

On American Identity Politics: Theoretical Origins, Real-World Impacts, and Fundamental Reflections

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Abstract: Identity politics, with its profound theoretical origins, emerged from the margins of the political spectrum to center stage through the social movements of 1960s' America. As a critical component of the U.S. political landscape, it has exerted increasing influence on society—eroding the once-prized social consensus and cohesion, transforming the political culture, and concurrently challenging the institutional framework of American governance. At its core, American identity politics represents a form of "pseudo-politics" lacking a shared political vision: domestically, it serves as a mechanism to divert attention from structural societal contradictions, while internationally, it functions as a tool for shaping and controlling the international order. Whether this political paradigm can transcend its current dilemmas and chart a sustainable trajectory remains to be seen through the lens of historical development.

Keywords: Identity politics, political identity, civic politics.

1. Introduction

The United States has long been described as a "melting pot," where people of diverse skin colors and religious beliefs converge to build and develop the nation. However, the escalating problem of "identity politics" is driving American society into a quagmire of dissolving social consensus, cultural fragmentation, and political polarization.

American identity politics operates across multiple dimensions—race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and religion—with groups defined by these identities seeking to advance their interests and status through political means, often intervening in policy-making and shaping societal direction. In May 2020, African American George Floyd died of asphyxiation after a white police officer knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes. Like a spark, this incident ignited large-scale protests across the United States that lasted for months. The "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) movement spread rapidly, becoming one of the largest social movements in American history in terms of participation. This movement not only expressed solidarity with an individual tragedy but also encapsulated the U.S. society's collective reflection on systemic racism and police brutality. It laid bare the deep-seated structural racism in American society, thrusting issues of police brutality and judicial inequality into the public spotlight and elevating racial justice from a marginal concern to a central political issue. Beyond demanding legal accountability, the BLM movement called for a reallocation of social resources—such as reducing police budgets and investing in community services—prompting the Democratic Party to integrate racial equity into its policy agenda.

This event starkly highlighted political divisions in the U.S. Democrats and their supporters framed it as a symbol of racial discrimination and police misconduct, advocating for reforms in the judicial and policing systems. In contrast, Republicans and their base viewed it as a challenge to "law and order," emphasizing the need to protect police authority and enforcement powers. This split political identity reflects profound disagreements between ethnic groups and the two major parties over identity politics. This paper explores the deepening trend of American identity politics: first, by tracing

its theoretical origins in history; second, by examining its contemporary impacts on society and politics; and finally, by reflecting on the essence of this phenomenon, which lies at the intersection of social inequality, political mobilization, and the fragile balance between pluralism and unity in a diverse nation.

2. A Literature Review of the Issue of Identity Politics in the United States

In different cultural contexts, identity carries distinct meanings and expressions. Within the English linguistic environment, the term "identity" inherently encompasses both "social status" and "recognition," functioning as a neutral concept that refrains from value judgments regarding superiority or inferiority. In Chinese discourse, there exists a customary integration of these two dimensions through the expression "identity recognition", which manifests an individual's sense of belonging and pursuit towards specific cultural and value systems. This concept serves dual purposes: clarifying one's objective position within social structures while simultaneously reflecting emotional connections with affiliated groups and self-identification. Whether discussing "identity" or "recognition" separately or unifying them under "identity recognition", these concepts remain deeply rooted in their respective cultural perceptions and behavioral practices[1]. Initially, identity functioned purely as a marker of cultural expression and behavioral patterns. However, when identity issues become politicized, their nature undergoes fundamental transformation, evolving into contentious arenas of confrontation. These politicized identity debates frequently escalate into violent conflicts, demonstrating complex and multifaceted social impacts. Through persistent politicization in political movements, identity ultimately evolves into identity politics[2].

2.1. The Context of the Emergence of American Identity Politics.

Everyone has different identities, and in most cases, we hope our identities will be recognized. As Charles Taylor once said, a person's identity depends decisively on their dialogical

relations with others, for our identities are partially constituted by the recognition of others[3]. Due to the special nature of political life, certain identities are always selectively acknowledged, while many others, overshadowed by the same class background, remain unaddressed. The challenges to public life order and the survival of political communities stem not only from the high complexity of identity recognition systems and the difficulty in identifying them, but also from the need to build the value consensus and spirit of tolerance essential for sustaining social operation. From a historical perspective, before the outbreak of global military conflicts in the mid-20th century, although there were instances of identity discourse intermittently entering the public domain in American society, such discussions generally remained in a non-dominant state, and their shaping influence on the national political structure remained at a relatively limited level.

Starting from the mid-to-late 1960s, with the deepening evolution of society's diversified structural transformation, the consciousness of subjective identity in the United States entered a stage of explicit development. This phenomenon represents not only a challenge by structural vulnerable groups—such as those defined by ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation—to the traditional power order, but more importantly, a key indicator of cultural sub-groups systematically reconstructing the discourse system of difference politics through institutionalized pathways. They not only emphasize their distinct historical experiences, cultural traditions, and customs but also focus on the “oppression” and “discrimination” they have endured historically, treating these as crucial components of their identity. These groups believe that the outside world can hardly truly understand or empathize with their past and present, let alone fully grasp the harm and injustice they have suffered. Based on this, they argue that socio-political structures and public policies must take into account the special identity-related needs of every marginalized group, even advocating for special attention and treatment to rectify historical injustices. This context gave birth to the concept of identity politics, which quickly permeated all aspects of American social life and became a force to be reckoned with. Within the evolutionary spectrum of contemporary American political ecology, identity politics practices centered on ethnic identity, gender dimensions, and sexual orientation have gradually entered the mainstream Western political arena. By redefining the tactical strategies of political mobilization and the orientation of its demands, identity politics has not only achieved a shift from the margins to the center but also established its significant role as an ideological reproduction mechanism within the U.S. social power structure.

2.2. Theoretical Origins of Identity Politics

Identity politics has three main theoretical origins: the Theory of Difference, the Theory of Identity, and the Theory of Recognition.

(1) Theory of Difference

Scholars who trace the theoretical origins of identity politics to the Theory of Difference argue that social diversity serves as the foundation for the emergence and development of identity politics. This diversity is not only reflected in economic, cultural, and social dimensions but also penetrates into layers such as individual identity and values. The existence of diversity promotes pluralistic political development, as different interest groups, value systems, and

cultural traditions compete and cooperate in the political sphere, driving innovation and transformation in political systems. For example, Fukuyama believes that differences arising from “skin color, gender, nationality, appearance, ethnicity, or sexual orientation” mean different Americans need to be treated differently[4]. Yulin Liao and others argue that cultural politics and difference politics are particularly appropriate for understanding identity politics, as identity politics emphasizes the differences between one's own identity and that of others, and when seeking recognition, groups form alliances for mutual support[5]. Yue Wang contends that the theoretical roots of identity politics are deeply embedded in 20th-century Western postmodernist thought, which aims to deconstruct the traditional framework of subjective metaphysics. As the myth of Enlightenment rationality gradually collapsed, the dominance and oppression exerted by mainstream subjects over marginalized others—long ignored by mainstream perspectives—began to emerge clearly in the public eye. Identity politics emerged as a practical form of struggle for these historically “marginalized groups” to resist unequal power relations. At its core, it embodies the politics of difference, highlighting the significant role of cultural uniqueness and diversity among different identity groups in the political domain[6]. Stuart Hall's politics of difference emphasizes constructing an egalitarian and coexisting society through respect for diverse cultures, arguing that the key to eliminating inequality and discrimination lies in recognizing and respecting cultural differences rather than judging them by a single standard[7]. Finding a practical balance between difference and equality is a necessary condition for stable political order. This balance requires both respect and protection of individual differences and diversity, as well as the realization of fundamental equality and justice among social members[8].

(2) Theory of Identity

Scholars who link the origin of identity politics to the Theory of Identity introduce this core concept from sociology and psychology into the study of identity politics, focusing on how individuals or groups cognize and confirm their self-identity. Aijun Zhang defines identity politics as a complex systematic process where political identity is formed on the basis of social identity, which in turn reinforces social identity[9]. Yongguo Chen argues that identity politics involves the relationship between individual and collective identity, i.e., the identification established by individuals based on their alignment with the interests of a social or cultural group[10]. Hong Lin states that identity politics is essentially a form of identity-based politics, which may lead to plural and particularistic identities that hinder universal national identity[11]. According to American scholar Samuel P. Huntington's theory of American “national identity” in his book *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, the United States' two-century-long national development has essentially been a historical journey of continuously seeking and confirming its self-identity. Since the 17th century, Americans have sought to shape and defend their conception of “national identity” to maintain and strengthen national unity[12].

(3) Theory of Recognition

Some scholars argue that identity politics is inseparable from the politics of recognition. Ankui Tan notes that identity politics and the politics of recognition are essentially intertwined, though sometimes recognition becomes a more urgent political issue[13]. Charles Taylor's concept of “the

politics of recognition” has profoundly influenced identity politics movements, constructing two frameworks: “the politics of equal dignity” and “the politics of difference”. The rise of “equal recognition” stems from the collapse of hierarchical systems based on honor and the increasing prominence of the concept of dignity in Western modernity[3]. The politics of difference, meanwhile, emerges from interpretations of individual identity, deeply reinforcing the core value of recognition and expressing a profound desire for the acknowledgment of individual uniqueness under the ideal of authenticity[14]. Giddens points out that at the social level, the meaning of identity lies in gaining recognition from others and sharing specific norms and values with them[15]. Fukuyama has also stated that minority groups increasingly feel their identities—whether ethnic, religious, racial, sexual, or otherwise—have not received adequate recognition[16]. Canadian scholar Will Kymlicka similarly argues that the lack of respect and recognition for the identities and cultures of marginalized groups constitutes a form of cultural injustice[17].

3. The Realistic Impacts of Identity Politics

The influence of American identity politics is profound and complex, serving not only as a critical phenomenon in the U.S. political ecosystem but also deeply shaping all facets of American society.

(1) Eroding Social Consensus and Cohesion

At the core of American identity politics lies an emphasis on the identities and affiliations of specific groups, a focus that often exacerbates and fragmentation between different communities. In the U.S., as identities based on ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation have gained prominence, social consensus has gradually weakened. Diverse groups pursue distinct political interests and social statuses rooted in their identities, a pluralistic pursuit that has, to some extent, torn apart the nation’s social cohesion. In recent years, for example, the massive influx of Hispanic immigrants has drastically altered the country’s ethnic composition. While immigrants and refugees legally acquire citizenship and settle into the political framework of the U.S., their inner worlds often undergo more complex transformations: psychologically tied to their original ethnic groups, they struggle to sever cultural identity bonds while nurturing complicated emotional attachments—tinged with nostalgia, historical memory, or political divergence—to their home countries. This dual psychological and cultural belonging, coupled with varying degrees of adaptation to their new identities, plunges immigrant and refugee communities into multidimensional conflicts of personal identity: balancing responsibilities as U.S. citizens with unbroken ties to their ethnic origins. This tripartite tension between individual, ethnic, and national identities—creates profound cognitive dissonance, influencing not only personal well-being but also sparking societal debates about balancing diversity and integration.

(2) Transforming Political Culture and Atmosphere

The ascendancy of identity politics within American political culture has engendered an increasingly emotive and polarized political climate. Political discourse has become saturated with targeted attacks and accusations against specific groups, while political debates frequently devolve into clashes between conflicting identity claims. This political culture not only undermines the rationality and impartiality of

policymaking but also erodes civic trust and social cohesion. Furthermore, identity politics risks fueling political polarization and populist resurgence, exacerbating societal fragmentation and instability.

Since the onset of the 21st century, the rise of populism has emerged as a defining feature of social transformation. Particularly in the post-2008 financial crisis era, multiculturalism propelled by identity politics has paradoxically failed to foster intercultural harmony, instead incubating extremist terrorist activities that have precipitated unprecedented global anxieties. The proliferation of populist ideology can be interpreted as a defensive socio-psychological mechanism rooted in structural inequality. This phenomenon operates not merely through institutionalized strategies to secure existential safety thresholds, but more fundamentally reflects a legitimacy crisis arising from the structural rupture of the social contract in post-industrial contexts. Its diffusive trajectory essentially embodies the performative manifestation of asymmetrical power dynamics within stratified systems—concurrently serving as the masses’ pragmatic counteraction to the reconfiguration of cultural hegemony and as antagonistic engagements among diverse actors in symbolic power fields during social capital redistribution.

Today, the ubiquity of digital connectivity has further intensified these dynamics. Amid the escalating politicization of identity politics, populist forces exploit social media platforms to rapidly consolidate ideological allies, sharpening the digital demarcation between “friends” and “foes” while intensifying confrontations. However, identity politics remains fundamentally a cultural resistance anchored in discursive frameworks, its practical efficacy often paling in comparison to direct action. Radical theoretical critiques rarely translate into substantive systemic transformations and cannot supplant material revolutionary praxis. Under its current operational paradigm, identity politics not only fails to mitigate social contradictions but paradoxically amplifies populist extremism. Addressing entrenched societal issues ultimately necessitates pragmatic, holistic strategies that transcend rhetorical debates and symbolic critiques.

(3) Challenging the National Governance System

The U.S. governance system, rooted in “confrontation and division” but sustained by “compromise politics,” relies on pillars like representative democracy, separation of powers, and the two-party system. However, identity politics has undermined this equilibrium by intensifying polarization: groups defined by racial, gender, or religious labels resist consensus, making political compromise increasingly difficult[18]. This manifests in legislative gridlock (e.g., immigration and gun control) and policy implementation conflicts, disrupting the balance between federal and state powers and public trust in governance. Rediscovering the art of compromise—promoting dialogue across interest groups—has become urgent for maintaining societal stability, as the current trajectory risks fracturing the very foundations of American democracy.

4. The Essence of American Identity Politics

Identity politics has become the defining backdrop of American political society, with political elites adorning it with captivating rhetoric that intensifies its fervor while leaving those engulfed in it trapped in a quagmire, struggling

to find escape. Therefore, it is necessary to cut through the fog and grasp the essence of American identity politics.

(1) Identity Politics as "Pseudo-Politics"

At its core, identity politics is a form of "pseudo-politics," fundamentally flawed by its failure to construct a unified political vision. Instead, it appeals to the fragmented demands of numerous identity groups, not only eroding social cohesion but also deepening ethnic divisions and pushing society toward a "tribalized" state. Worse still, it deviates from the core of politics—power distribution and governance—devolving into empty self-expression and protest movements lacking substantive purpose. These activities exacerbate societal antagonism rather than fostering unity, driving political extremism[19]. Such intense polarization has created a vicious cycle in U.S. democracy: political consensus becomes unattainable, governance efficacy plummets, and endless feuds cripple efficiency. Meanwhile, the conflictual nature of identity politics provides fertile ground for populism and resentment-driven politics, allowing these emotional forces to spread widely and shape societal dynamics. In this context, the proliferation of "veto politics" further undermines state institutions, obstructing policy-making and execution and challenging national governance capabilities. As a "pseudo-politics," identity politics not only hinders social harmony but also exacerbates division and instability, impeding the healthy development of democratic politics.

(2) Identity Politics as a Mechanism for Diverting Social Contradictions

Born from rights consciousness, identity politics effectively serves as a tool to divert public attention from core societal issues. The ruling class skillfully uses cultural pluralism themes such as ethnic differences, gender issues, cultural diversity, and even marijuana legalization—so-called "low politics" topics—to shift focus from "high politics" issues like social inequality, economic justice, and exploitation. Critics have long argued that U.S. multiculturalism functions more as an "pacification tool" or "analgesic" to alleviate, not resolve, deep-seated social suffering. The American power elite has systematically incorporated such political maneuvering into the apparatus of ideological governance. Its operational logic is not only manifested through the institutional co-optation of critical discourses within higher education systems but further extends to capital penetration into the domain of knowledge production. By strategically cultivating academic narratives centered on ethnic differential studies and gender paradigm deconstruction—via foundation-think tank networks that construct knowledge-power complexes—this process achieves a symbolic displacement of class struggle as the core sociopolitical antagonism. This directs academia to fixate on marginal topics while neglecting urgent challenges, inadvertently hollowing out the foundations of social progress. Over the past half-century, class issues obscured by identity politics have only intensified, while identity conflicts themselves have reached a breaking point. These intertwined problems now form a complex predicament—a cage of destiny—from which the U.S. struggles to escape.

(3) Identity Politics as a Tool for Disrupting International Order

In the intertwined international landscape of globalization and multipolarity, the United States has instrumentalized identity politics as a tool to maintain hegemony. By manipulating differences and antagonisms across ethnic, religious, gender, and other identity dimensions, it

destabilizes sovereign states and erodes the legitimacy of multilateral order. This practice essentially constitutes a contemporary variant of "neo-interventionism" – cloaked in the guise of "universalist values" while pursuing geopolitical expansion, thereby threatening the fairness and sustainability of the international order. America's identity-based political interventions manifest through three destructive logics:

First, manufacturing "identity fragmentation" to dismantle sovereign states. In the Middle East, the U.S. has long exploited ethno-religious tensions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On one hand, it reinforces Jewish dominance in Israel through military aid, while intervening in Palestinian affairs under the pretext of "democratic reform," deliberately exacerbating historical rifts between Islamic and Jewish civilizations, prolonging regional conflicts for half a century. In Eastern Europe, the U.S. reframed the Crimea issue as a "clash of civilizations" narrative by leveraging linguistic-cultural divides during the Russia-Ukraine conflict, inciting tensions between Russian-speaking communities in eastern Ukraine and pro-European factions in the west – a pretext for NATO expansion and weakening Russia.

Second, constructing "identity hegemony" to monopolize international discourse. The U.S. forcibly binds identity issues like gender equality and minority rights to "international norms," creating a hegemonic logic of "prosperity for compliance, punishment for defiance." Nations failing to meet its identity-political standards face "human rights sanctions" or "democratic downgrades," effectively replacing the UN Charter's principle of sovereign equality with "value-based hegemony," undermining the legal foundations of international order.

Third, fostering "identity extremism" to sow chaos. Through funding and media manipulation, the U.S. inflames identity-based confrontations within target states. During the Syrian civil war, it financed Kurdish militias to intensify conflicts with the Arab majority; in Myanmar's Rohingya crisis, media narratives amplified Buddhist-Muslim religious antagonisms, collapsing governance systems. Such actions directly paralyze regional security mechanisms and fragment international mediation efforts.

America's weaponization of identity politics flagrantly violates the UN Charter's principles of sovereign equality and non-interference in internal affairs, constituting a form of "soft violence" for hegemony preservation. The consequences extend beyond prolonged regional conflicts and "bloc-ized" global governance fragmentation – they fundamentally erode the consensus for international cooperation. When identities like ethnicity and gender are politicized and weaponized, sovereign states' rights to autonomous development paths are stripped, rendering equitable multilateral order unsustainable. As the Cold War-era architect of the current international order, the U.S. is now dismantling its own system through identity-political interventions, laying bare the inherent contradiction between hegemonic logic and international justice.

5. Summary

As the tide of the civil rights movement surged, members of minority groups and marginalized communities began to actively assert the unique value of their identities, giving rise to the emergence of identity politics. Over the past few decades, this trend has quietly permeated and profoundly transformed every facet of American society: once-marginalized voices and identities have increasingly moved

toward the center, while what was once deemed "politically incorrect" has gradually evolved into "political correctness," exerting a far-reaching influence on the trajectory of social evolution, the direction of policy-making, and even the orientation of public opinion.

Against this backdrop, countless politicians and social elites have been shaped by the ethos of identity politics. Operating within the norms of "political correctness," their recognition and support for minority and marginalized groups have become commonplace. With the exception of a few conservative scholars, public challenges to the status and rights of these groups are exceedingly rare, underscoring the formidable sway of identity politics in contemporary society.

Yet identity politics has disrupted American social order, introducing numerous destabilizing factors into the nation's political ecosystem. It is dismantling the civic culture of the United States, making consensus-building increasingly elusive. Similarly, it is altering the political and cultural climate, undermining social trust mechanisms, and exacerbating political polarization. Ultimately, it has challenged the country's governance system, disrupting the once-stable political ecology.

While witnessing the profound impact of identity politics on American society, it is crucial to look beyond surface phenomena and grasp its essence. American identity politics is in essence a form of "pseudo-politics" that drives society toward greater tribalization. It diverts attention to "low-politics" issues—such as cultural symbolism and identity recognition—thereby shifting focus from core contradictions and masking the exploitative nature of bourgeois power. Internationally, the U.S. has weaponized identity politics as a tool to manipulate global dynamics, extending its influence through narratives of "human rights" and "diversity."

In an era where identity politics holds significant sway, reflecting deeply on its inherent flaws and potential dangers is urgent. Failure to recognize and escape the conceptual pitfalls and institutional traps embedded in this paradigm could spell severe challenges and latent crises for American social order—and even the future of Western civilization as a whole.

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