

# Kwame Anthony Appiah

## *The politics of identity*

I am never quite sure what people mean when they talk about ‘identity politics.’ Usually, though, they bring it up to complain about someone else. One’s own political preoccupations are just, well, politics. Identity politics is what other people do.

Here’s one example: When someone in France suggested gay marriage was a good idea, many French people complained that this was just another instance of American-style identity politics. (In France, as you know, ‘American-style’ is *en effet* a synonym for ‘bad.’) ‘Why should *les gays* insist on special treatment?’ So the French legislature created the Pacte Civil de Solidarité (PACS), whose point is exactly that marriage is open to *any* two citizens. ‘Much better,’ those people said. ‘Sexuality has

nothing to do with the government.’ You might wonder how someone who said *that* could think that civil marriage should *not* be open to gays. Isn’t that straight identity politics?

In short, I think that what Sir John Harrington so sagely said of treason is largely true of identity politics: it never *seems* to prosper only because it has largely won the political stage.

But I think there is a way of explaining why identity matters. ‘Identity’ may not be the best word for bringing together the roles gender, class, race, nationality, and so on play in our lives, but it is the one we use. One problem with ‘identity’: it can suggest that everyone of a certain identity is in some strong sense *idem*, i.e., the same, when, in fact, most groups are internally quite heterogeneous, partly because each of us has many identities. The right response to this problem is just to be aware of the risk.

But another difficulty with social identity is that the very diversity of that list can leave you wondering whether all these identities have anything interesting in common. What did it mean when I added ‘and so on’ just now to a list that ran from gender to nationality?<sup>1</sup> Well,

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1 I’m reminded of Jorge Luis Borges’s famous example of a list he claimed to have found in

you can only answer that sort of question by proposing a theory of identity.

My own account of social identities is nominalist because I explain how the identities work by talking about the labels – the names – for them. Take some arbitrary identity-label X. My proposal is: X will have criteria of ascription; some people will identify as X's; some people will treat others as X's; and X will have norms of identification.

*Ascription:* The criteria of ascription for X are the properties on the basis of which we sort people into those we do and those we don't call X's. These criteria need not be the same for everyone. Indeed, people will rarely agree on exactly which properties X's must have. Here is scope for one kind of identity politics: Are F-to-M transgender people men? Are Muslims really French? This form of identity politics involves negotiation (not necessarily by way of the state) of the boundaries of various groups. At the same time, this isn't just a matter of what people say about you, or whether they're polite: it may affect what resources you have access to. If being a devout Muslim is inconsistent with being French, you might not be able to go to a state school with your hijab on.

*Identification:* By itself, mere classification does not produce what I mean by 'a social identity.' What makes a classification a relevant social identity is not just that some people are called X's but also that being an X figures in their thoughts, feelings, and acts. When a person thinks

of herself as an X in the relevant way, she *identifies as an X*, which means she sometimes *feels like* or *acts as an X*. For example: Joe Kansas is in Rome. He sees a lost-looking couple and hears one of them say, with an American accent, 'Gee, honey, I wish I knew the route to the Capitol.' Since Joe's just come from there, he goes up to them and tells them the way. Why? Because he's an American and so are they. In other words, to *feel like an X* is to respond affectively in a way that depends on your identity as an X. You may feel proud of Mary, a fellow Englishwoman, say, who has just scaled Everest. Politicians mobilize this sort of feeling all the time, when they can – more scope then for a politicization of identities.

*Treatment:* Finally, to treat someone as an X is to do something to her *because she is an X*. When Joe tells those lost tourists the way to the Capitol, he's helping them, in part, 'because they're Americans.' Kindness of this sort is a common form of treatment directed toward fellow in-group members. Unkindness is an equally frequent form of treatment directed toward out-group members. Here is room for politics, once more, as people try to use the government to enforce their likes and dislikes. And the politics can be very serious: think of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

*Norms of identification:* Identities are useful, in part, because once we ascribe an identity to someone we can often make predictions about her behavior on that basis. This is not just because the criteria of ascription entail that members of the group have, or tend to have, certain properties. It's also because social identities are associated with norms of behavior for X's. People don't only do and avoid doing things because they're X's; there are things that, as X's, they

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an ancient Chinese encyclopedia. It begins: "(a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, . . ." and ends with "(n) those that resemble flies from a distance." What would it mean to add 'and so on' here?

ought and ought not to do. The ‘ought’ here is what a philosopher would call a general practical ought – the ordinary ought, not some special moral one. Here are some examples of the type of norms I have in mind. Negatively: men ought not to wear dresses; gay men ought not to fall in love with women; blacks ought not to embarrass the race; Muslims ought not to eat pork. Positively: men ought to open doors for women; gay people ought to come out; blacks ought to support affirmative action; Muslims ought to make the Hajj.

To say these norms exist isn’t to endorse them. The existence of a norm that X’s ought to A amounts only to its being widely thought – and widely understood to be thought – that X’s ought to A.

Let me underscore at once how wide a range of kinds of people fit the general rubric I have laid out. This story answers the questions: what things ‘like’ race, ethnicity, gender, class are; what it means to say ‘gender, nationality, *and so on.*’ We can now add, for example, professional identities (lawyer, doctor, journalist, philosopher); vocations (artist, composer, novelist); affiliations, formal and informal (Man. U. fan, jazz aficionado, Conservative, Catholic, Mason); and other more airy labels (dandy, conservative, cosmopolitan). There are also relationships that are an obvious extension of the general rubric: you can be X’s father and identify as such, or treat someone as X’s dad. Fatherhood has norms – things dads ought to do.

If this is what identities are, it appears silly to be either ‘fer’ or ‘agin’ them. Either posture calls to mind the full-hearted avowal of the American transcendentalist Margaret Fuller, “I accept the universe!” – and Thomas Carlyle’s famously robust rejoinder, “Gad! She’d better!”

‘There it is,’ Carlyle’s point was. ‘We’d better deal with it.’

But if we’re going to deal with identity, it’s reasonable to ask how large a part these identities should play in our political lives, whether we take politics in the narrow sense of our dealings with the state, or, more broadly, as our dealings, in social life, with one another.

To answer that question it helps to begin not with politics, not even with social life directly, but with the ‘ethical life’ of individuals. By ‘ethics,’ I mean something like what whoever put the label *Nichomachean Ethics* on that ancient book meant by it. (Apparently, it probably wasn’t Aristotle.) *Ethics* is a reflection on what it means for human lives to go well, for us to have *eudaimonia*. (This is Aristotle’s word, perhaps best translated as ‘flourishing.’) *Ethics*, in this sense, has important connections with morality, which Ronald Dworkin taught me to distinguish from ethics as follows: Ethics, he said, “includes convictions about which kinds of lives are good or bad for a person to lead, and morality includes principles about how a person should treat other people.”<sup>2</sup>

Each of us has a life to live. We face many moral demands, but they leave us many options. We mustn’t be cruel or dishonest, for example, but we can still live in many ways without these vices. Of course, all of us also have constraints of historical circumstances and physical and mental endowments: I was born into the wrong family to be a Yoruba *Oba* and with the wrong body for motherhood; I am too short to be a successful

2 Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 485, fn. 1. Note that Dworkin’s definition allows that the ethical might subsume the moral. It might be best to lead a life in which you treat others as they should be treated.

professional basketball player and insufficiently musical to be a concert pianist. But even when we have taken these things into account, each human life begins with many possibilities. Everybody has – or, at least, should have – a great variety of decisions to make in shaping a life. And a philosophical liberal, like me, believes these choices belong, in the end, to the person whose life it is.

This means at least two things. First, the standard by which we decide whether I'm flourishing is, in part, set by aims I define for myself. Second, provided I give others their moral due, the job of managing my life is mine. Thoughtful friends, benevolent sages, and anxious relatives rightly offer advice as to how to proceed. But it ought to be *advice*, not coercion. And, just as private coercion is wrong, it is also wrong when undertaken by governments interested in the perfection of their citizens. In other words, once I have done my duty, the shaping of my life is up to me.

What John Stuart Mill taught us to call individuality is one term for this task. But our individuality isn't produced in a vacuum; rather, the available social forms and, of course, our interactions with others help shape it. Chapter 3 of *On Liberty* ("On individuality as one of the elements of well-being") is the classic English formulation of this notion of individuality; but, as Mill freely acknowledged there, his own thinking about these matters had been profoundly shaped by an essay of Wilhelm von Humboldt, written in the 1790s, and known to us now as *The Limits of State Action*. (It's a good thing that's how we know it: the German title was actually *Ideen zu einem Versuch die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen*.) In Chapter 2, "Of the individual man, and the highest ends of his existence," Humboldt wrote that it is "through a social

union . . . based on the individual wants and capacities of its members, that each is enabled to participate in the rich collective resources of the others."<sup>3</sup> Liberals realize that we need other people: respect for individuality is not an endorsement of individualism.

You might object that I count too many things as social identities. But the fact that my account includes things we don't normally think of as social identities is actually an advantage. Because these other identities are important, as the usual social identities are, in our ethical lives. Humboldt, after the passage I just quoted, gives as his first example marriage ("the union of the sexes"), and then drifts perilously close to discussing homosexual relationships, too.<sup>4</sup> 'Spouse,' in short, is one of those relational words, like 'father,' that fit the model.

And it's important to put the social identities we normally talk about in the context of all these others, because the feature they all share, from the point of view of ethics, is that people make use of them in seeking *eudaimonia*.

Why do we have such a diverse range of social identities and relations? One answer, an etiological one, speaks to our evolution as a social species designed for

3 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, ed. J. W. Burrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 9. Humboldt's essay, though written in 1891–1892, was not first published in a fairly complete form until 1852. See the editor's introduction, vii.

4 That's perhaps one reason he didn't publish the essay himself, leaving it to his brother Alexander to publish posthumously. Another was that suggesting limits on the state probably wasn't so popular with Friedrich Wilhelm, King of Prussia, nephew of Frederick the Great – who, come to think of it, might have liked the gay part.

the game of coalition building in search of food, mates, and protection. This is why we have the sort of in-group solidarities and out-group antagonisms that social psychologists have been exploring for the last half century.

But from the point of view of a creature with that psychology, there is another, equally persuasive answer: we use identities to construct our human lives. For we make our lives *as men* and *as women*, *as Yanks* and *as Brits*, *as Catholics* and *as Jews*; we make them *as philosophers* and *as novelists*; we make them *as fathers* and *as daughters*. Identities are a central resource in this process. Morality – by which I mean what we owe to one another – is also part of the scaffolding on which we make that construction. So are various projects that we voluntarily undertake: Voltaire’s garden at Ferney shaped the last years of his life. (He really meant what he said at the end of *Candide*.)

Identities are so diverse and extensive because, in the modern world, people need an enormous array of tools in making a life. The range of options sufficient for each of us isn’t enough for us all. Indeed, people are making up new identities all the time: ‘gay’ is basically four decades old; ‘punk’ is younger. As Mill said in one of my favorite passages from Chapter 3 of *On Liberty*:

If it were only that people have diversities of taste, that is reason enough for not attempting to shape them all after one model. But different persons also require different conditions for their spiritual development; and can no more exist healthily in the same moral, than all the variety of plants can exist in the same physical atmosphere and climate. The same things which are helps to one person towards the cultivation of his higher nature, are hindrances to another . . . unless there is

a corresponding diversity in their modes of life, they neither obtain their fair share of happiness, nor grow up to the mental, moral, and aesthetic statures of which their nature is capable.<sup>5</sup>

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Philosophers have written a good deal recently about one way in which social identities have figured in politics, namely in what Hegelian language labels the ‘politics of recognition.’ The responses of other people obviously play a crucial role in shaping one’s sense of who one is. As Charles Taylor points out, this process begins in intimate life: “On the intimate level, we can see how much an original identity needs and is vulnerable to the recognition given or withheld by significant others.” Relationships, he says, are “crucial because they are crucibles of inwardly generated identity.”<sup>6</sup>

But that’s just the beginning. Our identities don’t depend on interactions in intimate life alone. Law, school, church, work, and many other institutions also shape us. However, this fact doesn’t tell us what role the state should play in the regulation of such acts of recognition.

Unfortunately, we live in societies that have not treated certain individuals with respect because they were, for example, women, homosexuals, blacks, Jews. Because our identities are ‘dialogically’ shaped, as Taylor describes it, people who have these characteristics find them central – often negatively central – to

5 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 18, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–1991), 270.

6 Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 36. Cf. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

their identities. The politics of recognition starts when we grasp that this is wrong. One form of healing pursued by those who have these identities involves seeing these collective identities not as sources of limitation and insult but as valuable parts of who they are. And since a modern ethics of authenticity (which goes back, roughly, to Romanticism) requires us to express who we centrally are, they move, next, to demanding society recognize them *as* women, homosexuals, blacks, and Catholics, and do the cultural work necessary to resist the stereotypes, to challenge the insults, to lift the restrictions.

Since these old restrictions suggested substantially negative norms of identification, constructing a life with dignity entails developing positive norms of identification instead. For example, an American homosexual after Stonewall and gay liberation takes the script of the closet, and works, in community with others, to assemble a series of positive gay norms of identification. This new conception recodes being a faggot as being gay, which requires, among other things, declining to stay in the closet. But if one is to be out of the closet in a society that deprives homosexuals of equal dignity and respect, then one must constantly deal with assaults on one's dignity. Thus, the right to live as an 'open' homosexual is not enough. It is not even enough to be treated with equal dignity *despite* being homosexual, for that would mean accepting that being homosexual counts to some degree against one's dignity. Instead, one must ask to be respected *as* gay.

This is a demand that others could accede to as individuals: I have no objection to calling social negotiations of this sort a kind of micropolitics. But what can it mean for the state? On one side lies the individual oppressor whose ex-

pressions of contempt may be part of who he or she is, and whose rights of free expression are presumably grounded, at least in part, in the connection between individuality and self-expression. On the other, the oppressed individual, whose life can go best only if his or her identity is consistent with self-respect. How, if at all, is the state to intervene?

There are undoubtedly all sorts of things that might be done here: laws against hate speech or verbal harassment in the workplace, state education for tolerance, public celebrations of the heroes of the oppressed. But it's important to see that, while members of groups that have experienced historical exclusion, contempt, or obloquy may indeed need new social practices in order to flourish, what they are seeking is not always *recognition*. When blacks and women in the United States campaigned for the vote, they did so very often as blacks and as women. But they weren't asking for recognition of their identity; they were asking, precisely, for the vote. Participation of this sort may presuppose a minimal sense of recognition, but it entails a good deal more. Similarly, when the lesbian and gay movement in the United States pursues recognition, it does so by asking for rights – to serve in the military, to marry – that would be worth having even if they came without recognition. So not all political claims made in the name of a group identity are primarily claims for recognition.

In social life, too, it's equally important not to pursue a politics of recognition too far. If recognition entails taking notice of one's identity in social life, then the development of strong norms of identification can become not liberating but oppressive. There is a kind of identity politics that doesn't just permit but *demand*s that I treat my skin color or

my sexuality as central to my social life. Even though my 'race' or my sexuality may be elements of my individuality, someone who insists that I organize my life around these things is not an ally of individuality. Because identities are constituted in part by norms of identification and by treatment, there is no clear line between recognition and a new kind of oppression.

One reasonable criticism of identity politics consists, then, in pointing out that there's more than recognition – often much more – at stake when people ask to be recognized. This resembles the standard old-style Marxist criticism that identities other than class-based ones get in the way of seeing where our real interests lie. (There's some truth to this, though as a good liberal, I don't think our real interests are just our economic ones.) But the point here is not just that recognition isn't all that matters. Indeed, because our identities shape our aims and our aims help fix our interests, we can have real so-to-speak identity interests as well.

Many people in the United States voted for George Bush in part because they wanted someone who was, like them, an evangelical Christian, in the White House. They voted *as* evangelicals, but this, at best, is very obliquely a point about recognition. Getting a wave from the White House may count as state recognition, I suppose, but most evangelicals sensibly don't hang their self-respect on that rather wobbly peg. Now I think that for many of them that vote was a mistake, since George Bush's actual policies are bad for many of the things that matter most to them – health care, pension provision, tax policy, not losing their sons and daughters in foreign adventures. And though he is, I believe, a sincere evangelical Christian,

George Bush hasn't done – and probably won't do – much in changing the law on many of the so-called social issues that evangelical Christians might be thought to care about: stopping abortions, refusing to recognize lesbian and gay relationships in any way, and getting lots of mentions for God in public life. So what George Bush says about abortion and homosexuality draws them to him, even though they should pick someone else if they cared about policy rather than identity.

This kind of politics is actually a deep feature of modern democratic life. We identify with people and parties for a variety of psychological reasons, including identifications of this prepolitical sort, and then we're rather inclined to support all the policies of that person or party. This is, in part, because sensible people have better things to do than work out, all by themselves, what the proper balance should be between, say, VAT and income taxes, but it's also because people sufficiently like you may actually pick policies, when they do think about them, that you would pick, if you had the time. So here, as in many places in life, it is sensible to practice a cognitive division of labor. That used to work by creating political identities – left, right, small-l liberal, Labour, Tory, big-l Liberal, Democrat, Republican, Christian Democrat, and Marxist. In many of the advanced democracies, party affiliations are less strong than they used to be, and other identities are bearing more political weight. But that's in part because many of the older party affiliations were class-based, and social class as defined by one's work has declined in significance in people's identifications. In that very profound way a new kind of identity politics, based in the declining social salience of class, has been on the rise since the 1960s.

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I count seven different ways in which I've said that you might speak of 'identity politics.' (1) There are political conflicts about who's in and who's out. (2) Politicians can mobilize identities. (3) States can treat people of distinct identities differently. (4) People can pursue a politics of recognition. (5) There can be a social micropolitics enforcing norms of identification. (6) There are inherently political identities like party identifications. And (7) social groups can mobilize to respond collectively to all of the above. Maybe it's not so surprising then that, as I said at the start, I'm never quite sure what people mean when they talk about identity politics.