Why Conservatives Struggle with Identity Politics

Joshua Mitchell

Throughout history, the human race has divided into nations—into different kinds of peoples, having different inheritances. As recently as the 1960s, we identified ourselves in this way. “He is American.” “She is Italian.” This was not limited to political distinctions alone; we also treated religion this way. “He is Protestant.” “She is Roman Catholic.” Even ethnic and racial distinctions were often handled similarly.

By the time we entered the 1990s, however, a new term had entered our everyday vocabulary: “identity.” That term is now used nearly everywhere—sometimes consciously, sometimes simply because it is around and available. Instead of being an “American,” we might say, “my identity is American,” or “my gender identity is male,” or “my religious identity is Protestant,” or “my ethnic identity is Greek.” What is going on here? Why add the term “identity” when, a generation before, it seemed unnecessary?

In its more innocent and innocuous usage, the term “identity” is simply the upgraded and fashionable equivalent of what we once recognized as “kind.” To be American today is to have an American identity. With this meaning in mind, when critics suggest that the term is unnecessary or pernicious, the usual response is that people have had identities for all of human history, so it is impossible to eliminate the term and silly to complain about it. This response is understandable—but only when identity is synonymous with kind and has no further meaning.

Identity does have a second meaning, however, which is quite different from kind, and is at the heart of what has come to be known as

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“identity politics.” Without this other meaning, the term probably never would have taken hold in the 1990s in the first place. This second notion of identity is not so much a specification of kind as it is a specification of a relationship, and indeed a morally freighted relationship of a particular sort. Understood this way, identity is a concept with discernable religious overtones; it refers to an unpayable debt one kind owes another as the result of an unforgiveable wrong. It describes a relationship of transgressor and victim.

When identity is a mere proxy for kind, French identity is one kind and Algerian identity is another kind, and nothing more need be said. But when identity takes on this second meaning, something fundamentally different is involved. French and Algerian now stand in a relationship to each another: One is the offending transgressor; the other is the innocent victim. Moreover, French and Algerian (or American and Mexican or Northerner and Southerner or any of countless other pairings) bear these relations to each other not just for the moment of their encounter but permanently.

Just as Adam and all his progeny carry the stain of original sin, the transgressor is permanently marked. He himself may have done nothing to contribute to transgressions that predated him by decades or even centuries. But it makes no difference. He stands for the sum of the transgressions linked to his identity. Pressing Christian imagery further while at the same time distorting it considerably, the transgressor, like Christ, also stands in for those who are purportedly innocent and covers over their stains, so no judgment against their identity may be rendered.

This second understanding of identity is more often what we mean today when we speak about identity politics. Identity politics has no single progenitor or champion; it is less a single theory than a large genus within which nearly all modern theories of victimhood are species, because all of them invoke the relationship between transgression and innocence. Identity politics began penetrating our vernacular in the 1990s, but since that time, and at an ever-escalating pace, more and more groups have self-consciously claimed that they, too, have an identity—with a view to revealing to an unseeing, scapegoating society the transgressions that they, the innocent, have endured.

In this quasi-religious arena, innocent victims alone are hallowed; they alone receive what could be called “debt point” recognition. The rest—however much their legal, economic, or social status might
indicate otherwise—have no legitimate voice. Indeed, their penance as transgressors is to listen to the innocents, and their lay responsibility in the liturgy of identity politics is to assent to the right of the innocents to tear down the civilizational temple their transgressors have built over the centuries—paid for, as it has been, not simply with money, but with the unearned suffering of the innocent scapegoats.

Whatever the innocents want to accomplish in politics is legitimate because the basis of political legitimacy is innocence. The past belongs to the transgressors, who today are an archaic holdover and an embarrassment. The future—politically, economically, and socially—belongs to the innocents. Little wonder that the prime transgressors—white heterosexual men who, in the world identity politics constructs, can have nothing important to say—eventually wonder if they too have been victims, and begin cataloging their wounds.

The logic of this still-novel political and moral framework is not obvious on its face. But it is essential that we come to know it, because it is already transforming the character of American politics. For the rising generation in particular, it offers something like a new default conceptual vocabulary for American life. Conservatives in particular have struggled to answer it because they have failed to understand it.

**A Politics of Moral Debt**

How have conservatives responded to the emergence of identity politics? Quite poorly. The modern conservative movement that emerged in the 1950s has been and remains transfixed on the twin threats of “progressivism” and “Marxism.” Its response to progressivism has been to remind the American public, with limited success, of the constitutional constraints placed on the federal government by the founding fathers. Its answer to Marxism has been to remind the American public, with modest success, that liberal and conservative ideas about commerce, tradition, law, God, and freedom are at odds with a grisly 20th-century political movement whose death toll measures in the tens of millions.

What held the conservative movement together from the 1950s onward was a loose coalition of factions that drew their views from Adam Smith’s and Friedrich Hayek’s ideas about commerce, Edmund Burke’s ideas about tradition, Thomas Aquinas’s ideas about natural law, John Calvin’s ideas about biblical revelation, and Abraham Lincoln’s idea that America is a “propositional” nation, dedicated to the equality of all.
This formidable array of thinkers, sometimes having little in common, provided the movement a vast reservoir of concepts and arguments with which, before the end of the Cold War in 1991, it opposed progressivism at home and Marxism abroad.

Since 1991, the conservative movement and the Republican Party to which it laid claim have been increasingly adrift. After the 2016 election, the internal tensions between the different intellectual and theological factions became fissures. Where once there were agreements to disagree, there is only disagreement. In short, the “fusionism” that once worked no longer does.

Neither together nor as solitary heroes under the Republican banner have Smith, Hayek, Burke, Aquinas, Calvin, and Lincoln engaged in the post-2016 battle for the soul of America. That battle will not be fought over the ghosts of progressivism or Marxism, but rather over identity politics, which most conservatives ignore or, finding it irksome, wish would just go away. A different strategy is required. That is not to say the ideas that served conservatives well in the 20th century will become irrelevant now; they could in fact be powerful sources of insight against a new danger. But they will need to be marshalled to that cause, and combined with other sources, under the guidance of a clear understanding of the danger to be answered. Conservatives so far lack that understanding, and while they remain in the dark, some champions of identity politics have already engaged on multiple battlefronts.

Two of these fronts warrant special attention from conservatives because they have been the linchpin of the American experiment itself: the combined legitimacy of free markets and commerce (Smith and Hayek) and tradition (Burke) — or more precisely, the inheritance of the founding fathers. Commerce and tradition are both chief targets of identity politics, in ways that have a great deal to teach us.

Conservatives continue to defend market commerce and tradition against the ghosts of progressivism and Marxism, but their defenses will not avail against identity politics. In the conservative account of commerce, citizens labor to build a world together and receive payment for what they achieve. Payment is tangible and appears in the moneyed ledger that accountants keep. A failure to pay a worker for his labor is unjust; a refusal to allow him to enjoy the fruit of that labor is as well. So the market answers to moral laws, but at its heart is an idea of justice that prioritizes material welfare and progress. The most radical kind of
moral recompense it imagines involves notions like reparations for slavery—which might address a historical wrong if they could be properly administered, but they probably can’t be.

Identity politics is all about moral recompense, but of a different sort. It weighs and measures invisible, non-monetary, victim “debt points” and then reminds debtors each time they wish to be heard that payment is due, in perpetuity, irrespective of their competence. It is rooted in the recognition of a moral wrong, an act of aggression that cannot be made right and that therefore must permanently reshape the relationship between the transgressor and the victim. Identity politics silences the transgressors, listens to the innocents, and encourages episodic “activism” on behalf of those innocents against the transgressors. Attentiveness to the invisibility of the innocents is the true measure of “social justice.”

The sublime mystery of this kind of “debt payment” cannot be rendered in terms of mere monetary value, or in the payment ledger that records the more mysterious calculus of mercy. Conservatives who defend free markets understand only monetary price and relentless competition. Their defense of a middle-class commercial republic, of competent citizens building a world together, therefore falls short of the necessary measure of mercy. Conservatives tell of a world of payments in which lions compete with each other, and in which the hope for lambs is that they, too, might become lions. Identity politics upends that world. Now, lions must listen to and elevate innocent lambs. The world foretold by the prophet Isaiah has arrived. Justice is the ledger of tangible payments, and mercy is beyond price. The conservative defense of free markets is the former; the identity-politics defense of “social justice” purports to be the latter. And such mercy is not a one-time act of recompense but a transformation of relations that must endure for all time to be meaningful.

The tension between such notions of justice and mercy has been with us always. So why has the schism between them emerged with such force today in the world of politics? What has happened in the last half-century to transform the tension into a schism? An answer would have to begin from Tocqueville’s insight that, when the institutions of society no longer can (or do) address the issues that are proper to them, those issues will be elevated to the political level. The moral logic of identity politics is a response to changes in other institutions. And these
are most apparent when one considers what has happened in the family and in the churches during the last half-century.

From Supplement to Substitute

Whether natural or contrived, the generative family today is less and less the delicate yet volatile relation of the heartless father, who disciplines himself and his children (and who attends almost single-mindedly to the verities of payment), and the compassionate wife and mother, who lovingly attends to her children, neighbors, and friends with mercy and without concern for cost. For marriages such as these to work (and there are many of them still today), “patriarchal” justice—the father’s world of payment—needs to take some priority, in the sense that the bills first must be paid. Marriages that attend only to justice and payment, however, are poor specimens indeed, because beyond justice—supervening justice, in fact—is the mercy that wives and mothers bring forward as a necessary supplement. Mercy is what it is—the gift for which the world of justice and payment have no place—only after and against the backdrop of the world of justice and payment. That world of justice and payment is the patriarchal world so many now wish to destroy. But if you destroy justice, there can be no mercy.

The fatherless world of the left, if such a phrase can be used, fixes exclusively on mercy—hence the impossibly expensive Green New Deal, the demand that there be free health insurance, or free college tuition, or socialism, which for the upcoming generation is a proxy, really, for the negation of the “capitalist” world of payment. This fatherless call for free stuff is the dreamy consequence of confusing supplements and substitutes, which will produce a political nightmare if implemented. There is no free stuff. There is only the mercy of the gift, which elicits thankfulness, or the distorted effort to eliminate the world of payment altogether, which produces a soul that demands everything.

These remarks about fathers and mothers will understandably exasperate thoroughgoing egalitarians. On their account, these are distinctions without a difference. We are all “co-parents” now. Of the following, however, we can be certain: Because ideas come to life only through lived experience of the world’s limits and promise, if marriages containing heartless fathers and compassionate mothers and wives do disappear, so too will one of the anchor points for the understanding that, while mercy supplements justice, it cannot be a substitute for it. This latter project, the
project of substituting mercy for justice, is the project of identity politics. Not by accident does it appear as a political project at a moment when, in the institution of marriage, the heartless father and the compassionate wife and mother together begin to disappear.

Marriage is one among many institutional anchor points by which citizens learn the supplementary relationship between justice and mercy. Churches are another, and the last half-century has been similarly destructive for them. As state “welfare” disbursements increased, the share of charity and mercy our churches infused into our communities decreased. Charity is a merciful gift. Welfare, on the other hand, is a payment. The charity and mercy of churches have always been the necessary supplement to the patriarchal world of commerce. Everything has a price, by the logic of market commerce. Without this harsh injunction, the improvements of the modern world could never have occurred. And we should be very thankful for these improvements. But charity and mercy are beyond price, by the logic of the church and the synagogue. And without this soft injunction, a commercial society would be intolerable.

In a world where everything has a price, some will be unable to pay. When parishioners take their own money and transform it into a gift, they answer the prayers of the poor. But parishioners quickly discover that, although their gift of charity and mercy has lightened the burden of the poor, “the poor will always be with us.” The charity and mercy of parishioners can and must supplement the world of payment, but it will never be a substitute for that world, which will remain, broken and unhealed, until the end of time.

This difficult understanding of the necessity and the limits of charity, achieved within religious communities, is lost when the state takes over and disburses welfare payments. Where are charity and mercy located when we treat the mystery of “the poor always being with us” as simply a policy problem to be solved with state payments for which no supplement is necessary—as if, in fact, more welfare is the glib response to that mystery? We cannot do away with charity and mercy; they reveal a truth the world of payment cannot know. Absent the anchor point of the churches in which the parishioner and citizen learns the supplementary relationship of charity and mercy to justice by heart, is it any wonder he is suddenly inspired to substitute mercy for justice in order to abolish the world of justice and payment altogether?
As the societal institutions in which we learn that mercy is a supplement to justice break down, the political project of making mercy the substitute for justice emerges in proportion. Conservatives often talk about the importance of family and churches, but still with a view to the perils of progressivism and Marxism. Failing to understand that the challenge of our times is how to recover a healthy understanding of the relationship between justice and mercy, they do not grasp that the argument they should be making about families and churches is that in and through them citizens learn that mercy must supplement justice but cannot substitute for it. Having learned that, the idea of market commerce can also be defended — not with a view to shoving justice aside, but with the understanding that through it citizens can build a world together, supplemented by the mercy we must show in our families, churches, communities, and nations.

All Have Sinned

If the conservative case for commerce fails to rise to the challenge of identity politics, the conservative case for tradition fares even worse. Free-market conservatives generally do not defend traditional institutions and practices except insofar as they contribute to the social capital necessary for commerce to work well. Cultural conservatives within the Republican Party, often at odds with their free-market compatriots, do defend tradition because civilization is impossible to sustain without it: no inheritance, no civilization.

But again, this amounts to a conservative case against progressives and Marxists. Progressivism undermines tradition by privileging novelty, experimentation, and efficient, top-down planning. Marxism undermines tradition because all historical arrangements before the advent of communism enslave and alienate. Conservative defenders of inheritance argue that tradition is the wellspring of accumulated wisdom. Citizens continue to do things in a certain way because they have been done that way before with success. Progressivism leaves tradition undisturbed only if reasons can be given for continuing to do things the old way; its prejudice is always against the old way. Marxism never leaves tradition undisturbed, because the revolution to which it is committed must overturn the existing state of things.

Identity politics, too, overturns the existing state of things, but it poses a much more aggressive and complicated challenge to tradition.
Tradition is not an inheritance through which civilization is sustained; it is the tainted resume of transgressions perpetrated. Slavery in America, European colonialism in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, South and East Asia—these are the real meaning of the celebrated historical inheritance of the West. The hallowed past that traditionalists celebrate was purchased with the blood of the innocents. That is all we need to know to pass judgment. Progressivism thought tradition was an obstruction to the future. So too did Marxism, though on different grounds. Neither thought of tradition as identity politics does—as a stain that delegitimizes inheritance altogether. Tradition, in this sense, does not so much obstruct the future as deform the present, and so it must be rejected.

How have conservatives responded to the indictment of the Western inheritance in toto that identity politics pronounces? Among themselves, they offer confident, full-throated endorsements of the inheritance of the West and the American founders. But when their political opponents publicly charge that the blood of the innocents has indelibly stained the Western tradition, conservatives grow silent, fearful that they will be scapegoated and crucified for what they believe or say. The nails that hammer them to the cross of humiliation are words like “racist,” “homophobe,” “Islamophobe,” “fascist,” “Nazi,” “hater,” and “denier.”

In the name of the innocents who themselves were once scapegoated and crucified by their transgressors, the innocents—or those who speak for them—now scapegoat and crucify the transgressors. In this reversal, we no longer dwell in the realm of politics; we are instead working within the Christian categories of transgression and innocence—though badly deformed and dangerously abused.

Indeed, the notion that inheritance is stained in toto is distinctly Christian and, since Luther and Calvin in the 16th century, decidedly Protestant. The ancient Greeks thought that history evinced decay: for example, from an age of gold to an age of iron. The notion that all of history is stained right from the beginning goes considerably further. Protestants who opposed the Roman Catholic Church—upheld as it was in part by a long tradition of Church teachings—relentlessly pounded away at the claim that tradition was of any use. They needed to look no further for biblical ammunition than to the fifth chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Romans: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered the world, and death by sin, so death passed upon all men, for that all have
sinned.” All are Adam’s heirs. By virtue of Adam’s sin, all are stained. So too is all that we do.

Identity politics partially recapitulates the early Protestant pronouncement about the stain that deforms the world and indicts tradition. It differs from those Protestant pronouncements in four important respects, however, which provide identity politics its political character. First, whereas Protestants identify Christ as the only truly Innocent One, in identity politics groups of mere mortals are innocent. Here, indeed, the divine has been made flesh. The second difference is a consequence of the first: Instead of all of Adam’s heirs being stained, only those within privileged majorities are. The rest are unstained—and the more their identity differs from stained, white, heterosexual men, the purer they can claim to be.

Third, as noted earlier, there is no forgiveness of transgression in the world of identity politics, because the arena in which transgression and innocence plays out is political, not religious. And fourth, identity politics recognizes, as some early Protestants did, that, notwithstanding man’s brokenness, creation must be restored and the stain man has left upon creation wiped away. That this call bears a resemblance to the call of the citizen to build a world with others cannot be overlooked. Identity politics works through the call unto restoration in a non-liberal way. It declares, for instance, that the stain of “anthropogenic climate change” must be wiped away, either by dismantling the world that white, heterosexual men have built with “unclean” energy, or by sustaining that world only with “clean,” green energy.

The early Protestants began from an understanding of the brokenness of man and his world. They labored in competence, and sought the grace of God until He returned and “saved the world.” Identity politics begins from an understanding of the brokenness of white, heterosexual men and the world they have built, and then, without the assistance of God, seeks to “save the planet” from the transgressors who have endangered it. The purportedly merciful world that identity politics seeks to create must purge all who are stained, impure, and defective. That is why it must indifferent those who associate with the world of payment, tradition, and “dirty” carbon-based energy forms. The redemption of the world, on behalf of the voiceless innocents, requires nothing less. Once upon a time, God spoke through His Revelation and the institutions that coalesced around His Word. Now, God speaks through identity politics, which alone relieves us of our uncleanliness and lifts our burdens.
The indictment that identity politics levels at the Western inheritance is comprehensive. The stains of slavery and colonialism are the “original sins” that taint the entire inheritance of the West, no less than Adam’s sin taints all of his heirs, irrespective of what his heirs might achieve. The accomplishments in science, philosophy, art, theology, politics, and economics that are the inheritance of the West subtract nothing from the debt that transgressors never can repay.

The comprehensive project that remains, now that the long history of transgression is nearing an end, involves recovering the silenced traditions of the innocents. The project began when multiculturalism equalized all traditions, and soon will end as identity politics scapegoats and delegitimizes the tradition of the transgressors. Conservatives have not dared to challenge this repudiation of the Western tradition directly because they have not yet grasped the breathtaking aspiration of identity politics, which is to cleanly distinguish between the transgressors and the innocents, silence the former, and listen to the “voices” of the latter.

The New Testament parable of the wheat and the tares in the 13th chapter of Matthew is perhaps the best way to understand this astounding enterprise:

The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man who sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? From whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, an enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

The parable tells us that the world is always mixed; good and evil interpenetrate. The transgressors (the tares) and the innocents (the wheat) are
never completely separable. That separation will happen at the harvest, the time of which no one can anticipate. Man (the servant) does not wish to live in this mixed world, and conceives of a plan to distinguish and separate the wheat from the tares. Identity politics is that plan.

But in this parable is also the beginning of an answer to the logic of identity politics. The parable tells us that man cannot purify the world. Because the world is broken, tradition, too, is mixed, no matter whose tradition we consider. Repudiating one tradition in favor of another—say, by rewriting the history books so they depict the “marginalized” innocents as pure and without stain—will not redeem a broken world.

Nothing in the world can bring about the redemption of the world. The alternative to the destructive project of identity politics is the difficult hope of living in a broken world, the world of our inheritance, and holding it dear notwithstanding its mixed legacy. We live in a broken world but are not broken by it. Like our families, traditions are never pure. They are, nevertheless, our families and our traditions, and whether we like it or not, we live in and through them. To be without them, as Aristotle wrote long ago, is to be “either a beast or a god.”

Mankind is neither, and politics must take account of that. But in order to build such a politics, those who would answer the claims of identity politics must first understand them and their moral appeal. Conservatives especially should come to see that Marxism and progressivism are no longer the best frameworks for describing their opponents. Some transitional conceptions and descriptions, like multiculturalism, are doomed to fail them too. Only by seeing the distorted pseudo-Christian roots of identity politics can the defenders of tradition—and of justice tempered and supplemented by mercy—truly take up the challenge of our time.