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Micaela di Leonardo

The American hills—and campuses and malls and downtowns—are alive with the sound of identity politics. Notions of "authentic identities," of the appropriateness of "speaking from experience," without reference beyond the self, as a woman or man, gay or straight or bisexual, black or Latino or Asian or other minority, are ubiquitous—from graduate seminars to Oprah. At the same time, the mass cultural airwaves resound with apocalyptic, largely conservative warnings against the "balkanization" of America into competing identities, the loss of a unified national political and/or cultural vision. Significant attention is focused on the term *identity politics* itself. And while most of this literature is both politically progressive and highly critical of the phenomenon, what is not noted is that, like *political correctness* or *yuppie*, *identity politics* is innately a term of opprobrium, of othering, a locution used largely by opponents of the concept. (For advocates, we have, depending on venue and relative trendiness, the choice among *multiculturalism*, *diversity*, *strategic essentialism*, *diaspora cultures*, or *hybridity*.)[1]

In order to clarify identity politics as both ideology and material reality, in order to make its fundamentally historic contingency nature visible, I wish simultaneously to delimit and to expand our purview. That is, for purposes that will become increasingly clear, I wish to consider contemporary identity politics and its discontents as fundamentally an American, not a global, phenomenon; and at the same time, to consider its sources and effects largely beyond the campus. It *is* a primarily American phenomenon because the United States is arguably the site of its invention and of its primordial application. Political theorist Michael Walzer, for example, celebrates a "tribal" global identity politics "among the people, ordinary men and women, living where they have always lived, sustaining a customary existence."[2] But, aside from his rather Grimm's-fairy-tale ahistoricist essentialism, Walzer's consideration of the rights and cultures of "ordinary people"—European peasants and what used to be labeled the Third World—is actually an afterthought to his fundamental concern, the inclusion of white ethnic men as full equals in the American polity.[3] Then, much recent postmodern-influenced work on power, the West, and the rest has an unfortunate but understandable tendency to "wave" at actual historical political economies rather than engage with them in any detailed way. Thus we read repeatedly of American racism, misogyny, homophobia without any sense of the shifts, interconnections, develop-

ments across time that would enable us to gain better purchase on these protean phenomena and thus on the tools with which to fight them in the present. As well, and relatedly, in this era of self-congratulatory post-modern "transnational identity," of "thinking beyond the nation," it is important to stress the continuing existence of states with courts, prisons, standing armies, policed borders, and financial and trade politics—and particularly, the existence of what is still the world's most powerful imperial nation.[4] States are still meaningful, the only entities that can discipline international capital—if their inhabitants aren't too busy "thinking transnationally" to pressure them to do so.

Second, we need to break up our solipsistic focus on the politics of the academy—political correctness, speech codes, etc. This is not because colleges and universities are any less real, authentic, or part of the nation's economy than suburban shopping malls or inner cities, but because the New Right for at least the past decade has had us pinned like moths on paper to infinitely recursive, largely campus-based cultural politics debates, debates the New Right is destined to win simply through financial clout, as Ellen Messer-Davidow has documented in these pages.[5] Speech codes and canons are not unimportant, but Clinton's draconian welfare and crime policies, the health care issue, and the deficit hysteria that rationalizes ongoing spending cuts (and yet somehow fails to fuel real military cuts) are more important and also related. The humanist academy's navel gazing in construing campus politics as all politics—as does, for example, Henry Giroux—definitely constitutes a class-based avoidance of the concerns of the bulk of the American population.[6] This privileged academic solipsism recalls Stendhal's protagonist Lucien Leuwen, who, in another context, imagined "what would be thought of a man who, during an eruption of Vesuvius, should be wholly taken up with playing cup-and-ball?"

In what follows, then, I first offer a taxonomy and a critique of recent progressive American commentary on identity politics. (I deal with its conservative variant in another venue.)[7] I then sketch part of its prehistory or genealogy: the rise of notions of white ethnic community in the late 1960s and the subsequent related and symbiotic construct of women's culture. In order to contextualize that symbiosis, I briefly depart the American scene to demonstrate these constructions' ultimate source in modern nationalist ideologies. Finally, jettisoning the more recent women's culture construction, I make the provocative claim of my title: that the mess of identity politics is all white ethnicity's fault. I choose, perhaps perversely, to drop the needle on the record at this largely forgotten point in recent American history. I do so, however, not for reasons of political bildungsroman—although that element is not entirely absent—but because reacquainting ourselves with this recent past, our own historical blind spot, provides a different vantage point, a fresh look at the long and short roads to our present conundrum.

Todd Gitlin, a chief progressive critic in the identity politics–bashing genre, tellingly defines it as "a politics that is rooted more in group self-assertion than in attempts to create broad alliances."[8] Sharon Smith offers the unapologetically sectarian Marxist version of Gitlin's stance: "Identity politics is a rejection of the notion that the working class can be the agent for social change. . . . rather than representing an advance, [it] represents a major step backward in the fight against oppression."[9] Stanley Aronowitz, in contrast, stakes out an ingratiating "necessary but not sufficient" line:

> It is not accurate to characterize the emergence of identity politics merely as a symptom of left fragmentation; it was the result of overdue developments of necessarily autonomous movements. What *is* at issue is whether the perspective of identity politics is *sufficient* to achieve its own goals, let alone attain wider objectives.[10]

Aronowitz tries to assimilate all identity politics to radical objectives by naming it the "social left," despite abundant evidence that only a minority of contemporary feminist, gay, and race-minority activists identify with "left politics," and despite the fact that even those few who do so are unable to publicize the class-conscious elements of their political agendas, to push any sort of class-inflected analysis through the media mesh into the agora.[11]

Ilene Philipson offers a definition complementary to Gitlin's and Smith's, stressing identity politics' individualism: "A fundamental belief is the necessity of expressing an identifiable 'authentic self.'"[12] Ellen Willis adds the "you see from where you stand" positionality argument to this deprecatory characterization: "As I see it, the basic premise of identity politics is that membership in an oppressed group . . . determines my legitimacy as a political person, the validity of my political ideas, and indeed, my moral right to express them."[13] The British critic Ambalavanar Sivanandan has commented most compellingly on the logical absurdity of this tack: "Only the white straight male, it would appear, had to go find his own politics of resistance somewhere out there in the world (as a consumer perhaps?). Everyone else could say: I am, therefore I resist."[14] Barbara Epstein adds the pragmatic political point that "a politics based on identity encounters not only the problem of the fragility of particular categories of identity, but the fact that everyone occupies various categories at once. One may be female and white, or black but male; virtually everyone is vulnerable to some charge of privilege."[15]

These negative definitions, and many others in the recent literature, contain three separable arguments against identity politics. The first, which has been colloquially labeled the leftist white boys' class lament,

quite simply claims that this stance evades both the relative places of different populations on the American class ladder and intrapopulation economic stratification. While the element of heterosexual white male resistance to female, gay, and minority claims is obvious here, it is nevertheless also the case that the women's, the gay and lesbian, and various race-minority movements have historically, and rather notoriously, tended to fight for political changes of greatest benefit to those already middle class or wealthy. (Of course, we can all think of exceptions; the point is that they *are* exceptions.) As well, "multiculturalism" or "diversity"—as instantiated in mass media, in local-level political organizing, in corporate and government "sensitivity training," and in school curriculums from kindergarten through graduate work in ethnic, women's, or cultural studies—most frequently essentializes racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation statuses while eliding the key importance of differential access to economic and political power within and across these groups.

Second, and relatedly, the critics point out that the separatism characteristic of identity politics balkanizes the progressive movement, preventing through its very structures and language any transcendent vision or cause that could unite the left. (This argument is identical in structure to, but very different in content from, the conservative lament that multiculturalism is fissioning the country.) The same caveats on positionality and the same admission of a residual kernel of truth apply here as in the first case: it is still an unfortunate fact that many "progressives" do not take minority, women's, and/or gay rights seriously; it is also true that we have seen precious little unified left political pressure in the past two decades.

Finally, mixed into these critiques is a complicated argument against sheer identity, mere being—rather than ideology, study, practice—as a basis of political insight and authority. (The old sectarian left enshrined this point in the aphorism "No investigation, no right to speak.") There are four elements to the anti-identity argument. The first is indicated by Sivanandan's Cartesian wit: mere existence comes to be defined as doing politics; this elision then sows confusion and demoralization across movements and, not coincidentally, provides big payoffs for veritable armies of "identity" poseurs inside and outside the academy. The second critique is Epstein's point, above: grounding political authority in identity, given that identities are blurred and multiple, leads inevitably to confusion and fights over authenticity. The third point is that essentialist identity politics denies friendly nonmembers' knowledge, commitment—and clout—stupidly failing to identify important allies for the accomplishment of specific political goals. The final, related point is that it lets unfriendly nonmembers off the hook, putting no pressure on them to undergo the sea changes in mentalité and political practice that genuine support of race-minority, women's, and gay rights would demand.

All of these critiques are salient, but they fail at the same time to strike at the roots of the identity politics problematic. First, they are not really embedded in American history and political economy. That is, identity politics did not spring full-grown onto the American political scene like Athena from the head of Zeus—and its characteristic forms are not determined by the gods, immutable. Second, despite the trenchant nature of the left critiques, they miss the point that neither the content nor the structure of identity politics is a natural or logical given.

Let me elaborate. Ironically, critics and advocates alike implicitly or explicitly assume that contemporary identity politics categories—gender, race or ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation—are ur-identities, the most fundamental divisions in human experience. But, depending on which era of American history we consider, we would want to alter or expand this list. At various points in the past century, for example, the most salient identity category for millions of Americans was union membership. People sacrificed, fought and died, created art on the basis of an identity that today very few of us acknowledge as in any way primary. Similarly, for millions of Americans from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, being against—or for—the Vietnam War was perhaps the most fundamental element of individual identity, determining friendship networks and hatreds, daily activities, the very trajectories of lives. At various points in the 1970s and 1980s, it began to look as if the environmental and antinuclear movement would be the most important source of identity for large populations of politically active Americans. Or, finally, and overlapping, for an entire generation of youth in the 1960s and 1970s, being part of the "counterculture" was the most meaningful element of one's identity, channeling social networks, economic activities, even child rearing and diet—far more than the old mantra of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll.

On the other hand, as Henry Giroux points out, contemporary identity politics is not just a phenomenon "from the left." In fact, a conservative white Christian identity may be a more pervasive feature of the political landscape than many of the categories so scored by the right as dangerously ubiquitous. And, on the global scale, for untold millions religious identity has been and is the most fundamental ground of action. (This is not to say, however, that religion is somehow a more—or less—profound identity than, say, race, but simply that in some contexts it may seem so.) My point, then, is that identity is the product of historical contestation, a response to oppression or part of organizing to retain or regain power or privilege, essentially the emotive component of political action—or inaction.

But historical accident, the contingent nature of identity politics categories, and the fact of multiple membership across categories do not

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exhaust the problematics of the phenomenon. Contemporary identity politics also frames a set of categories as parallel to one another, as though they were so many eggs in the box, when in fact they are fundamentally noncomparable units. Gender, race or ethnicity, and sexual orientation are not particularly "like" one another logically, historically, or economically. Groups based on these categories (insofar as they do not overlap, as of course they do) have differing perceived grievances, have differing structural locations in systems of hierarchy, and engage in different political strategies to achieve very different goals. This reality is veiled by the history of semantic infiltration and political mimicry across movements, particularly by the use of the civil rights movement as symbolic prototype. Let me illustrate this process, and my original provocation, by laying out the successive developments of two American invented traditions, those of the white ethnic community and women's culture, which arose successively, and functioned symbiotically with one another, from the close of the 1960s into the 1980s.[16]

White Ethnic Community

While certain popular works (such as *Streetcorner Society* and *The Urban Villagers*) foreshadowed it, the American concept of the white ethnic community coalesced in the early 1970s, the period in which the term *white ethnic* itself gained currency.[17] A white ethnic, of course, exists in contradistinction to ethnics defined as nonwhite, and thus white ethnics came into existence as a labeled group in response to the civil rights and black power movements and the allied organizing of Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans.

Populations we now label white ethnic—those whose antecedents arrived from (mainly southeastern) Europe from the 1840s and increasingly after the 1880s—were subject to intensive, largely deprecating or patronizing public scrutiny, particularly throughout the Progressive and Depression Eras. Popular representations of Irish, Italians, Poles, Russians and other Slavs, Jews, and others as mentally deficient, dirty, diseased, and/or innately criminal were widespread, but popular knowledge of those representations—and the discrimination that underlay and arose from them—has largely been forgotten, even though, or especially because, these images are now used solely against poor blacks and Latinos. One example of contemporary WASP reaction will help dredge up a sense of this prior bourgeois structure of feeling. In 1882 the *New York Tribune* commented on the uncouth nature of Jewish immigrants in a language closely parallel to contemporary white New Yorkers' characterizations of the minority poor:

> Numerous complaints have been made in regard to the Hebrew immigrants who lounge about Battery Park, obstructing the walks and sitting on the chains. Their filthy condition has caused many of the people who are accustomed to go to the park to seek a little recreation and fresh air to give up this practice. The immigrants also greatly annoy the persons who cross the park to take the boats to Coney Island, Staten Island, and Brooklyn. The police have had many battles with these newcomers, who seem determined to have their own way.[18]

It is important to note that the populations that would come to be called white ethnics were the first American groups classically defined as "urban poor," both by the nascent reform movement and by the developing field of urban sociology in the 1920s and 1930s. As such, these domestic exotics were heirs to a profound Enlightenment ambivalence about the nature of communities.[19] Since at least the time of Rousseau and his critics, "community" has explicitly or implicitly contained both the images of republican equality, order, and civility and those of peasant ignorance, hidebound tradition, and narrowness. This dichotomy, first inscribed as a country-city contrast, was transposed, in the urban American context, into a contradictory vision of the functioning of newly arrived European peasantry in U.S. cities. Thus the work of the Progressive Era–Chicago school sociologists and anthropologists could describe migrants to the city both as the inheritors of *Gemeinschaft*—the simple, humanly satisfying, face-to-face, traditional rural world that was giving way to the complex, anomic, modern urban world of strangers—and as rude, uncivilized peasants who must modernize, assimilate, Americanize in order to rise to the level of work and social life in the new industrial city. And these urbanizing peasants, as the first populations of impoverished Americans studied (and therefore defined) by social scientists, would inevitably be used as templates against which to compare other groups, especially black Americans, despite the fact that blacks were also present, and subject to even worse treatment than European migrants, in Progressive Era northern cities.

From World War II to the end of the 1960s, there was a general hiatus in both scholarly and popular attention to the non-American origins of this large segment of the American population. This was in part an epiphenomenon of restrictive immigration legislation in 1924; by the end of World War II, most immigrants had been resident in the United States at least twenty years and had children and often grandchildren. (Some Irish, of course, were at that point marking nearly a century of U.S. residence.) It was also a result of the conscious efforts (assisted, of course, by capital and state) of migrants and their children to "modernize" and "Americanize." As well, it was in part the result of social scientists' interests in the changing physical features of the postwar American landscape,

such as increasing suburbanization (*The Levittowners*) and in emerging types and characteristic social relations related to the maturation of corporate capitalism (*The Lonely Crowd, The Organization Man, Workingman's Wife*, and *Blue-Collar Marriage*).

This era of public and scholarly quiescence ended abruptly in the early 1970s as white ethnicity suddenly became a topic of key national concern. Across the nation, moribund ethnic voluntary associations revived and countless new ones formed; popular books celebrating the white ethnic experience, such as Glazer and Moynihan's (second edition of) *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Michael Novak's *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, Andrew Greeley's *Why Can't They Be Like Us?* and Richard Gambino's *Blood of My Blood*, became best-sellers; and a stream of scholarly books and articles flowed from the academy. Werner Sollors has noted that "ethnicity truly was in vogue in the 1970s."[20] Journalistic and scholarly accounts alike advanced the notions that white ethnics were an unjustly repressed, maligned, ignored—take your pick—segment of the American population, were just beginning to rediscover their own histories and cultures, and deserved respect and attention in the public arena. Novak, among many others, threw down the gauntlet:

> In the country clubs, as city executives, established families, industrialists, owners, lawyers, masters of etiquette, college presidents, dominators of the military, fund raisers, members of blue ribbon communities, realtors, brokers, deans, sheriffs—it is the cumulative power and distinctive style of WASPs that the rest of us have had to learn in order to survive. WASPs have never had to celebrate Columbus Day or march down Fifth Avenue wearing green. Every day has been their day in America. No more.[21]

Tied to these notions of the nature of white ethnic Americans was the construct of the white ethnic community, which journalists, academics, and individual white ethnics themselves proclaimed an endangered but surviving inner-city institution. White ethnic communities past and present were characterized in terms reminiscent of Chicago school interpretations of interwar immigrant populations—with the negative end of the pole removed.

> The pattern of Italian-American life is continuous with that of their ancestors. Its verities continue to demonstrate that family, community and work mean survival and that outsiders are threats to neighborhood stability which is necessary to the close-knit life and culture of the people.[22]

> Within the geographic boundaries of the Italian Quarters the *connazionali* gave life to a closely woven community within which the Italian way of life flourished.[23]

> What the [New York Jewish] East Side lacked in sophistication, it made up in sincerity. It responded to primal experiences with candor and directness. It cut through the essentials of life: the imperative to do right and the comfort of social bonds.[24]

As Stephen Steinberg and I have argued, these claims concerning white ethnic communities rest upon unexamined presuppositions that there *were* in fact such discrete phenomena: long-term, self-reproducing, ethnically homogeneous inner-city neighborhoods.[25] In reality, American white ethnic populations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, no matter how abused or discriminated against by majority society, lived in ethnically heterogeneous and shifting urban and suburban neighborhoods—and moved often. Indices of residential segregation for European populations in the United States fell steadily from 1910 onward. White ethnics also took flight to the suburbs in concert with their urban WASP neighbors. By the mid-1970s, at the height of white ethnic renaissance publicity, for example, California's prototypical Italian American "community," San Francisco's North Beach, was more than 90 percent Chinese. California's Italian American population was in reality scattered far and wide across the state's urban, suburban, and rural areas.[26]

If such popular claims about white ethnic communities were untrue, were, in fact, a newly invented tradition, what was the purpose and meaning of this ideological construct? Clearly the assertion of self-worth had psychological benefits for individual white ethnics, but why did these assertions arise at that particular historical moment, and why were they so attentively heeded? In other words, how did the rise of white ethnic community ideology intersect with other contemporary political, economic, and cultural forces? Why did the various social actors who made use of it find it salient?

The late 1960s–early 1970s period in the United States was characterized by economic expansion, the ongoing war in Vietnam, and a linked set of social movements directly related to these two key political-economic realities: civil rights and black power, the antiwar movement, the student/youth movement, and the revived feminist movement.[27] The connections among these social movements and their links to larger political-economic realities have been exhaustively documented, but in brief: The prospect of partaking in the benefits of postwar economic expansion, protests against victimization by urban renewal displacement, and anger at the disproportionate induction of black youth for war service fueled black power activism. The antiwar and feminist movements drew inspiration and personnel from black movements. Economic expansion and the demographic bulge of a 1960s college-age cohort laid the material basis for college- and then high-school-located youth rebellion—including not

only civil rights, antiwar, and feminist protests but also demands for increased autonomy and sexual freedom. Finally, postwar economic expansion led to American capital's greatly increased demands for labor, and thus to American women's rising rate of participation in the labor force. The very possibility of supporting themselves without reliance on father or husband allowed many women to challenge male societal dominance, while the low pay, low status, and minimal prospects for advancement that characterized most "women's jobs" in that era stimulated a feminist reaction.

These multiple movements for reform and liberation challenged both federal, state, and institutional structures—such as those of colleges and universities—and individuals who perceived themselves as threatened by particular demands for social change. The Nixon administration in particular sought to exploit and enhance these social divisions through the use of the polarizing discourse of the silent majority—as opposed to the protesting anti-administration "minority." Between administration rhetoric and the media's response, an image grew of this stipulated entity: the silent majority were white (implicitly, white ethnic), largely male, blue-collar workers. They were held to be "patriotic" and to live in "traditional" families—ones in which males ruled, women did not work outside the home for pay, and parents controlled their children.

This media image, of course, did not reflect an aggregate social reality. This was the era, after all, in which married working-class women entered the labor force at record rates and in which their contributions to family income maintained working-class living standards in the face of declining real incomes. White labor support for the Democrats actually peaked in 1948—the party's loss of the white working class had begun long before Watts, Woodstock, and Gloria Steinem. And sexual adventurism and drug use in the late 1960s and early 1970s were the property of working-class no less than of middle-class youth. Nevertheless, as a media construct, as a symbol of the hemorrhaging of Democratic voters to the Republican Party, the conservative white ethnic blue-collar worker gained salience in this period. This salience was much enhanced by the shifting demographics and power relations of American cities.[28]

In the 1960s, poor black Americans became newly visible and newly defined as a social problem in northern cities. The two great waves of black migration from the South, during the First and Second World Wars, had each resulted in cohorts of permanent northern black urban residents. These men and women had come north (often through employer recruitment) both to take advantage of lucrative war jobs and to flee Jim Crow and the mechanization of southern agriculture, had then often been laid off, and had become part of a permanent army of reserve labor. Urban renewal projects in the 1950s and 1960s—an employment boondoggle for white ethnic blue-collar workers—destroyed countless black

neighborhoods, replaced them with office blocks and sports complexes, and shifted and concentrated the poor black population in areas dominated by inhospitable, poorly built, and badly maintained government housing projects. Ninety percent of the housing destroyed by urban renewal was never replaced, and two-thirds of those displaced were black or Latino. The Federal Housing Authority deliberately fostered segregated white housing and refused loans to blacks until the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968. Big-city governments refused to shift budgetary resources to basic services for these impoverished areas. (Northern white populations, contra contemporary received wisdom, discriminated against, refused to patronize public establishments with, rioted against, attacked, and killed blacks in the North from the First World War on. There was no "era of northern amity" prior to the civil rights movement and black power.) Neighborhood deterioration, increased crime, and urban uprisings—combined with intensive political organizing—stimulated the establishment of highly visible federal Great Society programs. (But ironically, the late 1960s explosion of welfare rolls mainly benefited poor *whites*.)[29] At the same time, a small cohort of socially mobile blacks, emboldened by the civil rights movement, attempted to buy homes in white urban and suburban neighborhoods. The resulting "white flight" greatly enriched the real estate speculators who fanned its flames and exacerbated inner-city white racism. Black (and Latino) struggles for higher-quality public education, neighborhood services, and civil service and union jobs, along with the newly oppositional rhetorical style of black power advocacy, intensified friction between white, often white ethnic, and minority citizens in northern urban environments. The first scattered fringe of desuburbanizing bourgeois whites entered this polarized and often dangerous environment—and benefited, of course, from its newly low real estate values.

Thus the white ethnic community construct arose from an extraordinarily complex historical ground, and this complexity was reflected in its multiple expressions and political uses. Key to all expressions and uses, though, was its reliance upon the basic ideological tropes of the civil rights and black cultural nationalist movements as structural templates, and thus its posture of competition through emulation. This ideology posited that blacks were a unitary, identifiable group that had experienced and was experiencing extreme discrimination and therefore was entitled not only to cessation of discriminatory law and behavior but also to receive financial and other recompense (affirmative action, Head Start, CETA, etc.). Thus, ironically, key expressions of white ethnic resentment were couched in language consciously and unconsciously copied from blacks themselves. Notions of the strength and richness of white ethnic cultures and their repression by WASPs, for example, mimicked black cultural nationalist celebrations of black culture's endurance despite white domination. When

The white ethnic community construct arose from an extraordinarily complex historical ground, and this complexity was reflected in its multiple expressions and political uses.

I was doing fieldwork among California Italian Americans in the mid-1970s, many individuals identified my documentation of their and their antecedents' life histories as "our *Roots*," after the book and television film series on Alex Haley's southern black family history.

Deliberate denigration of blacks vis-à-vis white ethnics relied as well on the ideological frame of entitlement used by black Americans. Popular journalistic accounts and grassroots white ethnic discourse, for example, both focused on the strength and unity of white ethnic as opposed to black American families, whose popular image, a "tangle of pathology," had been shaped in the early 1960s by the Moynihan Report. This popular apprehension was further shaped by Oscar Lewis's extremely successful locution "culture of poverty," a proto-underclass formulation, which had effects in the public sphere long after anthropologists had driven a stake through its heart. In my own study, many Italian Americans' racist expressions against blacks singled out inferior black family behavior as both the explanation and the justification of widespread black poverty. Thus the argument that, as the "undeserving poor," blacks were not entitled to Great Society largesse or to the approval of elite sponsors, which should instead flow to "deserving" white ethnics.

This relative entitlement frame is attached, as I argued in *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience*, to a "report card mentality": shifting American class divisions were caused by proper and improper ethnic or racial family and economic behavior rather than by the differential incorporation of immigrant and resident populations into American capitalism's evolving class structure. The social intimacy that Chicago school social scientists considered southeastern European immigrants to have inevitably lost in the *Gesellschaft* of modernizing urban America was rediscovered in the 1970s as a surviving feature of white ethnic selfhood. Scholarship, journalism, and grassroots expressions celebrated white ethnics for their family loyalties and neighborhood ties. In fact, advertising in this period began to exploit "cute" white ethnic imagery—the pizza-baking grandmother, the extended family at the laden dinner table—in order to invest frozen and canned foods with the cachet of the *Gemeinschaft*.

This *Gemeinschaft*—this community—was delineated as an urban phenomenon existing alongside and in opposition to urban black populations. Stephen Steinberg has sardonically pointed out that "the Poles and Slavs in Chicago, like the Irish in Boston and the Jews in Forest Hills, rarely experience their ethnicity so acutely as when threatened with racial integration."[30] In fact, there was the distinct flavor of a Three Bears analogy in much 1970s and 1980s rhetoric on white ethnicity. (And this eastern seaboard and industrial Midwest-based trinity neatly wrote nonblack Latinos, Asians, and others right off the American stage.) While WASPs were "too cold"—bloodless, modern, and unencumbered—and blacks

"too hot"—wild, primitive, and "over"cumbered—white ethnics were "just right." They could and did claim to represent the golden historical mean between the overwhelming ancientness and primitiveness of *Gemeinschaft* and the etiolated modernity of *Gesellschaft*. For a hot minute in the 1970s, American white ethnics commandeered Baby Bear's chair.

This new vision of white ethnics as the proper urban residents, those who maintain stable neighborhoods that nevertheless have "character"—ethnic restaurants, delicatessens, and other small businesses—was a major ideological component of gentrification. Ironically, of course, the more urban professionals were attracted to inner-city neighborhoods, the more real estate prices rose and the less *any* working-class urban residents or shopkeepers—white ethnic, black, or other—could afford to live or do business there. Thus the economic logic of Third World tourism—the more successful one is in commodifying oneself, the less one is able to reproduce the self that has been commodified—came to characterize many American inner-city neighborhoods.

Central to the new construction of white ethnic community has been the Madonna-like image (in the older sense) of the white ethnic woman. Early 1970s popular writers extolled her devotion to home and family, and many of the more conservative Italian Americans in my late 1970s study echoed this fusion of ethnic chauvinism and antifeminism. Part of the appeal of this construction to women and men was the notion that white ethnic mothers, unlike "selfish" WASP and "lazy" black mothers, could control their children and thus were exempt from blame for then current youth protests. Clelia Cipolla exclaimed to me in response to my narration of a recent Thanksgiving holiday's activities: "You mean Mommy and Daddy *allowed* you to have Thanksgiving away from home?"[31]

But in fact, white ethnic women were no less subject to the pressures and opportunities of the shifting American political economy of the 1970s, and many more of the Italian American women with whom I worked actively altered or rejected the popular image of the self-sacrificing, kitchen-bound ethnic mother. What is important to note is not whether or not white ethnic women fit the model—by and large, they did not and do not—but that the model has been so hegemonic as to command belief and influence the construction of identity. In an era of rising feminist activism, the sudden celebration of a group of women once labeled backward, stolid, and possessive wives and mothers functioned very clearly as antifeminist rhetoric, particularly with regard to the participation of women in the workforce. As well, in focusing on women's "duties" to husband and children, it worked against prevalent civil rights imagery of heroic black movement women whose perceived duties lay in the public sphere. But like all symbols, the white ethnic woman is polyvalent, subject to feminist and progressive interpretation. Many feminist

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scholars have attempted to celebrate the strength and endurance of "traditional" ethnic women and to use, for example, narratives of past union and strike activities or of consumer protests to suggest a vision of innately progressive, rebellious ethnic womanhood.[32] This attempt to wrest the white ethnic woman from the antifeminist right overlaps another prominent invented tradition of the same period, women's culture.

Women's Culture

Here I will just sketch in the rise of this invented tradition of the 1970s into the present. "Women's culture" is a protean set of claims that there is an ur-form of women's nature and that this transhistorical, cross-cultural essence includes moral superiority to men, cooperative rather than competitive social relations, selfless maternality, and benevolent sexuality. Women's culture thus implies that there is an authentic global feminine selfhood that has been distorted, accreted over by male domination.[33]

This set of notions was constructed in the crucible of the Victorian era, and has been transformed most recently by the second wave of American feminism and its partial devolution into cultural feminism. (Alice Echols's *Daring to Be Bad* documents this process.) That is, the dominant feminist tendency shifted from "a political movement dedicated to eliminating [what at the time was labeled] the sex-class system" to "a countercultural movement aimed at reversing the cultural valuation of the male and devaluation of the female."[34] Challenging individual men, institutions, and the state to change dramatically to allow women to achieve social equality was replaced by celebrating "women's values" and feeling superior to men. Potted prehistory, abounding with visions of prior peaceable matriarchies and goddess worship, came to characterize much feminist popular culture.

On a parallel but somewhat separate track, the emphasis of feminist scholarship in this period shifted from male-female to female-female relations in the past and the present. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's "Female World of Love and Ritual," an analysis of nineteenth-century (middle-class, white) American women's passionate letters to one another, which appeared in the 1975 premier issue of *Signs*, both heralded and helped to cement this shift. During the 1980s and 1990s, first Carol Gilligan and then Deborah Tannen gave the imprimatur of feminist scholarship to interpretations of women's moral and communicative ties as utterly different from, and better than, men's.

At the same time, the very success of women's culture themes among feminists during a backlash period was an index of their fundamental compatibility with nonfeminist or antifeminist ideologies in the larger society. Since the Victorians, in fact, notions of women's differences from

men, their naturally nurturant and peaceable natures, have been elements of Western common sense and key weapons used by antifeminists to prevent women's labor force participation and full citizenship.

Women's culture ideology, then, whether feminist or nonfeminist, is like white ethnic community ideology in that it makes claims that are simply false. Women, like men, are members of the human species, and nothing human is alien to them. Women's culture denies many women's closer allegiances to men than to women. It denies various forms of female cruelty—the reality of female participation in theft, torture, murder, and in the abuse, sale, and abandonment of children, activities that have been carried on by at least some women in most past and present societies, and activities that are not necessarily explained away by prevalent male domination. It effaces class and race stratifications among women, and the attendant ugly fact that many historical forms of female power derive from the exploitation of other women. It denies quite prevalent female apathy and laziness. And it denies the realities of women's self-seeking strategizing *within* the "nurturant," "unselfish" activities of caring for home and children. Children, after all, until recently in the industrialized West, labored for their parents and as adults owed them—often especially their mothers—loyalty, labor, and cash.

The women's culture construct, then, is structurally related to the white ethnic community construct in two ways. First, it attempts to take over a prior existing polarized notion of its subjects (warm and orderly versus primitive and insular European migrants, Madonnas versus harridans and sluts) by chopping off and denying the existence of the negative pole. This operation has been relatively successful for the white ethnic community construct. The historical version of the negative pole—the stolid, backward, crime-ridden, socially immobile ethnic community, Harvard historian Stephan Thernstrom's "subculture that directs energies away from work"—has been superseded in the public mind by the black and brown poor, whose segregation, poverty, and high crime rates are presumed to be self-caused.[35] The more recent negative vision, that of the racist, conservative white ethnic community, has not been revived, despite, for example, the Irish-led antibusing movement in Boston; despite the prevalence of Italian surnames among the Howard Beach and Bensonhurst adolescents and others guilty of recent unprovoked and murderous attacks against blacks and Latinos in New York City; despite the white ethnic leaders who risked bankrupting Yonkers in 1988 in order to continue their four-decades-long segregationist tradition; and despite the 1993 white racist vote in ethnic Staten Island to secede from New York City.

The negative pole of women's culture, in contrast, is alive and kicking in popular culture. Recent journalistic coverage—not to mention the behavior of courts and police—of reproductive issues such as surrogate

motherhood and prenatal care has tended toward automatic blame of women caught in difficult circumstances. Thus women who agree to be surrogates are deemed selfish, as was the woman who agreed and then wished to back out of her agreement. And pregnant women who have not followed the doctor's orders have been arrested. Negative stereotypes of women abound in popular culture, from the psychotic rejected woman in *Fatal Attraction* to the evil upper-class boss in *Working Girl* to the selfish, unmaternal bourgeois witches of John Updike's recent fiction. American press coverage of "rich bitches" such as Ivana Trump, Imelda Marcos, and Leona Helmsley—the conspicuously consuming wives of far richer and/or more evil men—is characterized by a populist venom not aimed at wealthy or powerful men since Nixon and Watergate.

There are obvious reasons for the relative failure of explicitly feminist women's culture ideology. The first is that it transmutes so easily into its much more prevalent antifeminist form. "Revaluing the female sphere" can be, and is a contemporary argument for, the backlash against gender equity. Then, it is easier to maintain a counterfactual vision of an elusive, ephemeral community—particular neighborhoods and individuals can be labeled inauthentic—than of half the human race. As well, the social base for the anti–white ethnic community sentiment is small. The Nixon era is long over; Reagan and Bush's three electoral victories cannot be ascribed to crossover white ethnics alone; and Clinton won the 1992 election with Rust Belt and eastern seaboard "white ethnic" votes, while he lost the good old boy South that the Democratic Leadership Council was convinced he had sewn up. In contrast, the key mainstream feminist goal in the 1980s—ratification of the ERA—failed, and antifeminist ideologies have been strongly represented since the 1980s from the White House down. It is in the current interests of a large number of politically active groups to blame some population of American women—those seeking abortions, those who have children without "men to support them," those who do not have children, those who leave their husbands, those who attempt to be attractive to men, those who do not, those attracted to women, those on welfare, those in the labor force, those who protest sexual harassment, those who put their children in day care—for all social ills.

The second relation between women's culture and white ethnic community is not emulation but annexation. In the 1970s context of rising feminism and the first antifeminist construct of the white ethnic woman, feminists responded, as I have noted, by claiming the white ethnic woman for themselves and their discourse. But the feminist women's culture construct also emulates the white ethnic community's annexation of the symbolic structures of the civil rights movement, "swallowing" not only the beleaguered white ethnic Madonna but the oppressed, heroic woman of color.

White ethnic community, since the late 1970s, is no longer a hot topic for academic papers and popular cultural accounts. Festivals and meetings of ethnic historical associations and social groups do not receive the public attention they once did. In Andy Warhol's phrase, white ethnicity had its fifteen minutes of fame in the mid-1970s, and other social groups and issues have since captured the public stage. Nevertheless, the transformed construction of white ethnic community remains "on hold." To switch the metaphor back, white ethnic community stands backstage, ready to reenter stage left or right on cue. Recently, for example, a series of Democratic politicians have attempted to use notions of family, stability, and tradition now associated with white ethnicity to bolster their appeal to the electorate. This strategy backfired for Geraldine Ferraro, of course, when both her husband and her son fell afoul of the law; and it could not insulate the originally progressive Jim Florio from full-scale right-wing attack in New Jersey. But it has been quite successful to date for Mario Cuomo and was one of the few winning elements of Michael Dukakis's ill-fated presidential campaign.

The relative weakness of white ethnic community ideology since the 1980s is also related, I would contend, to Reagan-era script revisions in the national ethnic/racial morality play. As Debora Silverman has compellingly argued in *Selling Culture*, the Reagan White House, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Vogue* magazine, and a number of clothing designers formed a sinister interlocking directorate that simultaneously flattered the administration, lauded wealth and aristocracy, and used museum resources to flout art historical considerations while shamelessly advertising the work of those designers who pandered most openly to wealth.[36] At the same time, we saw, paralleling the rise of colonial chic in popular culture, a renaissance of popular images of the wealthy West at home. Public television fare shifted significantly to reruns of BBC productions most nostalgic for the Edwardian upper classes—*Upstairs, Downstairs*, *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Treasure Houses of Britain*. *Good Housekeeping* began its "New Traditionalist" advertising campaign featuring affluent, nonworking blonde women and their well-groomed children on the spacious grounds of their suburban or country estates: "She knows what she values—home and family." And her Rolex watch. Wealthy whites took back Baby Bear's chair with a vengeance, and a new romantic halo appeared over the image—embodied by Nancy Reagan—of the elegant, dignified, adorned, and (publicly, at least) devoted wife and mother, the curator of the proper WASP bourgeois home and children.

Meanwhile, popular representations of white ethnics, which in the 1970s had teetered between pious "world we have lost" images of authentically warm, close families and communities and an *All in the Family* condescension, tipped over in the 1980s into permanent condescension and

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even minstrelsy. Take Italian Americans as an example. The ambiguous "Godfather" phenomenon, which had lent glamour and gravitas to organized crime, gave way to *Moonstruck*, *Married to the Mob*, *True Love*, *Working Girl*, *My Cousin Vinnie*—all films that represented working-class and better-off Italian Americans as philistines, tasteless boobs, Guidos, and Big Hair girls, the kind of people who would have mashed potatoes dyed blue to match the bridesmaids' dresses. White ethnicity, in some venues at some times, came to mean the inelegant, disorganized enactment of others' life dramas for our amusement—minstrelsy. The media hoopla surrounding the Amy Fisher–Joey Buttafuoco case denied the tragic realities of the emotionally disturbed young girl and the betrayed and wounded wife in sniggering references to the "Long Island Lolita," the auto parts store, and vulgar-sounding Italian names. (We would not, however, want to push this parallel to black Americans too far, as does Stanley Aronowitz in *The Politics of Identity*. In an attempt to describe the ambiguous position of white ethnics—white but not quite as privileged as WASPs—he takes film representations for material reality and sloppily generalizes the status of working-class Italian New Yorkers to the entire ethnic population.)[37]

Structurally speaking, white ethnic community and women's culture share the claims of unjust oppression, moral superiority (to the oppressor group and/or others), and the possession of a unique and valuable cultural heritage. These characteristics were borrowed from black cultural nationalism and ultimately from the history of modern nationalist movements. (A key distinction between nationalism and cultural nationalism is that the latter claims a territory only symbolically, as when Chicanos renamed the American Southwest Aztlan, or when "women-only" spaces are created at concerts and demonstrations or in bookstores and houses.) Modern nationalism, notes Benedict Anderson, is an "invention of community" that, once constructed simultaneously in a number of European states and their rebellious Latin American and Caribbean colonies, provided a new ideological template for native elites in other colonized and semicolonized Third World territories to borrow.[38] The rise of European nationalism was a complex process involving multiple constructions of self and other: the nation versus other European states or Third World colonies, and national populations vis-à-vis one another. Most particularly, European (and, later, Third World) nationalisms relied—and still rely, to some extent—on constructed notions of national peasantries and on distinctive images of vulnerable national womanhood.

In European state after state, national enthusiasts discovered the unique characteristics of "their" country people. The "folk" had particular customs of dress, food, dance, and music which reflected specific national virtues and must be selected, documented, and, if possible, preserved. Thus the founding of the discipline of folklore—in journals such as

Britain's *Notes and Queries*, in collections such as the brothers Grimm's *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, and in historical folk museums from Wales to central Europe to Greece—arose in concert with European nationalisms.[39]

Women in this era were newly defined as more traditional ("priest-ridden," in French revolutionary rhetoric) than men. They were thus often seen as the most folk of the folk, natural, outside history in their housebound maternality, needing both the modernizing guidance and the preservationist protection of "their" men.[40] This cultural phenomenon continued in the rhetoric and reality of Third World nationalisms: male nationalists in state after state determined that some female customs must be sacrificed for an appearance of modernity in tune with national aspirations, while others, particularly those relating to wifely and maternal duties, must be preserved to embody national distinctiveness and worth.[41]

Thus white ethnic community and women's culture stand in ironic relation to the historic crucible of modern nationalism. Their models of social reality mimic the structures and characteristics of historical claims to national recognition and fealty. At the same time, their very subjects—the descendants of European peasants and "natural" womanhood—are constructs formed by the same historical process, and formed not at all for the purposes of peasant and female liberation, but in the furtherance of male bourgeois and aristocratic political objectives.

The Flavor of the 1970s and Identity Politics

Let me now move to a deeper cultural engagement, a thicker description, of the political culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States. My argument is that, unlike the frequently recycled stylistic markers of the period—say, bell-bottoms, platform shoes, or Fleetwood Mac—the actual structure and flavor of political discourse of that time have been entirely forgotten, have fallen down the national memory hole. In particular, we do not remember how *new*—and how politically relevant—discussions of white ethnic identity, and of white ethnics as compared to black Americans, once appeared. Nor do we recall the strong, widely acknowledged claims of the existence of white ethnic communities, or the high levels of vituperation involved in contestations over racial and ethnic "essences" and their meaning to the nation. Excerpts from four contemporary texts bearing on racial/ethnic relations enable us to reenter this past, which has become another country.

The first text is "Respectable Bigotry," Michael Lerner's maiden effort at political analysis. The piece was first printed in 1969 in the *New Journal*, Yale University's student journal (Lerner was a graduate student at Yale), and was reprinted in the *American Scholar*. Lerner's specific point is that the "upper-class" Yale students and faculty "feel purged of bigotry

and racism" toward "ghetto blacks" even as they engage in racism against white ethnics:

> In general, the bigotry of the lower-middle-class policeman toward a ghetto black or of a lower-middle-class mayor toward a rioter is not viewed in the same perspective as the bigotry of an upper-middle-class peace matron toward a lower-middle-class mayor; or of an upper-class university student toward an Italian, a Pole or a National Guardsman from Cicero, Illinois—that is, if the latter two cases are called bigotry at all. The violence of the ghetto is patronized as it is "understood" and forgiven; the violence of the Cicero racist convinced that Martin Luther King threatens his lawn and house and powerboat is detested without being understood. Yet the two bigotries are very similar. . . . These upper-class attitudes are not a narrow phenomenon. *Time*, *Life* and *Newsweek* print ghetto phrases in reverent spidery italics—surrounded by space to emphasize the authentic simplicity—beneath soulful pictures of the cleansing but terrible, terrible poverty of ghetto blacks or rural poor. They reprint Daley verbatim as the fool. . . . When a right-wing Italian announced for Mayor in New York, a brilliant professor in New Haven said, "If Italians aren't exactly an inferior race, they do the best imitation of one I've seen." Everyone at the dinner table laughed. He could not have said that about black people if the subject had been Rap Brown.[42]

The second excerpt is from the bizarre 1970 volume *A Rap on Race*, the verbatim transcript of two days of tape-recorded conversations between Margaret Mead and James Baldwin. The book as a whole is a testament to Mead's fatuous and deeply ignorant self-confidence on every topic under the sun and to Baldwin's game, gentlemanly effort to lend existential gravitas to Mead's global assertions. Here they are on WASPs, white ethnics, and blacks:

> Mead: But most people who came here were terribly poor and wanted things.
>
> Baldwin: To prove they existed.
>
> Mead: To prove they could get them at all. They had been eating the black bread of poverty, so they came over here and they wanted to eat the white bread that was eaten in the castle. So instead of eating good, nourishing whole wheat bread—
>
> Baldwin: They started eating white bread. Yes, indeed, look at the results.
>
> Mead: They began eating too much sugar too; that's what the people in the castle had. So that what we have here, and I think this has to be remembered, is not an old American style. Old Americans were frugal. The style in this country . . . I still—you know, I was brought up to untie each package carefully, untie the knots in the string and roll it up and put it away to use again.
>
> Baldwin: Yes, I still do that too. And I hate myself for it.

> Mead: Still, there were all these people who thought they were coming to a land where the streets were paved with gold, and that is the reason they came. Now, if you go somewhere and suffer quite a lot trying to get there, being poor and digging roads, living in slums when you first come, and you only came because the streets were paved with gold—
>
> Baldwin: That describes a great deal of the black man's ironical amusement when he watches white people. You know, he did not have that illusion. He didn't want to come.
>
> Mead: He didn't come with that illusion at all. Now, most of the people who came to this country were poor. We had very, very few people who came to this country who had anything. . . . I think you have to discriminate between the people who came here early for political and religious reasons—the ones whom we still think made the country and whom we still talk about and use as ideals, and who did come here to live their kind of life the way they believed in—and the great many millions of immigrants who came here in the nineteenth century . . . you see, we have now an enormous amount of people in this country who didn't come here to dream. They didn't have dreams, except just security for their children. And these are the people we call the silent majority, and they are terribly frightened.
>
> Baldwin: Yes, their fear frightens me.[43]

The third text is a single sentence from Andrew Greeley's 1971 apologia for working-class white ethnics, *Why Can't They Be Like Us?* "What the blacks have done is to legitimate ethnic self-consciousness."[44]

The fourth excerpt is from Marshall Berman's 1982 analysis of modernity, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air.* In the chapter "Modernism in New York," Berman, reflecting on the recent past, asserts that

> many modernisms of the past have found themselves by forgetting: the modernists of the 1970s were forced to find themselves by remembering. Earlier modernists have wiped away the past in order to reach a new departure; the new departures of the 1970s lay in attempts to recover past modes of life that were buried but not dead. . . . One of the central themes of the culture of the 1970s was the rehabilitation of ethnic memory and history as a vital part of personal identity. This has been a striking development in the history of modernity. Modernists today no longer insist, as the modernists of yesterday so often did, that we must cease to be Jewish, or black, or Italian, or anything, in order to be modern. If whole societies can be said to learn anything, the modern societies of the 1970s seemed to have learned that ethnic identity—not only one's own but everyone's—was essential to the depth and fullness of self that modern life opens up and promises to all.[45]

What can we say about these very different takes on race/ethnic relations in the United States at the turn of the 1960s into the 1970s? What, if anything, do they tell us about the problematics of identity politics?

First, all of these texts assume a generic male subject. Since gender is

not particularly at issue, there is no effort to include women in the analysis. This is as true of Mead, who was a late, and very opportunistic, feminist, as it is of Lerner, Baldwin, and Berman. Then, Lerner's diatribe is a classic Three Bears expression, with white ethnics defined as "just right" and squarely lodged in Baby Bear's chair. Note his deeply emotive, sarcastic description of white elite guilt and compassion over Jim Crow—"the cleansing but terrible, terrible poverty of ghetto blacks." Note also his identification with the most stereotyped working-class white ethnic behaviors, his taking upon himself the ressentiment Nixon attributed to the silent majority.

Margaret Mead's emotive assertions are the obverse of Lerner's—a limousine liberal's merging of "old Americans" (read WASPs) and blacks against white ethnics because of the latter's "materialism." Her back-and-forth verbal volleys with Baldwin on string saving and unhealthy food provide moments of unintended high hilarity, not to mention an index of the newly hatched culinary obsessions of the trendy petite bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie, obsessions that have since spread through the entire American population. Note also the Mead-Baldwin mythic history of American immigration and that history's characterization of white ethnics as the "bad," economic migrants, as opposed to the "idealist" Puritans and the victimized blacks. This particular stage play is of course still running on Broadway; it has simply been recast for the present zeitgeist, with Russians, Cubans, and Eastern Europeans in the good-idealist and Haitians, Latin Americans, and poor Southeast Asians in the bad-economic roles.

Greeley's declaration, on the other hand, is a moment of unusual insight and honesty in an otherwise Three Bears–to–the–max text. *Why Can't They Be Like Us?* was a midpoint publication for Greeley, a popularizing, statistical sociologist who is also a Catholic priest. His primary aim throughout his career has been to defend Catholicism and American Catholics; during the white ethnic renaissance, his work was heavily "ethnicized."

Greeley serves as a bridge to Berman's fascinating argument. Berman's is the most interesting of the texts because he both acknowledges the shifting nature of identity and posits something like a Freudian model of ethnicity. Note the psychoanalytic echoes in his lexical choices: forgetting, remembering, recovering, rehabilitation. Berman's language implies that American ethnicity had been underground, a timeless, repressed essence, and was liberated, unbound, like certain kinds of sexuality, by the culture of the 1970s, to everyone's benefit and the enrichment of the American self. There is no hint in Berman that ethnic and racial identities had been and were being constructed from the outside as well as from within, constructed as much to the detriment of others as for the benefit of the self.

The extraordinary weltanschauung we perceive through these texts has been, as I have noted, forgotten in the present conjuncture, this era of Madonna rather than the Madonna. But we can perceive its sticky historical fingerprints on the lineaments of contemporary identity politics. We can see three simultaneous processes in the present that I would argue are due to, directly descended from, this new fetishization of "identity" in the 1970s.

First, there is the evasion of politics disguised as politics: the silly celebration of nonexistent "essences" and the making of political mountains out of stylistic molehills. Here we have the continuing counterempirical commitment to "women's spirituality" in the era of Lorena Bobbitt; the clinging to the notion of a "gay essence" in the face of the contradictory likes of Roy Cohn and RuPaul; and the pervasive cultural studies celebration of rap and hip hop as "resistance" while draconian, explicitly racist welfare and criminal justice policies go unprotested. Then there are contests over policy, over government distribution of resources, disguised as fights over identity—as in Pat Buchanan's racist and anti-immigrant ideology; right-wing Christian attacks on liberal curriculums; "school choice"; the continuing obscenity of the Hyde amendment, which makes abortion rights dependent on financial resources; and Afrocentric schools. And finally, we see fights over identity that, as when a cigar is only a cigar, *are* just fights over identity, part of the continuous psychologizing of American social reality, our constantly rewritten morality plays.

To use the contemporary coin of the realm, *my people*—white ethnics and women—pushed this process along several rungs of the ladder some two decades ago. I well remember the seductions of ruminations on the ethnic and female self and their natural merger with larger American therapeutic, self-help themes. But, to rewrite a morality play myself, yielding to these seductions has been a Faustian bargain, a giving-in to retrogressive and evasive currents in American political culture. And this capitulation is all the worse in that there is no public recognition that the devil's contract has been signed.

What is, is not necessarily right. We can explicitly refuse to be signatories, refuse our roles in this morality play, get up out of Baby Bear's chair and throw it off the stage. Such a refusal would in no way involve a turn away from antiracism, feminism, or gay rights. Indeed, it would demand a deeper engagement in all these movements, an engagement all the more thoroughgoing for its unloosing from the mooring of "identity." Such a politics would enjoy and make use of the changing contours of style, but never confuse hip hop with universal health care, body piercing with police review commissions or government-subsidized day care, *banda* with abortion rights. It would fight to take back national political discourse and action from the neoliberal policy wonks and the rightists who now monopolize it. It would explicitly demand the support of nonmembers and would

refuse to settle for political goals that failed to improve the economic lot of less well-off constituents. This last point is crucial: From "power feminism" to libertarian gay rights to assertions of "ghetto nihilism," we are awash in a petit bourgeois politics that simultaneously caresses the better-off female, gay, and/or minority self while consigning its working-class and impoverished sisters and brothers to their "richly deserved" misery, lecturing them, for all the world like some twentieth-century Gradgrind, to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. To paraphrase Anatole France's famous 1894 observation: Identity politics, in its majestic equality, forbids both rich and poor minorities, gays and women to sleep under bridges. We can and should do better.

Notes

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1. These terms are in play across a broad range of scholarship and popular culture, at times to insightful effect. I am commenting here on the dominant—I would argue, overdetermining—usages, which evade historical political economy and are therefore subject to my analysis of identity politics.

2. Michael Walzer, "Reply to Jim Rule," *Dissent* 39 (fall 1992), 523–24.

3. See Michael Walzer, "What Does It Mean to Be an American?" *Social Research* 57, no. 3 (fall 1990), 591–614. For a concise, insightful account of how to perceive difference in the contexts of history and power, see William Roseberry, "Multiculturalism and the Challenge of Anthropology," *Social Research* 59, no. 4 (winter 1992), 841–58.

4. For an example of "transnationalism" that avoids considering these political-economic realities, see Arjun Appadurai, "Patriotism and Its Futures," *Public Culture* 5, no. 3 (1993), 411–29.

5. Ellen Messer-Davidow, "Manufacturing the Attack on Liberalized Higher Education," *Social Text*, no. 36 (1993), 40–80.

6. Henry Giroux, "Living Dangerously: Identity Politics and the New Cultural Racism," in *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (New York: Routledge, 1994), 29–55.

7. See Micaela di Leonardo, *Exotics at Home: Anthropologies, Others, American Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

8. Todd Gitlin, "The Left, Lost in the Politics of Identity," *Harper's Magazine* (September 1993), 16–20.

9. Sharon Smith, "Mistaken Identity; or, Can Identity Politics Liberate the Oppressed?" *International Socialist* 62 (spring 1994), 4, 31.

10. Stanley Aronowitz, "The Situation of the Left in the United States," *Socialist Review* 23, no. 3 (1994), 49.

11. Ibid., 17–18.

12. Ilene Philipson, "What's the Big I.D.? The Politics of the Authentic Self," *Tikkun* 6, no. 6 (1991), 51.

13. Ellen Willis, "Multiple Identities," *Tikkun* 6, no. 6 (1991), 59.

14. Ambalavanar Sivanandan, "All That Melts into Air Is Solid," *Race and Class* 31, no. 3 (1990), 16.

15. Barbara Epstein, "Political Correctness and Identity Politics," in *Beyond PC: Toward a Politics of Understanding*, ed. Pat Aufderheide (St. Paul, Minn.: Greywolf, 1992), 153.

16. See also Micaela di Leonardo, "Habits of the Cumbered Heart: Ethnic Community and Women's Culture as Invented Traditions," in *Golden Ages, Dark Ages: Imagining the Past in Anthropology and History*, ed. William Roseberry and Jay O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 219–42.

17. William Foote Whyte, *Streetcorner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943); Herbert Gans, *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian Americans* (New York: Anchor, 1962).

18. Quoted in John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925*, 2d ed. (New York: Atheneum, 1981), 67.

19. See Micaela di Leonardo, *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class, and Gender among California Italian-Americans* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 129–35, for a more extensive critique of the community myth. See also Stow Persons, *Ethnic Studies at Chicago, 1905–45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Higham, *Strangers in the Land*; and Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951).

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21. Novak, *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, 136.

22. Gambino, *Blood of My Blood*, 343.

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24. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 170–71.

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