The multidimensional politics of inequality: taking stock of identity politics in the U.S. Presidential election of 2016[1]

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Abstract

Many Democrats hoped that a particular kind of identity politics – women's – would help Hillary Clinton win the White House. In the aftermath of the election, some commentators bemoaned the fact that a majority of white women had voted for Trump, and called it a kind of betrayal, underlining their expectation that women would naturally, on the basis of their gender identity, support a woman with women-friendly politics. Indeed, this kind of thinking about identity politics has been widespread with reference to a number of demographic groups. Meanwhile, identity politics is lamented from the right and left by those who favour a greater emphasis on class-based inequalities, or a greater national identity, some of whom blame identity politics for spawning or justifying a backlash of right-leaning populism in the US. We argue for a turn to a more robust definition of identity as multidimensional and politically mediated for understanding political alignments over the past several decades. The multidimensionality of inequality – intersectionality or complex inequality – is widely accepted in the study of gender and race across the social science disciplines but has yet to be as successfully integrated into studies of electoral politics. Thinking about women's positioning in systems of complex inequality, and how the political parties have or have not articulated the concerns of different groups of women, helps us to understand the 2016 election, as well as past and potentially future political developments.

Keywords: Inequality; gender; race; class; political parties; 2016 US presidential election

Introduction

Many Democrats hoped that a particular kind of identity politics – women's – would help Hillary Clinton win the White House.[2] In the aftermath of the

election, some Democratic commentators bemoaned the fact that a majority of white women had voted for Trump, and called it a kind of betrayal, underlining their expectation that women would naturally, on the basis of their gender interests and identity, support a woman with politics and policies understood to be women-friendly. Indeed, this kind of thinking about identity politics has been widespread with reference to a number of demographic groups, for example, Latinos and youth of all races as well as women (of all races and ethnicities, though that is not always explicit); and prominent centre-left analysts have predicted that various demographic transitions will produce a durable Democratic majority (e.g., Judis and Teixeira 2002). In this view, demography – and the associated rise and fall of identity groups – is political destiny.

In the wake of Clinton's defeat, rethinking about identity group politics abounds. Some argue it is a matter of better understanding identities via, for instance, a more fully intersectional analysis (e.g., as offered by Strolovitch, Wong and Proctor's 2017 analysis of women's voting patterns, which accounts for race, marital status, sexuality, religion, and more), or an analysis focused on identities heretofore neglected, such as rural, southern, and/or religious identities (e.g., Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016). Each of the dimensions of identity foregrounded in these studies are aligned, to varying degrees, with Republican-leaning ideology, so understanding their influence on politics might help explain the Clinton loss. White women, for example, have voted disproportionately Republican (relative to all women) at least since the 1990s (Strolovitch et al. 2017). Nevertheless, Democrats assumed that the logic of identity and interests thought to be generated by women's social positioning could overcome these long-standing patterns of partisanship. And, in fact, college-educated white women did shift somewhat toward Clinton, but white women without college degrees shifted more decisively toward Trump. These more complicated results certainly call out for a better understanding of political affiliations and realignments vis-à-vis different dimensions of identity over the past several decades.

Another rethinking of the identity politics conundrum, however, is ready to give up on identity politics altogether. Identity politics is lamented by those on the Democratic left who favour a greater emphasis on class-based inequalities, and some blame identity politics, meaning politics focusing on gender, race, immigration status, and sexuality, for spawning a backlash of right-leaning populism in the US (Lilla 2016). But while it may be true that, with the absence of a strong union or labour party presence in the US context, the interests of working-class individuals are distinctly absent from political representation (Gilens 2012; Carnes 2013), including among prominent women's and civil rights organizations (Strolovitch 2007), can we do completely without reference to status-based inequalities? Notably, this would entail a high gloss on class, leaving the concerns of groups at salient intersections of class and race/gender (e.g., white working-class women) unspecified. Below we discuss why this might

be problematic even from the perspective of constructing a political narrative around reducing class inequality alone.

Interestingly, those on the right – from the perspective of individualistic personal responsibility or of an undifferentiated American nation – concur that Democratic Party-style identity politics (and the political correctness they say it entails) has gone too far, although they certainly differ with those on the left about what they would replace it with. Where the anti-identity politics left wants unity around class, the right breaks down into two distinctive perspectives, one of which actually takes up certain working-class grievances and appeals to a certain identity – one might even call it the pro-identity right, although they eschew identity as an explicit form of politics. This populist right is arguing against the Democrats for a different set of unifying identities, which they claim is the real America: native-born US citizens, implicitly white, small-town, religious. They are makers not takers, as their claim to government benefits is construed as well deserved. Ironically, this may be the most fully intersectional version of politics on the contemporary scene, tapping as it does explicitly into racial, class, and gender themes. (We discuss the second, anti-identity politics version of Republican ideology below.)

Of course, some analysts have focused on the more contingent or generic causes of Clinton's defeat – Comey's letter, Russian email hacking, or opposition to a third term for Democrats – rather than a fundamental miscalculation about the identity sources of Democratic support. This is harder to maintain in the face of the Democrats' wider losses across many states. In any event, while there are several possible ways to interpret the election and its aftermath, our focus is the renewed interest in and critiques of identity politics, and our goal is the limited one of trying to illuminate these debates by situating them within a set of established literatures that we hope will expose both their limitations and potential.

In brief, our argument favours a better form of identity analysis – more fine-grained than just gender, just race, just class – and examining the interactions among different dimensions of inequality; this entails a turn to a more robust definition of identities as multidimensional. The multidimensionality of inequality – complex inequality or intersectionality – is generally accepted (in practice if not always in name) in the study of gender and race across the social science disciplines, but has yet to be as successfully integrated into studies of electoral politics and political institutions (Hooker and Tillery 2016; Strolovitch et al. 2017). And, of course, there are other components of identity to reckon with, like small-town residence and religion, but in our view these are easily accommodated to broader perspectives – and indeed should be – and ought not to distract from the more general utility of a multidimensional perspective on identity.

There are further components to our argument, for we also take issue with the implicit theory of politics that is present in too many versions of identity

politics (of all political orientations), which ignores the extent to which identifications are politically mediated and constructed, and instead forward a view of interests, aspirations and even values as objective and transparent. We do not think this is the case; by speaking of the politically mediated understanding of these interests, aspirations and values, we hope to imply that parties and political entrepreneurs are actively articulating interests, constructing self-understandings and identifications, and offering narratives to make sense of the changing economy and society. [Let us note that here our claims are in sympathy with other social scientists critiquing the concept of identity, and its alleged determinative effects on political orientations (e.g., Adams and Padamsee 2001; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Crenshaw 1991)]. Demography is not destiny. Thinking about women's positioning in systems of complex inequality, the politically and culturally mediated ways in which these positions influence partisanship, and how the political parties have articulated the concerns of different groups of women, or not articulated those concerns, helps us to understand the 2016 election, as well as past and, potentially, future political developments.[3]

In this paper, we first describe in greater detail the competing positions on identity politics (i.e., pro-left, pro-right, con-left, con-right) that emerged prior to and in response to the 2016 election. In the next section, titled 'Déjà vu', we document the ways in which these perspectives reiterate long-standing debates in the academic literature among scholars studying, separately, gender, racial and class inequality. We show that the current analytic and political impasse harkens back to at least the 1980s. Then, in the section titled 'Beyond the impasse?', we discuss the efforts of two prominent feminist scholars – Kimberle Crenshaw and Nancy Fraser – to overcome it. We find both to be promising and want to build on their analyses in several ways.

In our final section, 'Conflicts of interest, complex identifications', we offer a three-pronged perspective, arguing that current discussions of identity politics are problematic in at least three ways. First, *unidimensional* and *decontextualized* identity politics fail to reflect the complexity of inequalities and power relations, and this is especially notable in the particularly American version in which the political and economic elites of both parties do not typically address class dimensions of inequality explicitly, or at least not in a way that is historically and culturally resonant, and consistently so. Second, and further, interests or political goals cannot be simply read off of demographics in any event, not even for complex, intersectional demographic groups, because the categories underlying identity politics are politically and socially constructed, and interests are always mediated by *politics*, which in turn are informed by history, and changing economic and social conditions and experiences, among a host of other factors.

Third, we see conservative positions, including adherence to anti-feminist gender policy goals, as one, long-standing part of the multiplicity of religious, political and cultural traditions that make up the United States. Here, we reject

the implicit notions of false consciousness and material buy-offs as the principal political mechanisms linking less-advantaged voters to the Republican party and conservative organizations, and the corollary assumption that better information – revealing women's or workers' true interests and how the GOP hurts these, via their tax cuts, race-baiting, and anti-reproductive rights agenda, for instance – will supposedly lead to them voting for Democrats. Value pluralism is, we believe, a fact of political life, and denying that the convictions of conservatives are real interests does not further critical political analysis – of left, right, or centre. Rather, the challenge as we see it is to construct a pro-equality coalition that confronts conflicts of interest and differing values among its adherents directly and effectively, particularly, in our view, among those who would benefit most from greater societal equality. This is a challenge that has long preoccupied scholars of complex inequality.

The 2016 election: four takes on identity politics

Pro-identity politics and the 'betrayal' of white women

Hillary Clinton made no secret of the fact that she expected women to vote for her because she is a woman. She employed this same argument in the 2008 primary election, positioning herself as the identity underdog by asserting that discrimination based on gender was more fundamental than discrimination based on race (referring to then candidate Barack Obama's advantage as a man), and, therefore, that the inequalities based on these dimensions could be objectively separated, compared and contrasted.[4] Icons of second-wave feminism, such as Gloria Steinem, also made this argument forcefully on Clinton's behalf (Crenshaw 2011).

No ranking of oppressions was necessary in 2016 as Trump embodied the dominant group positions in terms of gender and race. Presumed support among women for this woman candidate also stemmed from Clinton's policy positions, such as her support for paid parental leave and expanded child care services, strengthened equal pay regulations, and reproductive rights. These were understood to be pro-women, in opposition to the war on women being waged by the GOP. Added to the feminist brief for Clinton, in 2016, were the blatantly sexist statements and behaviours of her general election opponent, Donald Trump, repeatedly denounced by the candidate and her supporters (e.g., in Michelle Obama's moving speech at the Democratic convention). Taken together, it seemed to many observers that these factors would determine Clinton's victory, with the majority of women throwing their weight behind the first woman candidate of a major party for the presidency of the United States (Strolovitch et al. 2017).

Post-election analysts who accepted the logic of this argument were at pains to explain how fewer women than expected voted for Clinton and, in particular,

how an actual majority of white women voted for Trump, based on a larger share of less-educated white women voting Republican than in 2012, a group that had at least two assumed identity-based affiliations with the female Democratic candidate: gender and class.[5] Given the supposed illogic of this result, the favoured, but still identity-based, explanation that emerged was racism, specifically, the racist appeals of Donald Trump, coupled with the apparent racism and sexism of white working-class men (and indeed some political commentators, scholars and comedians accused white women of sexism and thus betrayal). Defenders of racial and gender equality appeared caught by surprise by the depth and breadth of the cultural and political backlash against Clinton and the Democratic Party more broadly; even as they won the popular vote, they lost significant swathes of what was supposed to be a blue wall of traditional Democratic strength rooted in blue-collar constituencies. They concluded that the nation must not be ready for a woman to be president (e.g., Kristof 2017), let alone one who would succeed the first African American president.[6]

The right split between anti-identity politics and economic populism/pro-'American' identity

The Republican Party's long-standing opposition to the twentieth-century civil rights agenda contributed to an explanation for Clinton's loss rooted in popular revulsion to more recent versions of affirmative action, which replaced the long-standing preferential treatment whites received from government through the mid-twentieth century (Katznelson 2005). Contemporary policies were understood as giving preferential treatment to white women and minorities [but especially minorities (Strolovitch 1998; Gilens 1999)], who were seen to be no more deserving than other, implicitly white, hard-working and law-abiding Americans, and their families, facing troubles of their own, yet making do. This message may have resonated especially for those who found the modern-day successes of many women and minorities (e.g., Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton), and the seemingly abundant employment opportunities available to immigrants portrayed in the media (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015), as evidence that discrimination was long gone; affirmative action, or even the robust enforcement of anti-discrimination law, was no longer necessary.[7] While party activists and followers, as deserving citizens, were not above accepting government assistance in times of need, what they *aspired* to were family-supporting jobs for themselves, their families, and their communities.

It has been argued that, over the past several decades, the Republican Party had managed to become identified with just such a positive economic agenda (Smith 2007), which in turn served to counterbalance their negative anti-civil rights/anti-government platform. Indeed, a prominent strain of right-leaning, anti-immigration and anti-trade economic populism in the 1990s, as espoused for example by Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan, prefigured many of the themes

of Trump's campaign (McCall 2013; Oliver and Rahn 2016). Yet mainstream GOP politicians eschewed such populist orientations in favour of tax cuts and smaller government, and left open the potential, exploited by Donald Trump and his protectionist advisors, to meld the earlier strain of economic populism to a 'real' American identity centred on hard-working American citizens, implicitly white, of left-behind small towns and deindustrialized regions, those on the losing side of automation and globalization (Autor 2010; Milanovic 2016; Kolko 2016), who would also gain from a major overhaul of the nation's infrastructure. This represented a certain kind of unabashed intersectionality, targeting whiteness plus economic decline in male-dominated sectors, that contrasts significantly with more conventional conservative positions: anti-identity, pro-trade, pro-automation, and anti-federal-spending (Judis 2016).

Moreover, Trump and his allies made use of some whites' reactions against the policies advocated by Democratic constituencies, especially people of colour, women oriented to feminist policy agendas, and sexual minorities favouring inclusion and equal rights. This cannot be attributed solely to whites' endemic racism, their attachment to a white racial identity and the privileges this confers (and the threats this invites), although that is a key factor in the equation. What is missed in such accounts is the intersectionality of Trump's discourse, the articulation of racism with pro-working-class economic populism which appealed to so many whites without college educations, including some who had earlier been drawn to President Obama (e.g., Cohn 2017; Egan 2017).[8]

Anti-identity politics from the left: the rise/salience of class politics

From the left, a similarly populist impulse was brewing but it was accompanied by a diametrically opposed analysis that faulted structural inequalities, rather than personal failings, rampant taking of government largess by people of colour, or unchecked immigration, for the economic anxieties of the 99 per cent. According to this view, as the leading Democrats pressed their message of gender equality, immigrant integration and racial inclusion, they became vulnerable to the critique that they were actually representing the concerns of upper-middle-class or even elite white women and minorities or, rather, the professional class *tout court*. Identity politics were a post-materialist (Inglehart 1977) indulgence of liberal, cultural elites, and a distraction from the material and other problems facing the majority of Americans (e.g., Lilla 2016). The unexpected success of Bernie Sanders attested to the salience of the divide between the rich and everyone else as a defining cleavage in contemporary society. That he appeared to be shunted aside by party stalwarts and insiders only strengthened the impression of the party as out of touch with what ought to be its base of regular Americans.

In this view, identity politics – and one of its policy corollaries, multiculturalism – could be allied with, or co-opted by, the forces of inequality, as economic

elites can live with certain versions of identity politics, including feminism of the lean-in, Silicon Valley variety, but not with actual redistribution (e.g., Eisenstein 2009; Fraser 2009; cf. Orloff and Shiff 2016).[9] With the central critique of Obama and the Clintons (Bill as well as Hillary) being that they were too soft on Wall Street prior to, during and after the financial crisis, advocates of a leftist anti-identity, class- first politics promoted a vision of competing partisan coalitions built around a logic of different political-economic interests: a progressive, anti-income inequality alliance against conservative, pro-inequality elites. Other bases of inequality, power and difference seemed to be banished from the discussion, or at least downplayed (López and McGhee 2016). Even the anti-racist credentials of a Bernie Sanders were sidelined in an effort to highlight what has not recently been centred in American politics – even among the heirs of the party of Franklin Delano Roosevelt – class inequality.

Déjà vu

One of the most striking features of this debate around identity politics, at least to us, is its almost verbatim rehashing of academic and political debates in the 1980s and 1990s, and its failure to overcome the limitations of those debates. In this section, we review these debates as a way to more accurately characterize and assess current discussions of identity politics in response to the 2016 US presidential election. For the gender/race (pro-identity) and class (anti-identity) positions in particular, we discuss the assumptions of (1) unidimensionality (rather than multidimensionality) of identity and (2) transparent and objective (rather than politically and historically mediated) interests.

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First, and perhaps most elementally, the assumption that all women would join a single feminist coalition simply by virtue of their gender was thoroughly rejected in the feminist literature dating back to at least the late 1970s and early 1980s (e.g., Combahee River Collective 1977 [1983]). Moreover, it was precisely women of color and anti-racist white feminists (Thompson 2002) who challenged those (generally white, straight, middle-class) feminists who assumed that gender was a unifying, undifferentiated category of identity rather than one that was fractured by race, class, sexuality, and so on (criticisms that no doubt Gloria Steinem was well aware of). Thus the grouping of gender and race together as indicative of a certain kind of identity politics obscures the different foundations of these different movements and their internal critics. Moreover, the same kinds of internal divisions characterized groups defined principally by race and class (Crenshaw 1991). To many scholars, this is so demonstrably true that a separate name for this type of analysis (e.g., intersectionality) seems superfluous (and thus the term itself is often not adopted in social science research).

Not only have racial and class differences among women and men always been significant, but the political incorporation and mobilization of women took different forms across both space and time. Alliances with other excluded groups varied, as revealed in the contestations and coalitions of the US second-wave feminist or earlier suffrage groups and African American civil rights groups, as compared with the (often pro-imperialist) feminisms of the UK or other European colonial powers, and their vexed relationships with working-class or anti-colonial groups.[10] The feminist movement was in some places incorporated into a more labour- or Marxist-dominated political movement, as in France and Germany (Lépinard 2007; Ferree 2012), but in the US, while this segment of the women's movement was important in securing some of the second wave's most significant victories around wage parity and integrating occupations, it was less prominent overall than in the movements of many other rich democracies (Cobble, Gordon and Henry 2014).

It is particularly notable for understanding current and past divisions among women that in the US, as in other Western countries, the suffrage, and then women's civil and economic rights movements, attracted both feminist supporters and anti-feminist opponents. At no point in history have all women been inclined to support gender-egalitarian or explicitly feminist politics. Indeed, these opposing groups clearly did not agree on what was woman-friendly or what might constitute a war on women. Think of Phyllis Schlafly, and her enthusiastic following, who saw feminist-inspired political and legal changes, exemplified by the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion rights (and therefore consequence-free sex for men), as undermining women's traditionally protected position (Mansbridge 1986; Luker 1984). These women were particularly active adherents of the newly energized Republican Party under Ronald Reagan, contributing to the right turn that marked the 1980s. If men's misogyny was one fuel for the rightward turn in US politics, so was a certain framing of women's interests as lying in valuing conventional roles and practices, as forwarded by well-organized groups of conservative women, especially white evangelicals and traditional Catholics (e.g., Moral Majority and pro-life groups). The historical scholarship around politics and inequalities, then, like the complex inequality studies of contemporary social relations, would surely suggest that we should not expect all women to support a single partisan agenda or candidate.[11]

To be sure, Clinton made gestures to diverse constituencies that were more inclined to a liberal Democratic message, even interjecting the term intersectionality into her campaigning in order to appeal to youth and minorities on the left who are comfortable with and embrace the term (e.g., Foran 2016; Milkman 2017). But the dominant message remained that women as a whole should naturally relate to the Democratic nominee and thus support her bid for the presidency. In short, this *unidimensional* appeal to women's gender identity is a

particular version of identity politics that many scholars and activists have long rejected in favour of a *multidimensional* version that recognizes both commonalities and conflicts among women, and assumes that the experiences and views of people who occupy politically significant categories – women, men, African Americans, whites, and so on – differ in many ways.

The class critique – from the left – of feminist, anti-racist, and intersectional identity movements and scholarship was no less central to scholarly debates of the earlier era, but it too assumed a unidimensional version of identity politics, both in the target of its critique and in its own formulations of class. Dating at least from William Julius Wilson's *Declining Significance of Race* (1978), scholars pitted one dimension against another, arguing, for instance, that attention to racial and gender divisions came at the cost of attention to class divisions (e.g., Kahlenberg 1996; Morris and Western 1999). No doubt this was true for unidimensional approaches to gender and race inequality, and no doubt an eye to class divisions was critical to maintain, especially as class inequality reversed its post-World War II course of decline and in the 1980s began a historic rise. But the class critique fell, and continues to fall, into the same unidimensional trap as some varieties of feminism and anti-racism in its minimization of the unfinished movements for gender and racial equality *within* class strata, including *within* the working class itself. Indeed, around this time, scholars such as J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996) and Dorothy Sue Cobble (2004) were calling attention to the transformation of work and the working classes occasioned by economic shifts toward the service sector and women's increasing labour force participation; and Gosta Esping-Andersen (1990, 1997) analysed the impact of these shifts on welfare state policies and politics in comparative perspective.

Specifically, while it may be true, empirically speaking, that class inequality was and is rising within racial and gender groups, this does not mean that gender and racial inequalities within and across class groups are easily solved within, or merged into, a strictly class-based framework (McCall 2001; McCall and Orloff 2005; Dwyer 2013; Milkman 2016). In fact, one of the most central questions – if not *the* most central question – that a class-first framework must address is how the economy can generate stable working- and middle-class jobs, stemming or reversing the hollowing out of the wage and job distribution that began in the 1980s and first emerged as a political issue in the 1990s (McCall 2013). But given occupational sex and racial segregation, which is greater among workers with less than a college education than among those with a college education (Jacobs 1999), and the ongoing shifts of the occupational structure towards female-dominated service-sector employment, this question is not easily addressed without reference to different gender and racially coded sectors of employment.

To illustrate, suppose, for the sake of argument, that Republicans focus their rhetoric on shoring up jobs in traditionally male-dominated sectors, such as extractive and manufacturing industries, while Democrats focus their rhetoric

on a social investment strategy that emphasizes education and health care (Morel, Palier and Palme 2012), both of which (education and health care) are female-dominated industries associated to some degree with the public sector, in terms of both employment and social spending. Suppose further that jobs in the male-dominated sector are higher-paying and that men who work in such jobs are married to women who work in the social service sector. While the Republican strategy taps into a known – and to many, revered – history of private sector prosperity, the Democratic strategy is a future-oriented one that not only acknowledges, though perhaps not explicitly, the end of an era of particular kinds of male-dominated jobs, but rests on a premise of social policy egalitarianism that has no comparable historical precedent [given the hidden, mixed private-public, and racially reactive character of the US welfare state (Howard 1997; Gilens 1999; Mettler 2011; Clemens 2017)].

In short, each of these are economic narratives – and there are multiple potential narratives *within* the economic domain (that is, even if we are assuming a simplified world in which individuals are focused only on their economic needs and aspirations) – infused asymmetrically with gender, race and history; in the absence of political work on the part of Democrats to make their preferred future convincing and compelling, something to truly aspire to in the long run, the asymmetry is to the Republican's advantage, we would argue, for white working- and middle-class heterosexual and married-couple families, which include men *and* women, and which do not have to contend with the additional considerations of racism that minority working- and middle-class families do (McCall 2016). And let us be clear that these kinds of conflicts and imperfect solutions do not befall only white men and women of the working and middle classes; those of the upper classes who cast their votes in the Democratic column, perhaps in part to support the historic presidencies of a woman or African American candidate, simultaneously engage in social practices that 'hoard' educational and economic resources for their children (Reeves 2017), thus exacerbating intergenerational immobility. The latter inequality-producing practices, and the policies that undergird them, however, are rarely called out by liberal and left-leaning elites. Finally, we might note that while many people of colour are repelled by the racial politics of the modern Republican Party, the weaknesses of the Democrats' economic narrative may be reflected in depressed levels of turnout among these voters.

There is also a deeper historical angle that highlights the relevance of race to a class narrative. The literature on comparative class formation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has assessed the extent to which the political mobilization of working-class people was organized around class or other social bonds, particularly ethnicity and community, which had significant implications for the kinds of policies and alliances workers actually formed (e.g., Katznelson and Zolberg 1986). Here was one source of the persistent submerging in the US of class-based concerns (meaning class as formed at the point of production),

and their at best partial reflection in racial and ethnic divisions. Racial formations differed as well, as in the contrast between the US and its one-drop rule, creating a racial binary of whites and blacks, versus Brazil and other Latin American countries, with their more complex topography of colour, inequality and dispossession. Again, this has had enduring significance for the struggle for political equality in the US, foregrounding slavery as America's original sin and ongoing racial discrimination as the key barrier to equal opportunity, rather than class inequality as in Britain and other parts of Europe. This makes it challenging, in short, to adopt a transparently class-based economic and political narrative with a *unitary* meaning across the subgroups of the population to whom it is presumably being addressed.

Ironically, one could argue, this neglect – some would even say rejection – of an explicitly and coherently multidimensional politics of inequality from the left as a whole – including candidates such as Clinton *and* Sanders – has opened up spaces for right populism to launch a more integrated racial, gender, and class narrative, one built on a foundation of economic and cultural competition (between us and them, elites and the public, whites and non-whites, men and women) rather than on a relatively complex and internally contentious foundation of economic and cultural coalition.

Beyond the impasse?

Feminist scholars developed two extremely influential attempts to overcome the polarities of identity versus class inequalities in the 1990s. One, initially offered by political philosopher Nancy Fraser, formulated an analysis of the analytically distinct harms of (1) cultural misrecognition and (2) the maldistribution of material goods. She referred to the challenges of dealing with both kinds of harms simultaneously, and the potential ways to reconcile the politics of redistribution and the politics of (identity-based) recognition, as the redistribution-recognition dilemma.[12] On the theoretical level, she clarifies the different bases of demands for redistribution, recognition and representation in, respectively, material inequalities, a status hierarchy that cannot be reduced to material inequalities alone (see also Ridgeway 2014), and barriers to political participation. She also acknowledges that these different dimensions of inequality are intertwined in practice.[13]

Fraser's work is extremely helpful in making the case that identity/recognition politics are not inevitably at odds with the politics of inequality and redistribution, and, indeed, that both forms of injustice must be confronted for social justice to be a successful project. Yet she has less to say about *how*, in practice, such alliances across lines of difference within the working and middle classes can be assembled, given often bitter conflicts over affirmative action, criminal

justice and welfare policies, reproductive rights, the economic fallout from decades of global economic restructuring and rising economic inequality, and political unresponsiveness (e.g., Gilens 2012; Hooker 2016).

Like many in the current moment, Fraser also failed to recognize the diversity of views under the identity politics umbrella, including those feminists of colour mentioned above who called attention to deep economic and racial inequalities among women as well as deep economic and gender inequalities among people of colour. Thus, the other effort to meld different bases of identity and social location was developed by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, and a number of others under the rubric of what Crenshaw called intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 1993). Crenshaw's conceptualization of intersectionality included structural, representational and political variants; it was not only multidimensional in terms of identity categories, it was multidimensional in terms of the domains in which complex inequalities manifested themselves, that is, in law, politics, cultural representations and the workplace.

Our slight recasting of this work in the present moment leads to the following question: how can we confront conflicts – based in potentially opposing investments, interests, histories and aspirations – among potential adherents to a platform of cultural and political inclusion and genuine economic opportunity? Our modest goal in this paper has been to clear some of the discursive brush around the issue of identity politics that has distracted attention from this central question; our view being that *each* of the three approaches to identity politics (i.e., not including the anti-identity politics of establishment Republicans) taps into a genuine, if mostly unidimensional and thus limited, constituency for such a platform. Clearly majority support for such a platform exists in the US, as evidenced in two national victories for Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton's winning of the popular vote in 2016, but, equally clearly, a comfortable majority cannot be taken for granted.

Conflicts of interest, complex identifications

To simply say that we need a recognition of multiple dimensions of power, difference and inequality (of status and of material resources) and attention to new forms and levels of material inequality is true, but, unfortunately, unmoored from our specific political context. Moreover, pro-equality forces face challenges in finding and coalescing around *specific policy solutions* – for there are multiple and competing potential policies to even commonly acknowledged social and economic problems (e.g., a social investment versus a classic redistributive model of social policy, or, alternatively, a regulatory approach to pay). Following from our critique, we suggest ways forward on three analytic fronts: foregrounding the multidimensionality of inequality, particularly as it

applies to political mobilizations; understanding social positions and interests as politically mediated and culturally constituted; and accommodating value pluralism. Our aim in this last section is to highlight examples of recent empirical research and/or theoretical analysis in each of these three areas that advances the prospect of a multidimensional politics of equality.

(1) We need a more historically situated account of which identities are politically activated, how they currently exist in alliance or enmity with each other, especially through the articulations performed by political parties (about which more below in point 2), and where there are potential commonalities of interest. At the very least, we should not assume coalition among different disadvantaged groups, for there are conflicts of interest and differences in political goals and priorities among those who are disadvantaged in one or multiple ways. But more fundamentally, we would argue for a rejection of binary thinking about identities and inequalities in which people are either victims or oppressors and in which those on the disadvantaged or advantaged side of the ledger on one dimension are automatically potential allies for others similarly positioned on other dimensions (on this point, see Collins 1993). By the same token, we would caution against assumptions that conflicts and coalitions are stable, durable, and entrenched rather than subject to political interventions.

We highlight in this regard the research of social psychologists who have, in the past five years or so, begun to explore these kinds of dynamics, albeit within the constrained setting of the laboratory. The emerging consensus confirms both the challenges and the potential that we have discussed throughout this essay. On the one hand, for instance, studies have shown that when white women are primed to think about sexism and gender discrimination, they are more likely to express negative affect toward Blacks and Latinos, leading to what the authors call 'derogation' rather than 'coalition' (Craig, DeHart, Richeson and Fiedorowicz 2012). More generally, when members of disadvantaged groups (e.g., racial minorities) are reminded of discrimination directed at their own group, they are less sympathetic to the concerns of other disadvantaged groups (e.g., sexual minorities) (Craig and Richeson 2014, 2016). Yet, on the other hand, interventions to minimize what psychologists label social identity threat, such as positive affirmations of threatened identities, finding common causes by emphasizing similarities in experience, reminding individuals of their own personal experiences of harm, and countering zero-sum thinking, for instance, in relation to government policies and economic resources, all lead to more solidaristic orientations across dimensions of identity. This research points clearly in the direction of addressing potential identity conflicts head on rather than taking them for granted or sweeping them under the carpet.

Feminists have also developed ways of thinking about the psychic mechanisms at play in the ways we cope with inequalities, power and difference, that may help understand critical components of current political dilemmas. They build upon the critique of understandings of selves as unified, autonomous,

rational and sovereign, and replace this with a concept of fractured, ambivalent identities – identities, then, which are potentially available for activation by multiple political forces. Analysts such as Jacqueline Rose have offered a notion of 'subjectivity at odds with itself' (Rose 1986: 15), via discourse or psychodynamics or both, which is of political significance:

> Perhaps for women [*we could say this for any dominated group*] it is of particular importance that we find a language which allows us to recognize our part in intolerable structures – but in such a way which renders us neither the pure victims nor the sole agents of our distress. In its strange attention to an involvement in a structure (say, sexual difference) no more reducible to false consciousness or complicity than to adaptation or ease, psychoanalysis might in fact allow us to rethink this vexed question (Rose 1986: 14).

Whether or not one endorses a psychoanalytic approach to politics, there is no denying that sexism or racism or both are everyday experiences for many who resist and cope but who nevertheless may pursue a different set of priorities in the voting booth or refrain altogether from the formal political sphere when it is perceived as chronically unresponsive (Hooker 2016).

Such a perspective also informs the view of some scholars of gender that there are both pleasures and dangers (or inequalities) in gender relations and the performance of gender and sexual identities (Vance 1984; see also Meadow and Schilt forthcoming). This implies that gender identities are politically plural, and that there should be no assumed set of policies that all women will interpret as woman-friendly (Orloff 2009). Women who identify with conventional roles and femininity may well find no natural alliance with feminists or the Democratic Party (Strolovitch et al. 2017).

(2) To understand political outcomes, then, we need to deal with the political articulation of identities and goals – the supply side of politics (Beramendi, Häusermann, Kitschelt and Kriesi 2015; de Leon, Desai and Tuğal 2015; Mudge and Chen 2014). What the party system allows, and what parties offer, significantly conditions the kinds of alliances that can be made. Here we refer not only to the role of money in politics, in both parties, but to an arguably more entrenched and challenging (though related) set of problems, which is the unresponsiveness of both parties to the policy preferences of low- and middle-income individuals of all races and genders (Gilens 2012; but also see Enns 2015), and the persistence of economic inequality, not simply in terms of escalating incomes at the top of the distribution, but of stagnating earnings throughout the rest of the distribution. Some solutions are straightforward, widely popular, and disproportionately benefit white women and people of colour, such as a higher minimum wage. Given the deep-seated and multidimensional nature of the problems, however, a more fully realized set of solutions is needed.

The preferred solution of many class-first advocates, raising taxes on the rich (e.g., Piketty 2014), is not, on its own, a sufficient solution to these problems, as it is unclear how exactly that will result in expanded economic opportunities for working- and middle-class people. This is what we mean by a fully realized set of solutions. For example, popular state-level ballot measures, such as those in Oregon and California, go further in connecting raising taxes on high incomes to spending on education, health care, and public safety, making visible the intended economic and social benefits of progressive taxes (McCall 2016). Still, Donald Trump's rhetoric towards corporate executives, like that of Ross Perot and Patrick Buchanan before him, was aimed at solving the problem of jobs perhaps even more directly at its source in the private sector (Cowen 2017). It is easy to dismiss this as false promises but when less immediate solutions, such as investing in retraining and education, are presented as alternatives, especially in an environment of already stripped-down government services, *those* solutions may appear no more credible (Lupia, Levine, Menning and Sin 2007; López and McGhee 2016). Our general point here is not to advocate for any particular policy formula but to illustrate the imperative to make economic and political arguments that address economic and political needs and aspirations as directly as possible.

(3) Finally, we acknowledge the diversity of values that characterizes the citizens and denizens of our country. The United States was founded on the premises of value pluralism, though it was not originally called by that term. Adherents of many different religions came together around the principle and institutional protection of freedom of religion, meaning the non-establishment of religion by the state coupled with the freedom to practise according to one's conscience. Notably, the founders eschewed attempts to convert everyone to the same religion. This premise of tolerance has been extended, unevenly, to other elements of identity and cultural expression, even as we struggle to overcome the legacies of slavery and conquest. We may be facing similar challenges today in our adherence to different values and life patterns, clustering around partisan affiliations rather than pulling in multiple ideological directions (e.g, Achen and Bartels 2016). The democratic pluralist vision has been one of accommodating difference, including liberal and conservative political orientations and their associated values.[14]

The 2016 election – in addition to earlier polarization – has led to calls for empathy and building bridges across difference. We do not think these are bad ideas, but believe that they will not be effective in helping to overcome polarization if the implicit assumption, from proponents of greater social equality, is that our political adversaries are victims of false consciousness, and that we can win them over simply by revealing the material consequences of Republican policies, coupling this with better understanding of the conditions that have encouraged their anti-government beliefs.[15] For one thing, this leaves no room for acknowledging the ways in which the Democratic Party has failed the working and

middle classes.[16] But it also misses the fact that people can be motivated by values other than economic equality and inclusion, such as religious piety. And it is no less problematic a premise than that of the political right, which posits that those of us promoting equality and inclusion – hallmarks of the left and centre left – simply haven't seen the light of religion or the free market, that we are victims of an imposed political correctness and leftist indoctrination.

To return to the white women Trump voters who feature as the villains in some post-mortems of the Democrats' 2016 loss, we should not assume that their attachment to the socially conservative aspects of the Republican agenda is false consciousness, or exclusively the result of racism and the material benefits attached to marriage. Rather, it also reflects an attachment to ways of understanding womanhood based on different values than those espoused by the feminist backers of Hillary Clinton. We should certainly attempt to persuade them of the benefits of a feminist and egalitarian position, without presuming that we know better than they do what their interests and goals are and should be. That kind of engagement has generated refusals that bear some similarity to those that have greeted other claims to speak for all women. We may conclude, pragmatically, that such women are unlikely to cross over to the Democratic side (in the short term at least), and concentrate our efforts elsewhere, free from the assumption that all women form a natural Democratic constituency.[17]

Yet, as scholars, we cannot abandon the hope of dialogue and political contestation based on knowledge as well as competing values, emotional investments and interests. That knowledge includes the multiplicity of interests and identities – the multidimensionality of inequality; the politically constructed character of identities, interests and goals; the diversity of values and the impossibility of final consensus in modern, complex, democratic societies. Our aspiration is not for an unachievable unity around the goals most typically espoused by egalitarians, nor for simply overwhelming our opponents in antagonistic political struggle, but for an agonistic politics, a politics in which we may fight for our causes, though without guarantees (e.g., Adams, Clemens and Orloff 2005; Zerilli 2005). This concept is enunciated well by Chantal Mouffe (2000):

> agonistic pluralism ... [is] a new way to think about democracy that is different from the traditional liberal conception of democracy as a negotiation among interests and is also different from the [idea that] ... the aim of the democratic society is the creation of a consensus, and that consensus is possible if people are only able to leave aside their particular interests and think as rational beings. However, while we desire an end to conflict, if we want people to be free we must always allow for the possibility that conflict may appear and to provide an arena where differences can be confronted. The democratic process should supply that arena.

Notes

1. We would like to thank Elizabeth Onasch, Jane Pryma, Talia Schiff, and James Druckman for comments on an earlier draft, and, for stimulating questions and comments, panelists and the audience at the session on "Trump's Challenges to American Society," held at the 2017 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Montreal, and Marie Laperriere for her help in preparing the manuscript for submission.

2. Identity politics, and identity itself, are contested terms (e.g., Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Calhoun 1994). In the contemporary US, identity politics refers to political organizing based on categories emerging from processes of cultural devaluation or stigma, usually coupled with some form of economic disparity or exploitation. Most prominently, these are the politics of race, ethnicity, nationality, citizenship status, and gender and sexuality. To put this into historical context, these are forms of leftist politics that were often marginalized – as secondary contradictions or derivative forms of subordination – or repressed, as detrimental to class unity, in the class-political, socialist and Marxist traditions.

3. The contrast between African Americans' overwhelming support for Obama, and the more fractured political affiliations among women, and the reflection of these patterns in support for or opposition to Clinton, is but one instance of the different and politically mediated ways in which race and gender affect politics – and a reason why race and gender should not be lumped together as similar forms of identity politics.

4. Here we see a reflection of 1970s debates among left activists over which oppression was and is primary, in which partisans of one or the other type of anti-oppression politics asserted that their oppression was foundational and others derivative (see, e.g., Sargent 1981 for essays on the class-gender debate).

5. Regarding the racial dimension, the Clinton camp arguably took minority support more for granted than it did the support of white women. Regarding voting patterns, our analysis of American National Election Studies data from 2012 and 2016 indicates that Obama received 40 per cent of the non-college educated vote among white women whereas Clinton received 30 per cent. Among college-educated white women, Obama and Clinton received 51 and 57 per cent, respectively.

6. Strolovitch et al. (2017) provide an excellent review of these arguments and the associated evidence.

7. The over-emphasis on black progress and underestimation of black-white inequality among both whites and blacks is explored in Kraus et al. (2017).

8. As Steve Bannon was widely quoted, days before leaving the White House, 'The longer they talk about identity politics, I got 'em,' he said of Democrats. 'I want them to talk about racism every day. If the left is focused on race and identity, and we go with economic nationalism, we can crush the Democrats' (Egan 2017). On conservative uses of intersectionality, see Lindsay (2013).

9. The fact that new forms of inclusion and destigmatization might be compatible with capitalism does not, in our view, undermine their significance as important elements of a comprehensive social justice project.

10. And nowhere were these movements entirely separate; for example, even as African American feminists contested their exclusion from some quarters of the women's movements, both black and white anti-racist women were active in both US civil rights and feminist struggles (e.g., Hull, Scott and Smith 1982; Thompson 2002).

11. This is particularly relevant for white women, with their diverse and opposing conservative, moderate and radical

political affiliations. Given the racial poli-
tics of the contemporary Republican Party
and related organizations (e.g., Frymer
1999) – that is, the supply side of party ori-
entations – differing party affiliations have
not been the main way in which political
differences among women of colour, par-
ticularly African Americans, have been
expressed.

12. She has updated this formulation to
take more explicit notice of the specifically
political aspects of inequality (as expressed
in political exclusions and remedied by
political representation) and of the global
dimensions of justice (Fraser 2000, 2009,
2013).

13. As Fraser put it, she 'sought an
account of modern society as comprising
two analytically distinct orders of stratifica-
tion, an economic order of distributive rela-
tions that generated inequalities of class
and a cultural order of recognition relations
that generated inequalities of status... [and]
was seeking to theorize their mutual
entwinement and causal interaction'. She
also notes (Fraser 2000), 'on the status
model, moreover, misrecognition is not
relayed through free-floating cultural repre-
sentations or discourses. It is perpetrated, as
we have seen, through institutionalized pat-
terns – in other words, through the work-
ings of social institutions that regulate
interaction according to parity-impeding
cultural norms ... Economic issues such as
income distribution have recognition sub-
texts: value patterns institutionalized in
labour markets may privilege activities
coded "masculine", "white" and so on over
those coded "feminine" and "black". Con-
versely, recognition issues ... have distribu-
tive subtexts.'

14. We acknowledge that there is an
asymmetry to our calls for policies and pol-
itics organized around 'tolerance', accep-
tance, and inclusion, as this works against
many of the goals and practices of those
who favour a single 'real American' iden-
tity and associated practices, including gen-
dered ones. Yet it does seem that an

agreement to disagree may again be the
only way to accommodate the undisputed
fact of value pluralism in the contemporary
United States.

15. Other analysts claim that some of
the people in disadvantaged positions
who support the Republicans are actually
materially implicated in larger systems of
masculine domination or white suprem-
acy, receiving a small part of the patriar-
chal dividend (Connell 1987) or enjoying
the wages of whiteness. Thus, the mecha-
nism linking them to the political right is
not exactly pure false consciousness, but
could be seen as material buy-offs in
combination with an occlusion of the
ways in which these larger systems harm
them and benefit men and whites
disproportionately.

16. To name a few recent examples, nei-
ther Hochschild's (2016) nor Cramer's
(2016) sympathetic readings of southern
Tea Party and rural conservative commun-
ities, respectively, makes a single criticism
of Democratic Party policies. They also
make little note of the data that is pre-
sented to them that clearly indicates oppo-
sition to both inequality (e.g., the high
salaries of public university professors) and
the free market (e.g., the egregious envi-
ronmental hazards unleashed by extractive
industries), thus cementing an us-versus-
them mentality that doesn't necessarily fit
the data.

17. One may, of course, admit that his-
torically there have been political divisions
among women around feminist agendas,
but still argue for a progress or moderniza-
tion narrative in which ever-increasing num-
bers of women (and, at least in some
versions of the argument, also men) come
to embrace feminism and women's
equality. Here, the true interests in equality
associated with women's gender identity are
revealed through education and greater
exposure to the settings that promote
economic independence. The appeal of con-
ventional gender roles should fade over
time.

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