

IDENTITY POLITICS

Where Did It All Go Wrong?

David Pilgrim



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Introduction

I set the scene here for themes expanded in later pages. My overall intention is to avoid replicating the flawed binary logic of identity politics (good or bad, woke or not woke, racist or not racist, transphobic or trans-affirmative, etc.). Instead, I assume that the world is nuanced and contradictory and that our awareness of it is highly partial. With their tendency towards absolutism and premature certainties, identity politics are an inadequate response to that complexity and mystery of life. I concede though that sometimes they offer us fully legitimate starting points of reflection, about both social inequality and the constraints upon the citizenship of some individuals. A problem, though, is that these fair enough places of departure all too often have led us into a cul-de-sac. As a consequence, identity politics quite quickly fail to deliver on their rhetorical goal of human betterment and instead we find irritability and self-righteousness. We have more heat than light.

The field day on the right and the wrong turn on the left

Identity politics is a curate's egg: good and bad in parts. However, the bad parts have proved to be extremely time consuming and divisive in

“progressive” discussions in recent years. Indeed, this has led at times to political paralysis and factionalism amongst those who are, on paper at least, on the same side. Political parties have been divided, and even new ones formed, as a result of the indignation and dogmatism generated.

For their part, the right has had a field day. Their laments about “political correctness gone mad” used to have a hollow ring and were condemned for being a veiled excuse for bigotry (because often they were). More subtly in the broadsheet conservative press, commentators note the capture of the polity of Western representative democracies by the “woke” agenda of critical social justice warriors. Here, for example, in the *Daily Telegraph* 15 April 2021 we find this from Allister Heath:

Biden’s first blunder has been to give free rein to the woke revolutionaries. Their ideology is a fusion of post-modernism, Marxism, Freudianism, critical race theory, gender studies, intersectionality and much else besides, and the brew is toxic, explosive and *potentially fatal to Western democracy and capitalism*. It detests rationality, the rule of law and even the presumption of innocence. It is obsessed with race and gender, assumes extreme amounts of never-ending exploitation, posits that progress is impossible and rejects the liberal, meritocratic, colour-blind approach that has done so much to improve society and combat racism since the Fifties. It claims to believe in “social justice” but rejects the very concept of a functioning polity and the possibility of objective, enlightenment-style justice. It considers free speech to be a form of violence and assumes that anybody who disagrees is guilty of false consciousness and, as such, deserves to be cancelled as a dangerous heretic. (Emphasis added)

Heath continued with this theme in another *Daily Telegraph* piece (2 August 2021) entitled “Biden’s woke, Left-wing America is no longer a model for the world”. The conservative logic of Heath scorns both Biden and the recently failed Corbyn project; it is an amalgam dismissal of all things to his personal left (and that of his employing newspaper).

Freedom for the right refers to the market, whereas for the left it is about fighting oppression. This reminds us that the word is readily adored but not always fully explored. Heath repeats the refrain of capitalism

being humanity's only hope. However, beneath his standard anti-leftism we find in his text a problem conceded about "the land of the free", which he has idealised since his student days. His lament includes a list of how US capitalism has actually *failed* working class people by impoverishing them and depriving them of needed education. He goes further:

The Right, for its part, has also gone mad: too many Republicans have ditched their old principles—be it free market, limited government or social conservatism—and instead embraced a dumbed-down populist demagoguery.

That demagoguery has required its own version of identity politics. From Trumpism and its desire to Make America Great Again, to the role of nostalgic Little Englander politics in Brexit, we can spot that the virtue signalling "wokery" of the left is not the only version to ponder. I return specifically to this question of ethnocentric nationalisms and *their* attendant fetishised identities in Chapter Eight and theocratic reliance on ingroup exceptionalism in Chapter Seven.

Thus, Heath makes two main errors in his argument. First, he conflates identity politics with what used to be called in Britain, for a while, the "loony left". In fact, the assumed benefits and virtues of identity politics can now be found *across* the political spectrum, including the problematic dumbed-down populist demagoguery that understandably concerns him. Second, Heath is concerned with the threat that identity politics is allegedly posing to capitalism, the system he loves so much. However, an argument made in this book is the reverse of this: **neoliberalism** and identity politics fit very comfortably, hand in glove.

Freedom of expression

Some on the left are discovering that the hurtful and gloating prejudices from the right, which were often rationalised by freedom of expression, might actually have some merit, at least in their consequences. Moreover, the right could make the claim that they are not oppressive ogres but instead the tolerant defenders of a fundamental civil liberty. They were also permitting themselves the right to humour, casting the left as dour and humourless.

With the exception of online journalism such as *Savage Minds*, with its strong left-wing slant, other libertarian outlets such as *The Spectator* and *The Critic* are funded by the rich and reflect right-wing tropes about Brexit, anti-lockdown indignation, and the absurdities of decolonising the curriculum. As with my note about Heath above, some of these regular columnists and right-wing thinkers, like David Starkey in *The Critic*, are afforded validation for their snooty contempt for all things progressive. Without the authoritarianism and illiberalism that typically characterises identity politics, the opportunity for this validation would be missing.

Voices from the left certainly creep in at times in the libertarian response (especially from gender-critical writers) but they are in the minority. *Sp!ked*, which I return to later, arguably has the reverse balance of *The Critic*, though it has had funding from the fossil-fuel billionaire Koch brothers, and so its provenance is also open to quite legitimate query. Nonetheless, the funding of these outlets can be taken into account, without assuming commercial reductionism as an *explanation* for the legitimacy of the arguments in their pages.

Arguments can be examined for their validity with reference to logic and evidence, despite the varied range of ideological motives for raising them. Indeed, as I will argue as a critical realist later, this is a both/and, not an either/or, exercise in the serious appraisal of the complexities of identity politics. To argue that only the right benefit from a defence of freedom of expression is like arguing that the confidence trick of selling bottled water means that water itself is not a fundamental human need. Water and free speech are desirable and fundamental, whichever political regime prevails for us at a moment in time and space.

However we might appraise the ideological character of these “woke-sceptical” outlets, what is not in doubt is that they all champion freedom of expression and celebrate satire to good effect. Here, for example, is the satirist “Titania McGrath” in *The Critic* (March, 2021: 45) calling for “a bonfire of Dr Seuss”:

just because Dr Seuss was born in 1904, that doesn’t mean that he shouldn’t have a firm grasp of the values of twenty-first century intersectional feminists. Besides the anti-lesbian subtext of *The Cat in the Hat* is unmistakable. In addition, Amazon has started

to remove books that it classifies as “hate speech” ... As left wing activists, it is imperative that we encourage multi-billion dollar corporations to monitor what we are able to read. So let us go forth and burn books, rename streets and erase the past and re-educate the masses so they have the correct opinions. It’s the only way to defeat fascism.

“Titania McGrath” is a parody account on Twitter, penned by the comedian Andrew Doyle, a regular columnist for *Sp!ked*. Doyle depicts this alter-ego as a “militant vegan who thinks she is a better poet than William Shakespeare”. This humour is not always appreciated in liberal outlets like *The Observer*, where woke defenders such as Alex Clark call Doyle’s writing a “cheap shot” (10 March 2019). Whilst seriousness is important for all of us in life, humour can also be used to expose ideological cant and self-serving rhetoric.

For Doyle to speak and for Clark to disagree requires a shared and inviolable premise, guaranteed for and from both protagonists: freedom of expression. If only determined libertarians (right, left, or centre) are now defending free speech, and the rest of us have naively, and with good intentions, drunk the “Kool-Aid” of identity politics, then culturally we are in a very precarious state. Authoritarianism from below is just as restrictive of human freedom as that imposed by the state.

Doyle describes himself clearly as someone from the traditional left of the political spectrum, rendering our traditional understanding of what “left” and “right” mean now as problematic. Maybe the political struggle today is between libertarianism and authoritarianism, with the latter coming from both above (for example in theocratic and Leninist regimes) and below (in Western liberal democracies). If this is the case, then defending freedom of expression on behalf of humanity as a whole is a vital starting point, as those like Suzanne Nossel in her book *Dare to Speak* have counselled (Nossel, 2020).

Thus, whilst the benefits for right-wing libertarians of attacking “wokery” and defending freedom of expression are obvious, those on the left have been ambivalent. This has been for a range of reasons noted and explored further in the coming chapters. Nonetheless, there have been clearly articulated objections. For example, Mark Fisher in his pithy essay from 2013 (“Exiting the Vampires’ Castle”) offers a critique

of the divisive and hyper-moralistic character of identity politics. He notes that:

The Vampires' Castle specialises in propagating guilt. *It is driven by a priest's desire to excommunicate and condemn, an academic-pedant's desire to be the first to be seen to spot a mistake, and a hipster's desire to be one of the in-crowd.* The danger in attacking the Vampires' Castle is that it can look as if—and it will do everything it can to reinforce this thought—that one is also attacking the struggles against racism, sexism, heterosexism. But, far from being the only legitimate expression of such struggles, the Vampires' Castle is best understood as a bourgeois-liberal perversion and appropriation of the energy of these movements. (Fisher, 2013, emphasis added)

These points about the divisive and diversionary logic of identity politics were made clear previously by the grand old man of the intellectual left in Britain in the 1990s, Eric Hobsbawm, using some terminology which might arouse sensitivities today, with our new norms of language policing:

The political project of the Left is universalist: it is for all human beings. However we interpret the words, it isn't liberty for shareholders or blacks, but for everybody. It isn't equality for all members of the Garrick Club or the handicapped, but for everybody. It is not fraternity only for old Etonians or gays, but for everybody. *And identity politics is essentially not for everybody but for the members of a specific group only.* (Hobsbawm, 1996, emphasis added)

In a similar vein, and from the same period, we find this from Ambalavaner Sivanandan:

The touchstone of any issue-based or identity-based politics has to be the lowest common denominators in our society. A women's movement that does not derive its politics from the needs, freedoms, rights of the most disadvantaged among them is by that very token reformist and elitist. Conversely, a politics that is based on women qua women is inward-looking and narrow and

nationalist and, above all, failing of its own experience. So, too, the blacks or gays or whoever. So, too, are the green and peace movements Eurocentric and elitist that do not derive their politics from the most ecologically devastated and war-ravaged parts of the world. Class cannot just be a matter for identity, it has to be the focus of commitment. (Sivanandan, 1990)

More recently the retiring founder of the Southall Black Sisters, Pragna Patel, made a similar point:

Identity politics is a considerable challenge for us, not just in feminist circles but actually within all social justice movements. Identity politics has taken root in a way that I feel is profoundly regressive. It is a focus on individual experiences of victimhood. It is a focus on difference rather than unity ... It is an analysis of the politics that arise from individual experiences rather than a political analysis of structural discrimination and oppression ... I fear that all social movements are now tainted by a narrow form of identity politics ... it has fragmented our struggles ... It is leading us down a political blind alley. I am reminded of June Jordan's very wise words that identity politics is '*very important to get things started but it is nowhere near to getting anything finished*'. (Interview on *Woman's Hour*, 5 January 2022, emphasis added)

We can see in these sentiments from intellectuals on the left, with their disquiet about identity politics, that their agenda is somewhat different from the haughty and self-satisfied reactionaries to be found in the *Daily Telegraph* or *The Critic* noted above. What they all agree on, though, is that the suppression of debate is not a route to either democracy or human progress, a cue for the next section.

The centrality of freedom of expression and the inanities of cancel culture

Free speech was used by the right to celebrate current power relationships, inherited from the past and defended conservatively in the present (for example about sex and race). The response of the left was then to assume that to tolerate the existence of these views was the same as

endorsing them, or encouraging them to flourish in the public imagination. The solution was to damn (“call out”) and suppress them instead (“cancel”, “no platform”, or “no debate”).

This response was understandable, but it was, in my view, fundamentally mistaken. Suppressing prejudicial speech does not eliminate prejudice; the path to the latter is long and hard, with few short cuts. Prejudicial speech is wrongheaded, hurtful, and at its margins will explicitly motivate violence. All that is true, but its blanket suppression creates problems, not just solutions. We need to reflect on an alternative path, but to invite that alternative path for the left is not to be naive.

It is clear that those with power disproportionately use it to control information in their own interests. Clear examples are the control of our political discourse by the Murdoch empire and, in the UK context, there has been the control freakery of New Labour ideologues (depicted satirically in the TV show *The Thick of It*). For New Labour this entailed the manipulation of information to pave the way for an illegal war in Iraq and then to punish those trying to expose that mystification. A more recent example is the purging of the left in the British Labour Party, post-Corbyn. Those with wealth use legal means to control the exposure of their wrongdoing, which is not an option for the poor. Whistleblowing employees are gagged or paid off with non-disclosure agreements. The list of the use of information suppression from the forces of reaction is a long one but two wrongs do not make a right.

Power and knowledge are intimately linked within all political regimes at the governmental level, as well as in organisations in the public, private, and third sectors in civil society. Thus, freedom of expression is unevenly available, with forces of suppression being evident on both the right and left. Freedom of expression is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for social progress and human flourishing. Nonetheless, it must be our starting point to defend. Both freedom of expression and whistleblowing favour the public interest and are both defended, quite properly, in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. When it was drafted in 1950, “the century of blood” was still absorbing the shock of both Stalinism and Nazism. It seems today as if identity politics, of all political hues, are discounting this needed reckoning about democracy.

The right certainly has a stake in arguing for freedom of expression, but so does the left. If the left attack freedom of expression because it is

depicted as *merely* a right-wing ideological strategy, then this is a serious error of judgement. We know from the recent past that once that authoritarian strategy became the dominant, and sometimes singular, political strategy aimed at producing social progress, then it gave a green light to the authoritarian right (both secular and theocratic). *Their* traditional desire to use repressive dogma and force to defeat their opponents was then legitimised. Accordingly, it was simply a matter of who was in power, contingently, to censor those who were a threat to their interests.

Authoritarianism from the left has encouraged libertarians on the right to defend credibly the post-Enlightenment liberal principle of freedom of expression. This plausibility can be found, for example, in writings in *The Spectator*, *Daily Mail*, or *Daily Telegraph* I cited above. This in turn has rendered the left unsure and so it has mainly resorted to simplistic name-calling in response. “Calling out” and assertion of notions of “privilege” and the glib and vacuous use of the suffix “phobic” have often become knee-jerk substitutes for serious analysis.

That name-calling and lack of seriousness have provided a wide-open goal for the libertarian right and so its writers have, quite understandably and intelligently, relished the opportunity offered. Their ranks have been joined by a residual Trotskyist culture from the 1970s, the tiny Revolutionary Communist Party. This group on its fragmentation maintained a network of writers who promoted libertarianism on the left, first in *Living Marxism* and more recently the *Academy of Ideas* and the online journal *Sp!ked*. However, its association with right-wing libertarian funders noted earlier now leave its political allegiances difficult to discern.

Speculations about CIA funding at this point are quite legitimate (though difficult to prove), in light of the eventual political careers of those like Claire Fox, from the *Academy of Ideas*. She joined the Brexit Party and then entered the House of Lords for services rendered to the Conservative government. The ex-Trotskyist appears routinely on British media as a brash controversialist, expressing views most readers of the *Daily Telegraph* would probably fulsomely endorse.

These combined forces, of seemingly unlikely bedfellows, are now gunning for identity politics and they have a large target to hit, even if they came historically from different political stables. My interest then is unpicking this contradictory scenario in a considered and academic manner. The book is not intended as a mere polemic against identity

politics. However, it does take that brand of politics, favoured by so many now on the left (especially in the young), to task for its palpable shortcomings and failures. Where credit is due, I will make sure that it is given. However, the hole that the left has dug for itself has to be honestly explored and alternatives examined.

The need for cautious definitions

There has been a nihilistic tendency from postmodernism of rejecting definitions as futile, favouring instead unending “situated perspectives”. However, identity politics *exist* and so we can broadly describe them and critically appraise their recurring premises.

The basis for being in a social group that claims an oppressed status, or the assumption that one has to experience that oppression in order to report its character authentically, reflect our material history as a species. This has contained demonstrable forms of exploitation and power play between groups and between humans and nature. These are examples of the master–slave relationships explored by Hegel and Marx.

I do concede, though, that what sort of emphasis we place on our working understanding of the character of identity politics will shape whether we are “on the same page”, or whether we are talking at cross purposes. For example, some protagonists seem to conflate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism but others do not. Those with these competing viewpoints will tend to “talk past each other” when debating or in political conflict.

Notwithstanding these sources of potential misunderstanding, wilful or unintended, we can be confident that (say) the slave trade and colonialism definitely existed, as did the Nazi holocaust and its consequences. We can also be confident that (say) patriarchal power has, on average, definitely limited the life chances of girls compared to boys in the past and the present. We can say with confidence people with brown skins experience a range of aggressive acts large and small, intended and not intended, from white people in daily life. Thus, when dealing with reports of oppression, these are not *merely* “narratives”, because they reflect real historical events, current social processes, and individual actors, as oppressors and victims. In practice, in the complex open systems of societies, we all at different times find ourselves in either or both roles.

My working definition has already mentioned two points: particular reported experiences of oppression and particular forms of group membership. The first feature is typified in the political currency of “lived experience” or even “epistemological privilege” and the second implies a natal or acquired social status. More will be said about both of these in the pages to come. I could also add a meaningful distinction between identity politics and **new social movements (NSMs)**, whilst recognising that they are often entwined.

For example, being a woman provides a strong natal basis for joining the ranks of a version of feminism as a social movement. However, women are not obliged to be feminists, while men may at times may provide critiques of patriarchy. Another overlap to note is that some NSMs have not been about humans but other species (animal rights activism) and some about the precarious future of our species as a whole, not the rights of one particular subgroup of people (climate change activism and nuclear disarmament). This book will not be dealing with these linked phenomena but will limit its remit to illustrative social groups and even then, for reasons of space, will not deal with all NSMs.

A final qualifier, when we are considering definitions, and which is the most important for the purpose of this book, is that we cannot assume that either identity politics or NSMs *inevitably* reflect persuasive struggles against oppression. Nor do they *necessarily* offer a generic advantage to human flourishing. As will be clear in these chapters, sometimes identity politics clearly undermine these assumed advantages and sometimes NSMs work to oppress others, while advancing the interests of in-group members. The ultra-right nationalist and the paedophile draw on the logic of identity politics with glee.

From group solidarity to personalised spite

The **emergence** of identity politics at the turn of this century, like older forms of politics, at first focused strongly on practical group solidarity and on the notion of **intersectionality** to point to the multiple material causes of oppression. Both of these promising starting points soon degenerated into individualism and personalistic forms of reasoning. Now political worthiness has often degenerated into armchair “virtue signalling”, with little requirement needed other than an angry emoji

on Facebook or a spiteful quip on Twitter. There is little need for personal responsibility or considered debate in draughty rooms in winter evenings to address a complex world with this new political form. Now the alias, once only the favoured deception of the career criminal, has become normal and acceptable on social media. Anonymity is now boasted and normal and it has lost its traditional connotations of shame, deviousness, and cowardice.

Auden may have counselled us to “love your crooked neighbour/ With your crooked heart” but instead we have created a sanctimonious world, in which the imperfections of others are contrasted with our own asserted political purity. Along with those who agree with me, I am a good person, but you and those agreeing with you are evil and deserve to be scorned or worse. Some “identities” then have become a convenient cover for bullying at a distance and without consequences for the bully (“trolling”). If there is any genuine solidarity remaining in this exercise, it seems to be directed at gaining and retaining “friends” in cyberspace and it permits a casual contempt for those victimised at a distance, with moral accountability going absent without leave.

The use and abuse of freedom of expression then has become a necessary focus when we examine identity politics. Freedom of expression is then both suppressed and used aggressively in order to achieve that goal. This contradiction in and of itself bears examination. This scenario of highly personalised politics reflects our neoliberal times and its rewarded forms of strong individualism. Today in “progressive” circles, expressed virtue (in the slang of today being “woke”) is a badge of *personal* pride, honour, and warranted *personal* indignation. This leaves out-group individuals lacking that virtue to be *personally* vilified justifiably and their viewpoints closed down. They have become fair game for vindictiveness and occasionally violence. In this process the experiential character of oppression becomes confused and confusing; rather like aiming for peace by killing people. If capital punishment involves taking a life as a punitive response to a life having been taken, then in this case, personal offence is allegedly solved by creating more personal offence.

Having said all of this, without identity politics, historical injustices, for example in relation to sex discrimination or racial prejudice, exploitation, and slavery, may not be revealed to public consciousness. Moreover, governments today might be unconcerned about their daily

relevance for public policy. In other words, power and its exploitation between social groups, past and present, are real sources of oppression and that oppression *really is* experienced at the individual level.

Thus, a focus on personal experience is a completely legitimate *starting point* to understand oppression. However, does that exhaust our understanding of political forces in their complexity and dynamic flux? Does it exhaust our way of “doing” politics? Does it bring costs as well as benefits, especially when self-righteous indignation is used to bully and belittle others? Does the legitimate starting point simply become a reified end in itself, with nothing else really required from any of us anymore? Does anxiously watching our “Ps and Qs” imply that politics might now have been reduced to the life-long discipline of self-censorship? These are the hares set running by identity politics and are questions worth exploring, together or apart, in personal reflections in or out of political or academic settings.

The courtroom of daily life and new technology

Norbert Elias’ work on the character of civilisation was misread by some as a celebration of ongoing progress in Western societies since the Enlightenment. More modestly he was trying to highlight the need to reflect on the costs and benefits of increasing personal restraint and moral probity, when risking offending others (etiquette and civility). As both Stalinism and Nazism demonstrated in the twentieth century, these habits can characterise daily life for many, even in the most barbaric of regimes. The norms of restraint and civility by no means ensure civilisation.

In a similar vein, Sigmund Freud was concerned to demonstrate that the superego (our ideal imagined self and our conscience) can have contradictory consequences. They may ensure the preservation of the status quo and have a cost to the mental health of individuals. Some psychoanalysts went as far as arguing that the superego was an “internal saboteur”. We punish ourselves for “getting it wrong” and often direct that censure outwards, when coming across the misdeeds of speech and action of others. The process of “projection” is one amongst many safety mechanisms to discharge anxiety and aggression. I will be exploring these and other psychodynamic processes in relation to the practice of identity politics episodically in the following pages.

Given that identity politics places moralisation centre stage, and then personalises that obligation, a range of eventualities can accrue, when the superego is in overdrive. The wrongdoer may be properly identified but what sanction should be imposed and on whose authority? What if they are wrongly identified or the rationale for condemning them is debateable? What if the self-righteous judgements of one social group are diametrically opposed to those of another?

Daily life then becomes a diffuse and often confusing courtroom for us all to be judged and to judge others. Now we are all the judge and jury and we are not always clear of the rules and the regime of punishment we are party to. This is a precarious state of affairs, whether we consider it in relation to rationality, evidence confirmation, or natural justice. It is not at all clear how it will enhance human flourishing. It may achieve little except making people feel bad about themselves and suspicious of anyone not in their contingently defined peer group. It divides people against one another. As it does not create solidarity amongst ordinary people, those divisions can be exploited by the rich and the powerful.

How has this messy modish trend of identity politics arisen? Possibly their ideological proximity to, or enmeshment with, postmodern social science and its constituent elements of idealism and “perspectivism” have sometimes culminated in the abandonment of the gains of the Enlightenment. A respect for reason, the judicious weighing up of evidence, the assurance of tolerant debates between competing ethical or political viewpoints and the rejection of *ad hominem* reasoning have been cast aside casually at times in the practice of identity politics. This has undermined the absolutist claim of critical social justice warriors to be an unalloyed progressive force.

At times, these eventualities have been amplified by the emotive and reckless norms of social media, where “the only way is down” for intelligent respectful exchanges. Social media have become a lawless playground in which those who shout loudest, or are following the comfortable norms of the cyber-mob, can threaten the well-being of others in a range of ways. When this happens, a social trend (which might be judged as being good, bad, or indifferent with the benefit of later hindsight) becomes a self-satisfied ersatz “social revolution”.

Social media as a rapid-fire form of communication held the promise of increasing public participation but, in practice, all too often, the opposite has occurred. The aspirations in the late twentieth century of those like Hannah Arendt to create a daily context of deliberative democracy have been dashed by the false promise of new technology. For example, the rational use of Twitter to enhance quick and easy access to new research for academics is soon drowned out by the noise of bile and contempt for others. When there is little or no respect for the distinction between fact and fiction and when all perspectives make an equal claim to authority or wisdom then democracy is undermined, not strengthened.

In this contemporary technological context, the *seeming* libertarianism of postmodernism and its expression on social media have culminated in authoritarianism and the closing down of debate. The surface defence and celebration of “diversity” have disguised a barely veiled undertow of intolerance. A diversity of viewpoints are not genuinely defended but shut down casually. When that occurs, the traditional defence of freedom of expression in life in general, but in academic life in particular, is threatened. Amongst other things then, identity politics has tested the willingness and ability of intellectuals to protect, rather than subvert, freedom of expression. The response has been divided and ambivalent, reflecting a period since the 1960s in which, for a variety of sound and sometimes unsound reasons, our traditional confidence in scientific evidence and truth claims has been queried.

A broad separation in US culture was identified by J. D. Hunter in his book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (Hunter, 1991). A cleavage then began to emerge, according to him, between progressives in American politics and those defending cultural orthodoxy. Hot topics such as homosexuality and abortion would then flush out those taking sides in this divide.

I would suggest some cautions about these (understandable) broad sociological brush strokes. First, this was a comment on US culture and so we might be wary to explore the strengths and weaknesses of identity politics globally by the norms of US society at a particular historical moment. Second, that broad description did not take into account contradictions. For example (as I will be exploring in Chapter Three

in relation to sex-based rights), a civil rights yardstick for social justice can lead to one group's rights being pitched against another. American individualism found its expression on the American left with these contradictions but, for example, the reconciliation of identity politics with both social democracy and Marxism in Europe is today being played out in a "non-American" way at times.

Ambiguities and contradictions

These ambiguities and contradictions then are explored in the coming chapters, using critical realism as a philosophical resource. I will say more about this in the first chapter and will offer a glossary of relevant terms at the end of the book for those wishing to extend their understanding of this approach, which treads a middle way between old-fashioned positivism and postmodernism. I will place glossary terms in bold in the chapters, when they first appear, to cue the reader.

A basic starting point for critical realists is to begin with an empirical description of X and then pose and answer a question about its emergence. In this case, where X is identity politics, what must have the world been like for them to emerge and then gain legitimacy in today's society? That tracing of relevant antecedents allows us to make sense of why identities have emerged during human history, which at the turn of this century began to constitute a different form of politics from the past, though some of the topics explored in the book suggest a far longer tradition of claims to an oppressed status (for example, the struggles against anti-Semitism and colonialism). Also, insights about divisions of social classes and their forms of consciousness and special pleading were described by Adam Smith, not just Marx.

A final caveat, by way of introduction, is that the topics chosen and listed are commonly known but they do not exhaust each and every group that might have been discussed under the rubric of "identity politics". I have deliberately selected some to highlight their usefulness and worthiness (for example, in debates about sex, gender, and race) but also some that legitimise reactionary goals (antisocial sexual identities and theocratic special pleading); a curate's egg indeed.