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How to cite:

Clarke, Caroline and Knights, David (2020). The Killing Fields of Identity Politics. In: Brown, A.D. ed. Oxford Handbook on Identities in Organisations. Oxford Handbook. Oxford: Oxford University Press., pp. 801–816.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

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The Killing Fields of Identity Politics

Caroline Clarke and David Knights

Abstract

The obsession with securing recognition through identity pervades organisational, institutional, political and everyday life. As academics, our culpability in promulgating this fascination, or *idée fixe* is indisputable, for as a collective body we are responsible for a proliferation of articles, books and conference streams on identity. However, apart from a few exceptions, the majority of texts fail to interrogate the concept to uncover its dangers, but instead reproduce the everyday common-sense fascination, indeed addictive, preoccupation with seeking order, stability and security through identity. In this chapter, we expose this neglect within the organization studies literature and argue that it contributes to, rather than challenges, some of the major social ills surrounding identity – discrimination and prejudice, aggressive masculine competition, conquest and control and the growing identity politics of nationalist, if not xenophobic and racist, constructions of boundaries and borders.

Key words: attachment, identity politics, identity work, security, self-defeating, stability.

Introduction

Within the social sciences generally there is a proliferation of studies of identity. In management and organization studies alone, Thompson Reuters *Web of Science* reveals more than 1,100 peer-reviewed articles published with ‘identity’ or ‘identities’ in their title (Brown, 2015: 21). Contemporary searches in this database and others (e.g. ABI/ Inform and Web of Science) suggest there are considerably more in the years since Brown’s search was undertaken; an estimate of 2,115 peer reviewed articles on the subject within the management field alone. Moreover, this trend concerning the ‘vexed question of identity’ (du Gay, Evans & Redman, 2000: 5) seems hardly to be on the wane considering that here we are contributing one of fifty more pieces in this Handbook, which we could say, speaks volumes.

It is claimed that ‘identity is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today’, for what appears to be fundamental to most people is a ‘demand for recognition’ (Fukuyama, 2018: ii). However, as with many authors, Fukuyama does not explore let alone interrogate this demand. In organization studies, Sveningsson and Alvesson describe identity as one of ‘the most popular topics in contemporary organization studies’ (2003: 1163) but they, like many other scholars, also take this for granted. One of the aims of this chapter is to question the prevalent focus upon documenting how identity manifests itself, particularly in strategies of *identity work*. While this may well be necessary insofar as identity is one of the most pressing concerns for people, it is not sufficient. For this reason, our objective is to deconstruct pervasive assumptions that it is adequate to describe identity antics without interrogating them.

While social identity and self-categorization theorists remain attached to views of identity as an outcome of socialization that prepares people for roles in society that sustain social order

(McCall & Simmons, 1978; Berndt, 2003), most contemporary critical and poststructural scholars have broadly abandoned these functionalist arguments and adopt a social constructionist and/or performative perspective. In so doing, this literature demonstrates how identity has to be worked at (identity work), if individuals are to gain the social recognition and status they seek. However, within this voluminous literature, very few authors in the field seek to interrogate identity (cf. Knights & Willmott, 1985; Collinson, 2003), so as to challenge the way that our *attachments* to identities can have the most horrific of consequences. In short, the literature simply describes identity and its practices rather than reflecting on their potentially lethal effects, when, as Marx would have argued, the point is to change ‘things’ if they are problematic.

The remainder of this chapter is organised around three themes: first, we challenge the literature on identity before tracing its failure to interrogate and deconstruct identity so as to reveal its self-defeating features; second, we review the contemporary literature concerning identity work to uncover the multifarious exemplifications of how individuals, organizations and institutions manage their attachments to identity; and third, identity politics, where we reflect on its positive and negative consequences or what might be seen as the light or non-unitary aspects of power relations by contrast with the dark side of totalizing forms of domination.

Identity

As a concept, identity has a very long history, extending back to Descartes (1998 [1637]) whose famous ‘I think therefore I am’ formulation depicted it as a function of the mind, to Locke (1997 [1689]) who believed identity to be derived from self-consciousness in providing a sense of psychological continuity, and to Hume who saw it as a bundle of perceptions (Thiel, 2014). It was only with Hegel’s theorising of master-slave relationships, in which he argued that

identity was contingent on the recognition of the other (Kojève, 1969; Grier, 2007), that more social, rather than individualistic, conceptions emerged. Excluding the Buddhist tradition extending back to the 6th century BC, Hegel also was one of the earliest thinkers to understand the paradox of identity insofar as recognition by a slave could be discounted by virtue of the slave's inferior status but recognition by the master was dependent on the slave's continued subjugation. Consequently, identity is contingent on social equality – a condition that so far has only occurred through idealistic denials of material reality.

Only in the 1930s, when symbolic interactionism became a prominent focus of social psychology and sociology, did identity begin to attract the sustained attention of social scientists (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). The self was understood by Mead as a function of how the individual sees others' attitudes of her or himself and is, thereby, experienced almost like an 'object', mirrored through the expectations of significant others. Obviously, the self, or what eventually began to be called identity, is never just a passive object or 'me' of others' expectations since there is an active 'I' that mediates to interpret them in accordance with prior experiences and future desires. Moreover, for Mead, there was also a 'generalized other' or what might be seen as society at large with its institutions, organizations, norms, rules and regulations that provides a context through which the multifarious interpretations involved in the formation of self and identity are made.

Identities, however, are never really 'made' insofar as they cannot be finished, or complete, for they are based on 'the unending and recursive perceptions of others' perceptions of the self', while of course 'the identities of others are constituted through exactly the same processes' (Knights & Clarke, 2017: 341). Within these perpetual cycles, each 'presentation of the self' involves an attempt to claim a specific identity (Goffman, 1959; 1967), but these endeavours

can never be assured, since they are necessarily contingent on the judgement of others. Identities, then, are always precarious, temporary and subject to diverse sets of accounts, interpretations, perceptions and expectations that are forever changing. We must also challenge those notions of 'self' that seek to theorise individuals as being separate from social relations in general. Norbert Elias explicates this point, when he rejects any dualism of individual *or* society on the basis of being both artificial and reductionist, since neither can exist without the other, while at the same time each is part of the other, 'nested', entangled and always involved in a dynamic figuration, and reconfiguration (2001) which, despite being self-evident, often is ignored (11). In neglecting this, we simply facilitate individualistic preoccupations with, and attachments to, identity, including those impossible attempts to secure order and stability for ourselves in an uncertain world.

Analyses of identity have passed through a range of approaches from behaviourism and functionalism through symbolic interactionism, and social constructionists to the more recent contributions of performativity and deconstructionism. We will not give much attention to behaviourists who focused only on how identity was an effect of responding to stimuli (Skinner, 1971) or psychologists that regard identity as fulfilling an essential need. Nor do we think it of value to follow functionalists who were more concerned with how the identities of individuals were simply an outcome of socialization into the norms of society and their contribution to social order (Parsons, 1951). As a critic expressed it, 'meaning is either taken for granted or played down ... in contemporary social science and psychological science...' (Blumer (1969: 2) and yet meaning is at the very heart of any sense of identity (Knights & Willmott, 2004 [1999]).

By contrast, symbolic interactionists challenge the failure of behaviourists and functionalists to theorize the importance of meaning, in the form of signs and symbols, rather than simply presume it to reside either in internal psychological states of mind (e.g. attitudes, needs) or in abstractions such as social order. In understanding meaning to occur through self-conscious processes involving internal and external conversations, where it is continually generated, negotiated and/or reformulated, symbolic interactionists can better interrogate identity. For we agree that it is through self-conscious learning in interactions with others that we gain a sense of identity as seemingly ‘discrete and responsible beings in the world’ (Knights & Willmott, 2004 [1999]: 69).

Social constructionists have tended to follow a symbolic interactionist approach in seeing the self as some kind of coherent, non-fragmented whole whereas poststructuralists recognize that identity is created, developed, sustained or transformed through its interactive performances albeit, following Foucault (1980), broadly as an outcome of relationships with specific power/knowledge discourses (Faas, 2009: 303). Notwithstanding the Foucauldian (1997) ‘death of the Subject’ thesis that would deny humans an autonomous base from which to enact an identity (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004), poststructuralists argue that despite multiplicities, contradictions, fragmentations and instabilities, identity or subjectivity has some kind of core of coherence and continuity that ‘is enunciated as an “I”’ but this is always grounded in ‘discourses, matrices of meaning, and historical memories’ that enable particular identifications (Brah, 1996: 122-124).

However, a multiplicity of identifications has now displaced the notion of a singular identity, reflecting a whole range of diversities in relation to ability, age, class, culture, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, regionality and nationality to the extent that a discourse on intersectionality

was generated or revived to represent it (Crenshaw, 1989). This reflected the cultural turn in social science (Anthias, 2014) whereby matters of meaning and identity displaced the prior focus on political economy, eventually resulting in identity politics (Crenshaw, 1991) as the dominant discourse of the late 20th and early 21st century, which we return to later in this chapter. While having a major impact within feminism and diversity studies concerned with discrimination and inequality, intersectionality discourses remain focused on identity without interrogating it.

A variant of this came with the idea of hybridity, where a racial or ethnic identity coincided with a political one such as the nation state, resulting in a black American identity, for example (Bhabha, 1990). By contrast, a hyphenated identity would link a person to a specific geographical region of birth that is different from their place of residence, as in the example of a Caribbean British person, so that there is a perpetual mediation between ‘two disparate cultures and territories’ (Faas, 2009: 304). While this distinction is important in understanding the different experiences of those who attach themselves equally to two or more identities and those who perhaps have emigrated from where they originated, it also offers little by way of interrogation.

If identity is not to be interrogated then it is suggested that we should abandon it in favour of ‘affinity’ since the crisis of identity only reproduces ‘endless splitting and searches for a new essential unity’ (Haraway, 1985: 276-7). In addition to disavowing any belief in a unitary essence that is often the identity project, this shift to affinity would also divert us from individualistic and competitive pressures to claim an elevated status for the self. In its place would be the collective, communal and embodied sharing of political and moral values together with concerns for socially beneficial transformations. We wholeheartedly support this but such

a move, we argue, demands a more thorough investigation of identity itself, otherwise the use of affinity risks merely changing the terminology without transforming those attachments to stability and preoccupations with security surrounding it.

As Hegel argued, one of the paradoxes of identity is that it involves us striving to be ‘different from everyone else’ (Pullen, 2007: 1), to be distinctive and unique, whilst at the same time craving recognition, by belonging to groups with which we identify. For ‘identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others’ (Rutherford, 1990: 6). In so far as it relates to how individuals identify with a particular community, identification is seen as distinct from identity (Skeggs, 1997). However, this is little more than a focus on the verbal or active notion since identification or identity often manifests itself through an attachment to ‘a particular doctrine, set of ideas, factions, gender, race, organization, culture, nation, etc.’ (Knights & Clarke, 2017: 338), which through various exercises of power can elevate, denigrate, include, exclude, subjugate or liberate a range of subjectivities. Such identifications are simply temporary focuses of attachment since they are ‘never fully and finally made; [rather] they are incessantly constituted’ (Butler, 1993: 105).

As such our identities tend to be confirmed, denied and underwritten according to singular rather than diverse assumptions of what might constitute security and ‘belonging’ in a context that is as diverse as it is prejudiced, as ‘plural as it is xenophobic’ (Hall, 2012:50). The attempts we make to secure ourselves are precisely why it is self-defeating, because it is the very act of pursuit that renders it ‘a constantly retreating phantom, [where] the faster you chase it, the faster it runs ahead’ (Watts, 1951: 56). The more we earnestly chase security, the more it slips out of reach, and yet this most fundamental understanding is often absent within studies of

identity in the MOS literature (Knights & Clarke, 2017). *Working* on our identities, holds more than a whiff of a promise we can secure that which can never be secured.

Identity Work

In recent articles, Brown declares that many scholars have ‘delighted in’ the ‘significant metaphor’ of ‘identity work’ and the experience of individual agency that it foregrounds’ (2018:4). By contrast, we ‘problematise, challenge, and treat with ambivalence, ideas of excessive individualism’ (Knights & Clarke, 2017: 345) that pervade contemporary texts on identity and identity work. In this regard, we highlight the self-defeating aspects of identity work, that may encourage expectations for, or even an entitlement to, the somewhat narcissistic need for self-fulfillment’ (Lasch, 1979: 102). In subscribing to this mantra (Costea et al., 2012) we risk becoming ensnared in a self-perpetuating, vicious spiral of fixation with ourselves.

The management and organization studies literature has tended uncritically to reinforce an ethics of individualistic success, whereby identity work, or ‘a story we tell about ourselves’ (Mishler, 1999), may simply serve as a means to climb the greasy pole. The harder we work on our identities, the closer we get to securing what we earnestly desire, or so the rhetoric goes. Moreover, individualized associations with contemporary working life (career, income, bonuses, elite positions, success) represent a taken-for-granted Holy Grail, displacing any attempts to constitute, bond and embody ourselves in ways that prevent us being separated off from one another. It is this failure to embrace a multiplicity of interdependencies (Elias, 1978), or affinities, that can leave us isolated, anxious, and oblivious as to how anyone outside of a small elite, will ever experience the (transient) sense of elation concerning achievement/success (Knights & Clarke, 2014). What is more invidious perhaps, is how these individualised social relations often leave the rest of society to interpret their personal lack of

success as a form of guilt, and a failure to realise their potential (Costea et al., 2012; Bauman, 2008: 107, Sennett & Cobb, 1977, Newton, 1995). Thus, just as we become invested in Scrooge's ultimate rehabilitation and redemption in *A Christmas Carol*, we become enraptured by promises of what might be achieved, in a future yet-to-come, through individual career projects (Grey, 1994; Clarke & Knights, 2015), so we feel similarly obliged, even compelled, to continue 'working' on potential selves (Ybema, 2004; Land & Taylor, 2010).

Since individuals and society are forever entangled within this contingent world (Becker, 1973), there should be little doubt that autonomously 'authoring' (Brown, 2015) our own identities is unrealisable. Such representations, however, are not uncommon, for the concept of identity is so often portrayed or theorized in this illusory manner, rather than perceived as the contested, fragmentary, contradictory and contingent phenomenon that it is *in practice*. Yet numerous articles merely describe, rather than interrogate the centrality of identity, and fall into the trap of conflating *attempts at*, with the *guarantee* of, securing particular identities. Snow and Anderson, use the term 'identity work' to describe 'the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept' (1987: 1348). Another example by Brown (2018) states that identities are 'most often regarded as temporary "fixes" concocted by individuals to impose a degree of coherence in the face of assorted vulnerabilities' (p.4). Apart from both authors presuming or exaggerating the levels of intentionality on the part of individuals, Snow and Anderson assume unproblematically that it is possible for individuals to 'create' and 'sustain' identities in a completely unfettered manner, while Brown could give more weight to the fundamental premise that identities cannot simply be concocted, since they are always contingent on the 'other'. Despite recognising that identity is situated within 'complex social interactions with others who may agree but are more likely to seek to negotiate or even contest

our preferred versions of who we are' (2018:3), he persists in viewing 'identity work' as intentional. It would make more sense to highlight how identity is contingent and often an unintended outcome of activities that are only predictable in their precariousness.

Our focus here is primarily with the *negative effects and potentially lethal consequences* of attachments to identity, and how these become exacerbated when its centrality is automatically taken-for-granted, as in everyday life and in much of the literature. Pullen and Rhodes warn that identity work is no more than a form of excessive 'productive narcissism' to 'maintain' an individual's 'idealized self-image', which can only serve to engender 'heightened insecurity, escalating personal demands, intensifying pressures on identity, and acute competition' (2008: 7). Before turning to the exploration of these specific ideas, we acknowledge Brown's question, as to whether identity work 'leads to an amoral understanding of identities' (2015: 33). However, we would go further, by asking if it is *the field of studies* relating to identity work (and to a certain extent also identity), that have rendered these processes amoral, because identity scholars have given so little attention to examining critically their conditions and consequences.

Setting aside these criticisms of the identity work literature, there are other dangers in succumbing to its enticements, for the rise of neo-liberalism has ensured that both careers and rewards have become increasingly individualised (Morgan, 2016). Accordingly, the responsibility for both success and failure is ours alone (Costea et al., 2012). This is usually aligned to the elevation of the values of 'meritocracy', together with its organisational apparatus (e.g. the appraisal, rankings, targets, bonuses, talent management, etc.), that Young (1994 [1958]) was at pains to discredit. This failure to read Young's thesis as it was intended, but instead to see it as legitimizing a new form of elitism in meritocracy can be seen, in

hindsight, to have contributed to creating the conditions of resentment that have inspired an identity politics of the New Right in Western democracies, that we discuss in the final section of this chapter.

It is unsurprising that identity work is so pervasive, because our lives and labour are organized around political processes that reflect, reinforce or transform social relations and the identities of those engaged in them. Work and organization can be likened to a pinball machine where balls are ‘careering around’, crashing into one another with some fortuitously winning, and others losing points as the game proceeds (Knights & Murray, 1994). What is at stake in this metaphorical pinball game is our sense of self, because anxiety or doubt about our own expertise or competence, can easily become a threat to identity and feelings of personal inadequacy and even ‘shame’ (Schwartz, 1986: 33). This sense of not living up to the impossible burdens of identity work, originating in both the misreading of meritocracy and exacerbated by neo-liberal demands, can quickly lead to stress and problems of mental health (Pilgrim, 2017). Relatedly, these issues are not helped by the proliferation of a self-help literature that often serves only to reflect and reinforce the stigma of failure.

According to the Institute of Directors (IOD), businesses are woefully ill equipped to deal with increasing mental health issues, stress, depression and anxiety that, combined, are the largest reason for workplace absences (Chapman, 2017). Interestingly, but perhaps predictably, the IOD does not reflect on how the workplace may well *contribute* significantly to the problem, but simply passes it back to the individual who may be suffering. Of course, when it begins to affect the business because of absenteeism, concerns are aroused because ‘bottom line’ implications are something to take seriously. In short, it is counter-productive if employees are too ill to be productive, so organisations may take remedial action under the auspices of

providing ‘help’ from a benevolent standpoint. The framing of these interventions typically individualises mental health problems, so they almost always represent private and personal troubles rather than public issues (Wright-Mills, 1959); a classic case of deflecting the source of stress away from the organisation onto the employee/victim, who is blamed for their limited resilience and ability to cope. The organization then projects itself as caring by ‘helping’ employees to cope with the troubles that, in large part, may have resulted from their conditions of work.

The pathologizing process of mental illness involves the stigmatization of those who become ill, reconfiguring their identities as insufficiently robust or resilient (Newton, 1995), thereby eschewing any organizational responsibility for setting impossible sales targets, publications, and other forms of output. The format of wellbeing initiatives in the workplace are various, including; yoga; stress-management seminars; counselling; time-management workshops; mindfulness; coaching; snooze-friendly policies; and emotional intelligence training, all with the intention of making employees ‘feel better and perform better’ (Forbes coaches council, 2015). This focus on the symptom, rather than the disease, is the equivalent of ‘putting a sticking plaster on a cancerous wound’ (Clarke & Knights, 2018). Where remedial action, disguised as a ‘wellbeing’ initiative, fails to provide a cure, the situation may become fatal.

Part of the problem is how common-sense macho language circulating within (Sinclair, 2005), and outside institutions, tends to treat vulnerability negatively, branding employees as weak, or having lost control. One consequence of such intense and masculine-inspired identity work is how it can readily obfuscate the gravity of the situation, and morph easily into tragedy, such as *Karojisatsu*, or work-induced suicide. In the UK, suicide is now the leading cause of death for men up to age 50 (Office of National Statistics, 2018), and recently the UK government

appointed its first ever minister responsible for suicide preventionⁱ. Moreover, this issue is not just located within private sector, profit-consumed corporations, but also the public sector and their demands for success and excessive workloads. One illustration is from February 2018, when Malcolm Anderson, an academic working at Cardiff university, threw himself from the roof of the business school due to pressure of work. It is perhaps not without irony that those tasked with teaching students about management and organisational practices, should also be subject to the same work intensification and managerial control practices they might analyse critically in their classes. Moreover, it has been revealed that over a long period of time Anderson had asked repeatedly for help, so even when employees become vocal, and protest at impossible workloads, in practice their wellbeing may not be treated as a priority.

Relatedly, studies have shown that many professionals, such as doctors (Marsh 2014; Gawande, 2003), dentists (Henning et al., 1998), vets (Clarke & Knights, 2018), and academics (Knights & Clarke, 2014), attempt to counter risks of failure and other identity threats by pursuing perfection in their practices. The (unrealisable) desire for perfection is seductive, for it should render workers beyond reproach and immune from future punitive action, and thus secure. The pursuit of perfection is an example of identity work *par excellence*, intended to prevent unravelling, and defend anxieties about ‘who we are, but it is also illusory. If we consider the Japanese phenomenon of *Karōshi*, or death resulting from overwork, rather than suicide, we can see only too well how striving for perfection holds the potential to be ‘both a benefit and a burden, life fulfilling and life threatening’ (Hyde, 2010: 4).

While the term *Karōshi* originated in Japan, its practice is not confined to the East. In their book *Dead man working*, Cedersstrom and Fleming (2012), chart both the oppressive and relentless nature of pursuing identity through contemporary work, together with its physical

and mental repercussions. One such illustration, is the story of Moritz Erhardt who secured a highly competitive place as an intern at Merrill Lynch, where working through the night was regarded widely as a naturalised (masculine) ‘rite de passage’. After three days of ‘pulling an all-nighter’ with no sleep at all, the 21 year old was later found dead at his flat. Among his possessions, the following quote from Marilyn Monroe was found, ‘*I don't want to make money, I just want to be wonderful*’, indicating how a desire for the ‘perfect’ identity can become so normalised that the preservation of life itself is forgotten. This normalisation of the centrality of work, is evidenced through observations about Amazon, an organization which along with other employers (Deliveroo, Uber, TGI Fridays), has come under fire for its exploitation of staff. Amazon workers are subjected to highly scrutinized, slave-like conditions, linked to a constant imperative to beat the clock (Cadwalladr, 2013; Panorama, 2013). Other workers, and members of what has come to be known as the ‘precariat’, or the ‘gig economy’, are also in danger of risking their health in ways that we have already outlined, but with the additional burden and risk factors associated with unpredictable (zero) working hours, with no paid leave or pension (Burgess et al., 2013).

So far, our focus has been on how organisations may (un)wittingly invoke potentially deadly practices at work, partly enabled by employees’ desires to mitigate insecurities, and confirm positive identities. In the remainder of this chapter, we explore how the literature on identity can be seen as reinforcing, rather than challenging, a preoccupation with identity, thereby contributing to its harmful effects on individuals and organizations, as the following examination of identity politics illustrates.

Identity politics: the organization of hatred

Despite its seemingly neutral seductive promise of stability, identity can be defined only through the relationship with its ‘constitutive outside’; its ‘capacity to exclude’, that which it *is not* (Hall, 2000: 17-18). Since it is also predicated on a *hierarchically* defined order, identity can never be other than an act of power (Derrida, 1978). Following Foucault (1980), this understanding of power departs from conventional views of it as the property of persons or groups seeking to control others (Knights, 2019); rather, power is positive and productive in the sense of inviting us to be both collaboratively and cooperatively creative. However, the effects of power can also be negative when exercised as a means of control and domination. Since identity politics has traditionally been about struggles on the part of oppressed groups against their discrimination, it often emerges from negative coercion and control while reflecting positive collaborative forms of resistance to these conditions. This resistance has usually taken the form of class conflict relating to the economic or wage exploitation of labour (Thanem, 2011: 108) and has a tendency to be associated with masculine forms of aggression on the shopfloor (Knights & Collinson, 1987), whereas contemporary identity politics is more nuanced in being sensitive to age, animal, disability, environmental, ethnic, gender, racial and sexual sensibilities.

On the other hand, identity politics has grown dramatically in recent years in relation to ‘progressive’ struggles against discrimination and disadvantage through, for example, anti-ableist, anti-racist, feminist and LGBT social movements. Some of these such as the ‘me-too’ campaign are headline news in exposing the sexually abusive behaviour of men, particularly of those in senior or high-profile situations in the workplace. As a consequence, numerous campaigns have been waged against sexism and sexual predatory behaviour in Hollywood and in US politics, as well as gender discrimination and violations of the equal pay act in the UK

media. Ironically, as part of the darker side of identity politics, ‘me-too’ has now been colonized by the hash-tag, ‘him-too’, in an attempt to exonerate male victims who claim to have been ‘falsely’ accused of sexual abuse as, for example, in the case of Brett Kavanaugh, Trump’s controversial nomination to the US Supreme Court in 2018. Still, ‘progressive’ identity politics has been incredibly successfulⁱⁱ in transforming Western societies to support multiculturalism, gender and sexual liberation, racial and ethnic diversity, and disability provision to the point of enshrining equal human rights in state law.

Nevertheless, the dark side of identity politics has a long and more tragic history, for example in slavery during the 18th century and the Nazi holocaust of the 1930s. Indeed, in recent times, there has also been a backlash against the successes of progressive movements in a surge of ‘reactionary’ demands from groups, concerned to redefine boundaries by asserting what they claim to be traditional identities relating to nationalism, white supremacy, masculinity and heterosexuality. This ‘identitarian’ wing (Economist, 2018) is globally evident in the number of right wing ‘populist’ political movements as personified by Trump, Le Pen, Erdogan, Farage, Orban and Steve Bannon, the latter of whom regards ‘accusations of racism ... as a badge of honour’ (Pasha-Robinson, 2018), thus perhaps inciting racial abuse and violence in various social venues. In UK football, for example, ‘Some fans are using the “political atmosphere as a cover for their own racism and prejudice”, says anti-discrimination group Fare’ⁱⁱⁱ.

Relatedly, following the UK’s Brexit vote, which was partly predicated on the seductive, yet misleading slogan of ‘taking back control’, everyday hate crimes against ‘immigrants’ have doubled (Quinn, 2018). For example, in October 2018, David Mesher a UK male passenger onboard a Ryanair aircraft was filmed demanding that Delsie Gayle, a British Caribbean

woman, was moved away from the seat near him because of her identity as a ‘foreigner’, lacking whiteness: he was recorded shouting ‘don’t speak to me in a foreign language, you stupid ugly cow’, having previously called her ‘an ugly black bastard’. Despite this illegal racist abuse, and the absurdity of his objecting to a foreign language while himself being on Spanish soil, Ryanair failed to call the police and instead moved the victim, rather than the perpetrator, of the crime to another seat at the back of the aircraft.

Indicating how identity lies behind much of this revival of racism, it has been reported how:

‘Those obsessed with identity have set about constructing their own idea of Europe, the purpose of which is no longer to preserve peace but to protect a white, Christian European “civilisation” against other civilisations, primarily Islam.’ (Ridel, 2018).

It has also been shown how ‘severe “we” and “they” divisions...have been reactivated, [where] one group feeling superior to “others” has [again] become routine’ (Volkan, 2014: 15). At the time of writing, a 16 year old UK schoolboy was caught on camera in the school playing fields ‘waterboarding’ another pupil, a Syrian refugee, which was then posted on Twitter, with comments claiming that up to this point the school and authorities had done little to ameliorate the bullying. This is borne out by footage showing the boy with his arm in a cast, reportedly having previously sustained a broken wrist in a similar incident. A search through the perpetrator’s facebook page shows positive comments and affirming remarks made by him, in relation to: Tommy Robinson ^{iv}; organised far right movements such as Britain First; and the racist remark made by the UK foreign secretary Boris Johnson, about women wearing Burkas resembling ‘letterboxes’. Such hatred of the Other at a relatively young age, perhaps illustrates an internalisation of this pervasive identity politics of hate, leaking out of so many of our institutions, including the Government cabinet. Hate crime has also multiplied in the US during the 2016 campaign and since the election of Donald Trump, reaching an extreme in late 2018

when a number of supporters sent packages containing explosive devices to prominent critics of Trump (e.g. Clinton, Obama, De Niro).

This intensification of an identity politics of hatred against individuals or groups that are perceived as deviant, because of their ‘difference’, has been rendered almost respectable, or at least more visible since the electoral success of Trump and other political populists. Yet, as we intimated earlier, it may have been provoked by the dominance of neo-liberal elites, with their middle class norms of meritocracy, leaving the comparatively unsuccessful feeling deprived and resentful in ways that lead them to seek out targets for their anger. Exacerbated by the long periods of austerity and erosion of income following the global financial crisis of 2008, combined with the polarization of wealth and perhaps self-satisfied complacency among the economically comfortable middle class, has served only to inflame the politics of hatred.

These examples might suggest that identity politics is wholly negative as a breeding ground for prejudice, intolerance and discrimination but when speaking about ethics, Foucault argued that ‘not everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad’ (1997: 256). Not least, it is dangerous because the attachment to one identity is invariably constituted and sustained through deriding or demonizing alternatives, even to the point of physical or verbal violence, as in the hate crimes we referred to. Similarly, because we understand identities as always situated (or entangled) within a specific set of hierarchically arranged power relations, vigilance must be exercised constantly with regard to totalizing forms of domination, and potentially tyrannical and oppressive practices. In terms of identity, this means remaining continually alert to how, even the most innocent of identity attachments such as supporting a sports team, a pop group or a political cause can readily spill over into violence against those stigmatized as the external, or ‘common’ enemy (Herman & Chomsky,

1988). Historically, of course, nationality, ethnicity, race and religion have perpetrated the most violent and extreme forms of identity politics through wars and persecution of those with beliefs that are divergent or deviant from the mainstream consensus.

However, we are now in the midst of a revival of this regressive politics where there are universal and totalizing demands to assert national supremacy, restore borders, build walls, eradicate the free flowing movement of peoples between them, and demonize difference as deviance. These have surfaced and gained legitimacy through the masculine inspired, xenophobic populist rhetoric of state political leaders already mentioned, but their venom is duplicated by elected leaders such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and the Trump of the Tropics – Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, or autocrats like Bashar Al-Assad, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un and King Salman as well as other current contenders such as Jimmie Åkesson, Heinz-Christian Strache, Geert Wilders, and Matteo Salvini. These authoritarian and divisive political climates have seemingly given licence to racist and other bigoted prejudice and discrimination sometimes materializing in hate crimes or even murders, particularly in post-Brexit referendum Britain and post-electoral Trump US. Although triumphant first in the Eastern European states of Hungary and Poland, these far-right movements have deployed identity politics to subvert many Western democracies by normalizing coalitions between Neo-Nazis and neo-liberal free-market conservatives. Again, perhaps one of the conditions of possibility of the spread of neo-fascism to the West was the global financial crisis of 2008, which resulted in resentment from large groups of citizens who felt ‘left behind’ and caught up in spirals of ever-increasing poverty. The seductive promise of a better future worked as a catalyst for those seeking a solution to their problems, thus enabling and providing a significant contribution to the regressive and aggressive identity politics of Trump, Brexit and European neo-fascism.

Although we have so far emphasized the dark, or at least the dangerous, side of identity politics, it does not have to be negative, but tends often to be so, when power is brought into the service of our attachment and preoccupation with identity. Consequently, we are not arguing for the eradication of identity even if that were remotely possible, since there are many positive and productive social and innovative benefits to be derived from sharing our affinities. Collective and collaborative relations are cultivated and sustained through shared identities and they can clearly have the wellbeing of peoples, planets and the 'natural' environment as their *raison d'être*. Only when an attachment to, and preoccupation with these identities becomes paramount, is there a likelihood of destructive means to a cause being justified, by calls for the end to any opposition, or even mere existence of difference, as it morphs into the 'enemy' to be eliminated.

Concluding thoughts

The dark side of identity politics is one of the most significant consequences of attempts to secure the self through attachments to identity. Historically, it has often resulted in totalitarian violence and oppression. However, such problems are not simply confined to the past for, as we have argued, identity politics is currently 'enjoying' a resurgence, as large sections of Western populations are rejecting the liberal establishment that they feel has failed to benefit them economically. Populism has been gathering momentum throughout Europe in the last few decades and is now firmly entrenched in many parts of the US, where the ability to scapegoat, blame and demonise particular groups has proven seductive. Any constitution of identity is always an act of power (Laclau, 1990: 33), because 'Othering' is predicated on a hierarchically constructed set of negative stereotypical beliefs (Pickering, 2001) about those whose identities are *not like ours*. Confronting our own difference, or Otherness, is the process by which we can come to be excluded from belonging, and this frequently depends on a single feature or

aspect of identity, such as religion (e.g. Jews, Muslims), sexuality (e.g. transgender or homosexuals), race (e.g. 'black' or 'coloured'), ethnicity (which includes nationality, religion, culture and language), perceived country of origin (foreigners or immigrants), status/wealth (the poor) and, of course, our political affiliation. Identity politics can of course focus on the production of more positive effects, for example it can mobilise and 'create "new social movements," collective initiatives that are self-reflexive and sharply focused on the expressive actions of collective members' (Cerulo, 1997: 393).

We have sought to theorize how the failure to interrogate taken-for-granted understandings, reflects and reinforces rather than challenges how potentially dangerous, destructive, and often self-defeating attachments to identity come to be formed. Since attachments to this, or that, kind of identity might provide a platform for oiling the political machinations of conflict, it is important to recognise how they may be readily co-opted and weaponised, precisely in order to divide, separate and conquer. The killing fields of identity (politics) are not however confined to those with deliberate and murderous intent, for they can be just as destructive for those who are literally dying at work, either through overwork, mental health conditions, suicide, precarity, or any combination of the aforementioned. Phillips and Hardy claim that it is only possible to appreciate ways of organising if we come to 'understand identity' (2002: 52), so surely the task of scholars within this field is to recognise our complicity in sustaining potentially injurious fantasies surrounding both identity and identity work. These include but are not limited to its: unchallenged centrality; self-defeating nature; unfinished and incomplete state; dependency on the Other; transactional and disembodied strategy for realising our potential by giving us a 'leg up' the greasy pole. Also, it includes the new forms of self-exploitation, when work intensification through zero hour and self-employed contracts that although depriving workers of many of their employment rights, seem attractive in providing

some flexibility. These have become normalized partly because they provide recipients with the illusion of freedom and thus an identity of autonomy that is one of the mechanisms through which humanist, neo-liberal regimes secure control. This has been another element of the deflection from material and economic relations in contemporary discourse and practice that has shifted the focus from material and economic relations to culture and identity politics.

Opportunities for undertaking nuanced and theoretically challenging research in the field of identity could include, returning to a focus on collective *action*, particularly regarding social movements, where there is more emphasis on what can be achieved collaboratively, rather than the tendency especially in the media, to celebrate individual identities. By the same token, it is important to problematise and analyse, rather than eschew, or simply take for granted the dangers integral to extreme attachments to any kind of identity, since these ubiquitous tendencies can literally lead us into the killing fields, where divisions between ‘them’ and ‘us’ can be lethal. Finally, we need constantly to recognise or remind ourselves of how the desire for identity as a means of gaining stability and security is invariably self-defeating (Watts, 1951), most relevantly in terms of this article for those at work in organisations. Such awareness could perhaps alleviate some of the damaging consequences invoked by the often insidious meritocratic, neo-liberal demands to realise some mythical potential in an idealised future perfect identity.

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ⁱ At the time of writing Jackie Doyle occupies this ministerial position

ⁱⁱ It could claim to have been much more effective than class struggles against exploitation.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/46563997>

^{iv} Tommy Robinson, real name Stephen Christopher Yaxley-Lennon, is a controversial figure associated with far-right extreme populism in the UK. Originally the founder of the English Defence League, Robinson attracts both admiration and criticism, for his ‘incitement’ based on anti-Muslim rhetoric.