

American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time

Joshua Mitchell, Encounter Books, 2020.
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Joshua Mitchell is a specialist in political theory who has contributed one of the few scholarly works addressing the issue of “identity politics” in a liberal society. This phenomenon has exploded on the cultural and political scene in the last twenty years and has caused heated debate across the political spectrum. Moreover, it indirectly affects the theory and practice of medical ethics. Race and gender issues have converged through intersectionality, which has brought together advocates of racial theory, LGBTQ activists, and academics in mutually reinforcing, though sometimes tense, relationships. For example, the issue of abortion interacts with race through the argument that restrictions on the procedure disproportionately affect African American women. Identity politics or “identitarianism” argues that one’s identity, what makes individuals who they are (or who they believe they are), is governed not by traditional categories but by race or gender identity. It is into this context that Mitchell’s book speaks.

Mitchell paints a broad picture of this aspect of the culture war in America in which he attempts to describe, define, and explain identity politics. His discussion shows the issue as a dichotomy between the innocents, who claim some identity with an alleged oppressed group, and the transgressors, who have allegedly engaged in various actions that harm the innocents.

The tendency in recent books on identity politics has been merely anecdotal, with thin assertions and minimal historical or theoretical foundations. However, Mitchell makes his case about the transgressor-innocent divide based on political theory and cultural history. In addition, he is familiar with many examples of the phenomenon about which he writes.

Mitchell begins his study with a history of how cultural elites came to speak of “identity” in its current sense. Humans have divided themselves “into different kinds of peoples, having different inheritances” (p. 4). He continues that this was still dominant into the 1960s, with political, religious, and ethnic distinctions. Mitchell marks the 1990s as a turning point, when “a new term became ubiquitous in our everyday vocabulary: ‘identity’” (p. 5). The term has a long and controversial philosophical history, but it usually refers to knowing oneself as a human being, drawing on such diverse writers as David Hume and Sigmund Freud. Identity in its radical usage came to involve “not so much as specification of a kind but a specification of a relationship . . . of a specific type” whereby the first term “is the offending transgressor; the other is the innocent victim” (p. 7). If one term in a pair is, say, “male” and the other “female,” the relationship of the two in a social context is one of permanent conflict: “male” in this new usage is the transgressor and “female” the innocent. Mitchell adds that the transgressor may have done nothing to warrant the label, but has come to stand in as a representative of historical

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transgressions. In the example above, the two terms in the relationship are usually groups, e.g., male/female, black/white, homosexual/heterosexual, etc.

Mitchell argues that this newer sense of “identity” within identity politics is “less a single theory than a large genus within which all theories of innocent victimhood are species, because all of them invoke the relationship between transgression and innocence” (p. 8). In describing these relationships in identity politics, Mitchell frequently invokes religious language to indicate the “quasi-religious” world they inhabit. In Mitchell’s view, identity politics has arisen due to (1) the collapse of mainline Protestant churches, shifting transgression/innocence concepts from religion to politics; (2) extension of the Black American template of innocence to other groups after the civil rights era; and (3) discovery by the academic left of postmodern thought as more potent than Marxism, especially for distinguishing the transgressors from the innocents (pp. 12–13).

Moreover, identity politics “purports to repudiate . . . the liberal idea of the competent citizen,” a theme Mitchell frequently uses in this work (p. 13). The competent liberal citizen has become the antithesis of identity politics. “Liberal” for Mitchell refers to the broad concept that originated three or more centuries ago, and it is from that ideology that he derives the idea of the “competent liberal citizen” (pp. 13–21). Mitchell writes, “For the liberal the task is not to distinguish among the transgressors and the innocents . . . but to recognize the limits [for example, self-interest] by which the democratic age is constrained, and to work within them to allow neighbors and fellow citizens to build a world together” (p. 21, emphasis added). We need each other in liberalism, but not in identity politics, except for our own “tribe.” Given the many limitations of human beings—the inability to know the future, the limits of self-knowledge, and the failure to understand one another fully—liberals should adopt a posture of humility in their capacity to envision and implement a utopian future. And since they are so limited individually, they must realize they should turn to each other, reinforcing trust in community through labor and mutual aid to build a better world for all. On the other hand, Mitchell states, “Identity politics is the compelling alternative to competence-based, self-interested, world-building liberal citizenship for many today. Identity politics proclaims that innocent victims must be heard and that historical perpetrators of transgression must listen, regardless of their competencies” (p. 31).

Part One addresses what Mitchell calls “the longing that identity politics answers,” with problems created for competent liberalism by both the Republican and Democratic Parties, along with the “purge” conducted mainly by the Democrats of transgressors (pp. 42–72). In the concluding sections of Part One, the author deals with “Group Unity,” one of the most significant parts of the book: What holds identity politics groups together and what kinds of groups can one identify? In these sections, Mitchell’s work intersects with medical ethics, discussing various groups of abortion, transgender, and homosexual rights advocates, and also alluding to end-of-life advocacy. Part Two employs metaphors of addiction and bipolarity to further describe obstacles to liberal competence. Part Three concludes with an appeal for recovery of proper liberal competence.

Mitchell presents a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the current identity politics movement. His use of various analogies helps the reader understand the nature and aims of this multifaceted movement and its antithesis. The historical genealogy is very helpful as well. As an academic book, *American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time* is very readable for non-academics. It is the first scholarly attempt to provide accurate and nuanced insight into identity politics.