

BOOK

Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment

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SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]

Demand for recognition of one's identity is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today. The universal recognition on which liberal democracy is based has been increasingly challenged by narrower forms of recognition based on nation, religion, sect, race, ethnicity, or gender, which have resulted in anti-immigrant populism, the upsurge of politicized Islam, the fractious "identity liberalism" of college campuses, and the emergence of white nationalism. Populist nationalism, said to be rooted in economic motivation, actually springs from the demand for recognition and therefore cannot simply be satisfied by economic means. The demand for identity cannot be transcended; we must begin to shape identity in a way that supports rather than undermines democracy.

Identity is an urgent and necessary book—a sharp warning that unless we forge a universal understanding of human dignity, we will doom ourselves to continuing conflict.

"Karl Marx had suggested that the end of history would be a communist utopia, and I was simply suggesting that Hegel's version, where development resulted in a liberal state linked to a market economy, was the more plausible outcome."

"Neither nationalism nor religion were about to disappear as forces in world politics. They were not about to disappear because, I argued back then, contemporary liberal democracies had not fully solved the problem of thymos."

"Thymos is the part of the soul that craves recognition of dignity; isothymia is the demand to be respected on an equal basis with other people; while megalothymia is the desire to be recognized as superior."

"Megalothymia thrives on exceptionality: taking big risks, engaging in monumental struggles, seeking large effects, because all of these lead to recognition of oneself as superior to others. In some cases, it can lead to a heroic leader like a Lincoln or a Churchill or a Nelson Mandela. But in other cases, it can lead to tyrants like Caesar or Hitler or Mao who lead their societies into dictatorship and disaster."

“In their effort to create a republican form of government in North America, they were aware of the history of the fall of the Roman Republic and worried about the problem of Caesarism. Their solution was the constitutional system of checks and balances that would distribute power and block its concentration in a single leader.”

“To propel themselves forward, such figures latched onto the resentments of ordinary people who felt that their nation or religion or way of life was being disrespected. Megalothymia and isothymia thus joined hands.”

“Demand for recognition of one’s identity is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today.”

“According to Hegel, human history was driven by a struggle for recognition. He argued that the only rational solution to the desire for recognition was universal recognition, in which the dignity of every human being was recognized.”

“The rise of identity politics in modern liberal democracies is one of the chief threats that they face, and unless we can work our way back to more universal understandings of human dignity, we will doom ourselves to continuing conflict.”

“Between 1970 and 2008, the world’s output of goods and services quadrupled and growth extended to virtually all regions of the world, while the number of people living in extreme poverty in developing countries dropped from 42 percent of the total population in 1993 to 17 percent in 2011. The percentage of children dying before their fifth birthdays declined from 22 percent in 1960 to less than 5 percent by 2016.”

“In the mid-2000s, the momentum toward an increasingly open and liberal world order began to falter, then went into reverse. This shift coincided with two financial crises, the first originating in the U.S. subprime market in 2008 that led to the subsequent Great Recession, and the second emerging over the threat to the euro and the European Union posed by Greece’s insolvency. mutated into the Islamic State, which emerged as a beacon for profoundly illiberal and violent Islamists around the world. What was as remarkable as ISIS’s resilience was that so many young Muslims left lives of comparative safety elsewhere in the Middle East and Europe to travel to Syria to fight on its behalf.”

“The left has focused less on broad economic equality and more on promoting the interests of a wide variety of groups perceived as being marginalized – blacks, immigrants, women, Hispanics, the LGBT community, refugees, and the like. The right, meanwhile, is redefining itself as patriots who seek to protect traditional national identity, an identity that is often explicitly connected to race, ethnicity, or religion.”

“The politics of resentment: In a wide variety of cases, a political leader has mobilized followers around the perception that the group’s dignity had been affronted, disparaged, or otherwise disregarded. This resentment engenders demands for public recognition of the dignity of the group in question. A humiliated group seeking restitution of its dignity carries far more emotional weight than people simply pursuing their economic advantage.”

“In this book, I will be using identity in a specific sense that helps us understand why it is so important to contemporary politics. Identity grows, in the first place, out of a distinction between one’s true inner self and an outer world of social rules and norms that does not adequately recognize that inner self’s worth or dignity.”

“Individuals throughout human history have found themselves at odds with their societies. But only in modern times has the view taken hold that the authentic inner self is intrinsically valuable, and the outer society systematically wrong and unfair in its valuation of the former. The inner self is the basis of human dignity, but the nature of that dignity is variable and has changed over time. In many early cultures, dignity is attributed only to a few people, often warriors who are willing to risk their lives in battle. In other societies, dignity is an attribute of all human beings, based on their intrinsic worth as people with agency.”

“The inner sense of dignity seeks recognition. It is not enough that I have a sense of my own worth if other people do not publicly acknowledge it or, worse yet, if they denigrate me or don’t acknowledge my existence. Self-esteem arises out of esteem by others. Because human beings naturally crave recognition, the modern sense of identity evolves quickly into identity politics, in which individuals demand public recognition of their worth.”

“Before we can understand contemporary identity politics, we need to step back and develop a deeper and richer understanding of human motivation and behavior. We need, in other words, a better theory of the human soul.”

“Modern economics is based on one such theory, which is that human beings are ‘rational utility maximizers’: they are individuals who use their formidable cognitive abilities to benefit their self-interest.”

“The second assumption concerns the nature of ‘utility,’ the individual preferences – for a car, for sexual gratification, for a pleasant vacation – that make up what economists call a person’s ‘utility function.’ Many economists would argue that their science says nothing about the ultimate preferences or utilities that people choose; that’s up to individuals. Economics speaks only to the ways in which preferences are rationally pursued.”

“Economics has become a dominant and prestigious social science today because people do much of the time behave according to the economists’ more restrictive version of human motivation. Material incentives matter.”

“One of the causes of the 2008 financial crisis was that investment bankers were rewarded for short-term profits and were not punished when their risky investments blew up a few years later. Fixing the problem would require changing those incentives.”

“Over the past couple of decades, behavioral economists and psychologists such as Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have attacked the model’s underlying assumptions by showing that people are not rational in practice, that they for example choose default behaviors over more optimal strategies or economize on the hard work of thinking by copying the behavior of others around them.”

“Economic theory does not satisfactorily explain either the soldier falling on the grenade, or the suicide bomber, or a host of other cases where something other than material self-interest appears to be in play.”

“Early modern thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau theorized at length about the ‘state of nature,’ a primordial time before the emergence of human society. The state of nature is, however, just a metaphor for human nature; that is, the most basic characteristics of human beings that exist independently of one’s particular society or culture. In the Western philosophical tradition, such discussions of human nature go much further back, at least to Plato’s Republic. The Republic is a dialogue between the philosopher Socrates and two young aristocratic Athenians, Adeimantus and his brother Glaucon, about the nature of a just city.”

“Socrates uses a new word, spirit, to refer to the part of the soul that is the seat of this anger against oneself, which is a poor translation of the Greek word thymos.”

“More than two millennia before its advent, Socrates and Adeimantus understood something unrecognized by modern economics. Desire and reason are component parts of the human psyche (soul), but a third part, thymos, acts completely independently of the first two. Thymos is the seat of judgments of worth.”

“This third part of the soul, thymos, is the seat of today’s identity politics. Political actors do struggle over economic issues: whether taxes should be lower or higher, or how the pie of government revenue will be divided among different claimants in a democracy. But a lot of political life is only weakly related to economic resources.”

“Aristocrats thought of themselves as better than other people and possessed what we may call megalothymia, the desire to be recognized as superior. Predemocratic societies rested on a foundation of social hierarchy, so this belief in the inherent superiority of a certain class of people was fundamental to the maintenance of social order.”

“The problem with megalothymia is that for every person recognized as superior, far more people are seen as inferior and do not receive any public recognition of their human worth. Thymos is the part of the soul that seeks recognition. In the Republic, only a narrow class of people sought recognition of their dignity, on the basis of their willingness to risk their lives as warriors. Yet the desire for recognition also seems to lie within every human soul.”

“The modern concept of identity places a supreme value on authenticity, on the validation of that inner being that is not being allowed to express itself.”

“In the West, the idea of identity was born, in a sense, during the Protestant Reformation, and it was given its initial expression by the Augustinian friar Martin Luther.”

“Luther was one of the first Western thinkers to articulate and valorize the inner self over the external social being. He argued that man has a twofold nature, an inner spiritual one and an outer bodily being; since “no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom,” only the inner man could be renewed.”

“Though it was not Luther’s intention, the Reformation brought about exactly this result: the decline of Rome as the Universal Church, the rise of alternative churches, and a whole series of social changes in which the individual believer was prioritized over prevailing social structures. What Rousseau asserts, and what becomes foundational in world politics in the subsequent centuries, is that a thing called society exists outside the individual, a mass of rules, relationships, injunctions, and customs that is itself the chief obstacle to the realization of human potential, and hence of human happiness.”

“But Rousseau was wrong about some important things, beginning with his assertion that early humans were primordially individualistic.”

“The modern concept of identity unites three different phenomena. The first is thymos, a universal aspect of human personality that craves recognition. The second is the distinction between the inner and the outer self, and the raising of the moral valuation of the inner self over outer society. This emerged only in early modern Europe. The third is an evolving concept of dignity, in which recognition is due not just to a narrow class of people, but to everyone. The Christian concept of dignity has revolved around this capacity for moral choice. Human beings are able to distinguish between good and evil; they can choose to do good, even if they often, like Adam and Eve, do not do so. Luther’s justification by faith was simply an expression of this choice.”

“Animals are incapable of knowing good and evil since they operate on instinct, while God in a sense is pure goodness and always chooses rightly. The human capacity for choice gives people a higher status than that of animals since it partakes of God’s capacity for goodness, yet is less than that of God since people are capable of sin.”

“In this sense, in the Christian tradition, all human beings are fundamentally equal: they are all endowed with an equal capacity for choice. The centrality of moral choice to human dignity was underlined by the Baptist minister Martin Luther King, Jr., when he said, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” – i.e., by the moral choices made by their inner selves, and not by their external characteristics.”

“Immanuel Kant presented a secular version of this Christian understanding of dignity in his Critique of Practical Reason and other writings such as his Groundwork to a Metaphysics of Morals. He asserts that we can point to nothing as unconditionally good other than a good will – that is, the capacity for proper moral choice.”

“Hegel accepted this link between moral choice and human dignity; human beings are morally free agents who are not simply rational machines seeking to maximize satisfaction of their desires. But unlike Rousseau or Kant, Hegel put recognition of that moral agency at the center of his account of the human condition.”

“Modern man is not loyal to a monarch or a land or faith, whatever he may say, but to a culture.’ But nationalism was also born out of the acute anxieties bred by industrialization.”

“The resentful citizens fearing loss of middle-class status point an accusatory finger upward to the elites, to whom they are invisible, but also downward toward the poor, whom they feel are undeserving and being unfairly favored.”

“When economic decline is interpreted as loss of social status, it is easy to see why immigration becomes a proxy for economic change.”

“A wider reading list will not necessarily transmit valuable or timeless knowledge that would be educationally important; rather, it would raise the self-esteem of marginalized students and make them feel better about themselves.”

“The rise of the therapeutic model midwifed the birth of modern identity politics in advanced liberal democracies. Identity politics is everywhere a struggle for the recognition of dignity. Liberal democracies are premised on the equal recognition of the dignity of each of their citizens as individuals.”

“Nationalists such as Paul de Lagarde or Adolf Hitler grounded their definitions of nation in biology and argued that the existing nations of the world constituted racial entities that had existed from time immemorial. Others made an allegedly unchanging inherited culture the basis for nationhood. Such theories became the justification for the aggressive nationalisms of early twentieth-century Europe, whose exponents were defeated with the fall of Nazism in 1945.”

FOUR PATHS TO NATIONAL IDENTITIES

“The first is to transfer populations across the political boundaries of a particular country, either by sending settlers into new territories, by forcibly evicting people who live in a certain territory, or by simply killing them off – or all three.’

“The second path to nationhood is to move borders to fit existing linguistic or cultural populations.”

“The third path is to assimilate minority populations into the culture of an existing ethnic or linguistic group.”

“The fourth path is to reshape national identity to fit the existing characteristics of the society in question.”

AMERICA’S PATH TO NATIONAL IDENTITY

“Religion and ethnicity were, in other words, key components of the way that many Americans thought about themselves. But a creedal narrative as well had equally deep historical roots, a narrative that contested this view.”

“The American Civil War was, at its root, a fight over American national identity. The Southern states explicitly linked identity to race by excluding nonwhites from citizenship.”

“By the middle of the twentieth century, the de facto diversity of the United States made it impossible to define American peoplehood in either religious or ethnic terms.”

“On the left, proponents of narrow identity politics assert that the U.S. identity is its diversity, or that we are somehow united by our diversity. Others have argued that the United States is too diverse to have a national identity, and that we shouldn’t worry about it one way or the other. Each person and each group experiences disrespect in different ways, and each seeks its own dignity. Identity politics thus engenders its own dynamic, by which societies divide themselves into smaller and smaller groups by virtue of their particular “lived experience” of victimization. Confusion over identity arises as a condition of living in the modern world. Modernization means constant change and disruption, and the opening up of choices that did not exist before. It is mobile, fluid, and complex. This fluidity is by and large a good thing: over generations, millions of people have been fleeing villages and traditional societies that do not offer them choices, in favor of ones that do.”

“But the freedom and degree of choice that exist in a modern liberal society can also leave people unhappy and disconnected from their fellow human beings. They find themselves nostalgic for the community and structured life they think they have lost, or that their ancestors supposedly once possessed. The authentic identities they are seeking are ones that bind them to other people. They can be seduced by leaders who tell them that they have been betrayed and disrespected by the existing power structures, and that they are members of important communities whose greatness will again be recognized.”

“As the political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset used to point out, in the United States one can be accused of being “un-American” in a way that one could not be said to be “un-Danish” or “un-Japanese.” Americanism constituted a set of beliefs and a way of life, not an ethnicity; one can deviate from the former but not the latter.”

“While the United States has benefited from diversity, it cannot build its national identity around diversity as such. Identity has to be related to substantive ideas such as constitutionalism, rule of law, and human equality. Americans respect these ideas; the country is justified in excluding from citizenship those who reject them.”