

Why Can't We All Just Get Along? How Identity Politics Fuels Division in a Time of Great Compromise

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If you haven't been paying much attention lately, America is in crisis. This past election goes to show you that our dual-party system suffers from unprecedented instability (at least since Lincoln's time). While President-elect Trump won the election, he did not win over the hearts and minds of America's public. In fact, he *trails* his runner-up opponent Hillary Clinton by nearly three million votes! I do not mean to question the merits of Donald Trump's victory—he won fair and square—and I also don't quite understand the benefits of dismantling the Electoral College system. However, I do recognize the problems presented by such a hard-fought election. It is most natural for the losing side of any conflict to feel let-down by the results. A sports fan knows full well how much it hurts to see his team lose deep in the playoffs. It does not surprise me that after an election so hotly contested, whose consequences can affect every aspect of local, domestic, and international politics, a Clinton supporter might justifiably feel *very* upset.

Nevertheless, I struggle to understand the underlying reasoning of the Clinton supporter, the rationale for his observed dismay. Usually the ideas behind the parties and candidates correspond to specific political philosophies that compete for the public's approval. This time around, that assumption did not seem to hold true. Instead of demonstrating concise, coherent political stances on a wide range of issues, the candidates resorted to ad-hominem attacks on their opponent's "fitness" or "temperament," smearing the candidate's personality, rather than engaging in political discourse and discussing the issues at hand. I watched the presidential debates, in a sense, not in order to learn about a particular candidate's position on the quite important questions of economy, global politics, and social issues, but in search of late-night entertainment. I cannot deny to you that the personal barbs exchanged indeed interested me much more than any actual discourse on global warming or minimum wage might have. Entertainment aside, this election, more than really any other I have witnessed, seemed to confirm an overwhelming suspicion of mine that American politics has descended into the realm of the absurd and does not much care for the *real* problems of the voters.

To be more precise, America has, over the past few decades, adopted liberal social stances, while it has forgotten the socialism of the post-war era. In an article for the libertarian think tank *Cato Institute*, Emily Ekins analyzes a recent Gallup poll (2015) and finds, as her title suggests, that

“Social Liberalism in the U.S. on the Rise, Fiscal Conservatism Remains Strong.” She reports that the polls show that “in 1999 Americans were nearly twice as likely to say they were socially conservative as socially liberal... In Gallup’s latest poll, Americans are equally likely to say they are socially liberal as socially conservative.” William Saletan, writing for Slate Magazine (5/24/2012) points out that in 1996, 68% of Americans opposed gay-marriage, while now over 55% *support* gay marriage. He also records that birth control has overwhelming support and that more Americans than ever do not consider pre-marital sex immoral. This, of course, points to America’s evolving sexual mores, a highly significant change from the past. I should point out that some disagree with this analysis. While I don’t dispute the fact that some issues appear to buck the trend, legally speaking America has moved left and I still think that I can fairly conclude that American society on a whole has become more liberal over the past few decades.

Interestingly, I cannot say the same for the fiscal policies of recent American presidents. President Clinton, a Democrat, made unprecedented cuts to welfare in his second term. According to George J. Church in an article in TIME (8/12/1996), Clinton caved into conservative pressures to fulfill his campaign promises to reform welfare and incentivize people to find jobs, amidst a turn to so-called “New Democratic values.” “A veto, however, would have repudiated the entire moderate, New Democrat stance—champion of family values, balanced budgets, more cops on the streets—that Clinton had been cultivating so assiduously since the rout of the Democrats in the 1994 elections. And, of course, there was that matter of his 1992 pledge to ‘end welfare as we know it.’” Politically savvy, Clinton knew that he could not expand the safety net, let alone veto a bill that would curb such spending. Similarly, Obama did not successfully roll back all the tax-breaks of the Bush (43) era, and while Obamacare has made it easier for many to buy health insurance, a lot of funding for it still comes from the middle-class paying higher premiums for less coverage (high deductibles). During his presidency, the measure of income inequality continued to rise.

That leaves us, then, with a curious dilemma: If Americans, and our recent presidents, have become increasingly liberal and less socialist, what determines anyone’s party affiliation, or association with a particular candidate? In an interview on NPR (11/2015), Danielle Kurtzleben hosted Marc Hetherington, an author of the book *Why Washington Won’t Work*, and discussed this question. Introducing the topic, Kurtzleben said, “Given all that, it may surprise you to hear that Americans aren’t actually all that ideologically polarized. In fact, they’re really pretty moderate.” Hetherington summarizes: “People are not so polarized on issues specifically or in terms of their ideological predispositions... But that doesn’t mean that we’re not polarized. It just means that we’re not polarized in terms of our issue positions or ideologies. We point out that ordinary Americans are, in fact, polarized, but it’s in their feelings, not in their issue positions. We’ve come to dislike our opponents in a way that we’ve never disliked them at this level before.”

This falls in line with my initial reflections on this past election. Even though both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton advocated for basically the same things (free-trade, stronger foreign policy, heightened domestic security, gay rights), they clearly despised each other. Though I can’t claim that they held *identical* views (Trump was slightly more pro-business but isolationist, Clinton slightly more progressive but for free-trade), I would say that their differences fall within a standard deviation. I don’t blame these issues for the fallout of the election, but rather the

phenomenon, now a hot-topic for debate, that Bernie Sanders famously denounced as “identity politics.”

I refer to Bernie Sanders’ statement that he made a week and a half following the election in which he criticized Hillary Clinton’s management of her campaign. He complained that she spread herself too thin by playing the gender, race, LGBT, or poverty card. President Obama agreed, saying in an interview that “micro-targeting particular, discrete groups in a Democratic coalition sometimes will win you elections, but it’s not going to win you the broad mandate that you need.” Mark Lila, a humanities professor at Columbia University, penned an essay for the New York Times wherein he also criticized such a strategy: “Hillary Clinton... tended on the campaign trail to lose that large vision and slip into the rhetoric of diversity, calling out explicitly to African-American, Latino, L.G.B.T. and women voters at every stop. This was a strategic mistake. If you are going to mention groups in America, you had better mention all of them. If you don’t, those left out will notice and feel excluded... We need a post-identity liberalism... such a liberalism would concentrate on widening its base by appealing to Americans as Americans and emphasizing the issues that affect a vast majority of them.” Mr. Lila, like Bernie Sanders, promotes a global liberalism, one that does not distinguish between races, sexualities, or gender. He suggests that by focusing on beating the White, Christian Americans, the Democrats needlessly disassociated themselves from them, a gamble that probably lost the Democrats the election. To summarize the advice of these repentant liberals: identity in politics can sometimes matter much more than the actual issues that the politicians discuss.

Werner Sombart, a German socialist sociologist from the early twentieth century wrote one of the first analyses of the problem of socialism in America. In his relevant book, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (1906), he deals with the paradox (at least for a Marxian) of American politics: “If ... modern socialism follows as a necessary reaction to capitalism, the country with the most advanced capitalist development, namely the United States, would at the same time be the one providing the classic case of socialism, and its working class would be supporters of the most radical of socialist movements.” But, with knowledge of history, we can say that socialism has had a hard time taking hold in America. In a book titled *It Didn’t Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (2000), authors Seymour Lipset and Gary Marks reiterate our initial difficulty: “The conundrum remains. Although the United States is the most productive industrialized nation, it has never had a viable left-wing working-class party. Its trade unions, which have been weaker than those of most other industrial countries, have been steadily declining in membership since the mid-fifties. At the present time, less than one-sixth, under 14 percent, of the employed labor force belongs to unions. This is down from one-third in 1955 and is a level of organization lower than that of almost all other developed economies.” They continue, “The inability of American Socialists to create a durable Labor or Socialist Party is not a historical quirk of a bygone era. On the contrary, it is a powerful influence on the present.” In a review of the book for the NY Times (9/2000), David Glenn clarifies it again: “Had they [American socialists] managed to forge such a party — or to capture the Democratic Party as successfully as the Goldwater and Reagan movements captured the Republican — the United States would almost certainly not be the only advanced democracy with no system of universal health insurance and no system of universal child support. We might not have levels of income inequality and relative poverty that are almost triple those of other rich nations.” Glenn writes that Sombart tries to explain the phenomenon by changing our perception of the American

worker. He quotes Sombart: “America is a freer and more egalitarian society than Europe. In his relationship to other people and to social institutions, and in his position in and to society... the American is also better-off than he would be in the contrasting European situation. For him ‘Liberty’ and ‘Equality’... are not empty ideas and vague dreams, as they are for the European working class... [In America] there is not the stigma of being the class apart that almost all European workers have about them... The bowing and scraping before the “upper classes,” which produces such an unpleasant impression in Europe, is completely unknown.” Glenn explains “whereas European laborers still chafed against vestigial feudal attitudes, the American worker ‘carries his head high, walks with a lissome stride and is as open and cheerful in his expression as any member of the middle class.’ For white workers at least, much of the visceral class-consciousness that fueled European movements was absent.” That, coupled with Americans’ aversion to relying on the government for support (a result of a highly individualistic mentality) and the socialists’ inability to unite, have contributed to the challenges of the socialist movement in America.

But, as both the authors of *It Didn’t Happen Here* and their reviewer understood, the dynamics of immigration hampered the development of socialism. In the book, Lipset and Marks make the assertion that immigration made unionizing extremely difficult, as many immigrants took low-paying jobs and did not express much interest in collective bargaining. Friedrich Engels, co-author of the *Communist Manifesto*, wrote that “your great obstacle in America, it seems to me, lies in the exceptional position of the native workers... [T]he ordinary badly paid occupations [are left] to the immigrants, of whom only a small section enter the aristocratic trade unions.” Glenn writes that “even though American socialist movements have been disproportionately immigrant-led, immigration has not, on the whole, been helpful to the cause. America’s ethnic, neighborhood and religious enclaves (“mutually isolated by their various starting-points,” as Friedrich Engels lamented in 1887) have rarely come together in effective class-based political action. Our few successful municipal socialist movements arose in cities with an overwhelmingly dominant ethnic group: Pennsylvania Dutch in Reading, Germans in Milwaukee, Jews on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The problem was not simply ethnic insularity but sometimes outright bigotry.”

Writing for the *Mid-American Review of Sociology* (1981), Patrick Akard of the University of Kansas similarly criticized Sombart’s ignorance of the same problem: “The most important error, given the problem he set out to solve, lay in his depiction of the working class as if it were homogeneous. He completely neglected the *crucial* heritage of immigration and slavery in America, and the effects of racial and ethnic divisions on working class unity.”

These sources clearly demonstrate that racial and ethnic division represented a big obstacle to the collectivization of American workers. Today’s term “identity politics” does not introduce anything new to the debate, it just reminds us that such identity-based divisions present great challenges when trying to create lasting social change.

Regarding the recent political trends that I highlighted earlier, it appears that they reflect a collective interest of the American populace to avoid social conflict. Upon recognizing the immense difficulties brought on by the diverse character of America’s population, politicians

skirt the issue, adeptly avoiding the tense topic. By emphasizing individualism and thrift, hence individual liberties and liberal moral attitudes, they have driven the debate away from the truly frightening realization that America remains a deeply divided country.

Simply put, if a socialist asks a wealthy capitalist to invest in his less-fortunate brothers, it necessarily creates an atmosphere where people begin to question their ethnic, religious, and racial identities. We Jews are commanded to adhere to strict social precepts: We are prohibited from lending at interest, must leave excess crops for the poor, and the Torah demands a redistribution of sorts through the fallow and jubilee years. However, as God repeats numerous times, such commandments do not apply to our treatment of other nations. We owe our brothers the dignity of social justice, and while many rabbis understand that we must act kindly toward our neighbors, the commandments do not bear the same strength when not dealing with “thy brother.” I caution you not to judge this perniciously, it is but a fact of life that we are more generous with our own kindred. Such a calculation provides us with an understanding of why socialism hasn’t worked in America. An essential lack of trust bars the government from introducing community-tying measures. If one does not share an identity with his compatriots, why should he fund public projects to their benefit?

Much of the white nationalism that Europe now experiences can also trace itself to these matters. A recent *Economist* (“League of Nationalists” 11/19/2016) article reported that “In 2010 the Sweden Democrats (SD), a nationalist party, put out a television ad that captured the popular fear that Sweden’s generous welfare system might not survive a big influx of poor, fertile Muslim asylum-seekers. An elderly white woman with a Zimmer frame hobbles down a dark corridor towards her pension pot, but is overtaken by a crowd of burqa-clad women with prams, who beat her to the money. At least one channel refused to air it, but it spread online. Polls suggest the SD is now one of Sweden’s most popular parties.” Parties like the SD now find favor in the eyes of many white Europeans who do not want to bankroll the large population of immigrants that now live in their respective countries.

If we are to solve the problems of inequality, xenophobia, and the like, we must interrogate our national identities and come to mutual understandings regarding what kind of character every individual, group, state, and region represents, and focus on the common bonds that link us together. Only God knows and time will tell what must occur in order to allow each nation to assume a coherent identity, but I wish that such identities would stabilize in the near-future. Without them, I fear that global disorder may fracture and disable large parts of humanity, and if conscientious, peace-loving people do not take up this task, I fear that hateful ideologues may yet take us back to times of war and sorrow.

On a side note, I believe that Israel presents us with a golden opportunity in its relative homogeneity. Although Jews possess great ethnic diversity, we have all united under the shared identity and history of our Judaism. If I should merit to see the advent of true socialism in my days, it would not surprise me if it came first from Jerusalem.