

Whose Identity? Whose Politics?

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Once again, it's time to fight back against the trivialization of the left's traditional concerns over race and gender issues. Calling those concerns "Identity Politics" attempts to put those concerns into a neat little cliché that dismisses them. "Oh, there they go again with their Identity Politics" makes race and gender issues appear to be not worthy of serious contemplation, let alone action.

A recent essay by Suzanna Danuta Walters published in the feminist journal *Signs*, rebuts the criticism against so-called Identity Politics with a depth and clarity that cannot be improved upon by this writer, so much of the article you are now reading will restate her ideas. Primary among those ideas is the point made in the following:

For these critics, identity politics are issues "we" (women, blacks, queers, etc.) spend too much time on, issues that ostensibly push away that white male voter (who doesn't have an "identity" presumably). Under the cover of this so-called concern, critics can attack abortion rights, gay rights, civil rights. As long as these rights are the property of certain identities, they can be denied as distractions by many on the Left and as narrow "special rights" by most conservatives.

In other words, trivial and unworthy of significant political discourse.

In another section of Walters' essay, she emphasizes that many of the anti-identity crowd complain that Identity Politics is too restrictive. Her rejoinder to that involves two interconnected aspects: the general and the specific. For the former, she states, "Let's be clear: most social change and political activism happens in and through identity politics—whether it is the righteous rage of [Black Lives Matter](#), [the fight for Indian autonomy and water rights at Standing Rock](#), the [immigrant rights movement](#), or indeed the recent [Women's March](#) in DC and around the world." For the latter she emphasizes those post-election Women's Marches, stating that the marches were very broad-based and that women were able to successfully rally millions of people of both sexes to show their solidarity in protesting all forms of repression, not just sexism.

Where does all of this anti-Identity Politics rhetoric leave us now? In light of the recent events concerning the Charlottesville march and the presidential pardon of a sheriff who actively condoned racial profiling, those who are shouting anti-Identity Politics rhetoric seem to be winning—for now. However, we cannot let them distort the dialogue until it is too late and the advances made by those who have supported civil and human rights are reversed. Walters uses the following quote to begin her argument—a fitting commentary with which to end this article:

Identity politics is ... what we used to call civil rights.—Samantha Bee, Full Frontal

Walters' essay is available at <http://signsjournal.org/currents-identity-politics/walters/>