By Alethia Jones

On the Contrary

IDENTITY POLITICS
Part of a Reinvigorated Class Politics

IDENTITY POLITICS HAS ITS SHARE OF SHORTCOMINGS. BUT THE PROBLEMS THAT plague an anemic class politics won't be solved by eliminating its supposed competitor. In recent decades, identity politics has mushroomed to include more and more social groups for good reason: numerous categories of persons have been systematically denied rights, privileges, and social respect. Major social catego-

ries, like race and sexuality, are not a "distraction" from the "real" problem of economic inequality; rather they are an integral part of an individual's lived experiences. But identity politics cannot end all forms of inequality. At best, it is one strategy in a larger assault against systems of inequality.

The Skip Gates debacle of July 2009 illustrates the importance of identity politics, as well as some of its limits. Professor Gates, an esteemed Harvard University professor who is African-American, found himself arrested on his front porch by a white police officer responding to a call of a break-in. Hands down, race mattered. It is difficult to imagine that a fifty-eight-year-old white man, living in a stately home near Harvard's campus and walking with a cane, would be arrested *after* showing proof of residence. But the attention generated by identity politics often focuses on sensationalized details at the expense of understanding systemic dimensions of social problems. The media's coverage of this shocking, frightening, and embarrassing public incident often focused on Professor Gates's professional achievements while alluding to, but never fully addressing, the structural dimension of police officers' abuse of authority, especially when racial minorities are involved. Public conversation centered on whether Professor Gates's achievements should have exempted him from the indignities of "being black"—a view rebutted by the answer to the question, "What do you call a black man with a Ph.D.?" Consequently, the systemic suffering of poor and minority communities,

whose encounters with police officers too often end in death or imprisonment, received relatively little comment. Furthermore, some observed that Gatesgate upstaged President Obama's major address on health insurance reform scheduled for that week, detracting attention from the most significant social and economic reform in over six decades. Finally, the entire affair culminated in a friendly beer summit at the White House, demonstrating how "kumbaya handholding" trumps actual accountability when politicians face difficult political situations.

Despite these and other shortcomings, we can't dismiss identity politics. A stigmatized identity is not a private matter; it is fundamental to the operation of systems of inequality. Stigmatized groups legitimize and naturalize the subjugation of particular social groups. Erving Goffman's brilliant work identifies some of the strategies stigmatized individuals employ to minimize the effects of social marginalization.[1] These strategies include: passing (hiding a stigmatized identity by pretending to be a member of the dominant group), distancing (denigrating the social group to which one belongs), and silencing (refusing to acknowledge or discuss difficult issues surrounding membership in an oppressed group). An identity politics that contests these social norms is a powerful and meaningful political act. Subordinated groups gain power when they reinterpret a spoiled identity in ways that affirm the humanity and agency of the group and challenge its exclusion and shame. It rejects dehumanization and, when forged within political contexts, targets systemic practices that reinforce the denigrating treatment of a group. The poor are well aware that identity politics defined by the successes of individual black Ivy Leaguers, like Skip Gates and Barack Obama, has little bearing on their material conditions. Too often, diversity programs divert and co-opt group remedies into individual achievements. An identity politics framed as high-achieving

minority group members gaining a seat at the proverbial table fails to address the inherent inequity of the table itself.

INTERTWINED IDENTITIES

IDENTITY POLITICS IS NOT A PANACEA but it can deepen our understanding of how social inequality works. It is more fruitful to understand how class status and identity politics intertwine than to debate which one is more important. Some argue that the devastation Hurricane Katrina wrought on New Orleans demonstrates the neglect of the poor and the primacy of class hierarchies. Others argue that historic racism against African-Americans more fully explains the humanitarian crisis the storm produced. But insisting on this separation is tantamount to arguing that the best way to study water is by examining hydrogen apart from oxygen. The essence of water is the combination of the two. Class and race (and other social categories) are separate social and intellectual categories, but it is imperative that we understand how they intertwine in real life. A generic poverty does not exist; class standing is intimately fused with a person's other identities. Consequently, poverty in urban Harlem, with its high-rise public housing projects and panhandlers, is different than poverty in rural Haymarket, Tennessee, with its trailer parks and meth labs. Similarly, sexual minorities (homosexual, bisexual, or transexual) all face discrimination but an individual's racial, cultural, religious, and class statuses will affect the specific obstacles she encounters and her ability to navigate them.

A CULTURAL PROBLEM

QUIBBLING ABOUT IDENTITY politics does not get us any closer to solving the problem of greedy, shortsighted, and unaccountable capitalism and employers who refuse to pay a fair wage. The severe income inequality and falling union

density rates of recent decades simply cannot be blamed on identity politics. Despite real productivity gains made by American workers, their wages and incomes are largely stuck at 1973 levels. Beyond income levels, the bottom 40 percent of those with wealth (in the form of stocks, savings, life insurance, real estate, etc.) held only 0.2 percent of overall wealth in this country.

The consumerist, individualistic, and anti-government elements of American culture bedevil both a politics of class and a politics of identity. When facing systemic inequalities, Americans overwhelmingly pursue individualistic responses: they work harder, get a better job (or a second or third job), get an education, start a small business, cut corners, or get more credit. Those who have lost jobs and homes in the worst financial crisis in recent history have not coalesced in a movement against Wall Street greed. Instead, they have organized to blame and punish big government and taxes (witness the Tea Party movement). The desire to be rich and the seductions of consumerism present real obstacles to efforts designed to end structural inequalities. A meaningful social change strategy must address how ideas about individual effort and merit—that ignore systemic injustice—hamper efforts to make policy changes that will bring more social and economic equity.

FINDING ALTERNATIVES

ATTACKING IDENTITY POLITICS doesn't get us very far in building alliances that respect the complexities of people's lives. Unproductive strategies, such as silent white guilt, complaints about welfare cheats, and critiques of identity politics, have had their day. Rather than banish identity politics, let's acknowledge how it operates within our movements. Doing so will cultivate the skills needed to create truly inclusive social justice organizations and movements. It is time that we *all* learn how to talk about race, class, gender, sexuality, and mental and physical ability (our own and that of others) in meaningful and responsible ways.

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Learning to navigate identity politics in an authentic and engaging way should simply become an essential part of any organizer's toolkit. Take a workshop with working-class activist Betsy Leondar-Wright and learn how white, college-educated devotees of class-based ideologies can become better allies by addressing the rage and mistrust that some members of stigmatized social groups feel when members of privileged groups preach about organizing for economic equality.[2] It's time to stop pretending that these tensions are not there, that they don't matter, and that ideological affinity is enough for successful movements. Being clueless about one's own social position is an obstacle to alliance building across lines of social difference.

Instead of insisting on minorities joining a class-based movement, perhaps class-based activists should join forces with movements that seek to redistribute society's resources to some of society's poorest and most stigmatized groups. The United States Social Forum held in Atlanta in the summer of 2008 featured the work of many of these activists. Those who are fighting mass incarceration, the demonization of welfare recipients and undocumented immigrants, and the marginalization of ex-felons in the workforce *must* fully engage with the intersection of poverty and specific

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marginalized social identities. These movements are informed by, but not confined to, a plain vanilla class politics.

Instead of blaming identity politics, let's turn attention to the real culprit: a system that co-opts, distracts, and obfuscates when faced with demands for fundamental change.

In addition to grassroots organizing, we need business and social leaders who will create institutions that cultivate a world defined by peace, fairness, and sustainability, rather than one driven by war and exploitation. The product of one interesting effort in this regard is Resource Generation, an organization that recognizes that the passing of the Baby Boomer generation will result in the largest generational transfer of wealth in U.S. history. The group works with wealthy young people to create strategies for pursuing political activism in ways that expand the resources available for social justice movements, but without reproducing the worst aspects of the "I-know-it-all" and "Do-it-my-way" sensibilities of the privileged.[3]

BEYOND SYMBOLISM

WE CAN'T IGNORE SOCIAL identities. Economic equality without social dignity and respect lacks meaning. But symbolic inclusion without real structural change is an empty and manipulative gesture. Instead of blaming identity politics, let's turn attention to the real culprit: a system that co-opts, distracts, and obfuscates when faced with demands for fundamental change. The Skip Gates debacle demonstrates that giving individual blacks more money does not solve the problem of police abuse within minority communities. Similarly, achieving economic equality would still leave many social problems on the table. We have to re-tool to reach potential allies for whom non-class-based identities are significant. Doing so requires significant growth in our political and personal strategies, as well as uncomfortable conversations about expanding the social vision that guides our movements.

Notes

1. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963).
2. Betsy Leondar-Wright, *Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle-Class Activists* (British Colombia, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2005). See also http://www.classmatters.org/2006_07.

3. Karen Pittelman and Resource Generation, *Classified: How to Stop Hiding Your Privilege and Use It for Social Change* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2006). For more information about Resource Generation, see www.resourcegeneration.org.