

ABSTRACT

Identity Politics: Its Epistemology, Moral Framework, and Implications for Democracy

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Identity politics has become a contentious and influential issue of American politics, but insufficient attention has been paid to how it may affect democracy and democratic norms. Primarily by means of a close reading of primary sources, this thesis describes certain epistemological and moral presuppositions of identity politics, especially its more recent critical social justice variant. It argues that these ideas have noteworthy implications for democracy and democratic norms, and indeed conflict with traditional understandings of freedom, self-government, and the role of the individual within American politics.

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IDENTITY POLITICS

Its Epistemology, Moral Framework, and Implications for Democracy

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

For the purposes of this thesis, I define “identity politics” as an understanding of politics in which various “identity” groups have different and competing interests and therefore vie with each other for power and scarce goods. By “identity” I mean a sociological characteristic (such as race, gender, sexual preference, etc.) that is thought to be salient with respect one’s level of oppression; in other words, possession of the characteristic is thought to be a cause of one’s being oppressed.

This thesis will argue that identity politics, or at least particular strains of it, (1) entail an identifiable (if flawed) epistemology, which is to say a theory or set of assumptions about the ways in which one gains knowledge, and (2) involve a distinct (and also dubious) moral-philosophical outlook, that is, as set of assumptions about what makes people good or bad. Next it will argue that the assumptions made in both categories (epistemological and moral) have significant implications for democratic norms. In this thesis, the term “democracy” refers loosely to a system of self-government in which all citizens are politically free and formally equal and have the right to vote for their political representatives. The term “democratic norms” refers more broadly to those habits and practices which undergird a democratic system of government; most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, these norms include the freedom of each individual to make up his or her own mind and to speak it freely, within the usual legal limits.

Much ink has been spilled on the epistemological and moral tenets of identity politics, but far too little effort has been made to show how these ideas might impact our system of government. This thesis may serve as a modest starting point for that crucial discussion. It will unfold in four chapters.

Chapter 1 of this thesis will describe the epistemological presuppositions of identity politics. It will introduce the concept of *identity epistemology*, a term coined by Glenn Loury, which holds that one's identity determines what one knows. Identity epistemology, in turn, confers an epistemic advantage to minority individuals; they are held to have special knowledge, about their own group and (some would argue) about society, by virtue of their identity. The chapter will then address the "critical social justice" view of knowledge; critical social justice theory is a burgeoning and highly influential framework for understanding society, and it is undergirded by epistemological tenets. *Positionality*, the critical social justice equivalent of identity epistemology, will be discussed along with the concept of *ideology*. Ultimately, these ideas work in tandem to create a further epistemic inequality among identity groups.

Chapter 2 will analyze the implications of these epistemological ideas for democracy. It will argue that they clash with democracy and democratic norms on three fronts. First, the focus on group identities is not compatible with a democratic framework built for the individual, and consequently a significant epistemological inequality must follow; this provides an opportunity for authoritarian measures. Second, as Mark Lilla argues, there is a logical contradiction inherent in identity epistemology that can undercut the basis for political cooperation, particularly in the realm of electoral politics. This contradiction is that identity politics presupposes knowledge of other groups, the very

knowledge that identity epistemology denies. Third, identity epistemology threatens to produce a more warlike and contentious politics because its epistemological premises undermine political deliberation and lend themselves to coercion.

Chapter 3 will turn to identity politics' moral outlook, and argue that, as in the area of epistemology, identity politics creates a moral inequality among identity groups. It will examine two different frameworks for better understanding this inequality: (1) Molly McGrath's interpretation of identity politics as a "politics of the sacred victim," and (2) the critical social justice framework of power and oppression.

Chapter 4 will consider how the previously discussed epistemological and moral considerations work in tandem to produce an undemocratic attitude of repressive tolerance. It does so by comparing the critical social justice framework to Herbert Marcuse's famous essay, "Repressive Tolerance," and showing the similarities between the two.

Finally, the conclusion offers suggestions for how committed defenders of democracy might respond to the undemocratic tendencies within identity politics. Let us now turn to the first chapter, regarding epistemological considerations.

CHAPTER TWO

The Epistemology of Identity Politics

In recent years, a growing number of scholars and public intellectuals have brought to light an implicit epistemological premise that lies at the heart of contemporary identity politics. While it has been called by various names, perhaps the most insightful term for this phenomenon is “identity epistemology,” a moniker coined by Glenn Loury. In an interview, Loury defined identity epistemology loosely as the idea that there exist “some facts that people don’t know because they are this particular thing or,” contrastingly, “they have inside knowledge: I’m a black person, I understand this better in virtue of being black.”¹ Identity epistemology, a compound term, can thus be broken down into its two constituent parts. First, in order to have recourse to this epistemology, one must have a salient *identity*, i.e. possess membership in one of the historically oppressed groups that dominate the sphere of identity politics. Such groups include African-Americans and other racial minorities, women, and LGBT individuals. Second, this identity purportedly endows one with special knowledge or insight into a broad range of topics related to one’s identity. In short, one knows something by virtue of being a certain somebody. Thus, identity becomes an *epistemology*, i.e. a way of knowing (from

¹ Glenn Loury and Russ Roberts, “Glenn Loury on Race, Inequality, and America,” July 20, 2020, in *EconTalk*, produced by the Library of Economics and Liberty, podcast, MP3 Audio, 44:39, <http://www.econtalk.org/glenn-loury-on-race-inequality-and-america/>.

the Greek *epistēmē*, meaning “knowledge” or “science”). For this reason, Thomas Chatterton Williams describes identity epistemology as “knowing-through-being.”²

If knowledge comes from identity, two further, interrelated aspects of identity epistemology follow. The first and most obvious is that individuals who do not share a given identity are not privy to that identity group’s special body of knowledge. While he does not use the term “identity epistemology,” Charles L. Griswold describes the phenomenon cogently:

One frequently hears people declare, with passion: “speaking as an X, I can inform you that Y,” where X is the name of the relevant group and Y stands for some description or evaluation of X’s situation or beliefs. An auditor not in group X cannot speak with any authority about that group but must defer immediately. The moral authority embodied in statements preceded by “Speaking as an X” stems in part from an epistemic thesis to the effect that the point of view shared by all members of X is not accessible, or at least not sufficiently accessible, to non-X persons.³

If knowing comes through being X, then being non-X necessarily means you *cannot know*. Only a member of this group, X, has the knowledge—and thus the authority—to speak about X and the issues affecting X.

Second, and very much related to this epistemic barrier, in-group members possess special moral authority. Griswold argues that this moral authority comes in large part from a “shared experience,” specifically one that involves “a history of suffering and sacrifice.” Identity is inextricably bound up in this: “You can be one of us if you have had experiences like ours, and to have had them you must be very similar to us in relevant

² Thomas Chatterton Williams, “How Ta-Nehisi Coates Gives Whiteness Power,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/opinion/ta-nehisi-coates-whiteness-power.html>.

³ Charles L. Griswold, Jr., *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 97.

aspects.” Of course, this suffering must be “*undeserved* suffering,” or else it does not carry corresponding moral authority. In other words, “victimization” is the chief criterion. This victimization can be “construed broadly under the rubrics of race, gender, and class” (one could add many more in the present day), with “each subgroup claiming to have lived and suffered in a distinctive manner that is hardly intelligible to those not similarly privileged but that is in each case worthy of compassion and recognition.”

So, for example, African-Americans are deemed to have special authority to speak on racial issues because they, collectively, have suffered from discrimination and oppression precisely because they are black. Necessarily, then, white Americans cannot hope to achieve in-group status, having never suffered likewise, and therefore cannot access the knowledge belonging to African-Americans. “You don’t know what it’s like to be black in America,” is a common refrain. The message is clear: if you are not a member of this group, then you cannot know what this group knows.

In his analysis, Griswold limits the scope of identity epistemology to “X’s situation or beliefs”; it seems to apply only when talking “about that group.” However, recent social justice advocates have expanded the scope of identity epistemology quite dramatically. Robin DiAngelo (the bestselling author of *White Fragility*) and Özlem Sensoy furnish an excellent example in their book *Is Everyone Really Equal?* The book merits in-depth analysis due to the popularity of both its authors and its ideas.

In this work of “critical social justice” pedagogy, the authors promote “positionality,” the idea that “our perspectives are based on our place in society” and that “where you stand

in relation to others in society shapes what you can see and understand about the world.”⁴ By “place,” it should be noted, the authors primarily mean *identity*: one’s “socialization into . . . groups” including but not limited to “race, class, gender, sexuality,” and “ability-status.”⁵ In short, positionality represents yet another manifestation of identity epistemology. Whichever group we belong to determines our perspective.

Thomas Chatterton Williams has argued that identity epistemology presupposes that “a universal or transcendently human perspective is impossible to begin with.” Consequently, he adds, “[c]redentials, then, like critical authority, are foremost a matter of identity.”⁶ Through positionality, DiAngelo and Sensoy explicitly endorse this idea. They hold that “the social groups we belong to (such as race, class, and gender) necessarily shape our frame of reference and give us a particular—*not a universal*—perspective” (emphasis added).⁷ Fundamentally, this conclusion stems from their belief that knowledge is “socially constructed,” and therefore “reflective of the values and interests of those who produce it.”⁸ Necessarily, then, they reject the idea that “objectivity

⁴ Özlem Sensoy and Robin J. DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, Second Edition (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2017), PDF, <https://xyonline.net/sites/xyonline.net/files/2020-05/Sensoy%2C%20Is%20Everyone%20Really%20Equal%20-%20An%20Introduction%20to%20Key%20Concepts%20in%20Social%20Justice%20Education%20%282017%29.pdf>, 13, 40, 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20, 31.

⁶ Thomas Chatterton Williams, “Step Aside,” *The American Scholar*, July 10, 2019, <https://theamericanscholar.org/step-aside/>.

⁷ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

is desirable or even possible.”⁹ Knowledge always bears the finger-prints of our biased identarian perspectives. It can “never” be “neutral.”¹⁰

In order to understand positionality, one must also understand the concept of intersectionality. Briefly, intersectionality as an academic concept was first pioneered by scholar Kimberle Crenshaw. Crenshaw argues that “single-axis framework” is insufficient to analyze the oppression of black women. On the contrary, the “intersectional experience” of black women is “greater than the sum of racism and sexism.”¹¹ Or as Elizabeth Corey puts it, their “combined racial and gender identity” creates a unique “compound discrimination.”¹² Subsequent scholars, taking Crenshaw’s lead, decided to investigate the intersections of different forms of oppression.¹³ Thus, intersectionality became a way to “integrate the disadvantages caused by sexual orientation, class, age, body size, gender identification, ability,” etc.¹⁴ Membership in these groups “determine[s] an individual’s position in the ‘matrix of domination’”—hence, positionality.¹⁵

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 41.

¹¹ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 140.

¹² Elizabeth C. Corey, “First Church of Intersectionality,” *First Things*, August 2017, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/08/first-church-of-intersectionality>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

An earlier and influential expression of intersectionality can be found in the *The Combahee River Collective Statement* (1977), a mission statement formulated by the Combahee River Collective, a group of self-described “Black feminists and Lesbians.”¹⁶ These women argue that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking,” and that the “synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.”¹⁷ The members of the Collective are oppressed by virtue of being black *and* women; these oppressions are “experienced simultaneously.” Consequently, as black women, the members of the Combahee Collective stood apart from both groups (blacks and women) by virtue of their two-fold identity. Politically, for example, they felt “the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men.” The Collective represented a unique third party.

Intersectionality potentially exacerbates the epistemic solipsism inherent in identity epistemology. If out-group members cannot understand in-group members, then nothing could undermine mutual understanding more than an increase in the number of unique, insular groups. And yet, in the present day, identities have become increasingly fissiparous, multiplying dramatically. In 1977, the Combahee River Collective discussed the interacting identities of class, sex, and sexual orientation.¹⁸ However, as mentioned previously, current social justice advocates have added new identity dichotomies, often with a new oppression label attached: abled/disabled (abilism), cisgender/transgender

¹⁶ The Combahee River Collective, “(1977) The Combahee River Collective Statement,” *BlackPast*, Nov. 12, 2016, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

(transphobia), young/old (ageism), and many more. These new categories compound the problems of identity epistemology.

A quick thought experiment can illustrate this point. Imagine two individuals who wish to discuss politics. What are the odds that they share the same race, sex, gender (itself a rapidly proliferating category), approximate age, approximate economic class, disability status, nationality, ethnic heritage, religion, and so forth? With these and other axes of oppression proliferating at an alarming rate, the likelihood that one person has the same exact “positionality” as another is alarmingly slim. Moreover, even if—against all odds—these two individuals belonged to the same exclusive groups, “lived experience” would no doubt separate them at last. Paradoxically, these group identities tend to divide more than unite, especially if one believes in identity epistemology.

The Combahee Collective had a positive image of how these fragmenting identities would work: “We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism,” they wrote.¹⁹ In other words, where your identities align, you struggle *alongside* one another. Where they collide, you struggle *against* one another. Each group has at least one thing in common. However, that paradigm could just as easily be flipped: necessarily, each group is at war with every other group on at least one front. In short, Hobbes’s “war of every man against every man” has become a war of every group against every group. As Elizabeth Corey argues, we cannot assume that the interests of the various sub-groups created by intersectionality will inevitably align.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Corey, “First Church of Intersectionality.”

One common example of the conflict latent in the idea of intersectionality is the feud between transgender advocates and more traditional feminists. Feminists wish to preserve a category for biological females, sometimes called “biowomen,” in contradistinction to males, their oppressors. For transgender advocates, on the other hand, biological sex can diverge from one’s true gender, so trans women have just as much right to call themselves “women” as “biowomen” do. Consequently, trans women and their advocates argue passionately with these “TERFs” (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists) on social media. Presumably these two groups can unite on the subject of opposing privileged cisgender males, but it does not seem to dampen the vitriol of their private quarrel. In sum, different identity categories, like biological women and transgender women, can have different interests. And if knowledge is indeed a function of our “values and interests,” as Sensoy and DiAngelo argue, then the proliferation of categories will result in the proliferation of separate, insular epistemologies.

Having established the importance of intersectionality in this framework, let us return to Sensoy and DiAngelo’s analysis. For these authors, knowledge represents one of the foremost tools of power. They believe that the dominant group uses “language,” or “discourse,” to “shape relations of power.”²¹ Language, like the knowledge it transmits, is far from value-neutral.²² Discourse communicates ideology, which the authors define as “the stories, myths, explanations, definitions, and rationalizations that are used to justify inequality between the dominant and the minoritized groups.”²³ The dominant group has

²¹ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 93.

²² *Ibid.*, 93.

²³ *Ibid.*, 95.

“control” over this ideology (a state the authors refer to as “hegemony”) and uses “ideological, technical, and discursive elements” (collectively referred to as “power”) in order to “impose their ideas and interests on everyone.”²⁴ Both oppressors and oppressed can buy into this system. Oppressors can “internalize dominance” and truly believe they are superior, while the oppressed may “internalize oppression” and truly believe they are inferior and thus that their subordination is justified.²⁵

This view of society resembles that of Marx in several key respects. In the *German Ideology*, Marx argues for the materialistic view of history and identifies what would later be called the “base” and “superstructure” of society. Marx argues that material relationships determined the fundamental structure of a society (i.e. the “base”). For Marx, this means capitalism and the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. The base, in turn, would determine the ideas and practices of that society (the “superstructure”). “The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships,” he writes.²⁶ These ideas would rationalize the superior position of the bourgeois, because the ruling class, in order to “carry through its aim” of domination, would need to “give its ideas the form of universality, that is, expressed in

²⁴ Ibid., 95-96.

²⁵ Ibid., 93-95

²⁶ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology: Part 1,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (London; New York: Norton, 1978), 172.

ideal form.”²⁷ Universality is an illusion meant to perpetuate domination. “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas,” Marx declares.²⁸

This is strikingly similar to the view of society that Sensoy and DiAngelo advance. They argue that there is a fundamental power dynamic in society, in which “[s]ocial groups that are valued more highly [males, whites, cisgenders, etc.] have greater access to the resources of a society.”²⁹ This power dynamic in turn pervades the whole of society and shapes the language, ideology, and relations among the people in order to justify that preexisting dominance: “the societal default is oppression; there are no spaces free of it.”³⁰ On this view, nothing is objectively true, only useful for those in charge. Or as Sensoy and DiAngelo put it, “the question moves from ‘Is this true?’ to ‘Whom does this belief serve?’”³¹ Both Marx and these contemporary authors argue that ideas are determined by fundamental inequality, whether it be in the realm of economics or power.

On this cynical view, virtually anything one says, thinks, or does reflects the oppression that pervades society. “Like a fish that is immersed in water from the moment of consciousness and thus cannot know that it is separate from the water,” DiAngelo and Sensoy write, “we too are immersed from birth in the deep water of our culture.”³² Seemingly everything in our culture is designed to benefit the dominant group: we are

²⁷ Ibid., 174.

²⁸ Ibid., 172.

²⁹ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 20.

³⁰ Ibid., 219.

³¹ Ibid., 114.

³² Ibid., 60.

“socialized” to believe in everything from gender to “democracy and free-market capitalism,” because they benefit the dominant group.³³ We can never escape socialization, or from the oppression that pervades it. The only question is which particular group we will be socialized into, which will then determine our perspective and our relationship with the surrounding culture.³⁴ If you are a privileged, dominant fish, the current will move “*with* you”; if you are a marginalized, oppressed fish, it will move “*against* you.”³⁵ If society facilitates one’s flourishing, then one has “privilege,” an important concept that will resurface elsewhere in this thesis.³⁶

This view of society raises epistemic barriers and seems to confer an epistemic advantage to the oppressed over the oppressors. Sensoy and DiAngelo’s stance must be contrasted with *perspectivalism*, in essence the belief that nobody can possess the whole truth but rather only one *perspective* on a truth. This belief would imply a far greater degree of epistemic equality, since everyone would be as ignorant as they are knowledgeable. And at times, Sensoy and DiAngelo seem to embrace perspectivalism. For example, they write “each of us has insight into some dimensions of social life but has limited understanding in others.”³⁷ However, this seems to hold true only on the *individual* level (“each of us”), likely because, according to intersectionality (examined in detail later), each individual could possess both oppressor and oppressed status in

³³ Ibid., 67.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 104

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 55.

different areas, such as if one were a male (oppressor) but also gay (oppressed).

However, on the *group* level, the epistemic inequality is clear:

Dominant groups have the most narrow or limited view of society because they do not have to understand the experiences of the minoritized group in order to survive; because they control the institutions, they have the means to legitimize their view (“I worked hard for what I have, why can’t they?”). Minoritized groups often have the widest view of society, in that they must understand both their own and the dominant group’s perspective—develop a double-consciousness—to succeed.³⁸

In short, on the group level (and it is important to remember that the group is the primary locus of identity politics), the oppressed have *greater* knowledge and insight than the oppressors by virtue of being subordinated in society. To clarify, the idea of “double-consciousness” comes from W.E.B. Du Bois, who (in Sensoy and DiAngelo’s view) wanted to “capture this burden of having to perform the dominant culture’s norms as well as your own.”³⁹ In understanding both himself and the oppressor, the oppressed has an epistemic advantage. In contrast, the dominant individual is aloof to the oppression of society, like a rich person who is blind to the troubles of the poor or an able person who “simply won’t see” the “barriers” that would confront a disabled person treading the same ground.⁴⁰

Thus, one’s inferior position can confer greater knowledge, and it seems to do so in large part through *experience*, similarly to what Griswold described. At the beginning of the book, Sensoy and DiAngelo make a methodological point about how social justice topics should be studied. They valorize “peer review” and “scholarly evidence” and

³⁸ Ibid., 92.

³⁹ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 40-41.

dismiss “personal experiences” and “anecdotal evidence” as inferior.⁴¹ Similarly, they also distinguish “*opinion*” from what they call “*informed knowledge*.”⁴² In the course of that argument, they use the example of someone (clearly intended to be a white individual) trying to disprove a general argument by saying ““My cousin tried to get a job, but they hired an unqualified Black guy instead because they had to fill a quota.””⁴³ The authors respond by pointing out that “[f]ocusing on exceptions or unanalyzed personal experiences prevents us from seeing the overall, societal patterns.”⁴⁴ This is a valid point: one’s personal, anecdotal experiences are not sufficient to debunk larger patterns or trends.

However, later, Sensoy and DiAngelo undermine this argument and elevate the role of experience. They clarify (emphasis added):

From a critical social justice framework, informed knowledge does not refer exclusively to academic scholarship, *but also includes the lived experiences and perspectives that marginalized groups bring to bear on an issue, due to their insider standing*. However, scholarship can provide useful language with which marginalized groups can frame their experiences within the broader society.⁴⁵

Thus (contra what the authors strenuously argued earlier), experience, and indeed anecdotal *lived* experience, constitutes a valid form of “informed knowledge.” Correspondingly, “scholarship” is no longer a superior form of knowledge that rises above personal experiences (like the individual saying his white cousin was unfairly

⁴¹ Ibid., 31, 33, 35.

⁴² Ibid., 35.

⁴³ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 51.

passed up), but rather a humble supplement that provides “useful language” that minorities can use to “frame their experiences.” The authors thus present two quite contradictory views on the validity of experience.

What explains the contradiction? It seems clear that the salient difference between the two cases is the “insider standing” of the minorities. Their experience becomes admissible evidence because they bring special insight by virtue of their identity, whereas the dominant white experience is dismissed. Moreover, the authors seem to assume that, in general, minority experiences would corroborate their general arguments whereas majority experiences would conflict with them. In sum, minority status grants epistemic privilege.

An extended metaphor may help further explain this “critical social justice” view of society and how it confers epistemic advantage. Imagine a stadium that hosts a soccer match or live concert. The stadium represents society, and the marquee event represents the resources and goods of that society, broadly understood—its desiderata. Members of the dominant group have front-row seats, unlimited access. Meanwhile, members of the oppressed group have undesirable seating in the back. They can still see the main event, but they have a far worse view of it. The dominant group has put in place certain rules and norms (like rows and assigned seating) that keep them in front and others in the back. The dominant group, through discourse and its ideology, rationalize its far better position: “Everyone can’t sit in front,” they might say, or “I paid good money for these seats.” Some audience members in the back might find these messages convincing and internalize that oppression. The ones that do not, however, have an epistemic *advantage*: sitting far in the back, they can see the whole structure of society laid out before them.

They also experience its ill effects every time they take their seat. In contrast, the dominant individuals in the front rows only see the great concert in front of them, and have no clue what is going on behind. Consequently, they are at an epistemic *disadvantage*.

In sum, this critical social justice view of society dramatically expands the scope of identity epistemology. No longer is identity epistemology restricted to talking about “X’s situation or beliefs” or “about that group” (although it would apply to such topics as well).⁴⁶ Now, through positionality, one’s status as a member of group X gives one the best position to critique *the rest of society* and decry it as fundamentally unequal and oppressive. The dominant part of society, deliberately or through ignorance, cannot know what the oppressed knows. In contrast, through “double consciousness,” the oppressed understands both himself and the oppressor and his culture. Like Marx, one can shrug off the lies of the superstructure and lay bare the oppression on which it rests. This is a definite epistemological advantage.

In a similar vein, Michael Rectenwald argues that “social justice ideology does not foster egalitarianism.” Instead, all its advocates do is flip “the totem pole of identity” to create an “inverted moral hierarchy.”⁴⁷ The end product of this philosophy is not moral equality between different identities, but rather merely a change in which identity is given the higher moral status. One could argue that the same holds true in the realm of epistemology. Instead of the opinions of black and white students being given an equal

⁴⁶ Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of the Enlightenment*, 97.

⁴⁷ Michael Rectenwald, *Springtime for Snowflakes: Social Justice and Its Postmodern Parentage: An Academic’s Memoir* (London, U.K.; Nashville, TN: New English Review Press, 2018), 75.

weight, identity epistemology of Sensoy and DiAngelo's variety would prioritize the opinion of the black student. But whose opinion would be given precedence if two black students, one male and one female, disagreed? How would one weigh the authority of these different identities? "Rank is established on the basis of intersectionality," Rectenwald argues.⁴⁸ On this view, intersectionality creates a hierarchy among oppressed groups in which somebody with membership in the most oppressed groups becomes the most morally superior.⁴⁹ So, theoretically, black females would be superior to black males. Would this make their epistemologies similarly superior? Sensoy and DiAngelo's argument would seem to answer in the affirmative, since subordinate status gives one a better view of society in their schema.

However, some scholars argue that intersectionality need not create a rigid epistemological hierarchy. For example, Patricia Hill Collins rejects "additive" views of oppression and argues that it simply is not true that the "more subordinated the group, the purer the vision available to them."⁵⁰ Rather, the proper attitude should be one of perspectivalism, in which each group sees its perspective as "unfinished."⁵¹ Collins envisioned a situation in which:

Those ideas that are validated as true by African-American women, African-American men, Latina lesbians, Asian-American women, Puerto Rican men, and

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Revised 10th Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 2000), EPUB, http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=70795&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EK&ppid=Page-__-1, 270.

⁵¹ Ibid.

other groups with distinctive standpoints, with each group using the epistemological approaches growing from its unique standpoint, become the most “objective” truths.⁵²

Of course, Collins also thought that this methodology implicitly undermined the false objectivity of the dominant epistemology.⁵³ Nevertheless, her argument represents a more modest and reasonable argument about identity epistemology. The difference, according to Nira Yuval-Davis, is between having “*privileged* access to liberating insight” and having “merely *different* insights.”⁵⁴ This seems a more reasonable stance, since different backgrounds do grant different perspectives.

For the purposes of this thesis, it suffices to make just a few points in order to accommodate this alternative epistemological stance. First, this passage still reflects the unfounded assumption of harmony that is present in so much of intersectional theory. What happens if these diverse groups do *not* validate each other’s ideas? How can these clashing perspectives be adjudicated? Second, others, like Sensoy and DiAngelo, *do* argue for an epistemic advantage that is to be gleaned from these oppressed identities. Their view is still worth addressing. Third, regardless of whether an epistemic advantage is gained or not, the multiplication of standpoints (i.e. identities) still creates significant issues with respect to mutual understanding. These issues can only be overcome by

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 270-271.

⁵⁴ Nira Yuval-Davis, “Dialogical Epistemology—An Intersectional Resistance to the ‘Oppression Olympics,’” *Gender and Society* 26, no. 1 (2012): 47.

means of healthy dialogue, something that (as we shall see later) identity epistemology and critical social justice tend to eviscerate.⁵⁵

Briefly, let us first consider the validity of identity epistemology, regardless of whatever consequences it may have. Its truth seems to be a question of *degree* and of *relevance*. For instance, few would deny that African-Americans suffer greater racial prejudice and oppression than do their white counterparts. Thus, it stands to reason that many would have experiences with such prejudice and be able to speak more authoritatively than white Americans on certain subjects related to racism. Racial microaggressions, assuming the validity of this phenomenon, seem like a promising example.⁵⁶

Recently, a friend of this author was discussing microaggressions with his girlfriend, who happened to be studying this concept in one of her classes. He mentioned that he did not really understand the idea of microaggressions. She responded, “It’s very hard for white people to understand microaggressions.” This is an ordinary sentiment that one hears often in discussions of race and other identity issues. However, the underlying premise is that of identity epistemology. By virtue of being a racial minority, one experiences microaggressions and thus understands them, whereas most white people remain ignorant of them and must be educated to understand them. Black Americans would more often experience people crossing over to the other side of the street to avoid

⁵⁵ Regarding the need for dialogue, see Yuval-Davis, “Dialogical Epistemology,” 47-48.

⁵⁶ For a brief overview, see Jenée Desmond-Harris, “What Exactly Is a Microaggression?” *Vox*, Feb. 16, 2015, www.vox.com/2015/2/16/8031073/what-are-microaggressions.

them, locking their car doors as they approach, etc. Of course, black Americans' having these experiences cannot be assumed; to do so would be to run the risk of the ecological fallacy, in which one imputes group characteristics to a particular individual within that group.⁵⁷ Still, being a member of that group would increase your likelihood of experiencing that phenomenon.

Nevertheless, this epistemological premise cannot be taken too far. Though they may not experience them to the same degree, white Americans must be able to have *some* understanding of microaggressions and related phenomenon. For what is the purpose of teaching them about this issue, if not to raise awareness and change their behavior? There must be a limit to how much different identities prevent mutual understanding, and there must be some way to bridge the divide between the experiences of various identity groups and enable them to understand each other. Otherwise, cooperation on any number of issues becomes impossible.

Furthermore, there remains the question of *relevance*. Microaggressions occur in the everyday experiences of black Americans, their "lived experience" as it is often called. But surely experience represents only one form of knowledge. As Sensoy and DiAngelo pointed out, scholarship can often take logical precedence over experience. One may grow up in poverty and gain a certain form of knowledge from that experience and, in a way, that individual could be said to "know more" about poverty than an aloof upper-class individual. But that experience has a limited scope. Would this experience apply to poverty in other cities, regions, or countries? In the realm of politics, would it

⁵⁷ See William M. K. Trochim, "Two Research Fallacies," Research Methods Knowledge Base, Conjoint.ly, March 10, 2020, conjointly.com/kb/two-research-fallacies/.

translate into knowledge of which welfare programs or laws might best alleviate poverty? Would it, as Sensoy and DiAngelo seem to think (recall “double-consciousness”), give the impoverished individual insight into upper-class society? Finally, is it not possible to draw the *wrong* conclusions from one’s experiences? In short, it seems that in many cases one’s experience of oppression would simply not be relevant. It may inform one’s viewpoint to a degree, but it does not necessarily confer special knowledge or insight into certain things, especially technical matters. Oftentimes, experience should be the *starting point* for debate and discussion, not the *end* of the discussion.

Moreover, the problem is that identity epistemology tends to undermine rational debate and dialogue, one of the primary means by which identity-based differences could be addressed, especially in politics. It does so in several ways. First, as Mark Lilla elaborates, the incommensurability of epistemologies disincentivizes argumentation. If “identity determines everything,” Lilla points out, then there exists “no impartial space for dialogue.” If “[w]hite men have one ‘epistemology,’” and “black women have another,” Lilla asks, “what remains to be said?”⁵⁸ Instead, identarian authority becomes the arbiter of disputes. The phrase “*Speaking as an X*,” Lilla explains, establishes a “privileged position” on a given issue and forestalls “questions, which by definition come from a *non-X* perspective.” Consequently, in the event of disagreement, two incommensurable perspectives clash. The only way to adjudicate them is not through reasoned argument, since both sides’ positions are reduced in essence to appeals to authority (derived from experience), but rather with reference to their identities.

⁵⁸ Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 90.

Disagreement becomes a “power relation: the winner of the argument will be whoever has invoked the morally superior identity and expressed the most outrage at being questioned.”⁵⁹ In a conflict between two authoritative identities, the more authoritative, i.e. who has suffered the most, must prevail over the other.

Second, as Lilla points out, identity politics incentivizes *feeling offended*. This makes sense for at least two reasons. First, to return to Griswold’s analysis, the criterion for an epistemically privileged identity is collective victimization. Therefore, it makes sense that the primary means by which this superior vantagepoint could be criticized is by claiming offense, which implies that one is being victimized in the present conversation. Increasingly, social justice advocates have argued that certain forms of speech represent “harm” and “violence.” By the logic of identity epistemology, claiming victimization represents a bid for greater authority on a given topic. In so doing, it also freezes debate, which assumes a degree of separation between oneself and one’s ideas.

Furthermore, social justice advocates of Sensoy and DiAngelo’s ilk undermine dialogue further with their emphasis on language and discourse being a vehicle for oppression. Their goal is to instill a “critical” attitude, which might be more accurately labeled a cynical attitude.⁶⁰ In any given situation, the reader is instructed to ask “‘How is [oppression] manifesting here?’ rather than ‘Is it manifesting here?’”⁶¹ And again, “‘Whom does this belief serve?’” rather than “‘Is this true?’”⁶² This cynical attitude seems a

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 48 ff.

⁶¹ Ibid., 219-220.

⁶² Ibid., 114.

far cry from the good faith necessary for productive dialogue. Indeed, Sensoy and DiAngelo's philosophy provides a host of ways to dismiss an interlocutor's arguments out of hand without actually addressing their substance. Disagree with a white American's argument? Dismiss it as "internalized dominance" or the rationalizing of privilege. Disagree with a black American's argument? Dismiss it as "internalized oppression."

The latter may seem farfetched, but it does happen. In an op-ed entitled "Dear White People: Stop Using the Term 'Uncle Tom,'" Clifford Thompson discusses how many white liberals are comfortable using the term. He argues that they "have no business trying to police authentic black identity" and that they have no "moral authority" to judge the so-called Uncle Toms because they would never be put in a similar ethical dilemma due to race.⁶³ One must ask: why do white Americans feel confident enough to label black Americans race-traitors?

One could argue that this attitude would not be possible if it were not for the prevalence of identity epistemology. Many Americans have become used to the idea that there is a "black experience" that inevitably yields a "black standpoint" on politics. Ironically, in the case of "Uncle Toms," the respect paid to this black standpoint has actually made it easier to dismiss those African-Americans who do not share it.

This debate also occurs within the black community itself. Recently, an African-American student at Baylor University penned an op-ed in the *Lariat* student newspaper

⁶³ Clifford Thompson, "Dear White People: Stop Using the Term 'Uncle Tom,'" *Washington Post*, Nov. 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/dear-white-people-stop-using-the-term-uncle-tom/2018/11/15/8a68e9c0-e84e-11e8-a939-9469f1166f9d_story.html.

criticizing Black Lives Matter.⁶⁴ Several other students responded in another op-ed, “Black Lives Matter: A Caution Against Reductive Rhetoric in the Black community.”⁶⁵ While these latter students did respond compellingly to some of the initial op-ed’s arguments, they also made sure to criticize them as the “regurgitating” of “negative generalizations of the Black community.” They also made a far more general point that seemed to embrace identity epistemology. Black Baylor students, they wrote, “are working relentlessly to bring a voice to the experience of being Black in America.” Once again, the experience of being a member of a minority represents a unique and authoritative epistemology: “Black people are experts of their own experiences,” they stated. Consequently, they resented these efforts being “undermined by someone who does not resonate with nor acknowledge the challenges of facing bias and prejudice in this country.” The initial student, they seemed to think, had internalized “harmful and false narratives” instead of embracing the black experience.

And so, while they did “not expect Black people to be a monolith,” they insisted that the first student be “empathetic to all of our community members’ experiences” and argued that black Americans should “take a unified stance in refusing to perpetuate and share misleading narratives about the Black community that are rooted in racism.”

Setting aside the obvious tension between avoiding being “a monolith” but also taking a

⁶⁴ Haika Mrema, “Be Wary of the Black Lives Matter Movement,” *Baylor Lariat* [Waco, TX], Oct. 14, 2020, <https://baylorlariat.com/2020/10/14/be-wary-of-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>.

⁶⁵ Owen Amadasu et al., “Black Lives Matter: A Caution Against Reductive Rhetoric in the Black Community,” *Baylor Lariat* [Waco, TX], Oct. 15, 2020, <https://baylorlariat.com/2020/10/15/black-lives-matter-a-caution-against-reductive-rhetoric-in-the-black-community/>.

“unified stance,” there is also tension between arguing for a coherent black standpoint, built upon a coherent black experience in America, and the acknowledgement that some black Americans do not share that viewpoint. While these authors, to their credit, addressed the first student’s arguments, that tension can all too often be resolved simply by dismissing dissenting individuals as race-traitors and Uncle Toms.

Assume, for a moment—as much of our culture and public discourse has assumed—the validity of identity epistemology. What logical consequences would follow? Alexis de Tocqueville once had a correspondence in which he debated a white supremacist, Arthur de Gobineau, the author of *The Inequality of Human Races*. Rather than merely questioning the accuracy of Gobineau’s racial theory, Tocqueville tried to show how those ideas would logically affect society and “human liberty.” Tocqueville wrote of Gobineau’s ideas: “I believe that they are probably quite false; I know that they are certainly very pernicious.”⁶⁶ In the spirit of Tocqueville’s critique, the next chapter of this thesis will explore the *implications of identity epistemology for democracy*. If taken to its logical conclusion, the basic premise of identity epistemology—that we know what we know because of who we are in terms of certain identity traits, and (crucially) that others therefore cannot understand us—presents several dire challenges to democratic politics. Let us now turn to that task.

⁶⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville to Arthur de Gobineau, Nov. 17, 1853, in *The European Revolution and Correspondence with Gobineau*, trans. and ed. John Lukacs (New York: Doubleday, 1959; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), 227.

CHAPTER THREE

Identity Epistemology's Implications for Democracy

Identity epistemology has several profound implications for the operation of democratic politics in the United States. This chapter will discuss three conceptual difficulties arising from identity epistemology. The first is perhaps the broadest. Because of its epistemology, the critical social justice view of politics is necessarily in tension with our democracy, which is designed to ensure individual equality, not group equality. The second difficulty was first elaborated compellingly by scholar Mark Lilla in the aftermath of the 2016 election. Lilla argues that identity politics, in large part due to its epistemology, threatens the shared vision needed to unite citizens, regardless of their various identities, and to engage in meaningful institutional politics. Finally, the third difficulty is that identity politics, undergirded by “epistemic advantage” and Griswold’s concept of the “epistemic privileging of the actor,” seems to undercut deliberation in favor of more competitive politics. This chapter will address each of these difficulties in turn, beginning with the first.

The fundamental principles of American democracies seem inconsistent with the presuppositions of identity epistemology, in particular the critical social justice view espoused by Sensoy and DiAngelo. To recapitulate briefly, their theoretical system holds that knowledge is subjective and takes shape via group socialization. Thus, our group determines what we know, and oppressed groups know more than oppressor groups. Knowledge is always reflective of fundamental power relations in society, and indeed

socializes us into upholding and perpetuating those power relations. Oppressor groups exhibit internalized dominance, oppressed groups exhibit internalized oppression. This latter seems to create an exception to the rule that one's group determines what one knows, since the influence of the dominant group can cloud the perspective of the subordinate group. This systemic internalization seems inevitable: Sensoy and DiAngelo write that "Oppressive beliefs and misinformation are internalized by both the dominant and the minoritized groups, *guaranteeing* that overall each group will play its assigned role in relation to the other," and that as a result, "injustice is *assured*" (emphases added).¹ Group identity is thus highly deterministic within this framework: identity epistemology.

Sensoy and DiAngelo's own classroom provides an insight into how these epistemological premises might manifest themselves in a democratic society. These same two authors wrote an article entitled "Respect Differences?" in which they argue against such classroom guidelines as "sharing opinions," "affirming everyone's perspectives," the idea that "*everyone's opinion matters*," and what they call "the *right to my opinion* discourse."² In contrast to such practices, Sensoy and DiAngelo do not let every student voice their individual opinions in their own classroom. They write regarding these students:

their opinions are necessarily reflective of dominant paradigms. Given that the majority of our students are from dominant groups in key identities, their opinions, perspectives, and personal connections—taken at face value—are not constructive, as they only reinforce oppressive narratives. This is one reason why

¹ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 90.

² Sensoy, Özlem, and Robin DiAngelo. "Respect Differences? Challenging the Common Guidelines in Social Justice Education." *Democracy and Education* 22, no. 2 (2014). <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol22/iss2/1>, 2, 4-5.

we restrict free sharing and affirmations of everyone's perspectives as equally valid. While we recognize that it is important to raise these perspectives (as this assignment does), we find it much more effective to do so in controlled ways.³

Thus, their argument runs along familiar lines: everyone's opinion is in fact not his own, but rather reflective of group identity. And since the "majority" of their students are from dominant groups, giving everyone a voice would mean giving more weight to the false dominant narrative. Thus, Sensoy and DiAngelo argue that "restricting dominant narratives is actually more equalizing."⁴

Consequently, it seems clear that the epistemological premises espoused by Sensoy and DiAngelo, carried into practice, undermine one of the fundamental principles of democracy: that everybody, *individually*, should have a vote, an equal say in how they are governed. Nor does this democratic principle assume that every person's opinion is "equally valid"; on the contrary, democracy is defended despite the fact that many citizens' votes might be incorrect, grounded in ignorance, or at variance with the scholarly consensus that DiAngelo and Sensoy so often laud.⁵ In contrast, Sensoy and DiAngelo's argument yields the opposite conclusion. There are no individual opinions in this schema, only "narratives." Everyone is merely regurgitating what they have been taught by society (or rather society's dominant groups) to think.

Of course, it must be stipulated that a classroom is not a democracy. Indeed, teachers may run their classrooms like a dictatorship if they believe that method best

³ Ibid., 6.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

facilitates the learning of their given subject matter. Moreover, Sensoy and DiAngelo point out that a “social justice classroom” is a “rare setting,” intentionally designed to “correct the existing power imbalances” within the larger society.⁶ (For the same reason, these authors also support schools exclusively for minorities in the categories of race, gender, and sexual orientation.)⁷It makes sense that such a counterweight would perhaps overcorrect in order to make students think differently and question their presuppositions, which is surely one of the benefits of an education. However, Sensoy and DiAngelo do explicitly acknowledge that their stance “often appears counter to commonsense notions of democracy.”⁸ They justify this breach of democratic norms by arguing that the social justice “skills” inculcated in this undemocratic classroom will ultimately produce a more “just” and “healthy democracy.”⁹ Of course, one could argue that learning to interrupt others and to refuse to assume “good intentions,” based largely on whether they are from a dominant group or have a purportedly unacceptable opinion, is not a good education in democracy.¹⁰

But more troubling is the fact that it is the *internal logic* of Sensoy and DiAngelo’s worldview that drives such undemocratic practices. This is not an interpretation of their article; it is its explicit thesis. They argue that, once the reader understands ideas like “knowledge construction,” “positionality,” and “internalized

⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 217.

⁸ Sensoy and DiAngelo, “Respect Differences?”, 8.

⁹ Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

oppression/internalized dominance,” the reader will agree that the democratic method of classroom discussion actually serves to perpetuate inequality rather than end it.¹¹ All these ideas, which have been explicated in this thesis, have to do with epistemology. Thus, it is their epistemology that produces these anti-democratic tendencies, not the unique qualities of the classroom.

This tension between critical social justice and democracy is inevitable for a very simple reason: our democracy is built upon equality of individuals, not equality of groups. In contrast, critical social justice theory is more interested in equality of groups, not individuals. A quick thought experiment will help illustrate this. Imagine a room in which there are nine men (innate oppressors) and one woman (innately oppressed). On an individual level, we have ten individuals. But in Sensoy and DiAngelo’s framework, because we only have two groups, we only have two perspectives, two “narratives.” Any unique insight that one of the dominant individuals might have would come by virtue of another identity (perhaps if one of them were gay).

Therefore, if their classroom were a democracy, it seems logical that the last thing that Sensoy and DiAngelo would do would be to give each individual a vote. That would only ensure that the dominant narrative would drown out the minority’s voice. Thus, the only way to equalize these two groups and their perspectives *would be to give each group one vote*, regardless of how many individuals are in those groups. (Sensoy and DiAngelo do not say this, of course, but it seems to follow from their premises.) However, in light of existing power imbalances, systemic and historic oppression, etc. what they actually advocate is silencing the dominant group and listening almost exclusively to the

¹¹ Ibid, 2.

subordinate group. The moderator or instructor would presumably determine which of the subordinate group's contributions constitute internalized oppression and which constitute an authentic minority insight—an unfortunate authoritarian outcome of Sensoy and DiAngelo's theory.

This focus on group equality clashes with an obvious reality of our democracy: identity groups cannot be given equal representation. Our system is designed for the equality of individuals, not the equality of groups. The U.S. has a white majority (for the time being). The U.S. has a heterosexual majority. The U.S. has a cisgender majority. The U.S. has an able majority. Consequently, African-Americans and other minorities, as *groups*, cannot be given equal representation. Nor can homosexuals, transgenders, or disabled citizens. The *individuals* within those groups, of course, do have an equal voice and an equal say in government. This imbalance seems obvious; after all, these groups are commonly referred to as “minorities.” But the point bears repeating in the face of the critical social justice framework, which demands that groups, and not individuals, be given equal representation. In reality, this simply cannot happen within a democratic framework, where a majority, notwithstanding the usual exceptions and constitutional protections for minorities, rules. Thus, to give everybody a vote in our democracy *guarantees* that dominant voices will outweigh minority voices. The best that could be achieved would seem to be *proportional* representation, but that is already accounted for in the current system, since by definition giving each individual a vote will result in a proportional allocation of votes (assuming, of course, that minority individuals choose to exercise that right).

Sensoy and DiAngelo seem to have a solution for this numerical difficulty: “allies.” An ally, in short, is a member of a dominant group who recognizes his privilege and works to end it. An ally does *not* understand those whom he is assisting. As explained previously, this does not seem like a possibility within the social justice schema. On the contrary, the ally supports minorities despite this lack of understanding. A real ally dedicates him or herself to “[v]alidating and supporting” minorities, “regardless of whether [these allies] completely agree with or understand where they [the minorities] are coming from.”¹² Allies also cede “control” and share “power when possible.”¹³ Essentially, the ally is one who effaces himself in order to elevate members of oppressed groups.

It is unclear why one would choose to be an ally within Sensoy and DiAngelo’s schema. It would seem that the allies must have some sort of understanding of what the oppressed feel in order to have the empathy to assist them. (This is one of Lilla’s main points, discussed below.) At the very least, the ally must be convinced that group equality, in the abstract, is a noble goal worthy of sacrifice. But that would seem to be one of the false universal ideals that Sensoy and DiAngelo warn are one of the tools of power. In fact, universality is the hallmark of dominant group propaganda.¹⁴ Regardless of its internal consistency, the concept of allies seems to be one of the ways that Sensoy and DiAngelo might address the problem of numbers. Allies would almost

¹² Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 227.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁴ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 41-43; Sensoy and DiAngelo, “Respect Differences?”, 3.

act as proxies for minorities in this schema, using their power and voices to echo (but not supplant) minority voices. Without allies, equal representation of groups seems impossible within an individualist democracy.

Let us now turn to the second significant challenge that identity epistemology poses for democratic politics. Columbia professor Mark Lilla first formulated this critique in the aftermath of the 2016 election. Lilla argued that the Democratic Party's overemphasis on identity politics led to its defeat to the Republican candidate, Donald Trump. In a *New York Times* op-ed, Lilla wrote, "In recent years American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism's message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing."¹⁵ Subsequently, Lilla expanded this critique into a book, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*.

Lilla's main thesis is that the solipsism inherent in identity politics undermines the unity that is a prerequisite of democratic politics. The goal of democratic politics, in Lilla's view, is to build broad coalitions by focusing on what all of us have in common and formulating an "ambitious vision for America and its future."¹⁶ Lilla shares the Democrats wish to protect minorities and create a better and more just society, but he believes that the best way to do that is to "win elections and exercise power in the long run, at every level of government." And in order to do that, one must "have a message

¹⁵ Mark Lilla, "The End of Identity Liberalism," *The New York Times*, November 18, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html.

¹⁶ Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 6.

that appeals to as many people as possible and pulls them together.” Lilla argues that what he calls “[i]dentity liberalism,” undermines that effort: it focuses one’s attention inward, not outward, and prioritizes “self-expression” rather than “persuasion.”¹⁷ It is predicated upon “difference,” not “commonality.”¹⁸

At the heart of Lilla’s critique lies an epistemological problem, the recurring problem of identity epistemology. Lilla puts it most succinctly as follows: “You cannot tell people simultaneously ‘You must understand me’ and ‘You cannot understand me.’”¹⁹ If a minority group is oppressed by virtue of its identity, it must appeal to some other group in order to overcome this oppression. Or as Lilla explains, “when they call for political action to assist their group *X*, they demand it from people they have defined as *not-X* and whose experiences cannot, they say, be compared with their own.”²⁰ But this creates a paradox: “Why should *not-Xers* give a damn about *Xers*, unless they believed they share something with them? Why should we expect them to feel anything at all?” These two groups must have something in common, some shared understanding, in order for that appeal to resonate with the *not-X* population. In other words, one might say that emphasizing differences makes it more difficult for *not-Xers* to empathize and identify with the oppressed *X-ers*. It makes them seem like an “other,” part of “them” rather than “us.”

¹⁷ Ibid., 117; See also: 12, 75, 84.

¹⁸ Ibid., 78.

¹⁹ Quoted in Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019), 240.

²⁰ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 120.

For political purposes, Lilla argues that the requisite common identity should be found in “citizenship.”²¹ The advantage of citizenship, Lilla explains, is that it is a “*political status*, nothing less and nothing more.”²² It does not need to replace group identity markers like race, religion, or sexual orientation, but can transcend those in order to unite a diverse population into one polity with a shared vision.²³ Lilla’s goal seems to be a situation in which oppressed minorities can speak out about their oppression and the majority hastens to help them because, as he describes the sentiment, “these are our fellow citizens who deserve to be fully enfranchised.”²⁴

There is another alternative: conflict. This brings us to the third challenge that identity epistemology presents for democracy. If there is a group that feels oppressed, but cannot appeal to either fellow citizens or to universal principles, the only recourse that is left seems to be conflict and coercion, rather than cooperation. This situation closely resembles what Charles Griswold, discussed in the previous chapter, fears. Griswold argued that the solipsism of identity epistemology could lead to what he calls “the epistemic privileging of the actor,” as opposed to the “spectator.” In other words, the actor (in this case the member of the oppressed group) denies the spectator the “right to judge.” Only the actor himself can judge of the rightness of his cause. He can become “resentful of an outsider who fails to recognize him *and* of one who claims to understand him.” Griswold worries that this epistemic authority can devolve into “narcissism and

²¹ Ibid., 121.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 127.

into the complete denial that one group can be the measure of another,” with ripple effects for the polity. If no group can judge another, the “community” becomes merely “the arena in which war is waged for recognition (and for the political and economic benefits that follow from recognition).”²⁵ In short, politics becomes political war between different insular groups: identity politics run amok.

Sensoy and DiAngelo endorse Griswold’s idea of “the epistemic privileging of the actor” quite explicitly. For example, when criticizing those who accuse minorities of “[p]laying the race card,” they respond by saying that whites have a fundamental “lack of knowledge” about racism and by bemoaning the “arrogance” needed to assume that they “could understand it better than peoples of Color.” When it comes to racism, they argue, whites are the “least qualified to assess its manifestations.”²⁶ Nor is this ignorance specific to racism. Rather, it is a general rule arising from oppression. Elsewhere, the authors discuss the “arrogance of someone in the dominant group feeling qualified to determine the legitimacy of a minoritized group member’s reaction to oppression.”²⁷ The “burden of understanding,” they add, “should rest with the dominant group.”²⁸ Thus, just as Griswold argued, the actor denies the spectator the right to judge as a consequence of identity. If you are white, you cannot discuss race on equal terms with a black individual. You must defer to that individual’s greater knowledge, and not presume to disagree with

²⁵ Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of the Enlightenment*, 98-99.

²⁶ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 168.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

that individual's "reaction to oppression," since you have no knowledge of what he or she has experienced and suffered.

Absent is any account of how exactly one can shoulder the "burden of understanding" the minoritized individual's experience, since we have been "socialized" into different categories that—as the authors explicitly point out—limit what we can "see and understand about the world."²⁹ Consequently, the "understanding" DiAngelo and Sensoy advocate seems bound to resemble unconditional agreement rather than dialogue or compromise. It also seems to entail what Thomas Chatterton Williams calls "allyship," i.e. "silence and total repentance," and—DiAngelo and Sensoy would add—leveraging one's power (as a member of a dominant group) to achieve greater equality.³⁰

Scholar Archon Fung explains in detail how coercion and deliberation intersect in an excellent piece entitled "Deliberation before the Revolution: Toward an Ethics of Deliberative Democracy in an Unjust World." This piece merits an in-depth discussion because it argues compellingly how ostensibly democratic goals can require coercion, rather than simply asserting this connection. Fung is committed to the idea of deliberative democracy, which holds that, overall, the best political decisions are reached when there is robust deliberation among all the parties involved and their reasoned arguments about what would best serve the common good, or, as Fung puts it, "shared objectives . . . or values."³¹ Fung addresses a dilemma: deliberative democracy requires a great deal of

²⁹ Ibid., 54, 210.

³⁰ Ibid., 222; Thomas Chatterton Williams, "How Ta-Nehisi Coates Gives Whiteness Power."

³¹ Archon Fung, "Deliberation Before the Revolution: Toward an Ethics of Deliberative Democracy in an Unjust World." *Political Theory* 33, no. 3 (2005),

equality, because “inequities in resources, status, and other forms of privilege upset the communicative equality that deliberation requires.”³² However, we live in a world with significant inequality. Fung sets out to resolve that tension: what can believers in deliberative democracy do in a world with such inequality? The answer is something that Fung calls “deliberative activism.”³³ Fung argues that coercion can actually further the end of deliberation, if properly applied.³⁴

To clarify, I do not mean to suggest that social justice advocates of Sensoy and DiAngelo’s ilk espouse deliberative democracy. On the contrary, I think they differ fundamentally from Fung’s initial premises. For example, among the guiding principles of deliberative democracy, Fung lists “*fidelity*,” which includes fidelity to the “liberal society in which he lives.” The deliberative democrat views “contemporary institutions and practices as flawed but improvable” by means of “incremental improvement.” He is thus not a “revolutionary.”³⁵ Fung also lists “*charity*” as another core principle, a principle which “requires the deliberative activist to act as if his would-be interlocutors are willing to engage in good faith deliberation,” at least initially.³⁶ In contrast, Sensoy

401; Jennifer L. Eagan, “Deliberative Democracy,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, May 17, 2016, www.britannica.com/topic/deliberative-democracy.

³² Fung, “Deliberation before the Revolution,” 398.

³³ *Ibid.*, 399.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 402-403.

³⁶ Fung, “Deliberation before the Revolution,” 403; Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement: Why Moral Conflict Cannot Be Avoided in Politics, and What Should Be Done about It* (Cambridge, MA:

and DiAngelo seem to take a far more cynical view of the societies in which they live and also the motivations of their interlocutors; they are far more likely to dismiss the contributions of members of dominant groups on the grounds that they simply represent rationalizations of their unearned privilege and deeply unjust social arrangements. As we have seen, their classroom practices are a testament to their skepticism regarding deliberation.

Nevertheless, Fung's stance offers a useful comparison to that of Sensoy and DiAngelo, because of areas of agreement. Sensoy and DiAngelo do seek to "foster an environment wherein people from minoritized groups (and their allies) can voice their perspectives and have them listened to and taken seriously."³⁷ Their goal is not only to get minorities a metaphorical "seat at the table," but to restructure the table and its practices so as to give them a legitimate share in the conversation; mere numerical representation is not enough.³⁸ This harmonizes with Fung's own view: the creation of genuine deliberation among different groups (in Sensoy and DiAngelo's system, these are identity groups) by eradicating the background inequalities which jeopardize that deliberation. Both theories are deeply concerned with the problems of inequality and how that affects discourse. Second, it is useful to consider under what circumstances even the most faithful advocates of deliberation, those who believe it is the best practice for a democracy, are forced to acknowledge that coercion is necessary in order to set the stage

Harvard University Press, 1996), as cited in Fung, "Deliberation before the Revolution," 403.

³⁷ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Equal?*, 218.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

for genuine deliberation, and also when deliberation is no longer feasible. Thus, I would argue that these two philosophies are sufficiently analogous, as both have a similar goal and the same pressing concern.

In brief, Fung's solution, "deliberative activism," justifies coercion based on two variables. These variables are "the extent of background inequality and the presence of reciprocal will to deliberate."³⁹ Based on the presence or absence of these variables, Fung constructs four different situations. The first is when there is willingness to deliberate and relative equality. In such circumstances, only "communicative methods," not coercion, are permissible for the deliberative activist.⁴⁰ The second is when there is willingness to deliberate, but there are significant background inequalities. In that case, the inequality must be acknowledged and addressed, perhaps through procedural measures. The goal is to "*bracket the effect of these inequalities upon deliberation.*"⁴¹ The third situation is when there is both significant background inequality *and* a lack of will to negotiate. In this situation, after "persuasive appeals have been exhausted, the principle of proportionality allows nondeliberative forms of action in order to coerce unwilling parties to deliberate."⁴² This coercion can culminate in "civil disobedience."⁴³ The final situation is one Fung entitles "*Incorrigible Hostility.*"⁴⁴ In essence, whether due to one or the other

³⁹ Fung, "Deliberation Before the Revolution," 404.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 405-406.

⁴¹ Ibid., 406.

⁴² Ibid., 408.

⁴³ Ibid., 409.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 411.

variable, deliberation becomes impossible and the deliberative activist is “at liberty to engage with them [the entrenched opposition] using the full bargaining, negotiating, purchasing, protesting, and more militant confrontational tactics that are regulated by the ordinary nondeliberative ethics of pluralist regimes.”⁴⁵ In other words, the deliberative activist stops trying to persuade and instead tries to change the current arrangements through “muscular political mobilization—by social movements, political parties, or interest groups.”⁴⁶ Conflict, rather than deliberation, becomes the norm.

In effect, Sensoy and DiAngelo’s theory intensifies these two variables to an alarming extent. First, with respect to background inequality, their view of society is predicated upon extreme inequality among different groups. This inequality pervades every aspect of our lives, thoughts, and interactions. It is inescapable, and thus cannot be bracketed as Fung hopes in his second scenario. Second, with respect to the lack of will to deliberate, Sensoy and DiAngelo’s theory displays a lack of will on the part of both parties, both the oppressors and the oppressed. The oppressors are extremely invested in their own privilege and seek to stonewall any efforts to illuminate them. They dissemble and rationalize. And yet Sensoy and DiAngelo do not seem to value deliberation much either. Recall their classroom, in which they prefer silencing dominant narratives. They do not think the dominant-group students have a legitimate view on the common good worth sharing; rather, they are simply parroting a narrative that benefits themselves at the cost of minority groups.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 412; See also: 404.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 415-416.

Ultimately, a comparison of Fung's theory with that of Sensoy and DiAngelo reveals that the critical social justice framework uniquely lends itself to coercion or the outright rejection of genuine deliberation. Sensoy and DiAngelo's view of society seems to fall into either the third scenario, unwillingness to deliberate and significant inequality, or the last, incorrigible hostility. The first would entail coercion in the hope of future deliberation, the second would abandon deliberation altogether. Either way, a more contentious and warlike politics seems inevitable.

In conclusion, identity epistemology, especially the critical social justice variety, presents three different challenges for democracy. The first is that there is a disjuncture between identity epistemology, which seeks to equalize the voices of groups, and democracy, which seeks to equalize the voices of individuals. The second, argued by Mark Lilla, is that identity epistemology has an internal logical contradiction; it simultaneously says "You must understand me" and "You cannot understand me." Instead, Lilla argues that we should create a common vision for all citizens, regardless of their identities, in order to unite our democracy and hold power. That is what will best serve endangered minorities. The third difficulty is that, due to the epistemic privileging of the actor, as well the significant inequality and ill-will included in the social justice framework, identity epistemology seems likely to produce a less deliberative and more competitive or coercive politics.

As these last two chapters have shown, epistemology is far from an insular branch of knowledge. On the contrary, it influences much of how we view society, discourse, and democracy. Thomas Chatterton Williams has identified a further phenomenon that epistemology has influenced: morality. In a *New York Times* op-ed, Williams argues that

“identity epistemology, or knowing-through-being, somewhere along the line became identity ethics, or morality-through-being.”⁴⁷ Taking a cue from Williams, the next chapter of this thesis will discuss how identity politics has its own particular view of morality. And, as we shall see, this ethics of identity also has implications for our democracy.

⁴⁷ Thomas Chatterton Williams, “How Ta-Nehisi Coates Gives Whiteness Power.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Moral Framework of Identity Politics

In addition to its epistemological premises, identity politics possesses a moral dimension. In the realm of epistemology, sociological or demographic categories determine the limits of one's knowledge, and also confer special insight to minorities, creating a form of epistemological inequality. Similarly, in the realm of morality, demographic categories determine one's moral status and create a moral inequality in which members of minority groups, the oppressed, are morally superior to the dominant groups, the oppressors. This chapter will explore two separate but interrelated theories that explain this moral imbalance: (1) Molly McGrath's theory of "Sacrificial Politics" and (2) the critical social justice view of oppression, as exemplified (once again) by Sensoy and DiAngelo and explicated by Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff.

McGrath's main thesis is that *suffering* has made certain demographic categories sacred. She puts this in the form of a general principle, that suffering makes one sacred or holy, and that the sacred also demands suffering for its sake (sacrifice): "human beings naturally sense that suffering has the power to make sacred and grant wisdom and that the sacred warrants sacrifice and deference from us."¹ "Etymologically," McGrath explains, there is also a deep connection between these concepts: "the 'sacred' means 'holy' and

¹ Molly Brigid McGrath, "Social Justice Rites: Sacrificial Politics and Sacred Victims," *Law & Liberty*, Feb. 1, 2020, <https://lawliberty.org/forum/social-justice-rites-sacrificial-politics-sacred-victims/>.

‘cursed,’ just as the ‘blessed’ is ‘bloodied,’ ‘wounded.’”² Provided the suffering is dealt with properly, McGrath stipulates, “[e]xperiences of suffering” become “central to our identities because their lessons shape us profoundly.”³ Thus, there is actually a deep and intimate connection between suffering and a sacred identity. How does this relationship manifest itself in politics?

With a few alterations, the same process of sanctification unfolds in identity politics—those who have suffered have become sacred. For the purposes of identity politics, McGrath argues, the suffering in question must have been “a politically relevant type of suffering.”⁴ While McGrath does not explain exactly what that means, it seems that the usual minorities (African Americans, women, homosexuals, etc.) and their experiences of oppression can be assumed without violence being done to her thesis. The condition of political saliency being met, however, the same logic of sacredness applies: if their “suffering was a sociopolitical event,” then “the victims are socio-politically sacred.”⁵ Because African-Americans endured slavery, Jim Crow laws, and segregation, for example, their suffering has made them socio-politically sacred.

There is, however, one key difference that McGrath emphasizes: rather than the suffering individuals themselves being made sacred, that individual’s “demographic category” is instead made sacred.⁶ McGrath argues that, in identity politics, one has

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

suffered precisely *because of* one's demographic category (race, sexuality, etc.), and therefore it is the *category* which has become sacred.⁷ She makes this explicit: "it's the demographic categories (not the individuals) that are sacred."⁸ To return to the example of African-Americans, for example, McGrath's theory would argue that individual African-Americans are not necessarily sacred, but rather the entire category of "African-American" has been made sacred.

This *group* sacredness explains certain inconsistencies in the sacred logic of identity politics. First, it explains why "many people who have not suffered for being part of the demographic category are still held sacred (e.g., a collegiate lesbian from a wealthy Pious family)."⁹ Mere group membership is enough, since past suffering, undergone by others, has already rendered that group sacred. Second, it explains "why a person can invoke his or her sacred status by narrating the injustices other people in the category have suffered."¹⁰ By bolstering the grievance claims of one's group as a whole, one's own credibility is boosted regardless of individual merits. Third, it explains why individuals in those groups (whom McGrath labels "Defectors") who do not conform to the strictures of sacred politics lose their sacred status: "Defectors lose their sacredness because they no longer properly symbolize the group."¹¹ McGrath uses the example of

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

black conservatives.¹² One is reminded of Ben Carson and Clarence Thomas, for example, as well as the phenomenon of Uncle-Tomism discussed in the foregoing chapter. Individuals may defect, or be unworthy members of a given group, without the sacredness of the category being lost. This is similar to how, in the Roman Catholic religion, any number of priests or popes may involve themselves in scandal without tarnishing their sacred office itself in the eyes of the faithful.

Sacrificial politics, for McGrath, creates different *roles*, like positions in a game.¹³ To continue the analogy to Catholicism, one could also think of these as various “offices” to be performed by different individuals. The first role is that of the Sacred, those members of the long-suffering oppressed groups.¹⁴ Lest they become Defectors, the Sacred must actively take on their role and “represent their category by believing and advocating certain things.”¹⁵ The second role is that of the Pious, who must defer to the Sacred in matters that pertain to them; though “privileged” themselves, they nevertheless “recognize, honor, protect, and avenge the Sacred.”¹⁶ By properly deferring to the Sacred, they also regain a measure of moral respectability.¹⁷ The third role is that of the Profane, who are simply the privileged individuals who are not Pious.¹⁸ The final category is that

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

of the Blasphemers, who deny or even mock the sacredness of the Sacred class. They thereby commit “acts of desecration against the Sacred,” whether “by accident” or “on purpose.”¹⁹

McGrath discusses two major effects of Sacrificial Politics. The first is to give a “special authority” to the Sacred in their interactions with others: it is as if “the person is also handed a script and is surrounded by sanctions, where even allies are afraid to speak and benevolent disagreement remains silent.”²⁰ There is a special weight or authority to the words of the Sacred. The second is ritual sacrifices, in which “a Blasphemer gets publicly excoriated” for not treating the Sacred with due reverence.²¹ Typically, the punishment in these cases is more severe than the crime deserves, but that is precisely why, in McGrath’s opinion, they indicate the system of Sacrificial Politics at play: they are not punishments for the individual crime, but rather vehicles for “communal atonement” and “communal unity.”²² They are in fact compensating for a far vaster crime than they could have ever perpetrated by themselves. In short, blasphemers become scapegoats, “symbolic substitutes made to bear the punishment of the social structure and the individual injustices enabled by it.”²³ Their crime, in the view of their punishers, is to deny sanctity: it “is a crime against the sacred category as sacred, suggesting it’s not sacred, implicitly denying the suffering that made it so.” To question the authority of the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

Sacred is to question their sanctity, and therefore to question the basis of their sanctity, their oppression. This seems to be the most heinous crime that one can commit within sacrificial politics.

By teasing out these religious elements of identity politics, McGrath does not seek to ridicule sacrificial politics as “fake religion,” or even to critique its more fundamental sacred logic.²⁴ On the contrary, she argues that the principle “I hold sufferers of injustice sacred” is a “morally respectable” answer to the question “what shall we hold sacred?”²⁵ But she still believes that sacrificial politics is pernicious, for two reasons. The first is the leap that sacrificial politics makes from individual sufferers becoming sacred to the categories themselves becoming sacred. She is concerned that Sacrificial Politics scapegoats “stray Profane individuals,” but also that it “mistreats Sacred individuals, too, precisely by fetishizing them as sacred, and especially by doing so because of suffering.”²⁶ We see in them a source of moral sanctity, rather than real flesh-and-blood individuals, imperfect as we all are. At this point in McGrath’s argument, one is reminded of “tokenism,” essentially the practice of using a minority individual as a “token” of diversity or of political correctness. A “token black” or “token gay” brings value to the group purely because of their demographic category, not any contributions they might make as an individual—anyone with a similar “positionality” would do just as well.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

This brings us to the biggest problem McGrath sees with Sacrificial Politics: “the system emphasizes suffering too much.”²⁷ For McGrath, suffering certainly has its place, but it “is not some singular site of meaning in life,” nor “the primary driver of identity or sole source of wisdom.”²⁸ The key point here is that Sacrificial Politics’ suffering is *reductive*. It reduces one’s identity to a particular identity (African-Americans, homosexuals, etc.) which is in turn defined by suffering. Or as McGrath puts it, “Sacrificial politics defines people by their categories and defines their categories by suffering—glorifying it, gluing them to it.”²⁹ It is as if we are *limiting* minority individuals to their suffering. It can become a way to bracket or pigeon-hole them, to define them purely by reference to suffering.

In closing, McGrath returns to the fundamental relationship between suffering and sacredness, which is that suffering is *not* an end itself. If we *transcend* suffering, we are better for it; but we should not become fixated upon it. This, McGrath suggests, is the difference between fruitful, edifying suffering and mere trauma.³⁰ McGrath writes, “The key thing about suffering, though, is to get through it to something better.”³¹ That something better, she explains, includes “Joy.”³² She continues,

In the case of personal trauma and tragedy, that “getting through it” happens as the soul gradually reopens itself to mundane opportunities for joy face to face

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

with other people. A political community also needs that. Its health requires that the people enjoy living together, in everyday interactions, across the categories that distinguish them.³³

McGrath thus concludes that “an exclusive focus on suffering can distort a person’s identity” by exaggeration with ripple effects for the polity.³⁴

McGrath’s thesis causes one to question the wisdom of sanctifying entire demographic categories. First, as she suggests with the example of the collegiate lesbian, individuals are becoming sacred who have not necessarily suffered, or suffered in the same way that their group-level claims might predict. As always, one should be circumspect about applying group characteristics to any one individual within the group. To do otherwise would run the risk of the *ecological fallacy*, which results when we attribute group-level patterns to individuals within those groups.³⁵ If suffering is the key driver of sanctity in this framework, then we should be leery of those who try to claim the mantle of sanctity without ever enduring the suffering.

Second, McGrath reminds us that even if suffering has the *potential* to make something sacred, transcendence—growth after suffering—is still required and necessary for a healthy view of suffering. This qualification, in turn, reminds us that responses to suffering are deeply personal and individual, and what may have been a sanctifying and wisdom-granting experience for one person may have been an embittering, stunting experience for another. In short, the requirement of transcendence *re-individualizes* the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See John J. Hsieh, "Ecological Fallacy," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 4, 2017, www.britannica.com/science/ecological-fallacy.

relationship between suffering and sanctity, because each individual responds to suffering differently, some for good and some for ill.

One thinks here of military veterans. War, often called the “baptism of fire,” has indeed forged many great leaders and great individuals. But it has also stunted and maimed many more. In a sense, we like to treat all veterans as members of a sacred class. We might, for example, respectfully stay in our airline seats while a group of such veterans deplanes. Nevertheless, I think we also exercise common sense in our view of veterans. We might listen especially carefully to those veterans who have acquitted themselves well and seem to show wisdom and insight. However, we also know that some veterans are severely traumatized and suffer from PTSD; some perhaps cope with their trauma by means of alcohol or other substance addictions. We treat these veterans differently—with *pity*. We fully acknowledge the suffering that they have experienced, but that suffering does not actually confer the moral authority that Sacrificial Politics would predict.

Much the same seems to apply with identity categories. For example, Americans have long been inspired by African-Americans who have evidently transcended their oppression and become better for it. Think of Frederick Douglass’s *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Or consider Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*. Or consider the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., who eschewed resentment and called for racial equality through common humanity. What all of these famous figures have in common is *transcendence*. They have not been stunted or stultified by their experiences with racial oppression. On the contrary, they have grown and flourished and gained wisdom and insight. Consequently, they have earned the

respect and reverence in which they are held. In short, McGrath's duly qualified view of suffering allows us to fully acknowledge the suffering that minorities have endured in America, while still cautioning against making that suffering their sole or most politically salient characteristic and against applying it indiscriminately to groups while forgetting the role of the individual in transcendence.

For the purposes of this chapter, however, the most important implication of McGrath's analysis is the *moral inequality* that stems from sacrificial politics. Because of suffering, certain demographic categories have an elevated moral status and special authority over others. They command the respect of the Pious, and in tandem with the Pious (although it seems that the Pious often do this on their own initiative) punish Blasphemers and the Profane, who are on a morally inferior plane.

Original sin is a fruitful analogy for this type of moral inequality. McGrath argues that while the Profane feel the "guilt of others in their category," it is not "actual guilt for actual sins," but rather an "*inherited ontological state like original sin*" (emphasis added).³⁶ The Pious, by virtue of their given (not chosen) demographic identity, are still born sinful, as in original sin. But on the individual level, they have contradictory emotions. While they have "shame" that comes from their avowed privilege, they also have "a deep conviction of their own purity."³⁷ Consequently, they seek atonement by helping punish Blasphemers, and thus their "group guilt displays their personal blamelessness."³⁸ So while a white male progressive may have been born white, and thus

³⁶ McGrath, "Social Justice Rites."

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

may acknowledge that he was born with “privilege” and the moral stain that comes with that label, McGrath would argue that he likely also feels implicitly holier or purer than others in his category, and seeks to demonstrate that through displays of social justice zeal.

How might this moral inequality impact democracy? To begin with, it must be stipulated that no one would maintain that everyone in a democracy is morally equal, or that complete moral equality is necessary for a functioning democracy. However, McGrath does identify one feature of sacrificial politics that seems clearly problematic for democracy: that same shift from making individual sufferers sacred to making entire demographic categories sacred. Now, based purely on a few characteristics, one can *identify*, perhaps even point to, who is Sacred and who is Profane, who has authority to speak and who should be silent. Vast swathes of the population are therefore placed on uneven moral footing in a conspicuous way. This raises a fairly obvious question: if we know who is moral and who is immoral, why should we give the immoral ones an equal say in our government? This question is so simple that it may appear naïve, but it bears mentioning that our political representatives and neighbors will lose their dignity and legitimacy if we view them as functionally immoral.³⁹ This is an issue that will reappear in the next chapter of this thesis.

McGrath’s thesis is predicated upon the relationship between suffering and sanctity. But how might an advocate of the critical social justice view of society, with its power dynamics working through various identity groups, view the relationship between

³⁹ On the question of moral legitimacy, see Shelby Steele, *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (2006; repub., New York: Harper Perennial, 2007).

identity and one's moral status? The answer to this question is best explained by Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, who describe the legacy of Marxist theory in how some view society: "Within this paradigm, when power is perceived to be held by one group over others, there is a moral polarity: the groups seen as powerful are bad, while the groups seen as oppressed are good."⁴⁰ In other words, power inequality creates a moral inequality in which the power-holders are immoral and the powerless are morally superior.

I argue that Haidt and Lukianoff's account accurately describes the relationship between power and morality in critical social justice theory. Sensoy and DiAngelo describe "Oppression" as "Prejudice + Power."⁴¹ In their schema, some "*dominant* (or agent)" groups oppress other "*minoritized* (or target)" groups.⁴² It is not that some groups are more prejudiced than others. On the contrary, every group is inclined to view its own members as superior to others: "All people have prejudice and discriminate," they explain.⁴³ When it comes to prejudice, then, their view seems to maintain moral equality.

However, not every group has the power to "enforce" their prejudices, to structure society so that it benefits them ("privilege") and disadvantages rival groups: "only the dominant group has the social, historical, and institutional power to back their prejudice

⁴⁰ Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (2018; repub., New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 64.

⁴¹ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 84.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 89.

and infuse it throughout the entire society.”⁴⁴ Thus, while in some sense any group could become oppressors if they have power, in reality the categories of “oppressor” and “oppressed” have already been fixed due to events and socialization that happened far in the past. The categories are “not fluid and do not flip back and forth.”⁴⁵ For example, straight white men have been oppressors throughout history, and remain so today; African-Americans, homosexuals, and women have been oppressed and remain so today.

This view of oppression is the theoretical underpinning of the controversial attitude that “black people can’t be racist,” a phrase that one hears in contemporary society. According to critical social justice theory, because only whites have power, only they can be racist, since racism is a form of oppression; that is why terms like “reverse racism” and “reverse sexism” are “misnomers” in Sensoy and DiAngelo’s view.⁴⁶ African-Americans can have prejudice and discriminate, but they cannot be racist. In essence, their discrimination is isolated and impotent, unlike the systematic and crushing oppression exerted by their white counterparts; the two are not “comparable,” Sensoy and DiAngelo claim.⁴⁷ Sensoy and DiAngelo essentially redefine these terms, since having racial prejudice and discriminating upon it constitutes what most laymen mean by “racism.” Nevertheless, their redefinition underscores how power adds an additional moral element; only some groups can be oppressors because they have power. Power thus creates a moral polarity, just as Haidt and Lukianoff assert.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 84, 89.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 88.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 88-89.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 88.

Indeed, within this schema, there seems to be a strong background supposition that inequality of outcome, in nearly any form, is wrong. The “justice” in “social justice” is virtually synonymous with “equality,” or perhaps “equity.”⁴⁸ This is especially true when it comes to power. Because power is such a zero-sum game, any power that one has comes at the expense of weaker groups. There is no notion that an uneven distribution of power is a natural (or perhaps even beneficial) state of affairs, or even that those granted power should exercise it benevolently rather than disavowing it.

At first glance, being an “ally” might seem like an exception to this last rule, since it requires that the privileged use their power to lift up the oppressed. However, allyship requires a recognition that even having the power in the first place is wrong. The attitude is something like “I have been unjustly given this power but I am going to (still unjustly) wield it for a more just outcome,” which veers uncomfortably close to a simpler idiom: “two wrongs make a right.” This is far different from another attitude that says “I have justly (or at least in a morally neutral way) been given this power, and I now have the duty to wield it for greater justice.” In this latter, more traditional way of viewing power, the powerful are judged by the use they make of their power. In the social justice worldview, they are judged for merely having the power in the first place.

Of course, there are clearly examples where one group should not necessarily have power over another. Few would advocate racial paternalism, for example. But what about “adultism,” a form of oppression that Sensoy and DiAngelo allude to?⁴⁹ Do adults

⁴⁸ See Robin J. DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 79-80.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

have a natural and justifiable power over youths, or is this just another form of oppression that we have been socialized to accept? What about “abilism”? Should the able feel that they have been unfairly given a power over the disabled, in large part because society has been structured for able people? Or should they instead feel innocent for being born able, but still charitably use the advantages of ableness to help disabled people? The latter seems impossible in the critical social justice framework, wherein the mere possession of power over others is wrong and indicative of an unjust society, regardless of how it is exercised.

To further explore how power dynamics create a moral polarity, let us now turn to Robin DiAngelo’s best-selling book, *White Fragility*, which examines racism in America. In many ways, this book summarizes in a more accessible way the critical social justice tenets of *Is Everyone Really Equal?* and associated literature. For our purposes, however, it is most helpful because it couches these tenets in more explicitly moral language and gives a clearer sense of how these ideas function on the level of the individual.

The main thesis of *White Fragility* is that white Americans benefit from a society structured for their interests, and they remain resistant (or “fragile”) in the face of people who try to explain this structural racism to them. As the critical social justice framework would predict, DiAngelo sees society as possessing a “racial hierarchy,” in which white people are on top. Because society is structured for white people, they are “insulated from racial stress” and lack the “racial stamina” to deal with racial issues.⁵⁰ When anybody presents the reality of our racist society or their complicity in it, white people respond

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1, 14.

with a number of “defensive responses,” such as “anger, fear, and guilt” along with “argument, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation.”⁵¹ All of these are ways to avoid responsibility, but they are also self-serving tactics. They “work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance.”⁵² This entire process of deflecting challenges in order to maintain dominance is what is meant by the term “*white fragility*.”⁵³ Thus, this fragility is not actually a sign of weakness, but of power.⁵⁴

This fragile defense is primarily the result of socialization; we have been indoctrinated into racism by the society in which we live. DiAngelo writes of herself, for example: “I know that because I was socialized as white in a racism-based society, I have a racist worldview, deep racial bias, racist patterns, and investments in the racist system that has elevated me.”⁵⁵ However, she continues to say that because she “didn’t choose this socialization, and it could not be avoided,” she does not “feel guilty about racism.”⁵⁶ This is a significant theme in the book: that while racism is itself a moral issue, we must transcend the idea that it is an *individual* moral issue; it is rather a system-wide moral issue for which nobody is personally responsible. Indeed, guilt is actually a symptom of white fragility (see the quotation above). DiAngelo thinks that an attitude that racism is

⁵¹ Ibid., 2.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 149.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

an individual moral failing is detrimental to combatting racism: “The simplistic idea that racism is limited to individual intentional acts committed by unkind people is at the root of virtually all white defensiveness on this topic.”⁵⁷ She calls this idea the “good/bad binary.”⁵⁸ Her point is that, if we see racism as a characteristic of evil, then we will refuse to see ourselves as racist, which (in her worldview) we all are. It thus gets in the way of confronting racism. If this is DiAngelo’s stance, why then does this thesis argue that her framework creates a moral equality?

To answer this question, we must first further elucidate DiAngelo’s view of morality. It must be noted that DiAngelo argues that she is “not saying that you [the white readers] are immoral.”⁵⁹ But by this she means that your racism is not “conscious” or intentional.⁶⁰ This is certainly one definition of morality; it applies to those actions (and sometimes thoughts and beliefs) that are conscious and intentional and thus somehow have the consent of the will.

However, I argue that DiAngelo’s view of “whiteness” is still laden with moral content, no matter how unconscious it may seem. For example, towards the end of the book DiAngelo briefly addresses those anti-racists who wish to “develop a positive white identity.” DiAngelo argues that this is a lost cause: “a positive white identity is an impossible goal. White identity is inherently racist; white people do not exist outside the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

system of white supremacy.”⁶¹ Our response to this, she further argues, should not be to “stop identifying as white” in favor of other identities (like being “Italian or Irish”), since this would be to “deny the reality of racism in the here and now.”⁶² She calls this response “color-blind racism,” but presumably it would also fall under the umbrella category of white fragility.⁶³

Rather, DiAngelo argues that our response should be to be “less white.”⁶⁴ What does being less white entail? “To be less white is to be less racially oppressive,” she explains.⁶⁵ Notice the word “less” in both quotations. It seems that, in DiAngelo’s worldview, a white person can never be wholly free of “whiteness”—they can only strive to be *less* white. This entails positive action: engaging in a wide array of “less oppressive patterns,” like forming relationships with minorities and making sure to “break with white silence and white solidarity.”⁶⁶ First, one must “accept” that one has “racist patterns.”⁶⁷ Then, one must strive to “ameliorate” them through remedial actions.⁶⁸

A comparison with the Marxist tradition of thought can help illuminate DiAngelo’s background assumptions about morality and its relationship to power. In

⁶¹ Ibid., 149.

⁶² Ibid., 149.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

particular, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers a succinct and quite overtly moral description of oppression that harmonizes with DiAngelo's idea of whiteness. Freire's thought is primarily informed by his work educating Brazilian peasants in the post-colonial era; his work inspired a lower-class movement for agrarian reform.⁶⁹

In Freire's worldview, a system of oppression is detrimental and dehumanizing to both the oppressed *and* the oppressors. Thus, the goal of "humanization" is best served by abolishing the dichotomy or system of oppression altogether.⁷⁰ He writes, "As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves become dehumanized."⁷¹ Consequently, it is not only a moral obligation but actually a "gesture of love" for the oppressed to overthrow their oppressors.⁷² However, these triumphant rebels should not become oppressors themselves, "simply changing poles."⁷³ On the contrary, they must "resolve the contradiction in which they are caught," by which Freire means ending the conflict between the two groups.⁷⁴ They must abolish the oppressed/oppressor dichotomy altogether by ending the oppression. Out of this dissolution of oppression, Freire argues in a rather grandiose phrase, comes "the new man: neither oppressor nor

⁶⁹ Tristan McCowan, "Landless Workers Movement," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Nov. 22, 2016, www.britannica.com/event/Landless-Workers-Movement; Editors, "Paulo Freire," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Sept. 15, 2020, www.britannica.com/biography/Paulo-Freire.

⁶⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970; repub., London: Penguin UK, 2017), 17.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 30; 20n2.

oppressed, but man in the process of liberation.”⁷⁵ The ultimate goal of the oppressed should be to *transcend* the oppression.

The powerful moral appeal of Freire’s framework can be seen if we think of an oppressive labor system, such as antebellum chattel slavery, a South American *latifundia*, or perhaps the feudal system of Medieval Europe. The problem with these systems is not primarily individual moral culpability. It is conceivable, for example, that some southern slave owners were kind and compassionate towards their slaves; others were undoubtedly cruel and exploitative. Many likely inherited slaves or grew up in a society in which slavery was the norm; they did not seek slave ownership out or “choose” it in the normal sense of the word.

Nevertheless, there is clearly something morally wrong and reprehensible with the whole system of oppression, even if these *individuals* do not bear moral culpability for that whole system, but likely only for a few individual manifestations of it. In a Freirian framework, such a system is itself dehumanizing for the slaves, and it is dehumanizing for the slave owners. The best moral outcome would be to abolish this system altogether, and allow the slave-owners and slaves to relate to each other not in terms of the oppressed/oppressor, slave-owner/slave dichotomy but as free and equal individuals. Indeed, if we consider deeply the inhumanity of slavery, we might even begin to understand Freire’s most radical claim: that a slave rebellion, or the entire Civil War, because it results in the end of this dehumanizing and immoral institution, could be a gesture of love.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 30.

With a few exceptions, this seems to be how DiAngelo views “whiteness.” Race, for DiAngelo, is a social construct; it does not really exist.⁷⁶ The reason that we relate to one another as “white” and “black” (or “people of color” more generally) is because we are stuck in a Freirian “contradiction.” Hence her assertion that white people do not exist outside of a system of racial oppression. Whiteness is therefore inherently evil, because whiteness by definition comes from being a racial oppressor of “black” people. This also explains why white people, though in one sense inherently moral evil, are nevertheless not “immoral” in the usual sense of the word: their position in the racial hierarchy is not a conscious choice or action, but the result of an unjust system. “Privilege,” though a problematic concept in many ways, is a fairly apt term for this unearned advantage.

However, DiAngelo does equivocate slightly on the question of how intentional (and thus “immoral” in one sense of the term) white racism is. In one chapter of the book, for example, DiAngelo criticizes white people who see themselves as “innocent of race.”⁷⁷ What she means by “racial innocence” is complicated, but it includes ignoring the “power we now wield and have wielded for centuries” to oppress minorities, and, interrelatedly, the idea that “privilege” is something passive, something that we “are just handed.”⁷⁸ On the contrary, DiAngelo argues there are “systematic dimensions of racism that must be *actively* and passively, *consciously* and unconsciously, maintained” (emphasis added).⁷⁹ In this passage, then, DiAngelo argues that we are in fact not

⁷⁶ Robin J. DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 5; 15-19.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 62-64.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

innocent or blind participants in a system of racial oppression; while in some respects we can be ignorant and thus (to an extent) innocent, in other ways we continue to consciously and actively perpetuate it as well and therefore are not innocent.

Furthermore, the reality of an unjust society creates a moral imperative, demonstrating that this a moral issue and not merely a technical one about restructuring power dynamics. DiAngelo's purpose in writing *White Fragility* is to "challenge racism," primarily by making the "white collective," and in particular "white progressives," realize their own racism.⁸⁰ DiAngelo acknowledges that, as a white person, she is speaking from a place of privilege. However, she asserts that she has to use her privilege in the service of this cause: "To not use my position this way is to uphold racism, and that is unacceptable; it is a "both/and" that I must live with."⁸¹ Again, this quotation indicates the somewhat paradoxical nature of exercising unjust power for greater justice. However, the main takeaway is that the power creates a responsibility to challenge racism, the unjust status quo.

Other passages echo this moral obligation. For example, DiAngelo writes that she aims "for a less white identity for my own liberation and sense of *justice*, not to save people of color" (emphasis added).⁸² Later, she reiterates this idea: "In the end, my actions are driven by my own need for *integrity*, not a need to correct or change someone else" (emphasis added).⁸³ From these quotations, it is clear that there is fundamentally

⁸⁰ Ibid., xiv-xv; 5.

⁸¹ Ibid., xv.

⁸² Ibid., 150.

⁸³ Ibid., 151.

something unjust with the white-dominated state of affairs, and that it is therefore morally incumbent upon white people to remedy this situation. Their actions should be motivated by a sense of justice and integrity, not necessarily any positive effects it may have, like helping suffering people of color or changing the minds of complicit white people. (Ironically, the latter is her stated purpose in writing the book; this quotation instead suggests that she did so primarily to ease her own conscience.⁸⁴) Confronting one's own racism and making changes is almost a deontological moral imperative within this framework. As in Freire's schema, it seems that the oppression itself is so morally repugnant that, as soon as one is made aware of it, one must act to change it for the sake of both the oppressor and the oppressed.

Based on these similarities with Freire's framework, we might hypothesize that DiAngelo's goal would be the resolution of the contradiction and ultimately a race-less system in which white and black Americans are equal. The reality, however, is a little bit more complicated. It is true that DiAngelo urges the white reader to challenge the oppressive system in which whites have advantages over blacks. However, there are also two key differences that ultimately make DiAngelo's framework more intractable and problematic than Freire's.

First, Freire was responding to more *external* forms of oppression, primarily oppressive labor systems.⁸⁵ While he does stress internalized oppression, he still sees oppression primarily as an external relationship that needs to be shrugged off.⁸⁶ If one is

⁸⁴ Ibid., xiv-xv, 4-5.

⁸⁵ See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 20.

⁸⁶ See Ibid., 32, 35.

born a slave-owner, for example, one can set those slaves free and thus remove oneself from the contradiction. Prior to the Civil War, for example, a great many white Americans did not own slaves and supported the cause of abolition. It is difficult to say how these individuals could be termed “oppressors” with respect to slavery. When it comes to race and other identity issues, however, the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy is more innate. One inherits “whiteness” by simply being born white in a racialized society. There is no choice involved, and one cannot abdicate this position of privilege. It is a common criticism of the critical social justice framework that it ends up re-essentializing race.⁸⁷ Compared to Freire’s framework, we can now more clearly see why this is. Second, it is unclear in DiAngelo’s worldview if we can ever actually resolve the contradiction and move into a post-racial society. Both Sensoy and DiAngelo argue that *perceiving* racial (and other identity) differences is innate, as is the discrimination based upon them.⁸⁸ They seem to think that we can more equally distribute power among these groups, and thus prevent oppression, but it seems exceedingly doubtful that we can ever have Freire’s “new man,” who identifies neither as white nor black. In fact, as we have seen, they would likely say that such a sentiment reflects color-blind racism and a denial of the ever-present racial oppression in our society.

Thus, I argue that, once again, Christianity’s tenet of original sin proves a more accurate comparison. How does a white person become “white,” in the sense of possessing “whiteness”? Simply by being born white into a racist society. Upon being

⁸⁷ See Thomas Chatterton Williams, “How Ta-Nehisi Coates Gives Whiteness Power,” for an excellent example.

⁸⁶ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, xiii; Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 79-81.

born, racist patterns are inevitably ingrained into that person. This is very similar to original sin, in which humans are held to be born into an inherently sinful state as a result of the sin of Adam. Like one's whiteness, one must first accept this sinfulness and acknowledge the need for salvation through Jesus Christ. One can remove the stain of original sin by being baptized, but original sin will still result in sinful proclivities. Consequently, every Christian will still sin while still striving to be holier. Similarly, one may have an anti-racist epiphany and try to be "less white," but one will be fighting a losing battle and will inevitably make mistakes and engage in racist behavior—some unintentional, some not. Like the battle against our sinful nature, "Interrupting the forces of racism is ongoing, lifelong work."⁸⁹ The most glaring dissimilarity between the Christian view of original sin and DiAngelo's worldview, of course, is that Christianity offers salvation despite one's sinfulness, whereas DiAngelo's schema seems to rely on the rightness of fighting a losing battle without the hope of salvation.⁹⁰ Another important dissimilarity, more important for the purposes of this thesis, is that original sin applies equally to all of humankind, whereas white guilt and its corresponding fragility only applies to white people.

Ultimately, then, I argue that DiAngelo's worldview results in a profound moral inequality between white people and people of color. On the one hand, DiAngelo would argue that white people are not born inherently immoral. On the other hand, she would maintain that they are born inherently oppressive and are complicit in the oppression of people of color. Indeed, it seems fair to her thesis to say that white people are inherently

⁸⁹ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 9.

⁹⁰ See DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 150-151.

perpetrators of injustice. Once they are aware of this, it is morally incumbent upon them to try to stop being so, an impossible task that nevertheless demands their utmost attention and effort. This is a profoundly moral, even quasi-religious, project.

In conclusion, identity politics can create a moral inequality that corresponds to its epistemological inequality. This chapter has examined two different justifications of this moral inequality. The first is Molly McGrath's theory of Sacrificial Politics, in which suffering has sanctified certain oppressed minorities. The second is the critical social justice view of politics, in which identity groups dominate other groups. As Lukianoff and Haidt argue, this creates a power polarity that in turn generates a moral polarity. And while moral inequality among people is nothing new at an individual level, the linkage of these moral qualities to (often clearly identifiable) identity groups is a new development. The next chapter will argue that these moral premises, along with the epistemological premises previously discussed, combine to create a Marcusean political framework that is hostile to democracy.

CHAPTER FIVE

Moral and Epistemological Implications for Democracy: Marcusean Democracy

The preceding chapters have argued that identity politics, particularly in its critical social justice form, presupposes epistemological and moral inequality among demographic groups—presuppositions which pose a challenge to democracy. This final chapter will further illustrate the undemocratic implications of these premises by comparing them with a famously undemocratic tract, Herbert Marcuse’s 1965 essay “Repressive Tolerance.” The chapter will argue that critical social justice theory closely mirrors Marcuse’s starting premises and, moreover, seems to arrive at some of the same undemocratic conclusions.

Marcuse’s central thesis is that, due to the inequality present in contemporary society, “abstract” or “pure” tolerance, tolerance that “refrains from picking sides,” would only serve to reinforce a repressive status quo, and therefore could be termed “repressive tolerance.”¹ What was needed instead was “discriminating tolerance,” the ability to distinguish between speech, ideas, and movements that should be encouraged and those which should be stifled.² In essence, Marcuse embraced the paradox of tolerance: in order to have a state of tolerance, society must be *intolerant* towards the intolerant, those who jeopardize the preconditions for “abstract” tolerance and therefore

¹ Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (1965; repub. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 85, 88.

² *Ibid.*, 119.

make a mockery of it in the present day. In its most simple formulation, the side which Marcuse thinks needs to be supported is the political left, whereas the side that needs to be stifled is the political right.³ Undergirding this argument are two central claims, one moral and one epistemological, which resemble those discussed in the preceding chapters.

The first claim is an *epistemological claim*. In brief, Marcuse argues that pure tolerance actually presupposes that all citizens have access to true information and are able to make up their own minds, free from external influences. He posits that “the people must be capable of deliberating and choosing on the basis of knowledge, that they must have access to authentic information, and that, on this basis, their evaluation must be the result of autonomous thought.”⁴ Marcuse demonstrates this by reference to John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, a famous defense of freedom of speech and thought.

Marcuse analyzes Mill’s argument, but surprisingly uses it to argue *against* toleration. He emphasizes one of Mill’s caveats, which is that freedom ought only to apply for “those in the maturity of their faculties”: a caveat that applies to children but also to those whom those Mill called “barbarians,” as opposed to civilized peoples, those further down the road of progress.⁵ Many would balk at this latter distinction, but Marcuse seems to endorse it and to extend it to the present day—the preconditions of freedom of speech and thought have yet to be met; the democratic citizens of today have

³ Ibid., 109.

⁴ Ibid., 95.

⁵ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (1859; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 9-10; See Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” 86.

not yet reached sufficient intellectual maturity.⁶ Following from this line of thought, Marcuse suggests that, implicitly, Mill believes that “free and equal discussion can fulfill the function attributed to it only if it is *rational*—expression and development of independent thinking, free from indoctrination, manipulation, extraneous authority.”⁷ Marcuse suggests that we have not yet met the conditions for truly rational public deliberation; there is a level of intellectual and epistemological progress that must be met before we can engage in it. Or as Marcuse puts it, “The conditions under which tolerance can again become a liberating and humanizing force have still to be created.”⁸

Why is contemporary society not ready for pure tolerance? The reason is that society is unjustly structured and dominated by a nefarious ruling class, a “democracy with totalitarian organization.”⁹ (At another point, he speaks vaguely of “particular interests which control the whole.”¹⁰) In other words, present-day democracy is only nominally ruled by the people; in reality, it is controlled by an elite class. Marcuse also makes it clear that this ruling class constitutes the political Right.¹¹ These elites have manipulated the people into a state of confusion as to their true interests: “the false consciousness has become the general consciousness,” as Marcuse puts it.¹² Amid such

⁶ Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” 87.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 107-109.

¹² *Ibid.*, 110.

mental manipulation, then, people have not yet reached the Millian “maturity of their faculties.” On the contrary, they are products of their coercive environment, and thus unable to take advantage of the tolerance that they are afforded. “The people exposed to this impartiality are no *tabulae rasae*, they are indoctrinated by the conditions under which they live and think and *which they do not transcend*” (latter emphasis added).¹³ Their freedom to think and to reason has been quashed by an oppressive society that has effectively brainwashed them.

Indeed, Marcuse seems to go further than merely saying that tolerance is impotent within this oppressive framework; he suggests that it is in fact *counterproductive* and detrimental. This is primarily because (as we shall presently see) it serves the current oppressive system, and “favors and fortifies the conservation of the status quo of inequality and discrimination.”¹⁴ Because these elites determine the ground-rules for tolerance, the function of tolerance, and any progress that may arise from it, will most likely further their own interests.¹⁵ Marcuse also suggests that the appearance of tolerance serves to legitimize this unjust regime by deceiving onlookers about its true intolerance.¹⁶

However, there is also a larger epistemological reason why tolerance is counterproductive. Marcuse casts this reason (in Marxian language) as the “*neutralization* of opposites.”¹⁷ He uses two quite striking examples. The first has to do

¹³ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴ Ibid., 123.

¹⁵ Ibid., 93-94.

¹⁶ Ibid., 83-85.

¹⁷ Ibid., 98.

with war. He writes, “For example, thesis: we work for peace; antithesis: we prepare for war (or even: we wage war); unification of opposites: preparing for war *is* working for peace.”¹⁸ Instead of seeing the inconsistency in the doctrines that they have been spoon-fed, the people accept a self-contradictory conclusion and the associated cognitive dissonance, thereby allowing the regime to continue its unjust warmongering. Another example that Marcuse uses is a magazine that balances out a positive story about the FBI (which Marcuse seems to see as an oppressive institution) with a negative one.¹⁹ Marcuse states that, although in one sense impartiality has governed this decision, “chances are that the positive wins because the image of the institution is deeply engraved in the mind of the people.”²⁰ In a tie, the status quo seems to win. Marcuse suggests that this is due to indoctrination, but one wonders if that is simply how human beings think—we tend to accommodate new information into our current mental frameworks and worldviews, rather than discarding those frameworks abruptly.

What would have been actual truth-telling in this latter situation, Marcuse suggests, is to vocalize the “accusation in the facts themselves” rather than “minimize or even absolve prevailing intolerance and suppression” by refraining from judgment.²¹ In other words, it seems that Marcuse wants the *moral truth* to be told just as much as the factual truth.²² False neutrality, in short, seems to undercut the very nature of truth itself,

¹⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹⁹ Ibid., 98.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² See Ibid., 98.

leaving the *demos* insensitive to those truths which might inspire them to change the unjust status quo.²³ Another way to put this is that the presentation of opposing viewpoints actually gives the illusion that these viewpoints are being addressed and accommodated, but they lose their power to effect change.²⁴ Consequently, Marcuse suggests that we should abandon this false neutrality: contemporary democratic citizens should “get information slanted in the opposite direction.”²⁵ In other words, Marcuse takes issue with the idea that “there are two sides to every story.” He would likely say that there may indeed be two sides, but that the truth (that is, the truth that serves liberation) lies far closer to one side than the other. Consequently, it would be better for the people to receive that more truthful half-picture than the whole picture, which would obscure the larger truth altogether.

Marcuse’s view of knowledge is similar in many ways to the more recent critical social justice view of knowledge advanced by Sensoy and DiAngelo. In this intellectual framework, to recapitulate briefly, society is dominated by identifiable groups (whites, men, etc.) with firmly entrenched interests. These groups promote *ideology* by permeating the whole of society with ideas that serve their interests. These ideas are then internalized by the marginalized groups, such that they espouse the ideas of their oppressors. Furthermore, Sensoy and DiAngelo’s view of knowledge is undergirded by *positionality*, the idea that our demographic identity determines what we can know and

²³ See *Ibid.*, 96-97.

²⁴ See *Ibid.*, 96-97.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

that we cannot transcend it. As we have seen, this makes it even easier to dismiss certain opinions.

In addition to this epistemological argument regarding the nature of knowledge and its relationship to democracy, Marcuse's argument also makes a *moral claim*. In essence, Marcuse saw the contemporary state as oppressive, as denying the full liberation and humanity of its citizens. This essentially functions as a moral condemnation. Marcuse writes, "When tolerance mainly serves the protection and preservation of a repressive society, when it serves to neutralize opposition and to render men immune against other and better forms of life, then tolerance has been perverted."²⁶ In short, if the status quo is immoral, then it is a moral imperative to foster that which might *change* the status quo. Justice, or fairness, within the present society is of less concern than promoting the conditions under which that unjust regime might be overthrown. Marcuse writes, "the ways should not be blocked on which a subversive majority could develop, and if they are blocked by organized repression and indoctrination, *their reopening may require apparently undemocratic means*" (emphasis added).²⁷ Marcuse's theory thus veers close to an "ends-justify-the-means" mentality, or, perhaps more specifically, the common attitude of political firebrands who claim that there will be justice after the revolution, but not before.

According to Rodney Fopp, a common criticism of Marcuse's argument is that it is elitist, since his theory requires some sort of an intellectual elite who will judge what

²⁶ Ibid., 111.

²⁷ Ibid., 100.

speech, movements, etc. to repress and what to promote.²⁸ While such a discerning elite may be necessitated by Marcuse's argument *in practice*, in theory Marcuse actually settles on an incredibly simple, even simplistic, rule of thumb: "Liberating tolerance, then, would mean intolerance against movements from the Right, and toleration of movements from the Left."²⁹ Marcuse thinks that, if one looks at history, the violence perpetrated by subversive groups on the left (such as the violence attending the Cuban Revolution and Mao's communist revolution in China) has evidently served the cause of human liberation, while violence perpetrated by status quo powers (like fascists and Nazis) has manifestly not.³⁰ Thus, we can "rationally and on empirical grounds" say that the Left is the side of progress, whereas the Right is historically oppressive.³¹

This argument seems circular. Marcuse's chief criterion is "progress in civilization," by which he means something like "an increase in the scope of freedom and justice, and a better and more equitable distribution of misery and oppression."³² *Equality*, or rather progress thereto, seems to be one of the main moral goals implicit in this definition. I would like to suggest that if this is one's criterion, then almost necessarily one will favor the Left over the Right. This is not because of any innate

²⁸ Rodney Fopp, "Herbert Marcuse's 'Repressive Tolerance' and His Critics," *Borderlands* 6, no. 1 (2007), go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&issn=14470810&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA169458012&sid=googleScholar&linkaccess=abs.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 107-109.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

³² *Ibid.*, 107.

superiority, but because it seems that Marcuse has already implicitly defined the Left as the force of change, and the Right as the party of the status quo.³³

Many have conceptualized the Left-Right divide in these terms, with the two parties representing something like change and stasis, progress and order. While this description has some explanatory power, it is too simplistic. Factually, it is inaccurate because both sides wish to defend some things and change others; the current American Left, for example, wants to *preserve* (and expand) the New Deal and Great Society welfare state in the face of conservative efforts to reform it. For their part, the current American Right wants to *change* our system of taxation, often to make it less progressive and to promote business.

From a moral standpoint, this also functions as a false dichotomy. First, it often assumes that the Left cannot support change that is bad, and therefore not “progress” but actually a moral “regress.” Second, it assumes that those on the Right are *indiscriminate* defenders of the status quo, even when it is unjust. Finally, people often defend the Right because they want to pursue *other goods* for which the status quo is conducive, rather than simply progress—which often takes the form of expanding existing goods to new people that were previously excluded. The preservation of existing goods is itself a moral endeavor. To put it simply, the conservative standpoint can often be summarized as trying to save the proverbial baby from being thrown out with the bathwater. Most would agree that a balance of both progress and conservation is desirable. But Marcuse’s exclusive focus on progress precludes him from seeing the value in conservatism, and

³³ See *Ibid.*, 106-110.

leads him to make absurd black-and-white characterizations such as the Right being the “party of hate” and the Left being that of “humanity.”³⁴

At any rate, Marcuse’s argument in favor of censorship places freedom of speech on a very slippery slope. In one of the more striking passages in the essay, Marcuse writes of the “undemocratic means” that might be employed to further the cause of liberating humanity:

They would include the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements which promote aggressive policies, armament, chauvinism, discrimination on the grounds of race and religion, or which oppose the extension of public services, social security, medical care, etc. Moreover, the restoration of freedom of thought may necessitate new and rigid restrictions on teachings and practices in the education institutions which, by their very methods and concepts, serve to the enclose the mind within the established universe of discourse and behavior.³⁵

Haidt and Lukianoff rightly call this passage “chilling,” but it is worth noting how logically it follows from Marcuse’s argument.³⁶ Once one has established that today’s citizens are brainwashed and unable to see past the ideological framework that has been imposed upon them, equally strident, or “rigid,” and one-sided tactics must wrest them from the grip of what Marcuse calls their “new masters.”³⁷ If there is no autonomy, as Marcuse would call it, then the only question is whether citizens should be manipulated for good or ill, humanity or hate.

Similarly, if one has established that “humanity” or “liberation” is the *telos* that toleration serves, and therefore the yard-stick by which it should be measured, anyone

³⁴ Ibid., 85.

³⁵ Ibid., 100-101.

³⁶ Haidt and Lukianoff, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 66.

³⁷ Ibid., 110.

who violates that moral imperative no longer deserves tolerance. Even something as specific and banal as “social security,” which one might think is an issue about which reasonable and well-meaning people could disagree and still be treated with respect, becomes a vital issue on the road to humanity’s liberation. Anybody who stands in the way of the extension of the welfare state, Marcuse thinks, is undermining the very basis for toleration and therefore undeserving of it. Thus, the democracy of tomorrow becomes the authoritarianism of today.

Once again, this moral claim parallels the moral content of Sensoy and DiAngelo’s critical social justice theory. As Chapter 3 of this thesis argued, this intellectual framework assumes a rather black-and-white distinction between the *haves*, who have all the power to enforce their prejudices and to structure society in a way that oppresses the *have-nots*, who are oppressed (but would presumably enforce their prejudices if they had the power to do so). As Haidt and Lukianoff put it, power creates a moral polarity where the oppressed are morally superior to their oppressors. Oppression seems to entail suffering, suffering that is potentially sanctifying (as McGrath would argue), but in general power itself is the deciding factor. Chapter 3 also discussed the idea that the *identifiability* of these moral categories is also worthy of note; often readily apparent identity characteristics (like sex and skin color) are the valences of oppression. Sensoy and DiAngelo can, for example, say that the Canadian government reflects oppression based on the percentage of women who hold office in that country’s Parliament.³⁸ Like Marcuse’s black-and-white distinction between the Left and the Right,

³⁸ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 89.

Sensoy and DiAngelo create a black-and-white dichotomy between various identity groups.

In short, Sensoy and DiAngelo share many of Marcuse's moral and epistemological presuppositions. Does their framework also end in repressive tolerance? Once again, if we turn to their classroom, we can see that it evidently does end in repressive tolerance of a very conspicuous kind. Recall this passage from their article, in which they discuss their students:

their [the students'] opinions are necessarily reflective of dominant paradigms. Given that the majority of our students are from dominant groups in key identities, their opinions, perspectives, and personal connections—taken at face value—are not constructive, as they only reinforce oppressive narratives. This is one reason why we restrict free sharing and affirmations of everyone's perspectives as equally valid. While we recognize that it is important to raise these perspectives (as this assignment does), we find it much more effective to do so in controlled ways.³⁹

This passage is strikingly similar to Marcuse's framework. Taken at face value, it may seem the most democratic practice would be to have an open classroom in which everyone is free to share their opinion on the topic being discussed. But in reality, since (Sensoy and DiAngelo can likely tell, just by looking at them) these students have the wrong positionality, their viewpoints are actually just manifestations of "oppressive narratives." Sensoy and DiAngelo's students are akin to Marcuse's "manipulated and indoctrinated individuals, who parrot, as their own, the opinions of their masters, for whom heteronomy has become autonomy."⁴⁰ Autonomy, in this case, is nearly synonymous with individuality. The individual's ability to make up his own mind, to

³⁹ Sensoy and DiAngelo, "Respect Differences?" 6.

⁴⁰ Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," 90.

choose apart from (or perhaps even against) the oppressor within (whether it has been internalized or has emanated from one's own oppressive identity markers) has been subsumed in a framework in which power has permanently tainted knowledge.

What is most democratic, given these presuppositions, therefore, is to be *undemocratic*—to shut down those viewpoints, to stop treating each student as an individual, and to override the discussion in the opposite direction—most likely towards the viewpoints of minority students (or, at least, those with whom Sensoy and DiAngelo agree). Again, this is quite Marcusean, with his “slanted” news sources to provide the population with “authentic information,” and his insistence that freedom of discussion must serve the larger goal of (what we today would call) social justice. Sensoy and DiAngelo's elevation of minority voices and “controlled ways” of addressing oppressive narratives is quite similar to the “undemocratic means” that Marcuse stipulates might be necessary for a “subversive majority” to develop. Of course, Sensoy and DiAngelo argue that teaching their students how *undemocratic* society is will make them better equipped for democracy. But in the meantime, democratic policies cannot get us there.

Authoritarianism, whether in the classroom or in society, seems to be the prescription.

This chapter has presented the theory of repressive tolerance advocated by Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse's argument rests upon epistemological premises, such as the indoctrination of the people by a nefarious elite, and moral premises, such as the idea that toleration ought to serve the broader goal of human liberation and progress and therefore that some oppressive groups are not deserving of it. This chapter has argued that these premises closely parallel those of contemporary critical social justice theory, exemplified in the work of Özlem Sensoy and Robin J. DiAngelo. Furthermore, both theories seem to

arrive at the same conclusion: that present-day democratic principles must give way to more authoritarian and intolerant principles, exercised in the name of greater democracy in the future.⁴¹

⁴¹ The second idea, regarding future democracy, is explicit in Marcuse and implicit in the work of Sensoy and DiAngelo. See Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” 122-123; and Sensoy and DiAngelo, “Respect Differences?” 7-8.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

This thesis has argued that identity politics, or some strands thereof, have epistemological and moral presuppositions that clash with democracy and democratic norms. First, Chapter 1 discussed the epistemology of identity politics and argued that it created an epistemic inequality among different identity groups. This chapter introduced the idea of *identity epistemology*, broadly, the idea that one's identity markers determine what one knows. This general idea also characterizes *positionality*, the preferred term for the phenomenon within critical social justice literature. Identity epistemology and positionality confer an epistemic advantage to minorities as in-group members within the realm of identity politics. *Intersectionality*, a theory about how the intersection of different identity markers creates unique identity categories, compounds the insularity and (at worst) solipsism of identity epistemology.

In addition, Chapter 1 discussed other epistemological tenets of critical social justice theory, including how positionality is qualified by the concept of *ideology*, in which the self-serving ideas of dominant groups permeate society. Ideology qualifies the idea of positionality because it holds that minority groups can internalize oppressive ideas and narratives. However, the idea of double-consciousness once again grants epistemic advantage to these minorities, because they simultaneously have access to their own viewpoint as minorities (identity epistemology) and a knowledge of the ideology of their oppressors.

To continue, Chapter 2 of this thesis discussed some implications of these epistemological presuppositions for democracy. The first is that democracy, because it entails freedom and formal equality among *individuals* (especially with respect to voting), is ill-suited to ensuring equality between groups. If individual's knowledge is merely a function of their groups, then numerically larger groups will necessarily have epistemological dominance over minorities. The second implication for democracy, articulated by Mark Lilla, has to do with electoral politics and the necessity to win elections. However, at its most fundamental level Lilla's critique is that, in practice, identity epistemology is self-contradictory because it essentially asks for understanding from groups that—by the very logic of identity epistemology—cannot understand one another. If different groups within the polity are to cooperate and win elections, they must be able to understand one another.

Finally, the third implication for democracy is that the lack of mutual understanding presupposed by identity epistemology will lead to a more coercive and warlike politics. This is because the “epistemic privileging of the actor,” a concept advanced by Clark Griswold to describe the mutual unintelligibility of identity epistemology and how it applies to claims of justice, discourages deliberation. Similarly, if one applies Archon Fung's framework for how coercion fosters deliberation, it becomes apparent that the critical social justice view of epistemology uniquely lends itself to coercion by undercutting the prerequisites for genuine deliberation.

Subsequently, Chapter 3 discussed the moral framework of identity politics and argued that it created a moral inequality among different identity groups. This chapter discussed two separate but interrelated reasons for this inequality. The first is Molly

McGrath's theory of Sacrificial Politics, in which suffering has sanctified certain demographic categories and thus elevated them over their erstwhile oppressors. While McGrath's theory validated this process to a large extent, it also cautioned against an overemphasis on suffering and a neglect of joy, which is essential to political life. Chapter 3 also suggested that, implicit in McGrath's requirement of transcendence after suffering, is a reinsertion of the role of the individual over against the blanket moral labelling of Sacrificial Politics. Chapter 3 also discussed the moral inequality present in the critical social framework. In this worldview, certain identity groups are morally inferior because they possess *power*, which allows them to enforce their prejudices and oppress less powerful groups, who are correspondingly morally superior. Chapter 3 discussed Robin DiAngelo's book, *White Fragility*, as exemplifying this moral imbalance at a group level.

Finally, Chapter 4 addressed both the epistemological presuppositions of Chapter 1 and the moral presuppositions of Chapter 3 and argued that those yield anti-democratic tendencies. It did so by means of an extended comparison with Herbert Marcuse's essay, "Repressive Tolerance," which argued that because contemporary citizens were *epistemologically* incapable of free thought (because they had been indoctrinated by a powerful elite) and there was a clear *moral inequality* between Left and Right, with the Right constituting the party of the repressive status quo and the Left constituting the party of liberation and humanity, true democracy and true tolerance meant abandoning false neutrality and instead repressing the Right and supporting the Left. Similarly, within the critical social framework, individuals are *epistemologically* incapable of free and autonomous thought (because the limits of their knowledge have been determined by

positionality and because they have also been indoctrinated by the most powerful groups in society), and there is also a clear *moral inequality* between the various identity groups, with some being morally compromised oppressors and others being morally superior oppressed. These ideas lead to an attitude of repressive tolerance, as exhibited in Sensoy and DiAngelo's own classroom.

In sum, this thesis has argued that the epistemology and moral framework of identity politics conflict with democracy and democratic norms. It has *not* argued that their opposition to democracy necessarily invalidates or disproves these aforementioned epistemological and moral ideas, although it has raised some critiques and qualifications as seemed germane. How, then, might a defender of democracy respond to identity politics and its epistemological and moral tenets? Two courses of action seem promising in the effort to salvage democracy from its implicit foes.

The first is to elucidate a competing epistemology. Identity epistemology and the concept of ideology are forms of determinism, which seek to constrain the individual's perspectives within the walls of self-interest (or the self-interest of their oppressors, if the individual is a minority). Advocates of democracy ought to argue that such determinism is overly simplistic, and elides an intellectual freedom in which individuals in a democracy are free to make up their own minds about the common good and about how they ought to govern one another.¹ Such an epistemology should, however, chart a middle path between the aforementioned determinism on the one hand and an equally inaccurate

¹ For one outstanding effort, see Harvey Mansfield, "How to Understand Politics," *First Things*, Aug. 2007, www.firstthings.com/article/2007/08/004-how-to-understand-politics.

epistemology in which each individual forms beliefs and makes decisions in a vacuum, without the influence of material conditions, culture, and mores.

Similarly, advocates of democracy ought to temper the somewhat Manichaeist and overly simplistic moral framework espoused by critical social justice theorists. We should not label entire groups as good or evil, oppressors or oppressed, often based only off their appearance rather than any knowledge of their character. Even more importantly, we should not use such overbroad and black-and-white distinctions to decide which viewpoints to censor and which to hear, which students can to speak and which must be silent. DiAngelo's own book, *White Fragility*, testifies to her belief that even members of ostensibly morally inferior categories can choose against their self-interest for principled reasons. That is an individual moral choice. Thus, once again, the advocate of democracy is in the position of arguing against determinism.

In conclusion, by virtue of some of its epistemological and moral presuppositions, identity politics has hostile implications for democracy. In the opinion of this author, this ought not to be used as a convenient dismissal of these ideas. On the contrary, defenders of democracy ought to spurn an attitude of repressive tolerance and instead engage with these ideas directly. By doing so, they will not only present a case for salvaging democracy, but also provide a model. By their example, they can show that disagreement among citizens need not necessarily be only a guise for a naked power struggle. On the contrary, they can show that charitable disagreement is actually an exercise in *deliberation* among people who respect one another and regard one another as equals to be convinced and *not* opponents to be dismissed, circumnavigated, or dominated.

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