, much of the public discussion of social issues revolves around notions of identity. Ideas about race, reformulations of gender, and considerations of class or religious confession. But it is not often stated that these identity categories are qualitatively different, and these differences have different implications for the real world. Some reflection on the real-world consequences of identity ought to make this apparent.

Why is a party based on working-class solidarity far less sinister than a party based on a racial or ethnic group? Perhaps because being working-class is not a fixed identity, and solidarity is open to all. One's race or ethnicity is viewed as more static. Most of us can imagine struggling to pay bills and keep a roof over our heads, but few can imagine being another race. Race-thinking is anti-empathetic by its nature.

Obviously, most humans have a variety of identities that they balance, synthesize, and are enriched by. Before World War I, socialists expressed their opposition to a conflict that they believed, correctly, would only bring suffering to the workers of the world. But once the Great War commenced socialist parties in the main fell into line, expressing national patriotism. This shattered the illusion of radicals that socialism would supersede nationalism, and that class solidarity trumped patriotic feeling.

The rise and success of the Soviet Union as a socialist state proved that identities and emotions beyond class are necessary. A cult of personality around Stalin flourished, while to defeat Nazi Germany the Soviet Union promoted the "Great Patriotic War" rooted in a traditionalist Russian nationalism.



Russian WWII propaganda

Just as individuals have complex identities, so do societies. Historian David Cannadine argued that the British Empire may have been grounded in the racial and ethnic nationalism that was ascendant in the late 19th century, but there was also an element of conservative class hierarchy that cut across race and ethnicity. The British aristocracy did not view the nobility of non-European societies as simply non-white, nor did they view their own British social inferiors as simply other white people.

In modern identitarian Left politics, the multidimensional texture of identities is often collapsed, with a spectrum of “marginality” being the primary organizing principle. Social justice liberation aims to free, empower, and “center” marginalized sexual, racial, religious, and social identities. But this paradigm ignores the fact that not all identity categories are interchangeable or operate with the same currency, and some identities are much more powerful, and dangerous than others. Race and ethnicity in particular have the potential to ignite conflicts within societies in a manner without parallel. Any conflict rooted around fixed identities can only end in zero-sum games. Someone wins. Someone loses. Always.

The other fixed identity is sex. But, despite rhetoric about a “battle of the sexes,” men and women need each other. Even in patriarchal societies where men are held to be superior to women, men have mothers and often sisters. The tensions between the sexes emerge from intimacy, not alienation and ignorance,

and that necessary intimacy imposes a limit on the conflicts and social discord that might emerge due to activism.

Men and women cannot abolish each other because men and women need each other to exist. There is no sexist equivalent in patriarchal societies to the sort of exterminationism which flourished in Nazi Germany or in Rwanda in the 1990s. Women in a nation such as Saudi Arabia are unfree and held in a level of extreme subordination and control which offends all those with liberal sensibilities, but there would be no Saudi nation without women.

Saudi Arabia in many ways is a perfect laboratory to illustrate the anatomy of oppression and the dimensions it may take. The House of Saud built a state on the foundation of religious supremacy, class hierarchy, and the abject subjugation of women to men. The monarchy began in the 18th century as an alliance between the rulers of Diriyah in central Arabia and the Wahhabi movement. The Saudi ruling family allows the Wahhabi sect to dictate the religious life of the nation through the ubiquitous morality police, and the Wahhabi establishment confers divine legitimacy upon the monarchy.

But the Wahhabis are only a minority of Saudi Arabia's population. There are Shia Muslims in the Persian Gulf region of Saudi Arabia who suffer explicit discrimination. Sunni Muslims from the west of the country, where Mecca and Medina are located, are also marginalized, outsiders to the Nejd Wahhabi ascendancy. And though Saudi Arabia has large non-Muslim communities of guest workers, no non-Islamic religion can be present and visible in public spaces in the kingdom.

But religion, by its nature, has within it the capacity for assimilation and fluidity. If you are a Shia Muslim oppressed by the Wahhabi domination of Saudi society, conversion is always an option. One's religion is not seen as fixed by birth. Oppression is balanced against the possibility of assimilation, even if such transformations of identity offend our views of the liberty that human conscience is due.

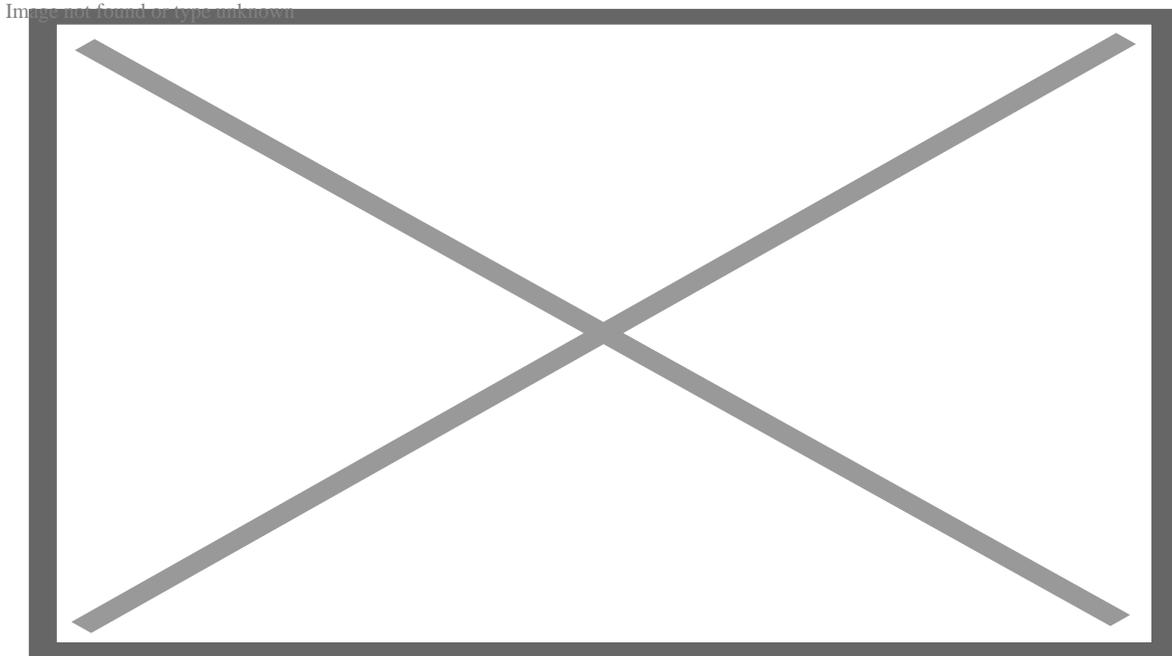
Similarly, though the Saudi state is run for and by the numerous princes of the royal family, who exist as a leisured class, poorer Saudis do have a chance, small as it is, to join the economic and social elite through luck and hard work. Osama bin Laden's father is a famous example of this. Born in coastal Yemen, he immigrated to Jeddah and worked as a porter, before parlaying a relationship with the House of Saud into wealth and prosperity. In all societies, there are those who are born poor who become rich, and those born to wealth who lose their wealth, status, and power.

Then there is sexual orientation. The Saudi state has [executed people](#) due to "homosexual acts." But the reality of being gay in Saudi Arabia is [more complex](#). In many repressive patriarchal societies where gender segregation is the norm, homosexuality is tacitly accepted so long as discretion and outward conformity to heterosexuality is maintained. Though sexuality has a biological basis, historically the way it plays out in terms of particular identities has been complex, and subject to cultural norms.

Whereas the Saudi treatment of religious and sexual minorities and women as second-class citizens is explicit, and the privileged social and economic position of the ruling family understood by all, attitudes toward race in the kingdom are much more shadowy. Very few outsiders are aware that about 10 percent of the population of the kingdom are native Saudi blacks. The reason for this is straightforward: black

Saudis [are marginalized and excluded](#) from visible elite positions in society. This is implicit, and there are exceptions.

Prince [Bandar bin Sultan](#), a member of the royal family, is well known in the West as a diplomat and ambassador. He is also the son of an Ethiopian slave woman. Despite his African appearance his status as a grandson of Ibn Saud, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, guaranteed his social promotion due to his competence and skills. Prince Sultan as a black man has raised eyebrows, but Prince Sultan as a member of the House of Saud is due deference.



Prince Bandar bin Sultan. Credit: AP

Whereas religious bigotry and sexism are enshrined in the de jure laws of many states, explicit racism is far more taboo. The pariah status of South Africa in the late 20th century highlights this fact. After the [1990 earthquake](#) that devastated Iran, the authorities made an appeal for aid, but explicitly rejected any from South Africa. Iran is a nation where women have [fewer rights than men](#), religious minorities [have fewer rights](#) than Muslims, with the Bahá'í Faith being subject to explicit persecution.

Iranians also harbor a great deal of ethnic prejudice against their [neighbors](#), and as highlighted in the Iranian film *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, take a dim view of their own dark-skinned fellow citizens. But this is not legally enshrined. Sexism and religious supremacism is a feature, not a bug, of Iranian society. Racism in contrast is missing the mark of their aspirations toward Islamic universalism.

Despite their differences, all civilized traditions over the past several thousand years have converged upon a common set of ideas and impulses which balance local particularism with human universalism. This is almost certainly an outcome of the fact that as our species settled down into villages, and produced agglomerations of habitation that we know as cities, something beyond our native social instincts was needed to smooth human affairs.

Christianity universalized the ethical monotheism pioneered by the early Jews. In China, Confucian scholars argued that the ways of the sages were accessible even to barbarians. The Indian concept of Dharma is universal, and through the vector of Buddhism a universalist rendering of Indian thought is now espoused by members of all nations in various quantities.

But these insights are not purely religious, as they echo down to the modern world as self-evident truths. The French in 1789 promulgated a “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,” which applied not just to their fellow citizens, but humans the world over. The revolutionary government abolished slavery in the colonies on these grounds. The early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* predicated on the unfilled human universalism of the French declaration.



Portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft (c. 1787) attributed to the Irish painter John Keenan. Credit: Bridgeman Library

And yet there was another face to human nature which emphasizes the local and particular as more precious. Confucianism explicitly acknowledges this, admitting that the primary loyalty of humans is to

their family, and so builds social and political institutions on the rock of familialism. The spread of universal religions did not lead to universal government, as proto-national identities retained their coherence in a global world order.

Benedict Anderson in [Imagined Communities](#) argues for the late development of national feeling with the rise of early modern vernacular language media. In this telling, nationalism is often seen to be a modern invention. In contrast, Azar Gat in [Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism](#) argues that nationalism is a primal force, derived from natural human tribalism. As such, it is at once powerful, pervasive, and dangerous.

I believe that Gat's thesis is closer to the truth. Though it is fashionable to say that race and ethnicity are social constructions, it is hard to deny that operationally they tend to follow certain lineaments of human relatedness and genealogy. To be someone's parent is a social construction. Adoptive parents are parents. But the truth is that in most cases parenthood is strongly associated with a close biological relationship to one's children. Similarly, the people whom we call Swedes or Japanese exhibit, on the whole, certain features due to predominant shared relatedness.

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The association between biology and race and ethnicity is the fundamental reason that identities rooted in these categories are more dangerous than those rooted in religion or class. Biology is often defined by zero-sum Malthusian dynamics. The Victorians viewed nature as "red in tooth and claw."

This is entirely too reductive, as complex human societies or eusocial insects falsify this generalization, but it gets at some element of the dynamics which define the world around us. Biological species compete with each other, and compete within species as groups or individuals. It is a world where resources are finite, and to the victors go the spoils.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Lord God has given the land of Canaan to the children of Israel. As a consequence, the Hebrews under Joshua and his successors enter into a program of conquest and genocide. These portions of the Hebrew Bible reflect primal human biological existence in a state of competition. The Hebrews were a nation. A collection of tribes. Their God, the Lord God, was a tribal god. An angry, jealous, and vengeful God.

Over 1,000 years later, the Jewish revolt of the Maccabees against the Seleucid Greeks was also characterized by violence. The revolt began with the priest Matthias disemboweling a Jew who began to offer sacrifice to an idol. The Maccabees did not win their independence through persuasion, but through violence. But Jews of the first century BC were not the Hebrews of the Bible. The Maccabees forcibly converted peoples they conquered to their religion. Though this action is objectionable to the modern mentality conditioned to no compulsion in religion, it was a humanitarian step forward, as gentiles could become Jews through affirmation of the God of the Jews and adherence to Jewish law. Herod the Great, who was appointed King of the Jews by the Roman Senate, descended from a people forcibly converted

after the Maccabean revolt.

The developments of Christianity, Islam, and eastern religions, after 0 AD take this process even further. The core insight of these faiths is that the truths of the world—to live a better life and devote oneself to transcendent truth—are accessible to all humans. Many of the moral and ethical teachings from these religions run counter to our baser instincts, whether it be to turn the other cheek, or unconditionally love a parent who is without merit.

And religion can also unleash brutality and repression, as evidenced by the Saudi theocracy, the Thirty Years War in 17th century Europe, or communal slaughter between Hindus and Muslims during partition. Religion, like most human institutions, can be turned to purposes good, and purposes bad. It is a collective human enterprise, and as such reflects our imperfections. But, unlike racialism, ethical religion has within it an element of utopianism, of striving for improvement.

The same can be said of political religions, such as Marxism. The ultimate aim of these movements is to expand the circle of dignity outward, to encompass the whole of humanity. Failure is inevitable, and sometimes the consequences are horrific, but the egalitarian impulse also has salubrious consequences, as chronicled in Steven Pinker's [The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined](#).

Racial and ethnic identity do not hold the possibility for such capaciousness of spirit. Taken to its logical conclusion this style of thinking leans upon biology, and therefore takes us down the path of eliminationism. In 1901, the brilliant futurist HG Wells wrote, "And for the rest, those swarms of black, and brown, and dirty-white, and yellow people... it is their portion to die out and disappear."

Though we are all conscious of the Nazi regime, the reality is that, in the first decades of the 20th century, this spirit of race was widespread in the Western world. A strong sense of racial purpose and solidarity amongst whites imbued the cultural elites with the sense of a zero-sum world of racial competition. It was either to eliminate the non-white peoples, or be swamped by what racial thinker Lothrop Stoddard termed "the rising tide of color."

It has been three generations since the fall of the Nazi regime and the end of crude racialism. The racist laws of the American South were repealed in the decades after World War II, and race-based regimes such as Rhodesia and South Africa became pariahs. This is not to say that racism does not exist, and that racial feeling and nationalism is not pervasive in many societies.

To a great extent, to be Chinese and to be of the Han ethnicity are implicitly coterminous. In much of Europe, non-white descendants of immigrants are still viewed as outsiders in societies which evolved organically out of local tribes over thousands of years. It would be folly to deny that ethnicity and nationality are not connected; I myself was born in Bangladesh, which was founded as a nation by and for speakers of the Bangla language.

But when the subtext becomes the text, furies can be unleashed, and atavistic reflexes can re-emerge. Much of the antiracist discourse in the West today seeks to make race more salient, more explicit, as an organizing principle of society. To remove racism one must acknowledge that one is racist. For white

people to repair their injuries to the world, they must acknowledge their own racial identity.

The road to hell was paved with good intentions, and no one can deny that the intentions here are good. But history teaches us that the choices we make in the present can have unforeseen consequences in the future. Some [white nationalists](#) are quite pleased that we are in a moment where “race matters.” They see an opportunity in the awakening racial awareness of white people, and the explicit re-racialization of public life. Perhaps white people are a race of saints, and the darkness shall not fall over them. But more likely some will fall prey to the temptations of racial pride as the world is soaked in racial thinking.

In the Malthusian world, where there is a loser and a winner in every game, you will always eventually lose at some point. The revival of racial identity to tackle social injustice reawakens an ancient beast. One may think that one can ride the beast to victory, but more likely the beast breaks free, and unleashes the rages of the ancient world upon the modern.

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