

# BEYOND SHARED TRAUMA

*The identity crisis: forging a path forward.*

By Adolfo Aranjuez

About a month before I started work on this essay, I stumbled upon a politically-charged Facebook post by a peer – someone with far richer stripes than I, being not just a fellow queer migrant person of colour, but also a refugee and an on-the-ground activist (unlike my penchant for removed, fingers-to-keyboard intellectualising). Lamenting the frequent infighting within queer communities, she exhorted: “Community cannot be built on the basis of shared trauma. We have to imagine ourselves beyond those constraints [...] so that we don’t rely on the scaffolding of oppression to define us.”

She was right, of course; myriad marginalised communities today have seemingly found voice and solace in the reliving of collective trauma, especially online. They aren’t empty rants, either; often, they’re presented as a ‘summons’ to mobilise against oppression, and there’s almost always a recipient, designated by identity markers (‘straight white men’ is one

moment of their creation. Crucially, they also seethe with – as Daniel Halliday warns in this issue of the *Australian Rationalist* – a hostile tribalism that impedes transformative discourse by ostracising alternative, ‘outsider’ viewpoints. Halliday is not alone in this; Fukuyama (2018) – the famed political scientist who, in the 1990s, harbingered the ‘end of history’ – has bemoaned that today’s “democratic societies are fracturing into segments based on ever-narrower identities”.

A 2019 Senate inquiry reported that Australians’ increasing disillusionment with democracy can be attributed partly to the way that identity politics is ‘fostering an intolerance of differing perspectives’. Heck, even I have expounded in great detail on identity politics and its deficiencies, particularly its reliance on essentialism and its apparent advocacy for politico-cultural separatism. My recommendations have been that we recognise the limitations of identity-based abstractions, especially

politics is now one of the most prominent vehicles for social justice, branching out to spheres as manifold as entertainment, education and policy, and manifesting not just in callouts, but also in think pieces, ‘cancellation’, petitions, rapid-fire Twitter debates and ‘no-platforming’.

Notwithstanding these heterogeneous expressions, it all hinges on a single element: identity (or, perhaps more accurately, the perceived identity of the ‘wrongdoer’, the espoused identity of the ‘victim’ and the historical power imbalance between the two). And my concern, then as now, remains that, despite its usefulness as a framework for diagnosing and discussing societal ills, identity politics falls short when implemented as the definitive methodology for change.

## **Fewer encumbrances**

In 2016, I encountered a blog post that likened its author’s daily travails as a straight white male to playing the game of

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of the most common). That these messages – callouts, they’ve come to be known – are phrased in the communal should not be surprising, as commiseration is a natural defence mechanism against negative experiences. Nor should the attempt to publicly seek redress surprise; it is a reasonable response to a sense of having been wronged by a cruel world.

Yet callouts, at heart, are ticking time bombs. They are cantankerous, crammed with ammo that can sully someone’s reputation and quintessentially tied to the

in the age of internet-mediated feedback loops (Aranjuez 2017), and redirect attention towards the performative nature and politicised negotiation of identities (Aranjuez 2019).

While I stand by those evaluations, what I’ve been blindsided by is just how significantly identity politics has at once morphed into a force for division and a polemical bogeyman shared by many across the political spectrum. Just as hateful views ‘fester and spread’ (as I had offered in 2017) so do rage and resentment. Identity

life on the ‘lowest difficulty setting’ (Scalzi 2012). The analogy largely works: in a race, it would be akin to starting a kilometre forward from the starting line. The way the world is currently structured, certain groups – men; heterosexuals; the affluent; the neurotypical; those who are Caucasian, able-bodied, cisgender, urban or English-speaking – have undoubtedly had things easier. While this doesn’t mean they necessarily breeze through to the finish line, they do tend to proceed towards it with fewer encumbrances.

This way of conceiving of identities, which has grown in prevalence, follows a specific lineage. Termed intersectionality, it was coined by Crenshaw in 1989 – at first to illuminate how injustice works across race and gender in the US legal system – and expanded in another paper two years later. While identitarian resistance had been gaining momentum since the 1960s and 1970s, especially following the US civil rights movement, this particular formulation opened the floodgates for a new way of talking about oppression. Crenshaw (1991) factored in multiplicity, delineating the ways in which power is expressed through a matrix of identity markers that, in tandem, make each member of society more or less vulnerable to oppression.

Recognising membership to one or more identity groups, wrote Crenshaw, allows for “social empowerment and reconstruction”. Her suggestion resonates more than two decades later: for Wong (2013), this type of self-assertion positions us “within a specific nexus of power and historical circumstances”; for Altman (2017), it is a “necessary step” towards “a world in which rights and freedoms are equally available to all”. That identity politics takes the self as its starting point is, in this light, a response to powerlessness; it is ‘the personal is political’ literalised.

Yet Crenshaw acknowledged that societal markers are “vestiges of bias or domination”, and that the supreme goal should be to dispense with them altogether. And she’s held fast to this belief: in an interview earlier this year, she commented that many who invoke the term today – of whatever political affiliation – have betrayed its original meaning, seeing it as a conduit through which to “create the world in an inverted image of what it is now” (Coaston 2019). By this, she’s alluding to what critics have called the ‘Oppression Olympics’, which takes her notion of intersecting societal positions and uses these as cumulative, hierarchal ‘evidence’ of individuals’ moral authority (Aranjuez 2016). Instead of describing oppression’s

effects, identity politics becomes a static, infallible system for determining eligibility and worth in discourse and action.

Revisiting my activist-peer’s Facebook post, it’s clear that she was responding to the centrality placed on suffering when asserting an identity. Detractors of identity politics likewise cite this troublesome aspect of it (though in less-good spirits), condemning how its adherents weaponise ‘victimisation’ to declare their intersectional dominance. Yet while this modern-day embodiment of Nietzsche’s notion of resentment (Dolger 2016) has been historically productive – many earlier fights for justice, from the French Revolution to gay liberation, were arguably fuelled by the same desire for redress – the battle for ‘equal recognition’ today has, in Fukuyama’s words, “mutated into calls for special recognition”.

Complicating this, as Halliday discerns, identitarians revel in “giving the impression they represent the entire group rather than just themselves”, a situation only exacerbated by the sense of solidarity fabricated by online communications technologies. As I’ve argued, these technologies’ endemic content churn and in-built algorithms can make us believe that the views we hold are shared by the equally rage-filled masses – an outrage-based feedback loop built to keep us online and aggressively posting (Aranjuez 2017). Together, this muddled perception of representativeness and reverberation give rise to the aforementioned tribalism: if identity assertion is a response to disempowerment, then it easily follows that it, in turn, will seek to seize power back in whatever fashion it can muster.

#### **Authority and emotion**

A prominent concern in Halliday’s paper is that, in identitarian debates, participants “claim representative authority they have not in fact earned”. The lynchpin in this criticism is the concept of lived experience, the belief that firsthand exposure to hardship automatically imbues a person

with expertise in the roots, effects and remedies of that oppression. While I share his wariness regarding such short sighted presumptions – experiential authority has its place, but so does removed knowledge born of observation and research – it’s worth grasping the genesis of identity politics’ stance, so as to propose ways to refine it.

Last year, a group of disillusioned academics spearheaded an ‘exposé’ on fields falling under an umbrella they called ‘grievance studies’; their project ostensibly revealed how ‘corrupt’ scholarship relating to race, gender, sexuality, disability and other forms of marginalisation ‘do not continue the important and noble liberal work of the civil rights movements’ (Pluckrose, Lindsay & Boghossian 2018). Their views are echoed by Halliday, who is wary of identity politics’ threats to “a liberal culture of open exchange” – an issue that I am somewhat sympathetic to.

Apart from the constant need to ‘distance ourselves from that which we reject’, as I’ve suggested elsewhere, in among all this talk of identity is the fact that ‘feeling comes first’ (Aranjuez 2019), regardless of whether the ‘talk’ is a disgruntled, spur-of-the-moment tweet or a lengthy, well-researched personal essay. But what is the place of emotion in political discourse?

Our conception of liberal democracy owes a great deal to the work of Habermas, particularly his glorification of impartiality and reason in public debate. In his schema, individuals must participate free from coercion, assume symmetry and reciprocity with other participants, and contribute with consideration for ‘communicative rationality’. It is only in doing so – discarding pluralistic, group-centric interests – that ‘universalisable’ conclusions can be arrived at, thereby best serving the common good.

According to Benhabib (1992), however, the net effect of this approach is that certain viewpoints are inevitably silenced. Habermas’s ‘rationality’ is premised on a very specific (patriarchal,

Eurocentric, middle-class) definition, and thus privileges those having more immediate familiarity with it. Additionally, in assuming impartiality and reciprocity with other participants, the particularities of lived experiences are dispensed with as extraneous and overcomplicating; we are left with reductive abstractions of identities. Only by confronting what she terms the ‘concrete other’ can we truly do (literal) justice to democracy’s goals.

Young (1997) takes this even further. As she sees it, the expectation that we must aspire to symmetry is self-defeating: doing so risks projecting our concerns onto the other, hindering mutual learning and denying the reality of unequal power relations. As an alternative, she exhorts that we welcome asymmetrical interactions, drawing attention to ‘temporality’ (i.e. history, experiences) and ‘position’ (i.e. intersectional designation, relationships) as factors shaping an individual’s political input. Because these two elements can result in useful contributions that do not fulfil the Habermasian ideal of dispassionate rationality, Young thus regards such an exclusionary ideal as untenable. Instead of being obscured, multiplicity and difference must be foregrounded as realities of discourse.

Central to this discussion is the relationship between language, knowledge and power: knowledge does not exist in a vacuum, nor does any articulation of it. Neither does any context within which exchanges of it take place – inception, motivation, ideology all seep in and shape what is seen as acceptable, agreeable, cogent and compelling. In traditionalist arenas, assertions that syllogistically proceed from premises to conclusion, with reference to academic sources and jargon, are considered consummate; in these combative domains, legitimacy emerges from surviving an onslaught of logical questioning.

Identitarian proselytisers, by contrast, believe that legitimacy comes not from theorising from the outside in, but from the

bruises born of firsthand struggle. There’s a belief in untranslatable subjectivity – that it’s ‘impossible to know what it’s like to be us’ and, spurred on by resentment, a demand that the towering barriers to institutional discourse be met with equally formidable barricades.

But both argumentation and pragmatic, lived knowledge are products of the institutions and cultures that elevate them. And it’s a revelation of bad faith to pit reason, emotion and experience against one another; they are not mutually exclusive but, rather, integral components in a continuum of understanding. Despite our idealised beliefs to the contrary, it’s not actually reason that changes minds, but feelings (Aranjuez 2017). So this combination of purism and militancy – from either camp – is letting us down, and we are left with a shortfall not in robustness but exhaustiveness: to employ philosophical parlance, theory and lived experience are both necessary, but neither alone is sufficient.

If political life is a game, per Scalzi, then it seems we’ve found ourselves preoccupied with one-upmanship and the accumulation of ‘wins.’ It’s no longer just identitarians who are playing the Oppression Olympics; their justice-oriented detractors now are as well, as is – worryingly – the mutual enemy of both. The far right, counsels Fukuyama, has just as readily weaponised identity as part of its crusade for chauvinism, men’s rights and other forms of exclusion; the same issue is intimated by the Senate inquiry. Dolgert even chastises us for “forgetting how to use the very tool [we] created [...] The right did not invent resentment, but came upon it lying discarded by the side of the road and decided that it still looked like a handy tool after all.” Alas, the fight against inequality is not as simple as a game or a race. And, as Collins (2000) implores, we must challenge ‘additive analyses of oppression’ like that exemplified by today’s distorted brand of intersectionality.

Key to the societal change we seek is the reality that each contribution is inherently

partial: “Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge,” advises Collins. “But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished.” It is imperative, then, that we pay heed to the word’s double meaning and leverage bias and incompleteness in a manner that benefits the largest number of groups, marginalised or dominant, institutionally privileged or not. Instead of seeking to vanquish oppositional views and emerge victorious, what should be aimed for is the infinitely trickier process of collaboration, arriving – perhaps at first in patchwork fashion – at the best that we can from the various tools at our disposal.

### Seeing ourselves, telling stories

It’s one thing to intellectualise about identity, and another altogether to confront its material underpinnings and bring about concrete results. An oft-touted line in identity-politics circles is the importance of ‘seeing ourselves’ and ‘telling our stories’ – that is, increased cultural and artistic representation – taking for granted that tangible economic and political change will spring from these. It certainly feels heartening that more minority characters are appearing in Hollywood films, and that global corporations can be coaxed to publicly apologise when reprimanded for a ‘problematic’ product. At the same time, such outcomes are ad hoc; sustainability and equity have not been built into the larger system.

They are also evidence of ever-expanding neoliberalism. It’s become so entrenched in our society that everything from schools to art galleries to hospitals are increasingly functioning more like commercial entities, with the concomitant view that competition should be central, State intervention should be minimal, outcomes should be quantifiable (and, ideally, commodifiable) and, ultimately, that we are all autonomous citizen-consumers with (purchasing) power to make things happen. This atomistic

marketisation has permeated democracy as well. Political agency and freedom have become entwined with the neoliberal ideal of individualised choice – due perhaps, according to Beaumont and Kelly (2018), to our resignation to the ubiquity of capitalism. Or, as Metcalf (2017) phrases it, an acceptance of “the market as unique discloser of value and guardian of liberty, and our current descent into post-truth and illiberalism”.

Such laissez-faire optimism is, of course, naive; people and culture are not products, and societies don't function like markets. And accepting such a position is ultimately hegemonic: the sense of autonomy celebrated is, in fact, operating within – and sustaining – the constraints set by corporate powerbrokers, capital-

to its mid-20th-century origins, Fraser (2000), like Fukuyama, is dismayed by the reduced attention to ‘the redistribution of wealth and power’. She attributes this shift to two things: the problem of displacement, which pins the scourge of inequality on symbolic violence and on individuals instead of institutions; and the problem of reification, seen in an exaltation of ‘authenticity’ that distorts into conformity and insularity in groups.

Two decades after Fraser's analysis, it seems displacement and reification have reoriented identity politics towards ‘memorability’: it now lends itself to simple (and simplistic) political catchcries that are easily disseminated, giving the appearance of critical mass – not to mention eliciting a cognitive association with having ‘done

precisely require some individuals' freedoms to be curtailed. The alternative – and, I suggest, a possible remedy to atomistic, antagonistic identity-politicking – is Berlin's positive liberty, which urges that we engender in individuals a kind of ‘self-mastery’ through informed agency. Adopting such a mindset, we would dispense with instrumentalism in favour of holistic decision-making: What are the larger interplays of which my action will form part? How does it align with broader intra- and cross-group interests? On a more fundamental level, it asks: I may feel I have a right to something, but is it rightful for me to possess or act on it? Elements of politics (identity, redress, authority, agency) thus no longer rest in possession but in action – what one does with them, and how

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oriented politicians and the societal institutions that have insidiously kept the machinery of subjugation running. What's more, the egalitarianism promised by the neoliberal notion of a ‘marketplace of ideas’, as facilitated by internet technologies, in fact breeds a type of populism – one that, according to Altman, ‘disregard[s] the checks and balances of institutional democracy’. This is why a well-re-tweeted, but not particularly rigorous, idea can garner more public influence than a peer-reviewed scholarly article. And, with more and more of us finding ourselves in thrall to quantification, it's easy enough to purport that equality is ‘here’. After all, by definition, the ‘majority’ of Australians voted yes for marriage equality, and statistics constantly show increases in ‘diverse’ representation (never mind that the figures themselves remain regrettably small, and that such measurement is ultimately reductive).

Comparing identitarian activism today

activism’ through sharing or liking – without really making room for nuance or practicable solutions. More worryingly, they've become cornerstones in identity-driven activity, which has seemingly adopted neoliberalism's individualistic mantle with gusto. And so representation is celebrated to such a degree that tokenistic power (as in ‘diverse’ film casts) is assumed to have ‘trickle-down’ effects, and purchasing power (as in ‘boycotting’) is believed to have the ability to transform entire industries.

“Under the neoliberal economy,” Beaumont & Kelly contend, “freedom is equated instead with the absence of impediments” – a contention that calls to mind Berlin's (1958) notion of negative liberty, or ‘liberty from’.

Like the inherent self-contradiction of capitalistic ‘choice’, this characterisation of liberty is flimsy, because various forms of social (and, nowadays, corporate) contract

they can be capitalised on to ensure others can have access to the same.

Berlin further declared: “The lack of freedom about which men or groups complain amounts, as often as not, to the lack of proper recognition.” Similarly, Fraser posited that, at heart, injustice is less about identity markers than social subordination – about marginalised individuals “being prevented from participating as a peer in social life”. There are reverberations here of Benhabib's and Young's concerns about exclusion.

When it all boils down, it is the constitutive, restrictive designations of society – the imposition of labels and expectations, with abstractions preceding persons – that has paved the way for marginalisation. Contra Halliday and others of his ilk, I question the assertion that identities are ‘real’ *ipso facto*: phenotypical expression may exist regardless of society, but categorisations like white, Asian,



disabled and cisgender, applied after the fact, don't. Era, credo, policy, history, resources, grievances – each of these has a part to play in the creation and continuance of the concepts we use to make sense of one another. And, as Wong reminds us, the issue is not the coming into existence of identities and labels, but the subsequent intervention of the State: with the detection of difference comes a policing of 'the legitimacy of that identity as a rightful participant of power'. In the neoliberal age, one can add to this the interference of corporate interest.

"Steps need to be taken," writes Halliday, "so that oppressed groups need

no longer rely on tribalism as a means of gaining relief from oppression." While there is, undoubtedly, something somewhat juvenile, an almost high-school-like cliqueness, about contemporary identity-based discourse, at this stage in history it is also the only recourse available to many who live with marginalisation: a taking-back of capitalistic power-plays by exploiting its own mechanisms. Sometimes, when everything else is taken away, a name – a 'brand' – is a powerful thing to hold onto. And since the neoliberalism that has so ingrained itself in our lives celebrates 'success' through quantitative measures,

it's no wonder that it has found so much sway on social media, a domain where quantification (through likes, shares, etc.) reigns supreme.

While identities may be constructed, they nevertheless have real impacts. Finite and fallible as they are, they can be wielded – in law, in media narratives, in market share – to materially and politically exclude or extol. So we must direct most of our energy not at individuals who enact identity-based 'wrongs,' nor the identity markers they are possessed of, but rather the institutions and platforms that perpetuate and benefit from those labels.

### Forging forward

Much as with anything in politics, there are no easy answers for us here. But, lest we find ourselves drawn to the siren call of 'cancelling' identity politics altogether, allow me to implore, instead, that we focus on rehabilitating what is a longstanding and not-altogether-unproductive framework.

By focusing less on what identity is and more on what it does and can do, we can forge forward, even if incrementally, towards wider-scale transformative justice. Instead of merely fighting for character and crew quotas in the film industry, say, resources could also be spent on improving hiring practices and employment conditions. Instead of championing increased diversity in cultural products, attention could be given to ensuring that big decisions are made by individuals from a range of backgrounds. Representational issues do not, and cannot, stand apart from economic ones.

Moreover, if we proceed from a position of 'moral humility,' as Young terms it, we can begin cultivating a predisposition towards listening and learning. What's missing from much social-justice talk today is an openness to a plurality of perspectives – not just between groups but also within them – and the acceptance that no one of us has exclusive access to the answers we seek. From there, we can better carve out courses of action that are collaborative – the notion



"We're looking for Google Earth."

of 'allyship' comes to mind – with a hearty glance back at the long history of revolution that saw solidarity carefully negotiated alongside separate group interests.

There's no denying that identity politics today – whether espoused by disenfranchised gender-diverse people of colour or threatened working-class white men – is premised on resentment, and stifling reactive responses tinged with it only strengthens the feeling of having been persecuted. However, in the spirit of positive liberty, we could instead encourage the mastering of constructive, humbler identity-inflected discourse, and create forums and measures through which such views can be aired, accounted for and acted on. 'Adversarial,' as in Halliday's evaluation, need not be inherently unproductive, so long as it's discursive and aiming for something greater than self- and group-based interest. By dispensing with identity as an endpoint and proceeding with Collins' partiality as a foundation, we can work towards tilting the balance of power (or, perhaps less capitalistically, diffusing power) in a way that proves beneficial for more players.

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