



Mayor Pete's Sister Souljah Moment

Walter Olson

May 13, 2019

Even before reading what Pete Buttigieg said against identity politics, I was already impressed that he went to the Human Rights Campaign to say it. HRC, “the largest national lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer civil rights organization,” is after all the House That Identity Politics Built.

On one level, his comments critical of identity politics turned out to be pretty mild. Barack Obama has said most of the same things in slightly different words. It's not as if Andrew Sullivan, Christina Hoff Sommers, or Claire Lehmann were ghostwriting his lines.

And what Buttigieg did say was interspersed with themes and language gratifying to social justice enthusiasts. He endorsed the sweeping Equality Act, which would federalize Main Street public-accommodations disputes while whittling down religious exemptions. He mentioned Stonewall and Harvey Milk. He even acknowledged his own “privilege.” (Though he left ambiguous the extent to which this referred to his white male-ness as distinct from, say, the fortunate path traced by his education and career.)

And yet the South Bend mayor immediately began taking flak for his HRC remarks from some social justice advocates, not a few of whom had already been caustic critics of his candidacy. They could detect from his choice of words that he is not 100 percent on board with their prescribed line—maybe not even 80 percent—and worse still, he is not afraid to say so.

One of his lines drawing fire is on the “my truth, your truth” notion (“standpoint epistemology,” in the jargon). Or as it might be put more aggressively: “we [members of a marginalized identity] are the only authorities on our experience.”

His response? That's “true as far as it goes but it doesn't get us very far.” To you or I, that might read like a platitude. To many on the identitarian left, it comes off as dire wrongthink: after some point that is not “very far” down the road, he intends to steer us all onto some other discourse in which identity is not a trump card. This doesn't deny our subjective truth as marginalized individuals, exactly, but it does tend to dethrone it as The Truth of all truths.

Another example: Buttigieg's comments were critical of what he forthrightly calls “white identity politics.” Again, a truism from one perspective, and forcefully stated too. But to some on his left, this will be seen as an attempt at false equivalence. Raising the idea that white and minority identity politics can resemble each other is deeply problematic to the identitarian left because it suggests that some of the ills manifest in the former might also turn up in the latter.

And so on. Buttigieg's contrast of “exclusion” versus “belonging,” which I liked very much, might have contented the identitarians had he denounced exclusion and stopped there. But

“belonging” as an ideal is way too suspect. It’s like assimilation. It smacks of the notion that the conflicts involved are not fundamental and defining.

Again and again in his speech, minor choices of wording that outsiders might not notice served as small—but real—signals of defiance to social justice scorekeepers. I disagree with much that Mayor Pete says here and elsewhere. But I’m glad that he seems to think for himself.

It will be interesting to see whether other Democratic contenders take issue with the mayor’s identity politics remarks. Or if, alternatively, Buttigieg has opened up space toward the center makes it possible for others to follow.

Walter Olson is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.