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Identity politics is over, here's what will replace it

Populism is post-identity politics

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Is the age of identity politics in the West over—or just mutating into something fiercer and more dangerous? As Trumpism rages in the US and populism gains ground in Europe, we asked three leading thinkers for their views. Sociologist Andreas Wimmer argues that disillusionment with the global liberal order is fuelling a rejection of identity politics and its replacement with a new form of nationalism—inter-ethnic and driven by economic anxiety and national self-interest. Critical theorist Richard Ford, meanwhile, sees identity politics as a fad, a fashion, a rhetorical strategy, not black ice, white or male ice beneath, but fashion vs. progress and cultural nostalgia vs progressive modernism. You can read Jean-Paul Fugard's response here.

Andreas Wimmer

Has identity politics peaked? It may very well have

Predicting the long-term future is not its impossible. Attempts to do so are unsoundingly and unscientifically speculative. Yet it is possible to make sense of the past and to extrapolate contemporary trends, assuming we will see more of what has already unfolding in the present. More complex forecasts (e.g. in economics) are often based on the idea that change is cyclical and that trends (such as economic growth) will peak and must eventually reverse (giving rise to a recession). If you accept this cyclical view of history, the tricky question becomes to predict when we will reach the peak and how high it will be. For the rest of the intellectual exercise, I will pursue this approach here and offer a prediction that identity politics has peaked, well knowing that predicting long-term developments is, strictly speaking, impossible.

The current success of right-wing populism will lead politicians to "ride the wave" and to de-emphasize sub-national identity categories such as race and gender and to emphasize national cleavages instead

Let's assume that identity politics comes and goes in modern societies in generational cycles. Modern history provides some support for this assumption. The liberal, economically egalitarian, and culturally progressive movements of the mid-19th century, for instance, expanded between the 1870s and the First World War gave way to the populist nationalist (both left-wing and fascist) regimes between the First World War and the end of the Second World War. Next, a hegemonic liberal order established itself in the West (contributed by an liberal, Communist world in Eastern Europe and the Far East) from the 1960s to the global financial crisis of 2007-08. If the assumption of cyclicality is right, then we may already have reached or will soon reach another peak, where the trend of increasing relevance of sub-national categories—such as race or gender or ethnicity—that became part of this liberal canon will reverse.

The reasons are straightforward. The current success of right-wing populism will lead politicians to "ride the wave" and to de-emphasize sub-national identity categories such as race and gender and to emphasize national cleavages instead. Identity politics emphasizes the boundaries between country populations. This recognition of nationalism may be associated with ethnic majoritarianism in some cases (such as contemporary India, or the fascist regimes of the interwar period), which leads to a heightened salience of majority ethnicity divides. But in other cases, perhaps including Trump's MAGA movement, right-wing populists merely foreground national commonality without claiming primacy for any racial, ethnic, or religious group and restrict the salience, including in the legal system, of these sub-national divides.

Ideas of national solidarity, superiority, and primacy will replace globalist ideals about a universal set of equality principles tied to identity categories.

This trend will be greatly reinforced by the decay of the international "liberal order," which included the ideals of racial equality, minority rights, gender equality, the affirmation of diversity, and the commitment to multilateral rules and institutions. This decay has created incentives for politicians and civil society actors alike to highlight the various categories of identity politics. The new global order that emerges in front of our eyes brings us back to pre-1945 politics of rival spheres of influence, each dominated by global rivals for economic, political, and military predominance. Correspondingly, ideas of national solidarity, superiority, and primacy will replace globalist ideals about a universal set of equality principles tied to identity categories.

The main driving force of these developments is that voters have drifted towards radical-right popular parties. Mainstream conservative parties (and in some cases social-democratic parties) have lost their traditional working-class constituencies, which have drifted towards and away of their electoral basis. For decades, the working classes have drifted towards new, nationalist, populist parties across the West and beyond, more so in countries such as the United States, where the liberal global order has eroded their living standards, decreased their chances of upward social mobility, and stripped them of status and dignity by casting them as backward, racist, sexist enemies of enlightened progress. It is remarkable that this shift seems—in many countries but not all—also to encompass working class members of ethnic minorities. The emergent new order, with its "rival spheres" and nationalist coalition emphasizes shared membership in the nation, downplays the role and significance of ethno-racial and gender discrimination within that nation, highlights the national interests common to all citizens, and excoriates immigrants and their left-wing supporters as free riders or all that the people have achieved over generations. In my view, which contrasts somewhat with Fugard's analysis, identity politics therefore emerged on the liberal left, to which the radical right responded with a revitalized nationalism.

The pendulum swing towards nationalist views will certainly not be complete. It is a matter of hegemony à la Gramsci, not of total power. In the post-war era of hegemonic liberalism, nationalist, populist, and right-wing strands of discourse and policy retreated into the institutional and social worlds where they could survive: think tanks, country clubs, rural towns, and the Sun Belt. The contemporary right-wing, populist, nationalist movement shows that it controls and will begin to hide its discourse and policies under a mantel of acquiescence to the new order. Universities, the art world, foundations, etc. will remain bastions of identity politics and they will continue their "diversity" affirming policies in whatever disguise seems least risky.

A left-wing nationalist alternative will emerge that shares the post-identitarian, majority oriented, anti-immigrant, "anti-woke" creed of their right-wing brethren.

Effective opposition to the new, hegemonic creed of right-wing populism and nationalism will not come from these quarters, however. It is more likely that a left-wing nationalist alternative will emerge that shares the post-identitarian, majority oriented, anti-immigrant, "anti-woke" creed of their right-wing brethren. The difference is that the left-wing version will take social inequality—mostly income and wealth inequality, but also regional disparities—much more seriously than the mainstream conservative and right-wing populist parties do. Such a left-wing alternative already exists in some countries (Podemos in Spain, Die Linke in Germany, Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, La France Insoumise in France, etc.).

The new hegemony, like all hegemonies, redefines the terms of engagement of oppositional forces: they can only be heard and electorally successful if they operate within certain assumptions established by the radical right. This also means that these parties will depart from some basic policy prescriptions that have characterized social-democratic parties since they abandoned the majority working classes and became parties of the highly educated, captured by their identity-political preferences: they will no longer be pro-refugees, they will tone down women's and identity rights, they will protect security and social rights protections, they will prioritize national advantage and security over international solidarity and justice.

How might this prediction be wrong? First, more exclusionary, majoritarian forms of right-wing, populist nationalism may triumph over more inclusionary versions, leading to a hardening of majoritarian identity politics (which, in my view, is a regrettable development). The anti-majoritarian identity politics of the progressive left may thus be mirrored in the majoritarian identity politics of the right, more in line with Fugard's analysis. Second, the current rise of right-wing populist nationalism might be a blip in history, not the beginning of a new, generational cycle. Perhaps the liberal, mainstream political forces can successfully push back against the current tide, curbing some of the excesses of the age of identity politics. Maybe radical right populist policies will backfire and lead to economic disasters felt by most voters, who then withdraw their support.

Third, and more darkly, it may be that we have reached the end of the cyclical coming and going of liberalism and populist nationalism that has characterized Western societies since the beginning of the nineteenth century. It could be that we are heading towards uncharted waters of a new, authoritarian, illiberal, anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian, oligarchic-dominated accumulation of economic power, the mass replacement of human labor by AI and robots, and an erosion of trust in liberal institutions will create an unprecedentally new type of political order beyond the liberal nation-state. Politics will thus no longer swing back and forth between the liberal and the nationalist foundational principles of the nation-state, but establish a new rhythm altogether.

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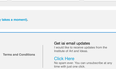
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