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Op-Eds

Why I Don't Support Identity Politics Anymore

By Michelle I. Gao, Crimson Opinion Writer
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I used to believe in identity politics because it told me: You and your experience matter. Your identity gives you authority. Your beliefs can't be invalidated because your identity can't be invalidated. This logical leap was empowering to take.

In the case of race, non-white people decided that their non-whiteness enabled them to speak with authority on topics of race. White people could only participate when they admitted that they were less worthy of speaking.

This kind of identity politics failed me when I went home. At the dinner table, I was ready to proselytize why we Asians, as people of color, needed to fight institutionalized racism and support minority movements like Black Lives Matter. I was armed with my experiences and the rhetoric of how America was built on a history of racism and white superiority.

But it was like I ran into a brick wall. The problem wasn't that my parents didn't know these things. They simply didn't care much about them. They emphasized their own lived experiences as Asians instead—immigrating to America in the 1980s and creating new lives in a time of arguably more open racism than that of today. They didn't have any reason to oppose whiteness and support black-led movements. White people weren't any more racist to them than black people. The trajectories that other immigrants led proved that America was a land of opportunity, even for minorities.

Under the rules of identity politics, arguing with my parents about race became essentially impossible. I could never make progress if I kept staking my correctness on being Asian and my experiences living with that identity. My parents, who had the same marginalized identity, could do the same thing. We'd be at a standstill. Admitting that our beliefs were wrong would mean essentially yielding our identity, and nobody was willing to give that up.

I realized that I had lowered the standard of conversation by opening with appeals to our race. I was not giving reasons why we should act; I was merely arguing that external factors obligated us to act. But arguments following the logic of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" make for halfhearted allyship at best.

The best solution was to deemphasize identity altogether. Appealing to my parents on the basis of race was unnecessary to the discussions I wanted to have. I wanted to make them care about what

I saw as unjust killings of innocent people and unjust verdicts freeing culpable cops. But police brutality, at its core, is not about race. Why is it wrong for a police officer to shoot a man reaching for his wallet in his own car and then go free, for example? As Columbia professor Mark Lilla argues in his book "The Once and Future Liberal," those acts are wrong because the victim is another citizen, another human. Humans do not deserve to be deprived of the benefit of the doubt and killed for ordinary acts. Similarly, humans deserve to be held accountable for their misdoings and wronging of others.

This kind of rhetoric would be a much more effective strategy for groups like Black Lives Matter, which need widespread support to effect change. It's tragic that, though the statement "black lives matter" is so obviously valid, after several years, most Americans still don't support the movement. But that's because its most vocal members have made everything about race—citing their race as the reason why everyone must listen to them, instead of trying to convince people why they must be listened to. They make as many sweeping generalizations about race—who can speak, who can ask questions, who can understand, who must try to understand but will never understand anyway—as they accuse others of making. So, they shouldn't be surprised when, instead of effecting change, they are now mired in cultural wars—the product of dissenters turning identity politics against them.

Identity politics makes people feel better about themselves at the expense of productive discourse. A person's lived experience should never be invalidated. But no identity makes the beliefs that someone derives from their lived experience automatically more correct. This is not just a logical fallacy that should be avoided on principle. In practice, it is actually a hindrance to persuading others. In a time of such polarization, identity politics makes us close ranks with the like-minded when we need to reach out.

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