

# The concept of identity politics



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Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality. But it is also about your social relationships, your complex involvement with others, and in the modern world these have become ever more complex and confusing. Each of us live with a variety of potentially contradictory identities, which battle within us for allegiance: as men or women, black or white, straight or gay, able-bodied or disabled, ‘ British’ or ‘ European’ ... The list is potentially infinite, and so therefore are our possible belongings. Which of them we focus on, bring to the fore, ‘ identify’ with, depends on a host of factors. At the centre, however, are the values we share or wish to share with others.

‘ Identity politics’ was initially defined by and for the new social movements that came to public consciousness from the late 1960s: the black movement, feminism, lesbian and gay liberation and so on. The question of integrating these creative but diffuse and potentially divisive forces into the political mainstream has been part of the agony of the Left during the last decade. Issues of identity are now, however, at the centre of modern politics. When

Mrs Thatcher utters anathemas against Brussels and all its works, or interferes in the details of the history curriculum, she is engaged in an exercise in delineating a cultural and political identity, in this case of 'Britishness', which she wants us to share. When President Gorbachev discourses on 'our common European home' he is striving to re-form our perception of the Soviet identity, and to re-fashion our idea of Europe. When the Bradford mullahs organize simultaneously affirming and fashioning an identity – as Muslims, but also as a black British community entitled to the protection of the blasphemy laws like Anglicans and Catholics and evangelicals. When we mourn with students in Beijing, or express solidarity with black South Africans, or run (or sing, or joke) 'for the world', we are striving to realise our identities as members of the global village, as citizens of the world.

Identities are not neutral. Behind the quest for identity are different, and often conflicting values. By saying who we are, we are also striving to express what we are, what we believe and what we desire. The problem is that these beliefs, needs and desires are often patently in conflict, not only between different communities but within individuals themselves. All this makes debates over values particularly fraught and delicate: they are not simply speculations about the world and our place in it; they touch on fundamental, and deeply felt, issues about who we are and what we want to be and become. They also pose major political questions: how to achieve a reconciliation between our collective needs as human beings and our specific needs as individuals and members of diverse communities, how to balance the universal and the particular. These are not new questions, but they are

likely, nevertheless, to loom ever-larger as we engage with the certainty of uncertainty that characterises ‘ new times’.

## **The Return of Values**

This is the background to a new concern with values in mainstream politics. Most notoriously, Mrs Thatcher has invoked ‘ Victorian values’ and has pronounced about everything from soccer hooliganism, to religion, to litter. Even the Labour Party, in an uncharacteristic burst of philosophising, has produced a statement on Democratic Socialist Aims and Values. And these are but the tips of an iceberg. Such flurries have not been entirely absent in the past from British political and cultural history. But on the whole, from the Second World War until recently, the political class eschewed too searching a discussion of values, preferring, in Harold Macmillan’s world-weary remark, to leave that to the bishops. During the years of the social-democratic consensus, welfarism, with its commitment to altruism and caring, provided a framework for social policy, but offered little guidance on the purposes of the good society.

Similarly, in the sphere of private life, the most coherent framework of moral regulation, that enshrined in the ‘ permissive reforms’ in the 1960s of the laws relating to homosexuality, abortion, censorship etc, is based on a deliberate suspension of any querying of what is ‘ right’ or ‘ wrong’. It relies instead on subtle distinctions between what the law may accept for public behaviour in upholding ‘ public decency’, and what can be tolerated in private when the curtains are closed. Most of us are probably quietly grateful for such small mercies. As the postwar consensus has crumbled, however, the search for more or less coherent value-systems has become rather more

fevered. On a personal level some people have moved promiscuously through drugs and alternative lifestyles to health fads and religion; a number seek to be 'born again'. Perhaps most of us just share a vague feeling that things are not quite right. On the level of politics, various fundamentalisms, on Left and Right, have burst forth, each articulating their own truth, whether it be about the perils of pornography, the wrongs done to animals, the rights and wrongs of this or that religion, or the marvels of the market economy.

There is a new climate where values matter, and politicians, willy-nilly, are being drawn into the debate. 'Speaking of values', as the philosopher Paul Feyerabend has said, 'is a roundabout way of describing the kind of life one wants to lead or thinks one wants to lead'.

1 Mrs Thatcher has been clearer about the sort of life she wants us to lead than any other recent political leader. She does not trust her bishops, so the values of the corner-shop and the cautious housewife have expanded inexorably into the culture of enterprise and the spiritual significance of capitalism. From her paean to 'Victorian values' in the run-up to the 1983 General Election to her address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in May 1988, Mrs Thatcher's moral outlook has had, in Jonathan Raban's phrase, a peculiar 'integrity'.

2 Questions of value have traditionally been more central to socialist debates than to conservatism but during the 1970s and early 1980s the nervous collapse of the Left allowed little room for such niceties. Recently, there have been welcome signs of a revival of concern with basic values. The Labour

Party's 1988 statement, Democratic Socialist Aims and Values, intended to frame the party's policy review, may have been too bland for many people's taste ('The true purpose of democratic socialism ... is the creation of a genuinely free society') but it was the first time since 1917 that the Party had attempted to define its purposes, and in a recognizable philosophical tradition (essentially the rights based liberalism of the American philosopher, John Rawls). At the same time the Party seems to be attempting to resurrect the half-buried collectivist traditions of the British population. The lyrical Kinnock election broadcast in 1987 subliminally told us of the importance of rootedness and belonging as the basis for political advance. The Labour Party's poster campaign early in 1989 – 'The Labour Party. Our party' – similarly articulated a sense of shared values, of communal spirit, lying latent in the collective unconscious. In part, of course, these Labour Party innovations illustrate the wizardry of ad-agency skills, but it is not too fanciful to see them as a reflection of broader tendencies towards reasserting universal humanistic values, which transcend conventional political divisions. In their different ways, President Gorbachev and green politics have made an impact because of their expression of a human solidarity underlying the divisions of the world. Gorbachev's address to the United Nations in 1988 turned on a call to respect 'universal human values', and looked forward to an ending of the arbitrary divisions between peoples. Green philosophy calls on the same sense of our common destiny and interdependence, as human beings and as fellow inhabitants of spaceship earth, and in doing so claims to displace traditional divisions between Left and Right. It is impossible to underestimate the power of these various (and perhaps sometimes contradictory) appeals to human solidarity after a

decade dominated by an ethic of human selfishness. We are reminded that what we have in common as human beings is more important than what divides us as individuals or members of other collectivities.

## **Difference**

Nevertheless there are difficulties for the Left in an all-embracing humanism. As a philosophical position it may be a good starting point, but it does not readily tell us how to deal with difference. As President Gorbachev could bitterly affirm, it is difference - economic, national, linguistic, ethnic, religious - and the conflicting identities and demands that diversity gives rise to, that poses a major threat to perestroika, and to human solidarity. If ever-growing social complexity, cultural diversity and a proliferation of identities are indeed a mark of the postmodern world, then all the appeals to our common interest as humans will be as naught unless we can at the same time learn to live with difference. This should be the crux of modern debates over values. In confronting the challenge of social and moral diversity, the responses of Left and Right are significantly different. The Right has a coherent, if in the long run untenable, view of the moral economy. At its most extreme, expressed in Mrs Thatcher's dictum that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families, difference becomes merely a matter of individual quirks or pathologies. Social goods are products of individual wills or desires, mediated by family responsibilities. In the economic sphere, this leads to a privileging of individual choice, 'the essence' - as Mrs Thatcher put it during the 1987 election campaign - of morality. But moral choice, in turn, particularly with regard to issues such as sexuality, is limited by the commitment to a traditional concept of domestic

obligation, in and through the family. The Left, on the other hand, is heir to a strong sense of collective identities, of powerful inherited solidarities derived from class and work communities, and of different social constituencies, however inadequately in the past it has been able to deal with them. Multi-culturalism, as it was articulated from the 1960s in the legislation on racial equality, embodied a notion of different communities evolving gradually into a harmonious society where difference was both acknowledged and irrelevant. In rather less hopeful times, the commitment to the co-existence of different value-systems is implied in the statement on Democratic Socialist Aims and Values: 'Socialists rejoice in human diversity'.

But the Left has been less confident and sure-footed when faced by the reality of difference. When the Livingstone-led Greater London Council attempted to let a hundred flowers bloom at County Hall in pursuit of a new majority of minorities, the response of the Labour Party establishment varied from the sceptical to the horrified. Nor should we be entirely surprised at that: despite its political daring, and commendable commitment to those hitherto excluded from the political mainstream, it was difficult to detect behind the GLC policy anything more coherent than the belief that grass-roots activity and difference in itself were prime goods. 'Empowerment', yes; but whom should the Left empower? The Salman Rushdie crisis has dramatised the absence of any clear-cut philosophy on the Left. The Rushdie affair is important for socialists not simply because it concerns the fate of an individual (and an individual of the Left at that) but because it underscores in the most painful way the dilemmas of diversity. At its simplest we have an apparent conflict of absolutes: the right of an author to freedom of speech,



to challenge whomsoever he wishes in a democratic society, set against the claims of a distinctive moral community not to have its fundamental religious beliefs attacked and undermined. But of course the real divisions are more complex and profound. The Left has not on the whole been willing to endorse an absolute right of free speech. On the contrary it has supported campaigns against racist and sexist literature, whilst a strong minority has supported the banning of pornography.

On the other side, the Muslim communities at the centre of the crisis are themselves not monolithic, bisected as they inevitably are by antagonisms of class and gender, and by political conflicts. At the same time the issues raised do not exist only in a meta-realm of principle: they work their way through the murky world of politics, in this case the complexities of international politics as well as the ward by ward, constituency by constituency problems of Labour politicians. Nevertheless, there is a central question at the heart of the Rushdie affair, and it concerns the possibilities and limits of pluralism in a complex society. Let's take as an example the question of religious education in schools: the government by insisting under the 1988 Education Reform Act that there should be a daily act of Christian worship in maintained schools is in effect asserting the centrality of the Christian tradition to, in Mrs Thatcher's words, 'our national heritage' – 'For centuries it has been our very life-blood'. People with other faiths and cultures are always, of course, welcome in 'our land', but their beliefs can only, by implication, ever hope to have a secondary position in relation to 'ours'.

Labour, however, accepts a less monolithic view of our religious past and present. As a result it seems prepared to support the principle of state-funding of separate ‘fundamentalist’ Muslim schools. There is a certain multi-cultural rationale in this: if Anglican, Jewish and Roman Catholic schools are supported by the state, there seems no logic in not supporting the schools of other faiths as well. But schools transmit cultural values, some of which in the case of fundamentalists run counter to oft-declared values of the Left. In this case, the schools will be based on a principle of sex-segregation which elsewhere Labour opposes. As a letter to the Guardian from Southall Black Sisters put it, ‘the Labour Party is prepared to abandon the principle of equality where black women are concerned. Instead, they deliver us into the hands of male, conservative and religious forces within our communities, who deny us our right to live as we please’.<sup>5</sup> This underlines the danger of seeing communities as unified wholes, rather than as the locus of debate and divisions. Not surprisingly, the ‘multi-culturalist’ values of the Labour Party seem as likely to cause confusion, conflict and distrust as the explicitly mono-culturalist views of the Right. It is ironically appropriate that these dilemmas should have been brought to the surface by the publication of, and reaction to, Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. Not only was the book written by an ‘immigrant’ and about ‘immigrants’, but the book itself, as Malise Ruthven argued on its publication, is about ‘changing identities’, about the transformations of identities that affect migrants who leave the familiar reference points of their homeland and find themselves in a place where the rules are different, and all the markers have been changed. This is not simply the experience of the migrant: the sense of dislocation and disorientation, of the rules of the game subtly changing, of

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the co-existence within us of conflicting needs, desires and identities, is becoming a major cultural experience for us all.

## **Choice**

The basic issue can be stated quite simply: by what criteria can we choose between the conflicting claims of different loyalties? To ask the question immediately underlines the poverty of our thinking about this. Can the ‘rights’ of a group obliterate the ‘rights’ of an individual? Should the morality of one sector of the population be allowed to limit the freedom of other citizens. To what extent should one particular definition of the good and the just prevail over others? These are ancient questions, but the alarming fact is that the Left lacks a common language for addressing them, let alone resolving them. There have been two characteristic approaches on the Left in confronting these dilemmas. Firstly, there is the ‘discourse of rights’, probably still the most potent mobilising force in the worlds of politics and morality. In the United States the protection of individual rights is enshrined in the constitution, and the claim to group rights has become the basis of many of the transforming currents of recent American politics, from the civil rights and black power movements to the women’s movement and lesbian and gay liberation. Elsewhere in the West, a rights-based politics is similarly enshrined in written constitutions, bills of rights, constitutional courts, and so on. In Britain, the tradition is enfeebled. Individual rights, though much bandied around in the political rough and tumble, are not entrenched in a constitutional settlement, and the concept of group rights barely exists.

Rights are, however, clearly back on the agenda of the Left: the response to the launch of Charter 88, with its appeal for a new constitutional settlement,

with government subordinate to the law and basic rights guaranteed, suggests there is a strongly felt need for a codification and protection of fundamental rights. Unfortunately, the claim to right, however well established at a constitutional level, does not help when rights are seen to be in conflict. To take the issue of abortion (yet again the focus of moral debate in America and Britain), here the conflict is between two violently conflicting claims to right: the rights of the 'unborn child' against the rights of a woman to control her own body. In these stark terms the conflict is unresolvable, because two value-systems tug in quite different directions. The problem is that rights do not spring fully armed from nature. They cannot find a justification simply because they are claimed. Rights are products of human association, social organisation, traditions of struggle, and historical definitions of needs and obligations: whatever their claims to universality, they are limited by the philosophical system to which they belong, and the social and political context in which they are asserted. This is not to deny the importance of rights-based arguments. But if we are to take rights seriously we must begin to articulate the sort of rights and the type of political culture we want.

This is the starting point for the second major approach to the dilemma of choice, the politics of emancipation. In his essay 'On the Jewish Question' in the 1840s Marx counterposed to the 'morality of Rights' a 'morality of emancipation', and even more powerfully than the claim to rights this has proved a potent mobilising force. <sup>8</sup> It offers a vision of a totally free society, where everyone's potentiality is fully realised, and a powerful analysis of the constraints on the realisation of human emancipation. At its heart is a denial

that want, division, selfishness and conflict are essential parts of human nature. True human nature, it claims, can flourish in a truly emancipated society. Most of us who are socialist must have been inspired by this vision. As a politics of liberation it shaped the rhetoric of the social movements that emerged in the 1960s. It is still latent in the hunger for utopia and for the transcendence of difference that shades our politics. The difficulty is that the practice has rarely kept up with the vision, particularly in the history of Marxism. The Marxist tradition has been reluctant to define the nature of the emancipated society, and has been noticeably blind to questions of nationalism, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Nor do the experiences of the soi disant socialist countries offer much confidence in the attainability of emancipation in the terms offered by the tradition so far. We must not confuse a noble goal with the sordid practices of particular regimes, but we need to ponder whether the very project of human emancipation as conventionally set forth is not itself the fundamental problem. The glorious goal has all too often justified dubious means, whilst the absence of any detailed exposition of the meaning of emancipation has left us floundering when faced by the reality of conflicting claims to right and justice.