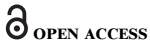




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(Non-)Identity Politics¹

SAMIR GANDESHA

Profoundly sensitive in its own way to a specific constellation of biographical and historical experiences, Adorno's negative dialectics—as an exemplary instance of what Edward Said calls the “contrapuntal thinking” of the exile—may help us articulate an immanent critique of an increasingly influential position on the Left that has come to be known as “identity politics.” The origins of identity politics are commonly associated with the Black lesbian socialist-feminist Combahee River Collective (CRC) in the early 1970s, but can, in fact, be traced to anti-colonial struggles decades earlier. Fittingly, the CRC took its name from a heroic military operation on the Combahee River planned and led by abolitionist Harriet Tubman in 1863. Identity politics can be succinctly defined as the idea that the interests of persons are tightly indexed to: (a) collective historical experiences of suffering, exclusion, and marginalization; (b) the epistemic claims

1 This is a greatly condensed version of a chapter in the forthcoming Oxford Handbook to Adorno, edited by Henry Pickford and Martin Shuster.

these experiences generate; and (c) the idea that the articulation of such claims transforms objects of historical processes into subjects with the agency to make history rather than be made by it.

An Adornian approach to identity politics would pose the following question: Is it possible to understand identity politics as a logic of *integration* or a logic of *disintegration*? The former is the core of Hegel's project which, as he defines it in the early *Differenzschrift*, is to show the "identity of identity and non-identity" in the contradictory trajectory of an unfolding historical reason. The latter lies at the heart of Adorno's *Auseinandersetzung* with Hegel, the core of which aims to show how the logic of integration is undermined in the process of its very realization.² Negative dialectics aims, as it were, to lay bare precisely the ineluctability of the *non-identity* of identity and non-identity. The question an Adornian approach to identity politics would pose, then, is the following: *Does identity politics foster continued domination or the emancipation of the "non-identical"?*

Central to the intertwining of Adorno's biographical and historical experience was the Holocaust. For Adorno, this historical caesura represented the culmination of the dialectic of enlightenment centering on the liquidation of the non-identical, and consequently constituted an unassimilable historical and civilizational trauma. The Holocaust was, itself, the culmination of the theory and practice of colonialism—combined, of course, with a new "scientific" form of anti-semitism—applied to Europe.³ Fascism was, in Frantz Fanon's words, "the whole of Europe transformed into a veritable colony."⁴ Adorno's thoughts about the domination of the non-identical, then, are especially germane to identity politics even if his thinking manifested, in common with other Western Marxists, what Enzo Traverso has suggestively called the "colonial unconscious."⁵

Adorno's challenge to what he calls in *Negative Dialectics* "the philosophical imperialism" of the concept is important here because identity politics could be said to have first emerged, as previously suggested, as a form of anti-colonial resistance in the name of what remained *non-identical* to the identifying logic of European colonialism, the imperialistic imposition of the value

2 It is for precisely this reason that negative dialectics is taken to be proto-deconstructive. See Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987).

3 I refer to this as "endo-colonialism." "Posthuman Fascism," *LA Review of Books*, Aug 22, 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/posthuman-fascism/>.

4 Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2007), 101.

5 Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 174.

form, in particular, whose own subsumptive logic is homologous to that of the philosophical concept. As a self-described *mission civilisatrice*, colonialism was based upon the dehumanization of subject populations and the violent effacement of their non-identity through its reduction to Western concepts and practices or what Said, an attentive reader of Adorno, calls “Orientalism.”

Yet, at the same time, the reclamation of a distinctive human form of life against such a civilizing mission, amounting to the revalorization of ethno-cultural difference, often entailed the sacrifice of difference to these resurgent identities struggling for recognition. Collectively, anti-colonial movements battled the imperial drive to subsume difference and generated resistance to what might be called, with Michel Foucault, the dividing, classifying, and disciplining modes of colonial governmentality. However, these new forms of collective identity, which typically took the form of emergent nation-states, reproduced a subsumptive logic of their own.⁶ One may speak, therefore, of a post-colonial dialectic of enlightenment according to which struggles for autonomy turn into their opposite; emancipatory political reason reverses into conservative cultural re-mythologization.⁷ Rather than challenging the colonizing logic of subsumption as such, identity politics unconsciously repeats it, as it substitutes an ethnonational identity for those identities forcibly imposed by the colonizer (Fanon’s “nationalist bourgeoisie”), whose proxy it inevitably becomes.

An Adornian critique of identity politics would emphasize that, because of its abstract negation or undialectical disavowal of self-critical reason, its refusal of mediation and consequent anti-intellectualism, identity politics is ultimately unable to escape the dialectic of enlightenment of which it is profoundly symptomatic. Identity politics is the scar tissue of the blocked universalism of the historical Enlightenment, as was apparent in Napoleon Bonaparte’s war on the “Black Jacobins”⁸ of San Domingo, not to mention the continued existence of slavery within Jeffersonian democracy. The anti-intellectualism of contemporary identity politics and consequent refusal of argument and dialogue (the root of *dialectical* thinking and critique) makes identity politics, at its heart, authoritarian. Here it uncannily and quite tragi-

6 One case in point is of course Idi Amin’s expulsions of the “Asians” in 1972. Quite literally, this was an extirpation of the non-identical, in the name of an authoritarian identity politics called “Africanization,” as if the Asians could not count as Africans. One also sees this rather starkly in contemporary Zionism, which reviles, ostracizes or worse those members of the Jewish community who are sceptical of or oppose Zionism and stand in solidarity with Palestinians.

7 As Ato Sekyi-Otu does in *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 29.

8 Hence Enzo Traverso’s speculations of what a meeting between Adorno and the author of *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James, might have been like. See Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*.

cally repeats the failed anti-colonial national liberation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. In this, it also echoes the dogmatism of the militant wing of the West German student movement that Adorno criticized in his exchange of letters with Herbert Marcuse in the final months of his life.

Identity politics, then, purports to open a space for the non-identical, which is to say, the abjected individuality of the de-differentiated colonized masses. However, insofar as it elides the non-identity at the heart of these very excluded and marginalized identities it supposedly “re-centers,” it cancels itself out. To put it somewhat differently, in seeking inclusion for the historically disparaged and marginalized, identity politics negates the very difference it purports to empower and finds itself in an unbearable aporia. Identity politics is grounded in the epistemic position of the “oppressed,” which affords it with a voice. The prospect of transcending the conditions of oppression, however, threatens to undermine precisely this “standpoint,” potentially leaving the oppressed voiceless.

In contrast to the contemporary identity politics with which it has much in common, Adorno’s (non-)identity politics contains a utopian promise of the negation of negative identities and the violent natural-historical conditions that produce them. Rather than seeking recognition for bearers of experiences of suffering, exclusion, and marginalization, which would constitute the reified historico-transcendental conditions for the possibility of their truth claims, negative dialectics demands that these conditions come to an end. This necessitates reflection on historical catastrophe.

Civilizational—as opposed to individual—trauma can be understood as occurring at two distinct though related levels. The first we may term *first order* trauma, which happens at the level of the event itself: for example, colonization, chattel slavery, war, and genocide. *Second order* trauma, in contrast, occurs at the level of the *hermeneutics* of the event: a crisis of interpretability or narrativizability of first order historical trauma. In other words, second order trauma results from the impossibility of integrating first order historical traumas into existing frameworks of intelligibility.

The dominant framework of intelligibility of European modernity was historicism or the philosophy of historical progress in the idea of universal history articulated by Kant and Hegel. The genius of such a philosophy was that it recognized the requirement of relating two orders of trauma through the notion of contradiction which, ultimately, was understood to lead, via a logic of integration, to reconciliation or what Hegel explicitly calls, as I previously mentioned, “the identity of identity and non-identity.”⁹ This is ultimately an

9 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, eds. and trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Buffalo, NY: SUNY Press, 1977).

apologia for historical violence and suffering which overlaps in important ways with the historical justification of colonial domination.

Here we are faced with two stark alternatives: The first is the often violent re-imposition of historically superseded frameworks of intelligibility as, for example, in a militant attempt to “reinvent” obsolete traditions specifying racial and/or ethnonational differences and hierarchies, gender roles, sexualities, etc., paired with the most advanced technical means of domination. The second, in contrast, insists on the necessity of articulating reinventing such frameworks, both theoretically and practically, in response to historical catastrophe. The first option is fascism, the second constitutes its antithesis, a kind of anti-fascist philosophy. This is why “Auschwitz” necessitates, for Adorno, the articulation of a “new categorical imperative,” namely, that we organize our thoughts and actions in such a manner as to avoid the compulsive repetition of genocide. Insofar as categorical imperatives are universalizable maxims, the imperative “Never again!” applies to all peoples. In the current context, this must, of course, include Palestinians.

A sympathetic reading of identity politics would suggest that, like Adorno’s own post-war writings about the ethico-political significance of the Holocaust, it registers a second order trauma produced by the bloody, even terroristic, colonial histories of Western modernity. Identity politics therefore registers the profound, perhaps irreversible damage to existing universalistic frameworks of intelligibility. In contrast to Adorno, such histories are, however, disavowed *in toto*, because rather than being understood as resulting from natural-historical dynamics, i.e., capital as self-valorizing value, they are attributed to a mystical “Whiteness” and/or “Eurocentrism.” It is precisely here that identity politics throws the *rational* baby out with the *colonial* bathwater and, consequently, turns mythical and therefore deeply authoritarian.

As previously suggested, Adorno’s negative dialectics embodies a logic of *dis*-integration, a logic that seeks to push Hegelian reconciliation, based on the “philosophical imperialism” of the concept, to the point where a space is opened up for the non-identical. Negative dialectics is the attempt to re-animate—and this is why it is a genuinely *immanent* critique—a dynamic that is inherent to Hegel’s thought itself. Hegel’s honest admission of the irresolvable negativity of the rabble (and by extension the proletariat) is a case in point. The rabble is produced by a capitalist order that defies *recognition* and *affirmation* within it and demands its own *abolition* and *negation* along with the privative social conditions that give rise to it. It is not too much of an audacious exaggeration to suggest, then, that despite his “colonial unconscious,” Adorno’s identification of a negative-dialectical logic of disintegration is a contribution to a kind of *philosophical anti-imperialism*.

Identity politics in the form of the transformative socialist-feminist politics of the CRC sought a liberation of non-identity from a society in which the identifying logic of abstract labor remained the dominant form of social mediation and as such reduced all difference to identity.¹⁰ As Angela Davis has recently written in her foreword to a book on Herbert Marcuse's notion of the "Great Refusal": "Zora Neale Hurston reminded us that the Black woman is the mule of the world. What if the mules of the world become the very height of humanity?"¹¹ In contrast to the affirmative, liberal-democratic politics of recognition of Charles Taylor or Axel Honneth, Davis implies that for Black lesbian workers to be truly included, society would have to be radically transformed in the process of such an inclusion. We might add that such a social transformation would also radically transform the nature of such "intersectional" identities in unimaginable ways.

In contrast with Davis' vision, identity politics today has subsequently devolved into what could be called a melancholy attachment to victimization and victimhood insofar as it takes oppression to be the transcendental condition for the possibility of the articulation of its truth claims. In psychoanalytic language, identity politics *enjoys* the symptoms of the historical trauma it purports to address. As a result, contemporary identity politics foregoes the negativity alluded to by Angela Davis and was embodied most clearly in the early work of the CRC. It fails to register the historical and therefore transitory nature of identity and succumbs as a result, as critics such as Olúfemi O. Táíwò have suggested,¹² to a logic of integration, incorporation, and capture whereby identity politics, betraying its early radical promise, becomes a form of "identity-thinking." It thereby embodies the promise of the liberation of difference while tightening the hold of a reified social order that deepens and consolidates a stifling sameness.

But the question remains an open one as to whether, like the dialectic itself, identity politics is amenable to a radical reanimation in a revised version of a form of the radical emancipation of the "non-identical" that takes aim at the real source of the logic of identity, namely, the "real abstraction" of the commodity form that lies at the heart of a society unaware of itself. Only then can we imagine the possibility of what Adorno calls a "reconciled condition" which "would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien.

10 Moïse Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

11 Angela Davis, "Foreword," in *The Great Refusal: Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements*, eds. Andrew T. Lamas, Todd Wolfson, Peter N. Funke (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), x.

12 Olúfemi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022).

Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own."¹³ Such reconciliation can only be regarded as the *telos* of dialectics decolonized.

Samir Gandesha is Professor of Global Humanities at Simon Fraser University, the Director of the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University, and is Co-editor of the *Journal of Adorno Studies*.

13 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), 191.