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Against Identity Politics

The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy

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Beginning a few decades ago, world politics started to experience a dramatic transformation. From the early 1970s to the first decade of this century, the number of electoral democracies [1] increased from about 35 to more than 110. Over the same period, the world's output of goods and services quadrupled, and growth extended to virtually every region of the world. The proportion of people living in extreme poverty plummeted [2], dropping from 42 percent of the global population in 1993 to 18 percent in 2008.

But not everyone benefited from these changes. In many countries, and particularly in developed democracies, economic inequality [3] increased dramatically, as the benefits of growth flowed primarily to the wealthy and well-educated. The increasing volume of goods, money, and people moving from one place to another brought disruptive changes. In developing countries, villagers who previously had no electricity suddenly found themselves living in large cities, watching TV, and connecting to the Internet on their mobile phones. Huge new middle classes arose in China and India—but the work they did replaced the work that had been done by older middle classes in the developed world. Manufacturing moved steadily from the United States and Europe to East Asia and other regions with low labor costs. At the same time, men were being displaced by women in a labor market increasingly dominated by service industries, and low-skilled workers found themselves replaced by smart machines.

Ultimately, these changes slowed the movement toward an increasingly open and liberal world order, which began to falter and soon reversed. The final blows were the global financial crisis of 2007–8 and the euro crisis that began in 2009. In both cases, policies crafted by elites produced huge recessions, high unemployment, and falling incomes for millions of ordinary workers. Since the United States and the EU were the leading exemplars of liberal democracy, these crises damaged the reputation of that system as a whole.

Indeed, in recent years, the number of democracies has fallen, and democracy has retreated [4] in virtually all regions of the world. At the same time, many authoritarian countries, led by China and Russia, have become much more assertive. Some countries that had seemed to be successful liberal democracies during the 1990s—including Hungary, Poland, Thailand, and Turkey—have slid backward toward authoritarianism. The Arab revolts of 2010–11 disrupted dictatorships throughout the Middle East but yielded little in terms of democratization: in their wake, despotic regimes held on to power, and civil wars racked Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. More surprising and perhaps even more significant was the success of populist nationalism in elections held in 2016 by two of the world's most durable liberal democracies: the United Kingdom, where voters chose to leave the EU, and the United States, where Donald Trump scored a shocking electoral upset [5] in the race for president.

All these developments relate in some way to the economic and technological shifts of globalization. But they are also rooted in a different phenomenon: the rise of identity politics [6]. For the most part, twentieth-century politics was defined by economic issues. On the left, politics centered on workers, trade unions, social welfare programs, and redistributive policies. The right, by contrast, was primarily interested in reducing the size of government and promoting the private sector. Politics today, however, is defined less by economic or ideological concerns than by questions of identity. Now, in many democracies, the left focuses less on creating broad economic equality and more on promoting the interests of a wide variety of marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities, immigrants and refugees, women, and LGBT people. The right, meanwhile, has redefined its core mission as the patriotic protection of traditional national identity, which is often explicitly connected to race, ethnicity, or religion.

This shift overturns a long tradition, dating back at least as far as Karl Marx [7], of viewing political struggles as a reflection of economic conflicts. But important as material self-interest is, human beings are motivated by other things as well, forces that better explain the present day. All over the world, political leaders have mobilized followers around the idea that their dignity has been affronted and must be restored.

Of course, in authoritarian countries, such appeals are old hat. Russian President Vladimir Putin has talked about the "tragedy" of the Soviet Union's collapse and has excoriated the United States and Europe for taking advantage of Russia's weakness during the 1990s to expand NATO. Chinese President Xi Jinping alludes to his country's "century of humiliation," a period of foreign domination that began in 1839.

But resentment over indignities has become a powerful force in democratic countries, too. The Black Lives Matter movement sprang from a series of well-publicized police killings of African Americans and forced the rest of the world to pay attention to the victims of police brutality. On college campuses and in offices around the United States, women seethed over a seeming epidemic of sexual harassment and assault and concluded that their male peers simply did not see them as equals. The rights of transgender people, who had previously not been widely recognized as distinct targets of discrimination, became a cause célèbre. And many of those who voted for Trump yearned for a better time in the past, when they believed their place in their own society had been more secure.

Again and again, groups have come to believe that their identities—whether national, religious, ethnic, sexual, gender, or otherwise—are not receiving adequate recognition. Identity politics is no longer a minor phenomenon, playing out only in the rarified confines of university campuses or providing a backdrop to low-stakes skirmishes in “culture wars” promoted by the mass media. Instead, identity politics has become a master concept that explains much of what is going on in global affairs.

That leaves modern liberal democracies facing an important challenge. Globalization has brought rapid economic and social change and made these societies far more diverse, creating demands for recognition on the part of groups that were once invisible to mainstream society. These demands have led to a backlash among other groups, which are feeling a loss of status and a sense of displacement. Democratic societies are fracturing into segments based on ever-narrower identities, threatening the possibility of deliberation and collective action by society as a whole. This is a road that leads only to state breakdown and, ultimately, failure. Unless such liberal democracies can work their way back to more universal understandings of human dignity, they will doom themselves—and the world—to continuing conflict.

THE THIRD PART OF THE SOUL

Most economists assume that human beings are motivated by the desire for material resources or goods. This conception of human behavior has deep roots in Western political thought and forms the basis of most contemporary social science. But it leaves out a factor that classical philosophers realized was crucially important: the craving for dignity. Socrates believed that such a need formed an integral “third part” of the human soul, one that coexisted with a “desiring part” and a “calculating part.” In Plato’s *Republic*, he termed this the *thymos*, which English translations render poorly as “spirit.”

In politics, *thymos* is expressed in two forms. The first is what I call “megalothymia”: a desire to be recognized as superior. Pre-democratic societies rested on hierarchies, and their belief in the inherent superiority of a certain class of people—nobles, aristocrats, royals—was fundamental to social order. The problem with megalothymia is that for every person recognized as superior, far more people are seen as inferior and receive no public recognition of their human worth. A powerful feeling of resentment arises when one is disrespected. And an equally powerful feeling—what I call “isothymia”—makes people want to be seen as just as good as everyone else.

The rise of modern democracy is the story of isothymia’s triumph over megalothymia: societies that recognized the rights of only a small number of elites were replaced by ones that recognized everyone as inherently equal. During the twentieth century, societies stratified by class began to acknowledge the rights of ordinary people, and nations that had been colonized sought independence. The great struggles in U.S. political history over slavery and segregation, workers’ rights, and women’s equality were driven by demands that the political system expand the circle of individuals it recognized as full human beings.

But in liberal democracies, equality under the law does not result in economic or social equality. Discrimination continues to exist against a wide variety of groups, and market economies produce large inequalities of outcome. Despite their overall wealth, the United

States and other developed countries have seen income inequality increase dramatically over the past 30 years. Significant parts of their populations have suffered from stagnant incomes, and certain segments of society have experienced downward social mobility.

Perceived threats to one's economic status may help explain the rise of populist nationalism in the United States and elsewhere. The American working class, defined as people with a high school education or less, has not been doing well in recent decades. This is reflected not just in stagnant or declining incomes and job losses but in social breakdown, as well. For African Americans, this process began in the 1970s, decades after the Great Migration, when blacks moved to such cities as Chicago, Detroit, and New York, where many of them found employment in the meatpacking, steel, or auto industry. As these sectors declined and men began to lose jobs through deindustrialization, a series of social ills followed, including rising crime rates, a crack cocaine epidemic, and a deterioration of family life, which helped transmit poverty from one generation to the next.

Over the past decade, a similar kind of social decline has spread to the white working class. An opioid epidemic [8] has hollowed out white, rural working-class communities all over the United States; in 2016, heavy drug use led to more than 60,000 overdose deaths, about twice the number of deaths from traffic accidents each year in the country. Life expectancy for white American men fell between 2013 and 2014, a highly unusual occurrence in a developed country. And the proportion of white working-class children growing up in single-parent families rose from 22 percent in 2000 to 36 percent in 2017.

But perhaps one of the great drivers of the new nationalism that sent Trump to the White House (and drove the United Kingdom to vote to leave the EU) has been the perception of invisibility. The resentful citizens fearing the loss of their middle-class status point an accusatory finger upward to the elites, who they believe do not see them, but also downward toward the poor, who they feel are unfairly favored. Economic distress is often perceived by individuals more as a loss of identity than as a loss of resources. Hard work should confer dignity on an individual. But many white working-class Americans feel that their dignity is not recognized and that the government gives undue advantages to people who are not willing to play by the rules.

This link between income and status helps explain why nationalist or religiously conservative appeals have proved more effective than traditional left-wing ones based on economic class. Nationalists tell the disaffected that they have always been core members of a great nation and that foreigners, immigrants, and elites have been conspiring to hold them down. "Your country is no longer your own," they say, "and you are not respected in your own land." The religious right tells a similar story: "You are a member of a great community of believers that has been betrayed by nonbelievers; this betrayal has led to your impoverishment and is a crime against God."

The prevalence of such narratives is why immigration has become such a contentious issue in so many countries. Like trade, immigration boosts overall GDP, but it does not benefit all groups within a society. Almost always, ethnic majorities view it as a threat to their cultural identity, especially when cross-border flows of people are as massive as they have been in recent decades.

Yet anger over immigration alone cannot explain why the nationalist right has in recent years captured voters who used to support parties of the left, in both the United States and Europe. The rightward drift also reflects the failure of contemporary left-leaning parties to speak to people whose relative status has fallen as a result of globalization and technological change. In past eras, progressives appealed to a shared experience of exploitation and resentment of rich capitalists: “Workers of the world, unite!” In the United States, working-class voters overwhelmingly supported the Democratic Party from the New Deal, in the 1930s, up until the rise of Ronald Reagan, in the 1980s. And European social democracy was built on a foundation of trade unionism and working-class solidarity.

But during the era of globalization, most left-wing parties shifted their strategy. Rather than build solidarity around large collectivities such as the working class or the economically exploited, they began to focus on ever-smaller groups that found themselves marginalized in specific and unique ways. The principle of universal and equal recognition mutated into calls for special recognition. Over time, this phenomenon migrated from the left to the right.

THE TRIUMPH OF IDENTITY

In the 1960s, powerful new social movements emerged across the world’s developed liberal democracies. Civil rights activists in the United States demanded that the country fulfill the promise of equality made in the Declaration of Independence and written into the U.S. Constitution after the Civil War. This was soon followed by the feminist movement, which similarly sought equal treatment for women, a cause that both stimulated and was shaped by a massive influx of women into the labor market. A parallel social revolution shattered traditional norms regarding sexuality and the family, and the environmental movement reshaped attitudes toward nature. Subsequent years would see new movements promoting the rights of the disabled, Native Americans, immigrants, gay men and women, and, eventually, transgender people. But even when laws changed to provide more opportunities and stronger legal protections to the marginalized, groups continued to differ from one another in their behavior, performance, wealth, traditions, and customs; bias and bigotry remained commonplace among individuals; and minorities continued to cope with the burdens of discrimination, prejudice, disrespect, and invisibility.

This presented each marginalized group with a choice: it could demand that society treat its members the same way it treated the members of dominant groups, or it could assert a separate identity for its members and demand respect for them as different from the mainstream society. Over time, the latter strategy tended to win out: the early civil rights movement of Martin Luther King, Jr., demanded that American society treat black people the way it treated white people. By the end of the 1960s, however, groups such as the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam emerged and argued that black people had their own traditions and consciousness; in their view, black people needed to take pride in themselves for who they were and not heed what the broader society wanted them to be. The authentic inner selves of black Americans were not the same as those of white people, they argued; they were shaped by the unique experience of growing up black in a hostile society dominated by whites. That experience was defined by violence, racism, and denigration and could not be appreciated by people who grew up in different circumstances.

These themes have been taken up in today's Black Lives Matter movement [9], which began with demands for justice for individual victims of police violence but soon broadened into an effort to make people more aware of the nature of day-to-day existence for black Americans. Writers such as Ta-Nehisi Coates have connected contemporary police violence against African Americans to the long history of slavery and lynching. In the view of Coates and others, this history constitutes part of an unbridgeable gulf of understanding between blacks and whites.

A similar evolution occurred within the feminist movement. The demands of the mainstream movement were focused on equal treatment for women in employment, education, the courts, and so on. But from the beginning, an important strand of feminist thought proposed that the consciousness and life experiences of women were fundamentally different from those of men and that the movement's aim should not be to simply facilitate women's behaving and thinking like men.

Other movements soon seized on the importance of lived experience to their struggles. Marginalized groups increasingly demanded not only that laws and institutions treat them as equal to dominant groups but also that the broader society recognize and even celebrate the intrinsic differences that set them apart. The term "multiculturalism"—originally merely referring to a quality of diverse societies—became a label for a political program that valued each separate culture and each lived experience equally, at times by drawing special attention to those that had been invisible or undervalued in the past. This kind of multiculturalism at first was about large cultural groups, such as French-speaking Canadians, or Muslim immigrants, or African Americans. But soon it became a vision of a society fragmented into many small groups with distinct experiences, as well as groups defined by the intersection of different forms of discrimination, such as women of color, whose lives could not be understood through the lens of either race or gender alone.

The left began to embrace multiculturalism just as it was becoming harder to craft policies that would bring about large-scale socio-economic change. By the 1980s, progressive groups throughout the developed world were facing an existential crisis. The far left had been defined for the first half of the century by the ideals of revolutionary Marxism and its vision of radical egalitarianism. The social democratic left had a different agenda: it accepted liberal democracy but sought to expand the welfare state to cover more people with more social protections. But both Marxists and social democrats hoped to increase socioeconomic equality through the use of state power, by expanding access to social services to all citizens and by redistributing wealth.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, the limits of this strategy became clear. Marxists had to confront the fact that communist societies in China and the Soviet Union had turned into grotesque and oppressive dictatorships. At the same time, the working class in most industrialized democracies had grown richer and had begun to merge with the middle class. Communist revolution and the abolition of private property fell off the agenda. The social democratic left also reached a dead end when its goal of an ever-expanding welfare state bumped into the reality of fiscal constraints during the turbulent 1970s. Governments responded by printing money, leading to inflation and financial crises. Redistributive programs were creating perverse incentives that discouraged work, savings, and entrepreneurship, which in turn shrank the overall economic pie. Inequality remained deeply entrenched, despite ambitious efforts to eradicate it, such as U.S.

President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society initiatives. With China's shift toward a market economy after 1978 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Marxist left largely fell apart, and the social democrats were left to make their peace with capitalism.

The left's diminished ambitions for large-scale socioeconomic reform converged with its embrace of identity politics and multiculturalism in the final decades of the twentieth century. The left continued to be defined by its passion for equality—by isothymia—but its agenda shifted from the earlier emphasis on the working class to the demands of an ever-widening circle of marginalized minorities. Many activists came to see the old working class and their trade unions as a privileged stratum that demonstrated little sympathy for the plight of immigrants and racial minorities. They sought to expand the rights of a growing list of groups rather than improve the economic conditions of individuals. In the process, the old working class was left behind.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

The left's embrace of identity politics was both understandable and necessary. The lived experiences of distinct identity groups differ, and they often need to be addressed in ways specific to those groups. Outsiders often fail to perceive the harm they are doing by their actions, as many men realized in the wake of the #MeToo movement's revelations [10] regarding sexual harassment and sexual assault. Identity politics aims to change culture and behavior in ways that have real material benefits for many people.

By turning a spotlight on narrower experiences of injustice, identity politics has brought about welcome changes in cultural norms and has produced concrete public policies that have helped many people. The Black Lives Matter movement has made police departments across the United States much more conscious of the way they treat minorities, even though police abuse still persists. The #MeToo movement has broadened popular understanding of sexual assault and has opened an important discussion of the inadequacies of existing criminal law in dealing with it. Its most important consequence is probably the change it has already wrought in the way that women and men interact in workplaces.

So there is nothing wrong with identity politics as such; it is a natural and inevitable response to injustice. But the tendency of identity politics to focus on cultural issues has diverted energy and attention away from serious thinking on the part of progressives about how to reverse the 30-year trend in most liberal democracies toward greater socioeconomic inequality. It is easier to argue over cultural issues than it is to change policies, easier to include female and minority authors in college curricula than to increase the incomes and expand the opportunities of women and minorities outside the ivory tower. What is more, many of the constituencies that have been the focus of recent campaigns driven by identity politics, such as female executives in Silicon Valley and female Hollywood stars, are near the top of the income distribution. Helping them achieve greater equality is a good thing, but it will do little to address the glaring disparities between the top one percent of earners and everyone else.

Today's left-wing identity politics also diverts attention from larger groups whose serious problems have been ignored. Until recently, activists on the left had little to say about the burgeoning opioid crisis or the fate of children growing up in impoverished single-parent

families in the rural United States. And the Democrats have put forward no ambitious strategies to deal with the potentially immense job losses that will accompany advancing automation or the income disparities that technology may bring to all Americans.

Moreover, the left's identity politics poses a threat to free speech and to the kind of rational discourse needed to sustain a democracy. Liberal democracies are committed to protecting the right to say virtually anything in a marketplace of ideas, particularly in the political sphere. But the preoccupation with identity has clashed with the need for civic discourse. The focus on lived experience by identity groups prioritizes the emotional world of the inner self over the rational examination of issues in the outside world and privileges sincerely held opinions over a process of reasoned deliberation that may force one to abandon prior opinions. The fact that an assertion is offensive to someone's sense of self-worth is often seen as grounds for silencing or disparaging the individual who made it.

A reliance on identity politics also has weaknesses as a political strategy. The current dysfunction and decay of the U.S. political system are related to extreme and ever-growing polarization, which has made routine governing an exercise in brinkmanship. Most of the blame for this belongs to the right. As the political scientists Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein have argued, the Republican Party has moved much more rapidly toward its far-right wing than the Democratic Party has moved in the opposite direction. But both parties have moved away from the center. Left-wing activists focused on identity issues are seldom representative of the electorate as a whole; indeed, their concerns often alienate mainstream voters.

But perhaps the worst thing about identity politics as currently practiced by the left is that it has stimulated the rise of identity politics on the right. This is due in no small part to the left's embrace of political correctness, a social norm that prohibits people from publicly expressing their beliefs or opinions without fearing moral opprobrium. Every society has certain views that run counter to its foundational ideas of legitimacy and therefore are off-limits in public discourse. But the constant discovery of new identities and the shifting grounds for acceptable speech are hard to follow. In a society highly attuned to group dignity, new boundaries lines keep appearing, and previously acceptable ways of talking or expressing oneself become offensive. Today, for example, merely using the words "he" or "she" in certain contexts might be interpreted as a sign of insensitivity to intersex or transgender people. But such utterances threaten no fundamental democratic principles; rather, they challenge the dignity of a particular group and denote a lack of awareness of or sympathy for that group's struggles.

In reality, only a relatively small number of writers, artists, students, and intellectuals on the left espouse the most extreme forms of political correctness. But those instances are picked up by the conservative media, which use them to tar the left as a whole. This may explain one of the extraordinary aspects of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, which was Trump's popularity among a core group of supporters despite behavior that, in an earlier era, would have doomed a presidential bid. During the campaign, Trump mocked a journalist's physical disabilities, characterized Mexicans as rapists and criminals, and was heard on a recording bragging that he had groped women. Those statements were less transgressions against political correctness than transgressions against basic decency, and many of Trump's supporters did not necessarily approve of them or of other outrageous comments that Trump made. But at a time when many Americans believe that public speech is excessively policed, Trump's supporters like that he is not intimidated by

the pressure to avoid giving offense. In an era shaped by political correctness, Trump represents a kind of authenticity that many Americans admire: he may be malicious, bigoted, and unpresidential, but at least he says what he thinks.

And yet Trump's rise did not reflect a conservative rejection of identity politics; in fact, it reflected the right's embrace of identity politics [11]. Many of Trump's white working-class supporters feel that they have been disregarded by elites. People living in rural areas, who are the backbone of populist movements not just in the United States but also in many European countries, often believe that their values are threatened by cosmopolitan, urban elites. And although they are members of a dominant ethnic group, many members of the white working class see themselves as victimized and marginalized. Such sentiments have paved the way for the emergence of a right-wing identity politics that, at its most extreme, takes the form of explicitly racist white nationalism.

Trump has directly contributed to this process. His transformation from real estate mogul and reality-television star to political contender took off after he became the most famous promoter of the racist "birther" conspiracy theory [12], which cast doubt on Barack Obama's eligibility to serve as president. As a candidate, he was evasive when asked about the fact that the former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke had endorsed him, and he complained that a U.S. federal judge overseeing a lawsuit against Trump University was treating him "unfairly" because of the judge's Mexican heritage. After a violent gathering of white nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017—where a white nationalist killed a counterprotester—Trump averred that there were "very fine people on both sides." And he has spent a lot of time singling out black athletes and celebrities for criticism and has been happy to exploit anger over the removal of statues honoring Confederate leaders.

Thanks to Trump, white nationalism has moved from the fringes to something resembling the mainstream. Its proponents complain that although it is politically acceptable to talk about black rights, or women's rights, or gay rights, it is not possible to advocate the rights of white Americans without being branded a racist. The practitioners of identity politics on the left would argue that the right's assertions of identity are illegitimate and cannot be placed on the same moral plane as those of minorities, women, and other marginalized groups, since they reflect the perspective of a historically privileged community. That is clearly true. Conservatives greatly exaggerate the extent to which minority groups receive advantages, just as they exaggerate the extent to which political correctness muzzles free speech. The reality for many marginalized groups remains unchanged: African Americans continue to be subjected to police violence; women are still assaulted and harassed.

What is notable, however, is how the right has adopted language and framing from the left: the idea that whites are being victimized, that their situation and suffering are invisible to the rest of society, and that the social and political structures responsible for this situation—especially the media and the political establishment—need to be smashed. Across the ideological spectrum, identity politics is the lens through which most social issues are now seen.

A NEED FOR CREED

Societies need to protect marginalized and excluded groups, but they also need to achieve common goals through deliberation and consensus. The shift in the agendas of both the left and the right toward the protection of narrow group identities ultimately threatens that process. The remedy is not to abandon the idea of identity, which is central to the way that modern people think about themselves and their surrounding societies; it is to define larger and more integrative national identities that take into account the de facto diversity of liberal democratic societies.

Human societies cannot get away from identity or identity politics. Identity is a “powerful moral idea,” in the philosopher Charles Taylor’s phrase, built on the universal human characteristic of *thymos*. This moral idea tells people that they have authentic inner selves that are not being recognized and suggests that external society may be false and repressive. It focuses people’s natural demand for recognition of their dignity and provides language for expressing the resentments that arise when such recognition is not forthcoming.

It would be neither possible nor desirable for such demands for dignity to disappear. Liberal democracy is built on the rights of individuals to enjoy an equal degree of choice and agency in determining their collective political lives. But many people are not satisfied with equal recognition as generic human beings. In some sense, this is a condition of modern life. Modernization means constant change and disruption and the opening up of choices that did not exist before. This is by and large a good thing: over generations, millions of people have fled traditional communities that did not offer them choices in favor of communities that did. But the freedom and degree of choice that exist in a modern liberal society can also leave people unhappy and disconnected from their fellow human beings. They find themselves nostalgic for the community and structured life they think they have lost, or that their ancestors supposedly possessed. The authentic identities they are seeking are ones that bind them to other people. People who feel this way can be seduced by leaders who tell them that they have been betrayed and disrespected by existing power structures and that they are members of important communities whose greatness will again be recognized.

The nature of modern identity, however, is to be changeable. Some individuals may persuade themselves that their identity is based on their biology and is outside their control. But citizens of modern societies have multiple identities, ones that are shaped by social interactions. People have identities defined by their race, gender, workplace, education, affinities, and nation. And although the logic of identity politics is to divide societies into small, self-regarding groups, it is also possible to create identities that are broader and more integrative. One does not have to deny the lived experiences of individuals to recognize that they can also share values and aspirations with much broader circles of citizens. Lived experience, in other words, can become just plain experience—something that connects individuals to people unlike themselves, rather than setting them apart. So although no democracy is immune from identity politics in the modern world, all of them can steer it back to broader forms of mutual respect.

The first and most obvious place to start is by countering the specific abuses that lead to group victimhood and marginalization, such as police violence against minorities and sexual harassment. No critique of identity politics should imply that these are not real and urgent problems that require concrete solutions. But the United States and other liberal democracies have to go further than that. Governments and civil society groups must focus on integrating smaller groups into larger wholes. Democracies need to promote what political scientists call “creedal national identities,” which are built not around shared personal characteristics, lived experiences, historical ties, or religious convictions but rather around core values and beliefs. The idea is to encourage citizens to identify with their countries’ foundational ideals and use public policies to deliberately assimilate newcomers.

Combating the pernicious influence of identity politics will prove quite difficult in Europe. In recent decades, the European left has supported a form of multiculturalism that minimizes the importance of integrating newcomers into creedal national cultures. Under the banner of antiracism, left-wing European parties have downplayed evidence that multiculturalism has acted as an obstacle to assimilation. The new populist right in Europe, for its part, looks back nostalgically at fading national cultures that were based on ethnicity or religion and flourished in societies that were largely free of immigrants.

The fight against identity politics in Europe must start with changes to citizenship laws. Such an agenda is beyond the capability of the EU, whose 28 member states zealously defend their national prerogatives and stand ready to veto any significant reforms or changes. Any action that takes place will therefore have to happen, for better or worse, on the level of individual countries. To stop privileging some ethnic groups over others, EU member states with citizenship laws based on *jus sanguinis*—“the right of blood,” which confers citizenship according to the ethnicity of parents—should adopt new laws based on *jus soli*, “the right of the soil,” which confers citizenship on anyone born in the territory of the country. But European states should also impose stringent requirements on the naturalization of new citizens, something the United States has done for many years. In the United States, in addition to having to prove continuous residency in the country for five years, new citizens are expected to be able to read, write, and speak basic English; have an understanding of U.S. history and government; be of good moral character (that is, have no criminal record); and demonstrate an attachment to the principles and ideals of the U.S. Constitution by swearing an oath of allegiance to the United States. European countries should expect the same from their new citizens.

In addition to changing the formal requirements for citizenship, European countries need to shift away from conceptions of national identity based on ethnicity. Nearly 20 years ago, a German academic of Syrian origin named Bassam Tibi proposed making *Leitkultur* [13] (leading culture) the basis for a new German national identity. He defined *Leitkultur* as a belief in equality and democratic values firmly grounded in the liberal ideals of the Enlightenment. Yet leftist academics and politicians attacked his proposal for suggesting that such values were superior to other cultural values; in doing so, the German left gave unwitting comfort to Islamists and far-right nationalists, who have little use for Enlightenment ideals. But Germany and other major European countries desperately need something like Tibi’s *Leitkultur*: a normative change that would permit Germans of Turkish heritage to speak of themselves as German, Swedes of African heritage to speak of themselves as Swedish, and so on. This is beginning to happen, but too slowly.

Europeans have created a remarkable civilization of which they should be proud, one that can encompass people from other cultures even as it remains aware of its own distinctiveness.

Compared with Europe, the United States has been far more welcoming of immigrants, in part because it developed a creedal national identity early in its history. As the political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset pointed out, a U.S. citizen can be accused of being “un-American” in a way that a Danish citizen could not be described as being “un-Danish” or a Japanese citizen could not be charged with being “un-Japanese.” Americanism constitutes a set of beliefs and a way of life, not an ethnicity.

Today, the American creedal national identity, which emerged in the wake of the Civil War, must be revived and defended against attacks from both the left and the right. On the right, white nationalists would like to replace the creedal national identity with one based on race, ethnicity, and religion. On the left, the champions of identity politics have sought to undermine the legitimacy of the American national story by emphasizing victimization, insinuating in some cases that racism, gender discrimination, and other forms of systematic exclusion are in the country’s DNA. Such flaws have been and continue to be features of American society, and they must be confronted. But progressives should also tell a different version of U.S. history, one focused on how an ever-broadening circle of people have overcome barriers to achieve recognition of their dignity.

Although the United States has benefited from diversity, it cannot build its national identity on diversity. A workable creedal national identity has to offer substantive ideas, such as constitutionalism, the rule of law, and human equality. Americans respect those ideas; the country is justified in withholding citizenship from those who reject them.

BACK TO BASICS

Once a country has defined a proper creedal national identity that is open to the de facto diversity of modern societies, the nature of controversies over immigration will inevitably change. In both the United States and Europe, that debate is currently polarized. The right seeks to cut off immigration altogether and would like to send immigrants back to their countries of origin; the left asserts a virtually unlimited obligation on the part of liberal democracies to accept all immigrants. These are both untenable positions. The real debate should instead be about the best strategies for assimilating immigrants into a country’s creedal national identity. Well-assimilated immigrants bring a healthy diversity to any society; poorly assimilated immigrants are a drag on the state and in some cases constitute security threats.

European governments pay lip service to the need for better assimilation but fail to follow through. Many European countries have put in place policies that actively impede integration. Under the Dutch system of “pillarization,” for example, children are educated in separate Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, and secular systems. Receiving an education in a state-supported school without ever having to deal with people outside one’s own religion is not likely to foster rapid assimilation.

In France, the situation is somewhat different. The French concept of republican citizenship, like its U.S. counterpart, is creedal, built around the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. France’s 1905 law on *laïcité*, or secularism, formally

separates church and state and makes impossible the kinds of publicly funded religious schools that operate in the Netherlands. But France has other big problems. First, regardless of what French law says, widespread discrimination holds back the country's immigrants. Second, the French economy has been underperforming for years, with unemployment rates that are twice those of neighboring Germany. For young immigrants in France, the unemployment rate is close to 35 percent, compared with 25 percent for French youth as a whole. France should help integrate its immigrants by making it easier for them to find jobs, primarily by liberalizing the labor market. Finally, the idea of French national identity and French culture has come under attack as Islamophobic; in contemporary France, the very concept of assimilation is not politically acceptable to many on the left. This is a shame, since it allows the nativists and extremists of the far-right National Front to position themselves as the true defenders of the republican ideal of universal citizenship.

In the United States, an assimilation agenda would begin with public education. The teaching of basic civics has been in decline for decades, not just for immigrants but also for native-born Americans. Public schools should also move away from the bilingual and multilingual programs that have become popular in recent decades. (New York City's public school system offers instruction in more than a dozen different languages.) Such programs have been marketed as ways to speed the acquisition of English by nonnative speakers, but the empirical evidence on whether they work is mixed; indeed, they may in fact delay the process of learning English.

The American creedal national identity would also be strengthened by a universal requirement for national service, which would underline the idea that U.S. citizenship demands commitment and sacrifice. A citizen could perform such service either by enlisting in the military or by working in a civilian role, such as teaching in schools or working on publicly funded environmental conservation projects similar to those created by the New Deal. If such national service were correctly structured, it would force young people to work together with others from very different social classes, regions, races, and ethnicities, just as military service does. And like all forms of shared sacrifice, it would integrate newcomers into the national culture. National service would serve as a contemporary form of classical republicanism, a form of democracy that encouraged virtue and public-spiritedness rather than simply leaving citizens alone to pursue their private lives.

ASSIMILATION NATION

In both the United States and Europe, a policy agenda focused on assimilation would have to tackle the issue of immigration levels. Assimilation into a dominant culture becomes much harder as the numbers of immigrants rise relative to the native population. As immigrant communities reach a certain scale, they tend to become self-sufficient and no longer need connections to groups outside themselves. They can overwhelm public services and strain the capacity of schools and other public institutions to care for them. Immigrants will likely have a positive net effect on public finances in the long run—but only if they get jobs and become tax-paying citizens or lawful residents. Large numbers of newcomers can also weaken support among native-born citizens for generous welfare benefits, a factor in both the U.S. and the European immigration debates.

Liberal democracies benefit greatly from immigration, both economically and culturally. But they also unquestionably have the right to control their own borders. All people have a basic human right to citizenship. But that does not mean they have the right to citizenship in any particular country beyond the one in which they or their parents were born. International law does not, moreover, challenge the right of states to control their borders or to set criteria for citizenship.

The EU needs to be able to control its external borders better than it does, which in practice means giving countries such as Greece and Italy more funding and stronger legal authority to regulate the flow of immigrants. The EU agency charged with doing this, Frontex, is understaffed and underfunded and lacks strong political support from the very member states most concerned with keeping immigrants out. The system of free internal movement within the EU will not be politically sustainable unless the problem of Europe's external borders is solved.

In the United States, the chief problem is the inconsistent enforcement of immigration laws. Doing little to prevent millions of people from entering and staying in the country unlawfully and then engaging in sporadic and seemingly arbitrary bouts of deportation—which were a feature of Obama's time in office—is hardly a sustainable long-term policy. But Trump's pledge to "build a wall" [14] on the Mexican border is little more than nativistic posturing: a huge proportion of illegal immigrants enter the United States legally and simply remain in the country after their visas expire. What is needed is a better system of sanctioning companies and people who hire illegal immigrants, which would require a national identification system that could help employers figure out who can legally work for them. Such a system has not been established because too many employers benefit from the cheap labor that illegal immigrants provide. Moreover, many on the left and the right oppose a national identification system owing to their suspicion of government overreach.

As a result, the United States now hosts a population of around 11 million illegal immigrants. The vast majority of them have been in the country for years and are doing useful work, raising families, and otherwise behaving as law-abiding citizens. A small number of them commit criminal acts, just as a small number of native-born Americans commit crimes. But the idea that all illegal immigrants are criminals because they violated U.S. law to enter or stay in the country is ridiculous, just as it is ridiculous to think that the United States could ever force all of them to leave the country and return to their countries of origin.

The outlines of a basic bargain on immigration reform have existed for some time. The federal government would undertake serious enforcement measures to control the country's borders and would also create a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants without criminal records. Such a bargain might receive the support of a majority of U.S. voters, but hard-core immigration opponents are dead set against any form of "amnesty," and pro-immigrant groups are opposed to stricter enforcement.

Public policies that focus on the successful assimilation of foreigners might help break this logjam by taking the wind out of the sails of the current populist upsurge in both the United States and Europe. The groups vociferously opposing immigration are coalitions of people with different concerns. Hard-core nativists are driven by racism and bigotry; little can be done to change their minds. But others have more legitimate concerns about the speed of

social change driven by mass immigration and worry about the capacity of existing institutions to accommodate this change. A policy focus on assimilation might ease their concerns and peel them away from the bigots.

Identity politics thrives whenever the poor and the marginalized are invisible to their compatriots. Resentment over lost status starts with real economic distress, and one way of muting the resentment is to mitigate concerns over jobs, incomes, and security. In the United States, much of the left stopped thinking several decades ago about ambitious social policies that might help remedy the underlying conditions of the poor. It was easier to talk about respect and dignity than to come up with potentially costly plans that would concretely reduce inequality. A major exception to this trend was Obama, whose Affordable Care Act was a milestone in U.S. social policy. The ACA's opponents tried to frame it as an identity issue, insinuating that the policy was designed by a black president to help his black constituents. But the ACA was in fact a national policy designed to help less well-off Americans regardless of their race or identity. Many of the law's beneficiaries include rural whites in the South who have nonetheless been persuaded to vote for Republican politicians vowing to repeal the ACA.

Identity politics has made the crafting of such ambitious policies more difficult. Although fights over economic policy produced sharp divisions early in the twentieth century, many democracies found that those with opposing economic visions could often split the difference and compromise. Identity issues, by contrast, are harder to reconcile: either you recognize me or you don't. Resentment over lost dignity or invisibility often has economic roots, but fights over identity frequently distract from policy ideas that could help. As a result, it has been harder to create broad coalitions to fight for redistribution: members of the working class who also belong to higher-status identity groups (such as whites in the United States) tend to resist making common cause with those below them, and vice versa.

The Democratic Party, in particular, has a major choice to make. It can continue to try to win elections by doubling down on the mobilization of the identity groups that today supply its most fervent activists: African Americans, Hispanics, professional women, the LGBT community, and so on. Or the party could try to win back some of the white working-class voters who constituted a critical part of Democratic coalitions from the New Deal through the Great Society but who have defected to the Republican Party in recent elections. The former strategy might allow it to win elections, but it is a poor formula for governing the country. The Republican Party is becoming the party of white people, and the Democratic Party is becoming the party of minorities. Should that process continue much further, identity will have fully displaced economic ideology as the central cleavage of U.S. politics, which would be an unhealthy outcome for American democracy.

A MORE UNIFIED FUTURE

Fears about the future are often best expressed through fiction, particularly science fiction that tries to imagine future worlds based on new kinds of technology. In the first half of the twentieth century, many of those forward-looking fears centered on big, centralized, bureaucratic tyrannies that snuffed out individuality and privacy: think of George Orwell's *1984*. But the nature of imagined dystopias began to change in the later decades of the century, and one particular strand spoke to the anxieties raised by identity politics. So-

called cyberpunk authors such as William Gibson, Neal Stephenson, and Bruce Sterling saw a future dominated not by centralized dictatorships but by uncontrolled social fragmentation facilitated by the Internet.

Stephenson's 1992 novel, *Snow Crash*, posited a ubiquitous virtual "Metaverse" in which individuals could adopt avatars and change their identities at will. In the novel, the United States has broken down into "Burbclaves," suburban subdivisions catering to narrow identities, such as New South Africa (for the racists, with their Confederate flags) and Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong (for Chinese immigrants). Passports and visas are required to travel from one neighborhood to another. The CIA has been privatized, and the aircraft carrier the USS *Enterprise* has become a floating home for refugees. The authority of the federal government has shrunk to encompass only the land on which federal buildings are located.

Our present world is simultaneously moving toward the opposing dystopias of hypercentralization and endless fragmentation. China, for instance, is building a massive dictatorship in which the government collects highly specific personal data [15] on the daily transactions of every citizen. On the other hand, other parts of the world are seeing the breakdown of centralized institutions, the emergence of failed states, increasing polarization, and a growing lack of consensus over common ends. Social media and the Internet have facilitated the emergence of self-contained communities, walled off not by physical barriers but by shared identities.

The good thing about dystopian fiction is that it almost never comes true. Imagining how current trends will play out in an ever more exaggerated fashion serves as a useful warning: *1984* became a potent symbol of a totalitarian future that people wanted to avoid; the book helped inoculate societies against authoritarianism. Likewise, people today can imagine their countries as better places that support increasing diversity yet that also embrace a vision for how diversity can serve common ends and support liberal democracy rather than undermine it.

People will never stop thinking about themselves and their societies in identity terms. But people's identities are neither fixed nor necessarily given by birth. Identity can be used to divide, but it can also be used to unify. That, in the end, will be the remedy for the populist politics of the present.

Links
[1] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-04-16/end-democratic-century
[2] https://www.economist.com/international/2017/03/30/the-world-has-made-great-progress-in-eradicating-extreme-poverty
[3] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2017-10-16/how-should-governments-address-inequality
[4] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2013-08-21/democracy-retreat-revolt-middle-class-and-worldwide-decline
[5] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-01-20/jacksonian-revolt

[6] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-06-14/tribal-world?fa_anthology=1122622
[7] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-06-14/marxist-world
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[10] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-03-06/how-metoo-became-global-movement
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