Essentialism and the Problem of Identity Politics

Preliminary Theses for a Longer Discussion on Essentialism and the Problem of Identity Politics

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1. Essentialism is the idea that there exists some detectible and objective core quality of particular groups of people that is inherent, eternal, and unalterable; groupings can be categorized according to these qualities of essence, which are based on such problematic criteria as gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, and class. These external qualities are almost always marked by visual cues, making the categories more obvious and/or easier to notice. These qualities contain social and — more importantly from an antiauthoritarian perspective — hierarchical significance to those marking the cues and those marked by the cues: sexism, in the case of gender; racism in the case of skin tone; the unwanted attention of authorities in the case of any and all different looking/acting people. Racism, sexism, classism, and most other forms of historical oppression are ideologies and policies maintained and justified by essentialism.

2. For a person or group of people on the receiving end of racism and sexism (etc.), essentialism can appear to be a powerful defensive perspective and counter-narrative. Rather than promoting categories of denigration and subordination, the counter-essentialist discourse of Identity Politics attempts to invert the historical categories of oppression into categories of celebration. This is often initiated by appropriating insults and turning them into acceptable, even honorable, labels. What had once been intended to harm the Other thereby becomes a way to show pride in the Group Self. Keeping with the inversion process, the counter-essentialist often merely turns the categories of Otherness upside-down, making visually identifiable members of the Oppressor group into enemies. A sense of belonging either to a group that has oppressed or been oppressed is immaterial — essentialism is not the exclusive domain of oppressors.

3. The discourse of counter-essentialism includes the ideologies of innocence and victimization, which can quickly transform an identity based on the history of shared oppression into a posture of superiority. Counter-essentialism supposedly proves that the victim is eternally innocent, so victims' actions and reactions are forever beyond reproach; all good Christians know that suffering is ennobling. Oppression is never the result of anything the victim has actually done to the Oppressor, so whatever strategies of resistance the victim chooses are legitimate. Self-defense is its own justification.

4. The adherents of Identity Politics rarely — if ever — question the criteria leading to victimization. They can't conceive of the possibility that the elevation of any particular culturally constructed marker into a significant value — laden category could lead to oppression. Unlike Oppressor essentialists, counter-essentialists ignore the complexities of relations of power (which are conditional and contingent); but like Oppressor essentialists, they revel in the smug self-assurance that their Identity is static, independent, and eternal. Essentialists create and

maintain their own privileges through the institutionalization of power; counter-essentialists through the institutionalization of innocence.

5. Franz Fanon, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Patrice Lumumba, and many other Third World national liberationists even less reputable to anarchists (like Castro, Tito, and Mao) inspired generations of self-described revolutionaries in the Imperial Metropole to fight against discrimination, racism, colonialism, and oppression. That all these Third World nationalists thought, wrote, and acted within a statist — and usually Marxist-Leninist, which is to say Stalinist — framework is also clear. Despite this, as successful anti-imperialists, they retain a certain appeal and credibility among anarchists. After all, what anarchist would be in favor of imperialism?

6. The philosophy and vision of self-determination requires an appeal to world political opinion; it is as if so-called revolutionary nationalists wanted to say: "We are mature enough to run our own governments, make treaties, engage in trade with the established states of the world, and control troublesome dissidents." On a certain level, these soon-to-be national leaders accepted and promoted the justification for colonialism — namely that the natives were too child-like or uneducated to determine the proper exploitation of the natural resources of their lands. They wanted to show — either through the force of morality (as in the totally mythologized case of Gandhi) or the force of arms (as in the totally romanticized case of Che and others) — that they were worthy of being reckoned and negotiated with, and eventually recognized as equal partners in the realm of statecraft. National borders invented and imposed by colonial powers would be respected, trade agreements would generally (or eventually) be concluded with the former colonial power, laws drawn up by the former colonial masters against internal dissidence would continue to be used, etc. The native bourgeoisie took over all the institutions of government, deflecting — through appeals to explicitly cross-class ethno-national unity and solidarity — the more basic struggle between exploiter and exploited.

7. The gender- and ethnic-based liberation movements in Europe and the United States of the late-1960s/early-1970s took their ideological cues and justifications from these successful anti-colonialist struggles. The rhetoric of Third World national liberation was used constantly, to the point where many African-Americans, some women and other self-identified oppressed groups began to describe themselves as "internal colonies." Minorities of all kinds had already been identified as subordinate Others by the elites of hierarchical societies; the facile identification of the colonial exploiter and his institutions as the oppressive Other is at the heart of the trouble with Identity Politics. The assigning of blame, responsibility, and guilt to everyone identified as belonging to the category of oppressive Other curtails the possibility of transcending hierarchy

and domination; this process merely inverts the values placed on particular classes or groups of people, regardless of their personal complicity in historical or contemporary oppression.

8. For most women liberationists, the category of Woman — reduced to a hermetic category based only on gender — became the only category of importance. The denigration and oppression of women was clear everywhere: discrimination, rape and other forms of violence, harassment, the expectation and enforcement of motherhood and heterosexuality, and the myriad ways of keeping women dependent and subservient. Women liberationists declared Patriarchy to be the Enemy, some taking the next logical step and making Men — reduced to a hermetic category based only on gender — the Enemy.

   For most black nationalists, the category of Black — reduced to a hermetic category based on genetics and race — became the only category of importance. The denigration and oppression of blacks was clear everywhere: discrimination in the form of Jim Crow, lynching and other forms of violence, harassment (especially by law enforcement), the expectation and enforcement of servility, and the myriad ways of keeping black people dependent and subservient. Black nationalists declared White Racism to be the Enemy, some taking the next logical step and making White People — reduced to a hermetic category based on genetics and race — the Enemy.

9. Race and gender, similar to other culturally specific ideological constructs, are both real and unreal. Unreal in the biological sense; conceptions of these distinctions do not correspond to objective — that is, non-culturally based — categories. Real in the sociological sense; there are clear ways of discerning racism, sexism, and other forms of domination and exploitation regardless of any particular cultural context. They are therefore deserving of critical attention. Those who champion the discourse of gender studies have done an excellent job in analyzing and shattering the contingent nature of how gender is understood, showing that particular combinations of chromosomes and genitalia are only a part (and arguably not even the most important part) of what makes gender meaningful. Critical race theory is also an encouraging and interesting recent anti-essentialist development.

10. Colonialists and their apologists consistently promote mythico-ideological categories of domination. People opposed to hierarchical institutions already understand and expect that. The main conceptual contradiction of anti-imperialists (those who supposedly oppose colonial practices) is their own acceptance of Euro-American prejudices and stereotypes — only with the values inverted. The categories of denigrated Other (black, savage, woman) created and maintained for the exclusive benefit of Eurosupremacists and sexists are not called into question;

their objectivity is self-evident, based on the common sense of the culture originally created by the racists and sexists. Everyone can tell whether someone is male or female — it's biological. Everyone can tell whether someone is black or white — it's scientific. Even before (but especially during) the formative years of European colonialism, Science and Biology were seen as methodologies for discerning Objective Reality. Anti-imperialists, as good Marxist-Leninists, find nothing troubling about Science; it's what separates their particular ideology from all other forms of socialism. However, Science is an ideologically driven pursuit. Thinking of Science as some neutral examination and discernment of facts for the sake of technological progress, increasing human liberation, and knowledge about the universe should be treated as any other form of wishful thinking. Knowledge is not separate from the uses to which it has been and is currently being put.

11. Group self-definition would seem to fit in with the anarchist principles of self-organization and voluntary association. Counter-essentialist identity can even be understood as an attempt to recapture kinship-based community, destroyed by the imposition of industrial capitalism (which is based on division of labor and the resulting atomization and alienation of individuals from each other). It remains problematic, however, because it is an identity forged within the ideology of victimization; it rests on the same arbitrary and constructed categories that were previously formulated to justify oppression. Creating a supposedly liberatory counter-narrative that remains based on visual markers can never possibly question the validity of an oppressive ideology. The other problem is the promotion of an ideologically constructed identity. Such an identity demands group loyalty and solidarity over and above the actual lived experiences of the individuals involved.

    The person who is attracted to the promised sense of belonging offered by any institution (whether an oppressed group, a hierarchical organization, or any formation promoting Unity) must agree to the prior distinctions and categories created by others. Once the counter-essentialist agrees to the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion (which is step one on the road to separatism), s/he can't identify or be identified any other way; whatever criteria already exist in the counter-essentialist narrative are the only ones that matter. This Identity Fundamentalism requires that any person interested in radical transformation relinquish the ability to define her/himself. S/he must dissolve any self-awareness into pre-existing categories of significance. Biology — no matter its ideological and cultural constraints — is Destiny; subjectivity can only be sacrificed and/or suppressed. One of the first authoritarian lies is that someone else knows better.

Essentialists, merely by casting a cursory glance at their chosen Other, already know all they need to know about that person. Separatists, nationalists, anti-imperialists — essentialists all — call that Liberation.

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