Introduction

During the late 1960s, certain political phenomena appeared on the US landscape that altered the terms of public debate about social justice. The political movements on behalf of African Americans and women took a distinctive turn. Both of these movements had been a force in United States politics prior to the late 1960s, most visibly in the earlier civil rights and women's rights movements. In these earlier incarnations, these movements had fought for legislation aimed at expanding the access black people and women had to opportunities long denied them for reasons of race and sex. But in the late 1960s, a new kind of emphasis emerged within both movements. While many within these movements continued to work for the above goals, others, particularly those who were younger and angrier, began to articulate different kinds of aims. Those who started calling their movement "Black Power," instead of "Civil Rights," and "Women's Liberation," as distinct from "Women's Rights," created a politics that went beyond the issue of access and focused more explicitly on issues of identity than had these earlier movements. Other activists, such as those who replaced "Gay Rights" with "Gay Liberation," made a similar kind of turn. The more explicit focus of these groups on issues of identity caused many to describe this new politics as "identity politics."

Identity issues had not been totally absent from the political movements of women and African Americans prior to the emergence of "identity politics." In these earlier movements, activists had struggled against prevailing ideas about who women and black people were, ideas that had often been used to prevent members of both groups from occupying social spaces open to men and to whites. But mostly such struggles had involved denying that blacks and women were naturally different from whites and men, and thus naturally unable to live and to work in those places open to whites and to men.

But the younger activists found this mere denial of difference inadequate. While such denial broke down barriers against the participation of some blacks and women in public life, it also worked to maintain a

privileging of certain values and practices of middle-class public life, a privileging that functioned to exclude many. As younger feminists began to focus on issues of private life, and as African American activists began to identify more with the values and practices of poor and working-class African Americans, the privileging of such values and practices seemed at best to benefit only some already advantaged members of their own groups. Changes that would reach wider numbers seemed to demand a revolution in the norms and values of US society, including a radical rethinking about how differences between blacks and whites and women and men were to be understood. While differences between blacks and whites and women and men had earlier been associated with what was supposedly inferior about the former groups, these younger activists began to associate such differences with what was positive, if not superior, about these groups. This self-conscious attempt to reframe the meaning of these identity categories was reflected in such political slogans as "Black is Beautiful" and "Sisterhood is Powerful." This proud assertion of difference became viewed by these younger activists as linked with a more radical restructuring of the social order than was demanded by the earlier movements, a restructuring that could address the needs of greater numbers of blacks and women.

This move to reframe the meaning of these categories of identity was accompanied by a focus on group specific problems. Whereas older political movements of the left had struggled for the kinds of things everyone could be expected to want – such as voting rights or access to educational and employment opportunities – the younger activists focused on problems specific to the situations of their particular groups. Women and black people examined their experiences for answers to questions about what it meant to be a woman or black. They articulated political demands based on those experiences and the specific needs emerging from them. As articulated by the Combahee River Collective in the early 1970s, "identity politics" was a politics emerging out of a group's distinctive experiences and expressed the needs it saw as following from those experiences. The Combahee River Collective contrasted this kind of politics to one earlier prevalent on the left where activists fought for supposedly universal ends on behalf of those who lacked the abilities or resources to fight for them themselves:[1]

[1] This recognition that different social groups had different perspectives and needs was not completely original with identity political activists. Marxists had long recognized the differences between the perspectives and needs of the working class from that of members of other social classes. However, Marxists had also tended to view the working class as a universal class. It was universal firstly because its members would come to represent the great majority of the population as capitalism developed. Secondly, Marxists held that its

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics comes directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression.[2]

Members of these new political movements believed that focusing on their group's distinct experiences was necessary not only to understand their group's unique needs. It was also necessary to redefine the goals of a just society. Social justice meant not only that women and black people should have access to that which had previously been understood as desirable, but it also meant changes in existing social beliefs about what should count as desirable. One of the slogans of the Women's Liberation Movement expressed this point in the following way: "Women who strive to be equal to men lack ambition."

"Identity politics" generated strong and diverse reactions across the political spectrum. Those who supported it believed that a new day was dawning in terms of sex roles and race relations. Others viewed it very differently. Conservatives attacked identity politics as too "radical," labeling those associated with it as "extremist." Some conservative critics of feminism distinguished between a feminism that stressed women's equality with men, and a "gender feminism" that emphasized women's unique experiences and needs. While claiming to support the former, these critics attacked the latter.[3] But, even among many of those on the left and among more moderate thinkers, identity politics was sharply criticized. Leftists sometimes credited identity politics with causing the left to dwindle in effectiveness from the 1960s to the present. They described identity politics as a type of interest group politics, where people who previously had been intent on transforming society as a whole now became concerned with their own limited ends. They argued that while an earlier left aimed at the real, common needs of people for a decent standard of living and political control over their lives, identity politics was a more culturalist, self-oriented politics. More moderate actors also took issue with identity politics' suspicion of universal rights and with many of its radical challenges to the existing social order. For such actors, identity politics

perspectives would alone not be distorted in the ways in which the perspectives of members of other social classes would be distorted. And finally, Marxists believed that the needs of the working class would, at base, represent the needs of humanity as a whole. In short, while Marxists did critique what they saw as the false universalism of bourgeois social thought, Marxists maintained a kind of universalism in their own political views.

[2] "The Combahee River Collective: A Black Feminist Statement," pp. 63–70 in Linda Nicholson, ed., *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 65.

[3] See Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

invited tribal forms of identification which courted social division and moral relativism.[4]

Both conservative and more centrist critics sometimes equated the "identity politics" of the post-1960s left with any political struggle where a group promotes its own specific interests. In accord with this understanding of "identity politics," the identity politics of the post-1960s left was viewed as identical to the turn any national, ethnic, or religious group takes when it defines the needs of its own group as paramount over the needs of society as a whole.

Identity politics seems now to be largely dead, or, at minimum, no longer able to command the kind of public attention that it did from the late 1960s through the late 1980s. And not surprisingly, this public diminishment of identity politics is understood in very different terms by different segments of today's population. Among many of those who had been active in its promulgation, and even among some younger activists today, the identity politics of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s is seen as a lost nirvana, a social revolution that somehow got prematurely stalled. But among those who had criticized it in the above kinds of ways, this public diminishment is experienced with grateful relief. For these commentators, identity politics represented a wrong turning point in United States history, a turning point that is now best left forgotten.

One premise of this book is that neither of these two responses is justified. Identity politics was not a nirvana. The ideas about identity promoted by identity politics were often misguided. Moreover, proponents of identity politics too frequently generalized the needs of the many from the perspective of the few. But, on the other hand, identity politics caused neither the demise of the left, nor can it simply be equated with an interest group politics. Rather, it represented a serious attempt to reconfigure our understanding of social difference. While some of the ways in which it depicted social identity were limited, it also inaugurated a very useful discussion about identity, a discussion that we continue to need today.

A second premise of this book is that we can best understand this complicated contribution of identity politics by placing it within history. We are now far enough away from the excitement and anger that identity politics generated, to begin to gain some objectivity about the forces that caused it to come into being, that shaped its nature, and that contributed

[4] For criticisms from the left and from a more centrist position see respectively, Todd Gitlen, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995) and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992).

to its present state. Such a history might help us begin to grasp not only why activists involved with identity politics felt the need to challenge existing beliefs about social identity in the ways that they did, but also why the movements were limited in the ways that they were. This kind of assessment might also help us in better understanding where we need to go today in thinking about social identity.

Thus, this book is centrally historical, and particularly in its first three chapters, is a history of ideas. I want to illuminate the historicity of some of the ideas about social identity that have organized the lives of women and black people in the history of the United States and that motivated activists to challenge those forms of organization and the ideas behind them. Because the intention of this book is to illuminate the prehistory of identity politics, this book will focus on those forms of identity that were central in this politics, that is, on race and sex. I will examine other forms of identity such as religion, nationality, class, etc. only in so far as these relate to the histories of these other two forms of social identity. And while similar phenomena emerged outside of the United States at this point in time, the focus of this book will be primarily on the prehistory of that politics in the United States.

In the opening chapter I focus on one particularly powerful way of thinking about the identities of women and those of African descent that emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century in northern and western Europe and that has played a very important role in United States history. This way of thinking used nature to explain differences between men and women and between blacks and whites, differences that earlier had been explained by other means. While this new turn to nature was theoretically race and gender neutral, in practice, its use was accompanied by a greater degree of naturalization of the identities of women and those of African descent in comparison to those of white men. Because of this difference in the degree of naturalization, the identities of women and those of African descent became perceived in less individualistic and more generalizable ways than those of white men. The identities of members of the former groups were also perceived as less subject to change and modification through the exertion of reason and will. In this chapter I look at some of the ideological mechanisms that made possible this differential degree of naturalization of the identities of members of these groups.

This differential degree of naturalization was pervasive in the United States by the late nineteenth century. Adherence to it was so extensive that even many of those in the United States who began to rebel against existing social arrangements for black people and for women assumed it in their movements against such arrangements. But during the first few decades of the twentieth century, certain groups within the population

began to articulate and defend a different stance on social identity, one where human identity was assumed to be more similar among all human beings, with most characterological differences claimed to be individual in nature.

To illuminate the full contours of this new stance, in chapter 2 I turn to the writings of Sigmund Freud. Freud, of course, was Austrian and therefore a focus on his writings takes the narrative of this book outside of the United States. But his work had a strong impact on public consciousness in the United States as well as in other parts of the world. And my focus on Freud is not so much on the specificities of his theoretical contributions as on how his writings reflected broad-based changes in ways of thinking about social identity among intellectuals and academicians across much of Europe and North America.

Particularly, in the development of his ideas we can see tensions between the hold of older, more naturalistically based ways of thinking, and the development of newer ideas about identity. Freud developed many of his core ideas about social identity in a period of time when many intellectuals still adhered to the older, more naturalistically based models. In focusing upon Freud's partial move away from these models and his arguments against those who still more fully adhered to them, we gain a glimpse into some of the key issues that divided proponents and detractors of these changing positions at this moment in time. Secondly, though Freud's move away from these older ways of thinking was only partial, the brilliance of his work reveals many of the important political ramifications of some of the newer ways of thinking. In particular, a focus on his work enables us to see how a rejection of naturalistically based understandings was related to a more socially egalitarian and individualistic understanding of human nature. But, as Freud's writing also illustrates, even to the extent such a rejection was present – which for Freud was not always the case – such a move towards egalitarianism could still be limited by the continued influence of unjustified heirarchical judgments about human behavior, judgments conceptually distinct from but historically associated with that naturalism.

If Freud's work illuminates a particular kind of political alternative to naturalistic understandings of human differences, the work of a different group of United States thinkers slightly later in the century illuminates a different kind of challenge with different political implications. In chapter 3 I focus on certain shifts in the discipline of anthropology in the United States in the period from the 1920s through the 1950s and in particular on the ways Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead helped elaborate a new concept of "culture." This concept explains practices common to members of a group neither by reference to nature nor by reference to

individually specific influences of the environment. Instead it allows for the fact that members of a social group may share traits as a result of common environmental conditions. But as a naturalistic model of organizing social identity, and Freud's more individualistic reaction against it, contained political implications, so too did this new concept of "culture" also contain political implications. The new concept of "culture" challenged the hierarchical model of social group differences that had been justified by naturalistic accounts and that were even left in place by a more environmentally individualistic approach.

Both types of challenge to naturalistic explanations became part of the cultural landscape of mid-twentieth-century America. The writings of some of these anthropologists, especially the writings of Benedict and Mead, like the writings of Freud, had wide circulation outside of the academy. Thus, the work of these intellectuals, in conjunction with the contributions of other scholars and writers introducing related ideas, contributed to the availability of alternatives to naturalistic accounts in popular culture. The question, however, is when and why these ideas became used by activists struggling to change existing social arrangements affecting African Americans and women. In chapters 4 and 5 I turn away from a history of ideas and to a history of the social movements engaged with such change. As I argue, structural shifts in the history of the United States caused some groups of women and some groups of African Americans at particular moments in time to turn away from the older naturalistic accounts and towards those ways of thinking about social identity that were exemplified in these intellectual challenges. In these two chapters I focus on these structural shifts to help explain changes in the history of these movements and to explain why each of these alternative ways of thinking about social identity found certain groups of adherents at certain moments in time. These kinds of stories will provide us with an understanding of why identity politics emerged when it did and what issues around identity this politics was created to address. These stories will also give us some insights as to why some aspects of identity politics and not others have been able to survive into the present.

In the epilogue I elaborate on this last issue, focusing on the legacy of identity politics in the early twenty-first century. Identity politics caused many to recognize the importance of social identity without supplying acceptable means for conceptualizing this type of identity. One legacy of identity politics has been, in fact, a very extensive recognition in social thinking about the importance of societal differences in affecting people's attitudes and people's lives. This recognition is manifest in a variety of ways, from increased attention to "the gender gap" in politics and the growth of such organizations as "Emily's List," to the expansion of cable

television stations that specifically target black, women, and gay and lesbian audiences; and to an educational system focused as much as ever on "multiculturalism." Such phenomena continue to remind us of the importance of social difference. However, we still are not quite sure about how to think about such difference. Rather, we tend to oscillate between an early twentieth-century model that proclaims that "we are all just individuals" and a model that explains social differences in overly homogeneous ways. In the epilogue, I suggest some ways of thinking about social identity that may help us get beyond both of these alternatives and thus better approach societal problems connected to social difference.

As the reader can conclude from the above, this is not a typical kind of history. This study covers a broader sweep of time and a more diverse type of subject matter than is covered by many, more academic histories. While there are many dangers to this kind of broad-based approach, I hope it will enable us to focus on some of the large shifts in ways of thought and in political movements that more focused narratives do not as easily allow. In particular, I hope that it gives us a more historical sense of why identity politics emerged when it did and a degree of insight into some of the conundrums about social identity that we still face today.

1 The politics of identity: race and sex before the twentieth century

In contemporary usage, the categories of "race" and "sex" share a common, curious feature. On the one hand, these appear as neutral categories: "natural" ways of organizing the human race. Thus, theoretically, everyone belongs to some race or another; everyone has a "sex." But, on the other hand, when examined more closely, the neutrality of the social organizing function of these categories dissipates. White men and women do not seem to belong to a "race" in quite the same ways as black men and women do. Similarly, men as a group are not defined by their status as men in quite the same ways as women as a group are. For both black people and women, their racial and sexual status appears to provide a richer, more elaborate content to their social identities than do the categories of "white" and "male" provide to white people and women. Generalizations about black people qua black and women qua women abound; many fewer such generalizations about white people qua white and men qua men can be found in our social lexicon.

In this chapter I want to focus on the evolution of the social categories of race and of sex from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century in western Europe and North America. As I will argue, this curious feature in contemporary understandings of these two forms of social categorization in the west has its roots in this period. At this time and place, science was emerging as a powerful tool for providing answers to questions about why the natural and social worlds were as they were. Consequently, scientists began to elaborate frameworks that accounted for the social divisions that were readily apparent in everyday life. These frameworks, because created by science, possessed an aura of objectivity and neutrality. The distinctions scientists described seemed distinctions independent of evaluative judgment and applicable to all.

But, the social distinctions that scientists described were distinctions already deeply enmeshed in evaluative judgments, in judgments about differences between women and men and blacks and whites and about the proper social functions of all. Science not only provided a neutral gloss to these judgments but, in taking over the job of explaining such distinctions,

employed nature as the means to justify such judgments. In short, nature came to occupy a role previously occupied by other sources, such as the Bible, in serving as the reason why existing divisions of social life had to be as they were.

But, existing judgments about divisions of social life possessed a particular bias. They were very much about social exclusion, particularly about excluding women as a group from non-domestic spaces and about excluding black men and women from political and civic spaces occupied by whites. But this meant that nature had to do heavy work in elaborating the identities of women and black people. The categories of female and black had to be descriptively rich, and since these categories were understood as categories of nature, this meant that they had to be descriptively rich in naturalistic terms. The categories of white and male, since not required to do as much exclusionary work, could be thinner in natural content and more easily brushed aside in favor of other identities, such as being American or a wage earner, in providing more elaborated content to the identities of white males. Such forms of self-description as wage earner or American, since not linked to nature in the same ways as were race and sex, enabled white men to think of their own identities more in terms of choice or accomplishment. In short, while nature now determined who all of us were, for some of us it determined this more extensively than for others.

The above points suggest that the histories of the male/female distinction and of race cannot be told as isolated histories. These forms of social categorization evolved in complex interplay with a host of other forms of categorization, some metaphysical, such as between nature and choice, and some political, such as between citizen and not citizen. In this chapter I hope to map out some aspects of this complex interplay between the development of these two forms of social categorization and the development of other forms of categorization over this period. I do so firstly as a means for giving us some insight into the curious ways in which we use these two forms of social categorization today. But also, in better understanding how these two categories came to function by the late nineteenth century, we are better equipped to understand why many of the twentieth-century struggles against existing boundaries took the forms that they did.

To some extent, the stories of the categories of race and of sex from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century share overlapping features. To some extent, however, the stories of these forms of categorization diverge. Because of the remarkable degree of overlap in these stories in this period, I am dealing with both as part of the same chapter. But because of the divergence in many of the specifics of these two stories,