DOI: 10.1111/1467-8675.12715

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Constellations WILEY

Identity politics and the democratization of democracy: Oscillations between power and reason in radical democratic and standpoint theory

Karsten Schubert

Department of Social Sciences, Humboldt University Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Correspondence
Karsten Schubert, Department of Social Sciences, Humboldt University Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, Germany. Email: karsten.schubert@hu-berlin.de

1 | INTRODUCTION

Criticism against identity politics, both in public discourse and political theory, has intensified over the past decade with the rise of right-wing populism and the polarization of politics (Walters, 2018). Such criticism portrays identity politics as a threat to democracy, alleging that it erodes community, rational communication, and solidarity. Drawing on radical democratic and standpoint theories, I argue for the opposite thesis; namely, that identity politics is crucial for the democratization of democracy. I show that democratization works through disrupting hegemonic discourse and is, therefore, a matter of power; and that such power politics are reasonable when following minority standpoints generated through identity politics. In other words, the universal democratic claims of equality and freedom can only become effective through their repeated actualization in particular power struggles.

Identity politics is a contested term. Nevertheless, there are systematic overlaps between current criticisms of identity politics that mainly repeat arguments that have been similarly articulated since the 1990s. Communitarians criticize identity politics as dividing the political community, liberals criticize it as disruptive of the public sphere and free deliberation (Fukuyama, 2018; Habermas, 2020; Lilla, 2017), and Marxist and anarchist theorists argue that identity politics undermines the struggle for justice and emancipation and stabilizes state power through neoliberal diversity politics (Fraser, 1990, 2007; Kumar et al., 2018; Newman, 2010; Táíwò, 2022; for a critique of these debates, see Bickford, 1997; Walters, 2018; Young, 2000, pp. 82–87; Paul, 2019). Based on universalist accounts of the political,[1] all three positions share the concern that particularist identity politics conflates social positions with epistemological possibilities and political positions, resulting in standpoint fundamentalism. In other words, the critics claim that, in identity politics, it matters more who speaks than what is said.[2]

Discussions about difference (Benhabib, 1996), counterpublics (Fraser, 1990), and inclusion (Young, 2000) at the intersection of deliberative and Critical theory early criticized such universalist accounts of the political for their

exclusionist effects. While these works offer valuable resources to construct the argument that strengthening identity politics is important for the development of more inclusive deliberations and institutions, they frame this as a correction of reason, leaving the aspect of power underdeveloped. To understand both the severe resistance against more inclusive politics and the strategic need for non-deliberative means to achieve it—such as protest, civil disobedience, "cancel culture," or uprising—what is necessary is a theoretical framework that describes democratization as an oscillation between power and reason. Even Mansbridge (1996) does not offer such a theoretical framework, despite explicitly arguing—contrary to deliberative democracy—that power through coercion is central for democracy and rightly points to the need for "protected enclaves" (p. 57) for the development of minoritarian standpoints. As the tension between power and reason, and respectively, particularism and universalism, is at the center of agonistic[3] radical democratic theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Lefort, 1988a; Mouffe, 2008; Rancière, 1999), it is better suited to develop such a framework than deliberative approaches.[4]

This tension should not be understood as one where identity politics is positioned on the side of particularism and its critics on the side of universality; rather, it is constitutive of identity politics, and in extension, democracy itself. "Identity politics"—in the sense of the history of the term's origin as well as the current debate—refers to the political practice of marginalized groups who, in relation to the construction of a collective identity and standpoint, defend themselves against their disadvantages due to structures, cultures, and norms of the majority society. Following Combahee River Collective (1979, p. 365), a Black feminist organization, identity politics can be defined as "focusing upon our own oppression," thus starting from particular experiences and standpoints. However, this should not be conflated—as some contemporary critics do—with essentialist interest group politics. Rather, identity politics is directed against oppression in general, insofar as it is an intersectional and "integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (Combahee River Collective, 1979, p. 362). This oscillation between particularist and universalist accounts of oppression is not a flaw in the Collective's text but stems from the inherent tension within identity politics. This tension has been discussed in the rich debates on identity politics, especially in the writings of intersectional feminism (Alcoff, 1988; Alcoff et al., 2006; Bickford, 1997; Briskin, 1990; Gamson, 1995; Hekman, 1999; Kruks, 1995; McNay, 2010; Nicholson, 2008; Whittier, 2017; see also the edited volumes, Benhabib et al., 1995; Hames-Garcia & Moya, 2000; and for an overview, see Bernstein, 2005; as well as Heyes, 2020). However, there is no systematic account of the tension between particularism and universalism in these works, which, indebted to that tradition, I will develop with the aim of strengthening it.

As "identity politics" is a contested term, alternative conceptual strategies exist. For example, Young (2000) speaks of the "politics of difference" of "structural social groups" to describe what I call "identity politics," while, following critics (pp. 82–87), she uses the term "identity politics" for the tendency toward substantialist, merely cultural, and potentially non-intersectional exclusive group-interest politics (p. 86). As the common understanding of "identity politics" entails the breadth of the critical politics of marginalized groups, I think it is important to defend, specify, and revive that term, instead of trying to establish a new term that is not currently criticized. This conceptual strategy underscores that, in general, the critical politics of marginalized groups promote democratization and inclusivity. This, of course, does not mean that all identity politics are equally democratizing. The argument is thus not a carte blanche for every practice of identity politics; rather, the reconstruction of the democratizing function of identity politics is not only descriptive but also normative, as it allows a differentiation of identity politics from exclusive group-interest politics and thereby criticizes identity political projects if they show tendencies to develop into exclusive group-interest politics.

To understand identity politics as a democratizing oscillation between power and reason, the radical democratic account has to be refined through standpoint theory. I will proceed in the following steps. First, I will systematically reconstruct the equivalences of both theoretical traditions, filling a gap in the existing research literature that is ignorant of these equivalences. Both put forward a critique of common notions of objectivity and universality, privileging the particularity of oppressed knowledges.[5] In contrast to the communitarian, liberal, and Marxist accounts that are based on universalist conceptions of the political, these traditions argue that breaking through established understandings of universal discourse through the use of particular identity politics is central to the further democratization

of democracy. However, the radical democratic affirmation of identity politics as a particular disruption of the universal prima facie confirms the critics' fear that identity politics destroys universal normativity and with it the very foundation of democracy, by fostering exclusive group-interest politics. This points to a more fundamental problem in radical democratic thought, which Volk (2018) recently called a lack of consensus orientation. If politics is only conceptualized as critique, disruption, and protest, this amounts to a rather one-sided account of politics that blends out the importance of institutions and deliberation. Thus, while radical democratic theory helps to understand that the tension between universalism and particularism is constitutive of democracy and identity politics, it risks resolving this tension toward particularism by overemphasizing power instead of reason as definitive of the political. It is, therefore, necessary to correct its lack of consensus orientation to develop the radical democratic account of identity politics.

To this end, in the second section, I demonstrate how standpoint theory refines the radical democratic interpretation of identity politics. This addresses the concerns that identity politics undermines intersubjective discourse and offers a solution to the lack of consensus orientation in radical democratic theory in general.[6] Standpoint theory allows a substantiation and reconciliation of two claims that are contradictory at first sight. First, that particular standpoints are necessary to criticize the current discursive and institutional order, and second, that such standpoints are based on intersubjective reason and "strong objectivity" (Harding, 1993). This helps to clarify the democratizing function of identity politics and the normativity of radical democratic theory in order to criticize interpretations of this school that reject any claims to objectivity based on the fundamental contingency of the political. Such a total rejection of objectivity is the philosophical basis for the aforementioned lack of consensus orientation in radical democratic thought, leading to dissolving the power/reason tension toward power. The radical democratic and standpoint theoretical interpretation of identity politics that I propose thereby explains that the ongoing oscillation between power and reason, respectively, particularism and universalism, is constitutive of identity politics, and by extension, of democracy.

2 | UNVEILING THE COMMONALITIES: RADICAL DEMOCRATIC THOUGHT MEETS STANDPOINT THEORY

2.1 | The shared critique of objectivity and universality

Radical democracy shares two fundamental arguments with standpoint theory. In this section, I will reconstruct the critique of objectivity and universality, and in the following section, I will detail how both theoretical traditions privilege oppressed knowledges.

Radical democratic theory is a postfoundationalist theory: It claims that foundations are contingent and therefore an objective theory of the social cannot exist (Marchart, 2007). Rather, politics is the attempt to universalize one particular interpretation of the social and to install it as a hegemonic regime. A primary concern of radical democratic critique is hence the depoliticization caused by expert knowledges and restrictive discourses in neoliberal post-democracy, which often sideline critical voices. Acknowledging the differences in their respective positions, I will reconstruct the critiques of objectivity by Lefort, Mouffe, Laclau, and Rancière.

As early as 1966, Lefort (1990)—a key thinker in the tradition of radical democracy—developed a notion of the political as necessarily contingent and contested. He develops his account by criticizing the objectifying theories of Marxism on the one hand, and liberalism on the other. Both are foundationalist theories: they derive politics from an objective account of the social, in the form of economic determinism in the case of Marxism, and as a universalism incompatible with social conflict in the case of liberalism. Both tell stories of an origin of the political that presupposes an ahistorical position (Lefort & Gauchet, 1990, p. 95). Analyzing the logic of the attempts to provide a foundation, and their continuous failure, Lefort defines the political as the ongoing conflictual foundation of society (Lefort & Gauchet, 1990, p. 96). Democracy is the political regime—in contrast to totalitarianism—that acknowledges the original division of society and continuously gives it unity through political representation (Lefort & Gauchet, 1990, p. 110). The argument is epistemological: there is no universal account of society, but only the contingent and particular political

attempts to ground society. Democracy thus takes into account the notion that there is no objective and universal account of society, but that its identity is essentially conflictual and contested (Lefort, 1988b). Thus, attempts to bring the democratic conflict to closure by positing a particular truth as universalistic and objective against the plurality of ideologies is, according to Lefort, totalitarian (Lefort & Gauchet, 1990, p. 111).

Laclau and Mouffe (2001) take up Lefort's theory—the political as contingency and conflict—in their approach to hegemony, antagonism, and radical democracy. First, their work is crucial for analyzing how identities and political subjectivities are constituted within this postfoundationalist framework; something that I will return to later. Second, they analyze—more historically and concretely than Lefort—how objectification and universalization work in contemporary societies. Laclau's (2000a, 2000b) account of politics as a logic of the universalization of particular demands helps to understand how a neoliberal regime of expertocracy, liberal and deliberative political theory, and the breakdown of social democratic parties, installed a political hegemony that is objectifying politics by suppressing political conflict and agonistic alternatives. Mouffe (2000, 2008) especially elaborated on this critique of post-democracy (Crouch, 2004) as a matter of political theory and the hegemony of liberal and deliberal approaches therein. Thus, objectification is the key strategy of universalization through which the liberal hegemony stabilizes itself. While this (neo-)liberal objectification is anti-democratic and depoliticizing, it is not necessarily totalitarian.

Rancière (1999, pp. 21–43) radicalizes the critique of universalism and objectivity through his differentiation of "politics" and "police." "Police" is Rancière's term for the regime of institutionalized politics as well as the discursive and normative order, while "politics" is the assertion of equality through the eruptive contestation of police from the position of those excluded by the police. It is key that "police," as an institutional order, is based on a regime of the visible and sayable. It is thus connected to an epistemic order that defines some as intelligible while radically excluding others. This means that every positive order is partial, excluding, and thereby unjust. Thus, Rancière's account helps to debunk claims that pertain to the universality and objectivity of a given order, as the critics of identity politics do, by cloaking such injustice and stabilizing the order.

Standpoint theories put forward a similar criticism against claims of objectivity and universality. While they focus on academic truth production and not on political hegemony, they share the critique that objectivity and universality are devices that cloak the particular, political, and unjust character of a given order. From feminist and Black perspectives, standpoint theories show that a traditional understanding of objectivity leads to precisely the opposite of a realist and plausible assessment of the social: a particular perspective of cishet male and White mainstream society. This means that scientific claims to neutrality are never neutral; they cloak their particular standpoint. Both radical democracy and standpoint theory agree that when conceptualized as the opposite of politics, objectivity leads to a particular perspective of hegemony that hides its particularity by presenting it as universality.

One early strand of standpoint thinking comes from a Marxian tradition, and the Marxian concept of ideology deeply influenced and informed both contemporary radical democratic theory and standpoint theories. Feminist and postcolonial theories took up and further developed this Marxian heritage.[7] According to Harding (2004b), standpoint theory challenges the "conventional view" that "politics can only obstruct and damage the production of scientific knowledge" (p. 1; see also Toole, 2022). This conventional view "persistently obscured their normative features behind a veil of claimed neutrality" (Harding, 2004b, p. 2). Thus, even maximally accurate descriptive theories are also normative and political. Haraway (1988) calls such an epistemology, which equates truth with the transcendence of particularity, a "god trick" (p. 582), and argues that knowledges are always situated. This critique of the "god trick" is equivalent to the radical democratic rejection of the last foundations: both theoretical traditions can be called postfoundationalist. The political effects of such aspirations to objectivity, universality, and neutrality are tremendous:

> The sciences' commitment to social neutrality disarmed the scientifically productive potential of politically engaged research on behalf of oppressed groups. […] Androcentric, economically advantaged, racist, Eurocentric, and heterosexist conceptual frameworks ensured systematic ignorance and error about not only the lives of the oppressed, but also about the lives of their oppressors and thus about how nature and social relations in general worked (Harding, 2004b, p. 5).

Thus, the conventional conception of objectivity and universality leads to the presentation of the particular standpoint of the privileged as universal. By linking this analysis to the concepts of "hegemony" and "police" in radical democracy—which emphasize the interplay between knowledge and power—one can argue that conventional views on universality and objectivity bolster the majoritarian hegemony and the prevailing "police." These very mechanisms are at stake in the contemporary critique of identity politics: by rejecting identity politics as particularistic, they universalize the perspective of the privileged.

2.2 | Privileging oppressed knowledges

Is there, then, a way out of these false foundationalist conceptions of objectivity and universality that lead to hegemonic knowledge regimes? Standpoint theory and radical democracy do not only share the postfoundationalist critique of universality and objectivity, they also argue that privileging oppressed knowledges can help overcome foundationalist universality. Standpoint theories develop "stronger" accounts of objectivity that take into account the plurality of standpoints. However, focusing on epistemological discussions, they do not lay out the consequences for democracy that might follow from this standpoint thinking. These consequences become clear through radical democratic theory.

The core thesis of standpoint theories is that standpoints matter in research, and in consequence, in politics, as our social position influences what we can know, both academically and politically. The everyday experience of the diversity of oppressed people matters for the development of social theories (Harding, 2004a, pp. 4–7):

> Standpoint theories argue for "starting off thought" from the lives of marginalized people [as this] will generate illuminating critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from dominant group lives (Harding, 1993, p. 56).

The critique of conventional objectivity does not entail overthrowing the concept of objectivity altogether. On the contrary, it is about conceptualizing a better version of objectivity, which Harding (1993) calls "strong objectivity." This objectivity is reflective of the contextualization and limitations of particular knowledges. It is "about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object" (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). In other words, "Only partial perspective promises objective vision" (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). Standpoint theories do not solely make this claim philosophically but are also based on the real existing perspectives of marginalized people. The analysis of these perspectives shows that due to their situatedness, they achieve knowledge that remains undisclosed to the hegemonic perspective but needs to be taken into account to achieve strong objectivity. Thus, standpoint theories are not simply about the pluralization of knowledge; they also assign epistemic privilege to oppressed knowledges (Toole, 2021).

The epistemic privilege of oppressed knowledges has been shown through the experiences of women and the experiences of Blacks and People of Color, who need a specific understanding of the social to navigate and survive it. For example, Hartsock (2004) argues that the position of women in reproductive labor enables a critique of masculine ideology. Black scholars refer to personal experience to describe their particular social, and thereby epistemological position within the racialized order. Early, Du Bois (2007, p. 8) spoke of a "double consciousness" that Blacks develop. In a similar vein, hooks (1984, preface) argued that the Black perspective is twofold, both from "the outside in and from the inside out," as racism requires the awareness of the separation of margin and center. Thus, Blacks in the United States developed an "oppositional view—a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors" (hooks, 1984, preface). Because of their Black feminist social position, Black female researchers can see anomalies in the normal sciences better than white scholars; for example, the systematic leaving out of Black perspectives from normal research (Collins, 1986). Taken together, these diverse empirical accounts of the differentiated positions amount to the insight that it is only through a plurality of "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988) that a better account of oppression can be reached.

Radical democratic theory also privileges oppressed knowledges. Because no universal perspective is possible in postfoundationalism, radical democracy conceptualizes politics as standpoint-dependent. When democracy is understood as protest by the excluded and disenfranchised, it is dependent on their standpoint. To privilege the perspectives of the oppressed is rooted in the Marxist account of the proletariat as a revolutionary class, and radical democratic theory is post-Marxian in so far as it transforms this standpoint thinking to disentangle it from economic determinism.

For Lefort (1990), democracy is characterized by the emptiness of the place of power and the institutionalization of struggles about that power, stemming from the non-fixed identity of society. This is the thinking of pluralistic democracy, based on the impossibility of conventional foundations, and the politically disastrous consequences of attempts to do so. Just as with the standpoint theoretical conception of situated knowledges, Lefort thus puts forward a pluralistic epistemology. His postfoundationalist theory of democracy can thus be seen as a first step in drawing out the consequences of standpoint epistemologies for political theory. However, as Ingram (2006) shows, Lefort is ambiguous. He can be, and has been, interpreted in a liberal and radical democratic vein, emphasizing either the need for stable institutions and universal human rights to confine social conflict, or the ongoing critique of the exclusions of a given regime. While the liberal interpretation falls back on what standpoint theories call the "god trick"—that is, an (imagined) neutral perspective that gives the framework to conflict but is not itself contested—the radical democratic interpretation is more plausible when taking into account standpoint theories. Rancière is a radical democratic reader of Lefort. His conception of democracy, as an ongoing struggle against exclusions by the excluded, is directed against a substantive notion of the people as homogeneous and self-identical. This argument can be further supported by standpoint theory, as the "god trick" not only needs to be avoided from the institutional perspective but also when it comes to political subjectivities. Presupposing identical people in political theory entails a majoritarian conception that leads to the epistemic exclusions of minoritarian perspectives analyzed by standpoint theory.

The privileging of oppressed knowledges is intrinsic to Rancière's aforementioned difference between "police" and "politics." "Police" entails political exclusions rooted in epistemic exclusions targeting specific groups. These can only be countered through the political–epistemological demands of these groups to be included through their assertion of equality. Rancière calls such particular demands for inclusion in the name of equality "politics." Thus, standpoint theory helps to understand the development of a standpoint as the necessary condition for politics (in Rancière's sense). Radical democratic theory, on the other hand, makes clear that such struggles about political epistemology are not confined to the space of science, but are at the core of the political, transcending any given institutional regime. Vis-a-vis standpoint theory, Rancière helps to understand that the struggle for inclusion into "police" has no clear limitations, but can and often needs to transgress given institutionalized forms of political deliberation; for example, in civil disobedience or revolutionary upheavals. Thus, while standpoint theory privileges oppressed knowledges to develop a stronger notion of objectivity, radical democratic theory shows that without significant political protest and change, it is unlikely that such "stronger objectivity" has political effects.

Privileging oppressed knowledges and standpoints is thus pivotal for the further democratization of democracy. How this works concretely in contemporary Western liberal democracies becomes clear in the work of Laclau and Mouffe (2001), who are concerned with how the identity politics of the new social movements can radicalize the democratic revolution by forming new alliances. They analyze the options for leftist politics after it became clear that the traditional Marxist strategy had failed, based, as it was, on an essentialist notion of the working class as a revolutionary subject. The new social movements, which confront various forms of oppression (such as racial or sexual), possess the potential to rejuvenate the radical democratic pursuit of freedom and equality for all; that is, to further democratize democracy. While standpoint theory helps to analyze the epistemic conditions under which such identity political movements can come about, Mouffe and Laclau are key for analyzing how such emancipative politics can become hegemonic. It is only through connecting the different particular projects to a larger one, by so-called "chains of equivalences" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 182), that the hegemony of neoliberalism can be challenged. This entails that the critique of universality that is based on "conventional objectivity" does not mean disposing of universality altogether. Quite the contrary, according to Laclau (2000a, 2000b), politics necessarily entails the universalization of particular demands. Yet, how does emancipatory postfoundationalist universalization differ from its false founda-

tionalist counterpart, and upon which concept of objectivity—if at all—is it anchored? In the next section, I argue that standpoint theory's notion of "stronger objectivity" helps to answer this question.

3 | RADICAL DEMOCRACY AND IDENTITY POLITICS: INSIGHTS FROM STANDPOINT THEORY

3.1 | The lack of consensus orientation in radical democratic theory

Given this systematic equivalence of radical democracy and standpoint theory, their remaining differences can be harnessed productively: standpoint theory helps to refine a plausible radical democratic interpretation of identity politics; radical democracy can learn from standpoint theory that identity politics is not about radical disagreement but intersubjective understanding. That identity politics can be productively interpreted in the framework of radical democracy became clear throughout the discussion of the systematic equivalences between radical democratic theory and standpoint theory. Identity politics is based on the formation of particular standpoints of oppressed groups, and for radical democratic theory, democratization entails the critique of exclusions from such particular standpoints and not from the majoritarian or hegemonic perspective. Thus, following radical democratic theory, identity politics is not a threat to democracy (as universalistic political theorists argue), but necessary for the further democratization of democracy.

However, a critic well versed in the current debates on radical democratic theory might remain unconvinced by this interpretation of identity politics. In these debates, radical democratic theory is criticized for reducing politics to a struggle for power through protest and insurrection, as well as having insufficient concepts of normativity, community, deliberation, consensus, and no account of good political institutions (Arato, 2013; Bergem & Bergem, 2019; Herrmann & Flatscher, 2020; Wiley, 2002). This critique mirrors the ongoing debate around identity politics. It is criticized, much like radical democratic theory, for undermining intersubjectivity and discourse due to its exclusivist power politics; for example, by imposing norms of "political correctness" that prevent further discussion or by excluding participants from debates through "cancel culture." If both radical democratic theory and identity politics share the same problem—the reduction of politics to power that blocks intersubjectivity and reason and might lead to exclusive group-interest politics—a critic of identity politics would have reason to reject the radical democratic interpretation of identity politics as necessary for democratization. For the critic, such a radical democratic interpretation of identity politics would not solve the problem of identity politics dissolving democracy; on the contrary, she would see it as a confirmation of this problem.

To defend the radical democratic approach, and to respond to the problem of differentiating democratizing identity politics from potentially exclusive group-interest politics, I will first reconstruct a rational core of such criticism. The problem is, according to Volk (2018, p. 11), "that radical-democratic thinking overemphasizes one central element of democracy, namely the manifestation of conflict, and falls short in properly grasping the second central element in conceptual terms, namely the postulate of understanding between political opponents." This underdeveloped account of understanding leads to a series of problems, for example, a lack of normative criteria to distinguish between "progressive and regressive forms of political protest" (p. 11), and a tendency toward decisionism instead of normative justifications. The reason for this tendency lies in the critique of universalism and objectivity that I reconstructed above. When the traditional modes of normative theory not only need to fail in their goal to reach universal normativity but also, when the very attempt to reach such justifications leads to the stabilization of hegemony, it is understandable that radical democratic theory tends not to engage with questions of intersubjective justification and draws instead on the given normativity within social movements without further questioning it (Volk, 2018, p. 14). The following critique of radical democratic theory's overemphasis on power could just as well be in a common text criticizing the effects of fundamentalist identity politics: "By overemphasizing the need for confrontation, the engagement with dissenting opinions threatens to degenerate into a mere ritual of self-reassurance and self-stabilization, and the emancipatory political practices within movements are endangered" (Volk, 2018, p. 12).

Such criticism can partly be addressed by pointing to radical democratic theory's support for universal democratic normativity. Lefort (1998) points out that human rights are constitutive of democracy because they claim equality and freedom as universal principles, and Mouffe's (2012) "agonistic democracy" entails a commitment to a shared social bond and the universalist normativity of the democratic tradition. In a similar vein, Rancière (2009, p. 115; 1999) specifies that his concept of politics is not about any particularistic demands but universalizable protest aiming for equal inclusion. Furthermore, Laclau (2000a) is clear that constructing universality through the equivalent articulation of particularity is key for establishing emancipative hegemony. This understanding of politics aims at the opposite of essentialist identities; namely, a "performative construction from below" of identities that "take into account their contingent and negativist nature and [are] cultivating a pluralist and inclusive ethos" (Kempf, 2021, p. 14). However, even on such a charitable reading, it remains unclear how exactly the emancipative chains of equivalence are articulated, and on what basis and by whom it can be decided what counts as democratizing politics in the first place.

In the following section, I will discuss how standpoint theory refines the radical democratic interpretation of identity politics with regard to these problems, accounting for intersubjective understanding and objectivity within political conflict. Thus, this interpretation not only shows that identity politics is crucial for democracy and how it is different from exclusive group-interest politics but also shows how radical democratic theory can be further refined by answering its critics.

3.2 | Exploring intersubjectivity and objectivity through standpoint theory

Standpoint theory helps to better understand how identity politics works toward the democratization of democracy by clarifying that privileging oppressed standpoints does not disable intersubjective understanding, it relies on it. I will elaborate on this in four points: first, the difference between a perspective and a standpoint; second, theories that enable intersubjective understanding as a mediator between particularity and universality; third, democratization as a matter of communication and learning; and fourth, the importance of power politics to bring about reasonable change.[8]

3.2.1 | Perspectives and standpoints

A perspective is a specific viewpoint connected to a social position, whereas a standpoint requires work and development. A standpoint is not "an ascribed position […] that oppressed groups can claim automatically. Rather, a standpoint is an achievement, something for which oppressed groups must struggle" (Harding, 2004a, p. 8). The term is not "simply another word for viewpoint or perspective" (Harding, 2004a, p. 8). While this definition of the term is not generally shared by standpoint theorists, and many use perspective and standpoint synonymously, all standpoint theorists agree with the conceptual difference at stake. Thus, a standpoint is not in any way given but is the result of social knowledge production through intersubjectively shared discourses. The construction of a standpoint requires specific political and cultural techniques and methods. A key component is what MacKinnon (1991, pp. 83–105) calls "consciousness raising": the exchange of experiences between members of oppressed groups—in this case, White middle-class women—that is the necessary condition for the development of critical consciousness among the members of this group. Consciousness-raising is necessary because dominant ideologies can distort the epistemic capabilities of oppressed subjects, blinding them to their own oppression.

MacKinnon does not address a further element essential for standpoint development: the creation of a shared culture within the oppressed groups that facilitates and promotes the development of critical standpoints vis-a-vis hegemony by valuing the particularity of the oppressed group. Collins (1986) shows that Black women resist the oppressive structures they are faced with by "the act of insisting on Black female self-definition [that] validates Black women's power and as human subjects" (p. 17), often cultivating specifically those "aspects of Black female behavior

that are seen as most threatening to white patriarchy" (Collins, 1986, p. 17). Such a culture encourages Black women to "embrace their assertiveness, to value their sassiness, and to continue to use these qualities to survive and transcend the harsh environments that circumscribe so many of Black women's lives" (Collins, 1986, p. 18). Similarly, through their gender performances, gay queens and fairies confront and appropriate the homophobic discourse that labels them as overly feminine (Butler, 2011; Halperin, 2012). Such resistant culture that does not adapt to discrimination and stereotyping but re-appropriates them to amplify the particular identity of the oppressed group; a necessary condition for the development of standpoints. The production of cultural and discursive standpoints is thus at the basis of transformative individual dis-identification that helps overcome confining hegemonic identities (Asenbaum, 2021; Schubert & Schwiertz, 2021).[9] This, in turn, answers the contemporary critique that identity politics fosters a culture of individual assertions of oppression. If statements about one's social position and oppression are indeed merely individual assertions devoid of embeddedness within social standpoints, they are not identity politics.

3.2.2 | Particularity and universality

How can such identity political intersubjectivity be more than a discursive bubble without communicative links to mainstream discourse? How can standpoint particularity be connected to universality? These questions are crucial for two reasons: first, to comprehend how identity politics can steer clear of "positional fundamentalism" (Hark et al., 2020, preface), which may lead to exclusive group-interest politics, and second, to understand consensus orientation and objectivity in the framework of radical democratic theory. The answer is academic truth production. The definition of a standpoint, in contrast to mere perspective, not only involves intersubjective discourse and cultural construction based on the experiences of oppressed groups but also involves research in connection to these minoritarian knowledges. Thus, "a standpoint is an achievement […] *that requires both science and politics* […] to be internally linked, contrary to the standard Liberal, empiricist, Enlightenment view" (Harding, 2004a, p. 8, italics added).

Hartsock's Marxist feminist account emphasizes that standpoints are based on academic theorizing that aims at objectivity, truth, and intersubjectivity: "The vision available to the oppressed […] requires […] *science to see beneath the surface of the social relations* […]. [It] exposes the *real relations* among human beings as inhuman" (Hartsock, 1983, p. 285, italics added). From today's postfoundationalist perspective, such a concept of ideology versus objective truth of real relations raises objections. After all, it is this type of traditional Marxist epistemology against which the radical democratic critique of objectivity is directed because it turned out to be undercomplex and politically exclusionary. Specifically, such a universalist epistemology is put forward in Marxist critiques of identity politics as lacking objective class analysis. The problem of universality and objectivity discussed above can reoccur in standpoint-related thought when it is based on a universalist social theory, such as the orthodox Marxian account of ideology and class struggle that also informs the universalist account of oppression in the Combahee River Collective statement discussed in the introduction. Thus, what is needed is a third way between conventional objectivity (such as in liberalism and Marxism) and a relativism that follows easily from postfoundationalist skepticism.[10]

The concepts of "situated knowledges" and "strong objectivity" are meant to navigate this tension. The key is not only to pluralize knowledge production—which follows from the fact that "only partial perspective promises objective vision" (Haraway, 1988, p. 583)—but also to continuously critically reflect on the construction processes of these situated knowledges and the "instruments of vision [that] mediate standpoints [as] there is no immediate vision from the standpoints of the subjugated" (Haraway, 1988, p. 586). This critical reflection is the opposite of the essentialism that is often associated with identity politics: "The search for such a 'full' and total position is the search for the fetishized perfect subject of oppositional history" (Haraway, 1988, p. 586). Standpoint knowledge achieves stronger objectivity by acknowledging that "subjects/agents of knowledge […] are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory incoherent" (Harding, 1993, p. 65). The critical reflection of multiplicity allows intersubjective understanding and strong objectivity. While standpoint knowledge is constructed from the experiences of specific groups, it aims at universalization: it can and should be universally understood, and it concretizes the universal normative principles

of freedom and equality by making visible where their hegemonic interpretation and practical realization fall short. Harding insists that "women are [not] the unique generators of feminist knowledge. […] Feminist theory, with its rich and contradictory tendencies, has helped us all—women as well as men—to understand how to do" (Haraway, 1988, p. 67f). This is also a crucial clarification of radical democratic theory: emancipatory "chains of equivalence" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 182) can be constructed by the intersubjective work toward strong objectivity. The key difference to exclusive group-interest politics is that they do not put forward objective accounts of social oppression and thereby cannot formulate universalizable demands.

3.2.3 | Communication and learning

The objective knowledge generated through standpoints can and should be learned and known by everyone, independent of their perspectives. This entails a high critical reflexivity regarding the construction of all situated knowledges, especially those of dominant groups. Today's epistemic exclusions largely arise from privileged actors' lack of critical reflexivity. These actors often blend out the situatedness of their own knowledge by referring to the conventional concept of objectivity, which amounts to the "god trick" of an (imagined) neutral position. Therefore, standpoint theory

> challenges members of dominant groups to make themselves "fit" to engage in collaborative, democratic, community enterprises with marginal [*sic*!] peoples. Such a project requires learning to listen attentively to marginalized people; […] it requires critical examination of the dominant institutional beliefs and practices that systematically disadvantage them; it requires critical self-examination to discover how one unwittingly participates in generating disadvantage to them … and more (Harding, 1993, p. 68).

While the feminist and postcolonialist standpoint theories of the 1980s and 1990s focused on conceptualizing the privileged knowledge of oppressed groups to refine the notions of objectivity and intersubjective understanding, a new generation of standpoint theorists have researched the epistemic shortcomings of both the dominant groups and the supporting social institutions in great detail.[11] These works outline the "dominant institutional beliefs and practices" (Harding, 1993, p. 68) rooted in ignorance that must be addressed to facilitate the democratization of democracy through strong objectivity. Fricker (2007) identifies two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice describes the lack of credibility attributed to the speaker by the prejudices of the listeners. It hinders the communication of knowledge, doubt, and critique and thus leads to false beliefs on the listener's side, which they could have corrected if they had listened unbiasedly. Thus, testimonial injustice is not only problematic for the speaker, but it also harms the general epistemic system (Fricker, 2016, p. 162). When testimonial injustice is structural and persistent—for example, through its inscription in social institutions—it can lead to hermeneutical marginalization. Hermeneutical marginalization describes the situation in which some social groups make only a very small contribution to the shared pool of concepts we can use to communicate our social experiences (Fricker, 2016, p. 163). When members of these oppressed groups explain their social experiences to members of dominant groups, their experiences may not be understood because of the lack of shared concepts. The injustice that results from this lack of understanding is what Fricker calls hermeneutical injustice. Hermeneutical injustice is thus the institutionalization of hermeneutical marginalization and testimonial injustice.

The stabilization of racism is a typical case of epistemic injustice in all its different forms. Mills (2007) calls it White ignorance, "a systemic group-based miscognition" (p. 13), entailing "false belief and the absence of true belief" (p. 16) that stems from racist perceptions, white supremacists' ideology, and hegemonic (racist) collective memory narratives. Mills (2007) reiterates the point of earlier standpoint theories that the goal of the critique of knowledge is to build stronger objectivity: "Mapping an epistemology of ignorance is for me a preliminary to reformulating an epistemology that will give us genuine knowledge" (p. 16). Medina (2016, p. 183) further delineates the types of ignorance under-

pinning racism: While racial insensitivity already follows from "basic ignorance," it is mostly strengthened by "active ignorance": an array of resistances against knowing in order to protect systematic ignorance. Medina calls the result "meta-ignorance": "Racially insensitive people of this sort are […] numbed to their own numbness, that is, incapable of reacting to it or even of recognizing how they have become numbed" (Medina, 2016, p. 183, italics in original). Mostly, it comes with a further form of resistance, "active meta-ignorance," that is directed against "epistemic friction" (Medina, 2016, p. 184), that is, the interaction with different perspectives, which could alleviate meta-ignorance.

The focus on the epistemic shortcomings of the social institutions and dominant groups underlines the crucial point for the radical democratic interpretation of identity politics. Identity politics offers intersubjective knowledge about specific kinds of discrimination; it is a matter of strong objective truth, and as such, this knowledge can be understood and productively implemented in democratic deliberation. In contrast, exclusive group-interest politics—especially by right-wing, nationalist, White supremacist, masculinist, and also recently trans-exclusionary radical feminist groups—that put forward identity conceptions that reject the freedom and equality of all are based on active (meta-)ignorance regarding objective discrimination.

3.2.4 | Reason and power

The discussion has shown that identity politics based on standpoints is a matter of reason and knowledge, not of decisionistic power struggles. It is a matter of curing epistemic failures such as epistemic ignorance, insensitivity, and numbness. To this end, it is key to securing equal access to social and political institutions, which generates strong objectivity. In other words, to reach strong objectivity, it is necessary to democratize democracy. However, the epistemic blockades that are iterated through social systems of oppression—racism, sexism, homo- and trans-phobia, and capitalist ideology—prevent, in many cases, reasonable voices from being heard. Thus, the academic mapping and analyzing of the objective shortcomings of the current hegemony, and suggesting more inclusive institutions, is not enough to foster political and epistemological change.[12]

The reason for this is that political institutions are not designed from a reasonable agreement alone, but are the sedimentation of historical power struggles. Radical democratic theory sees protest and civil disobedience from beyond the realms of institutionalized discourse as key for democratization, precisely because of the relative political impotence of reason alone (Celikates, 2016, 2021). To understand this process, we need a historical and dialectical model of power and reason. Existing regimes—"police" in Rancière's terms—are challenged by protests that transgress the hegemonic standards of reasonable deliberation, because these standards are not universalist: they privilege dominant groups through hermeneutic injustice. The protest, while engaging in political power struggles that can take confrontational and non-discursive forms (i.e., rejecting discourse, de-platforming, protest, civil disobedience, uprising, and historically, violence as well), is guided by strong objectivity developed by reason. This reason draws on the universalist normativity of democracy and concretizes it regarding the particular struggle at stake. It is thereby understood and adopted by some members and/or institutions of social hegemony. This is more likely when identity politics projects manage to form alliances through "chains of equivalence" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 182).

Through a combination of power and reason, the oppressed standpoint can slowly inscribe itself into hegemonic knowledge and the institutions that uphold it (the "police") and correct its shortcomings. Thus, the particularist critique can lead to a fuller realization of the universal democratic demands of freedom and equality within social and political institutions. When minoritarian discourses have already reached some wider social support and understanding but are still essentially contested, as in most contemporary liberal Western democracies, the power politics often takes the form of redistributing access to institutions and discourses, such as through affirmative action programs, diversity quota, or the de-platforming of representatives of dominant discourse, commonly called "cancel culture." These mechanisms are needed to create epistemic friction despite the resistance against it by actively ignorant subjects, as an "insensitive individual will need external help" (Medina, 2016, p. 184f.). This "help" is a matter of power rather than just reason, as reason alone is of limited use, precisely because of the epistemic limitations the privileged actors suf-

fer. Nevertheless, it is key that these power politics cannot work without being backed up by reason; they must lead to higher standards of rationality that refine and concretize universalist democratic principles. They only find support among some members of the dominant groups if they are reasonable, if they (implicitly or explicitly) refer to the shared pool of universalist democratic commitments, and if they are aimed at intersubjective understanding. Celikates (2019) describes moral progress in a similar vein: as a result of violent protest that is being reclaimed by (dominant) reason. The history of normative reason is often written after the fact of violent uprising as a history of reasonable learning that is not intrinsically violent, but merely discursive. This ideology of moral progress covers up past violence to make today's dominant groups look better—attributing to them more normative and progressive agency than they actually had—with the overall aim of limiting future violence.

Where such development is still at its beginning, critics of identity politics can get away with demanding inclusive deliberation while systematically disregarding deliberative standards themselves. They thereby often actively ignore the social theories of oppression that have been developed and are available for everyone with sufficient consensus orientation; that is, the will to expose oneself to epistemic friction to overcome one's own ignorance.

4 | CONCLUSION

The radical democratic and standpoint theoretical account of identity politics that I propose shows that particularistic identity politics is necessary for the democratization of democracy. Through the communicative disruption of neutrality, identity politics reconstitutes the space for deliberation. This is a matter of both reason and power, as strong objectivity produces intersubjectively understandable knowledge about social oppression, which nevertheless often requires force—such as protest, uprising, and de-platforming—to break through structures of epistemic ignorance.

As a universally inclusive order is impossible and concrete interpretations of reason will continue to be contested, democratization is a dynamic process that will not come to a halt. Therefore, the tension between the two poles of particularity and universality, and respectively, power and reason, cannot be resolved. The ongoing oscillation between particularism and universalism is a necessary feature of democratization through identity politics. Political theory needs to account for it instead of attempting to resolve it by a reduction to universalism—as in today's critics of identity politics—or by a reduction to particularism, as the emphasis on contingency and power in radical democratic theory could prima facie imply.

Of course, not all types of identity politics are equally democratizing. The conception is thus not a carte blanche for every practice of identity politics. While nationalist, right wing, or trans-exclusionary radical feminist demands can be categorized as exclusive group-interest politics that defy democratic universalism, in other cases the differentiation between democratizing identity politics and exclusive group-interest politics is more contested. This, however, is not a problem for the radical democratic account, but rather confirms it. To conceptualize identity politics as an oscillation between particularism and universalism already implies that struggles within identity politics over what is democratizing will continue, and that specific identity political practices might turn out to be wrong. Much of the rich theoretical debate around identity politics (see Introduction), which is part of identity political reason, deals with the problem of how to differentiate exclusive from emancipative forms of identity politics. The normativity, articulated by the radical democratic and standpoint theoretical account of identity politics, confirms and refines these identity political discussions: identity politics is democratizing if it works toward equality and freedom for all, which entails working toward intersectionality and inclusivity instead of naturalizing and essentialist accounts within identity political projects. Nevertheless, the pressing problem of contemporary politics is not the sometimes-difficult evaluation of specific identity political practices, but the universalist rejection of identity politics as a whole.

The first step for a political theory of identity politics is to make clear that identity politics, in general, is necessary for democratization, which I have attempted to do. This allows for further inquiries into the democratizing potential of different forms of identity politics. While such inquiries are needed in order to not fall back on the side of particularity by simply supporting all identity politics without differentiation—that is, without critique through reason—it

also risks falling back into a universalist critique. Defining narrowly what democratizing identity politics has to look like implies rejecting the privileging of particular knowledges by judging them through a universalist political theory. It would disregard the key insight of the radical democratic and standpoint theoretical approach to identity politics: that the normative democratic principles of equality and freedom need continuous actualization and concretizing through identity political practice. In other words, further research on different forms of identity politics needs to account for the ongoing oscillation between particularism and universalism. This means to take seriously that identity political knowledges might be able to reach a "stronger objectivity" than hegemonic knowledge and to exert epistemic modesty by taking into account one's own entanglement in this hegemonic knowledge.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Open access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

ORCID

Karsten Schubert https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6322-3370

ENDNOTES

[1] See also the recent analysis of the universalism in liberal critiques of identity politics by MacLellan (2021), who interprets identity politics as a democratic counter-conduct against such false universalism.

[2] Bickford (1997) differentiates three tropes in leftist anti-identity politics, which all share a critique of standpoint fundamentalism: resentment, balkanization or tribalization, and regulation. Resentment, which is criticized by Brown (1995), is "invested not just in its own pain, but in its purity and powerlessness," and this moral purity "eliminates the possibilities of democratic disagreement" (Bickford, 1997, p. 115). Balkanization refers to a focus on group differences that inhibits commonality and dialogue, and regulation refers to exclusions due to understanding identities as fixed and essentialized, which prevents criticism. Bickford shows how these critiques employ a false universalism that privileges "the perspectives of the powerful" (117). Táíwò (2022), who is similarly invested in a universalist conception of class struggle, recently criticized the focus of identity politics on epistemological standpoints as "deference politics" (p. 68f.) that only redistributes power within given rooms, instead of radically transforming systems of power.

[3] I engage with the agonistic rather than the autonomous Marxist or anarchist tradition of radical democracy, as these do not focus on the relation between particularity and universality. Anarchist thinkers, such as Newman (2010), put forward universalist anti-statist politics and therefore use similar criticisms of identity politics to those described above. Furthermore, while the leading representatives of the autonomous tradition, such as Hardt and Negri (2009, pp. 325–344), see identity politics as an early step in the formation of the so-called "multitude," their revolutionary idealism aims at overcoming identity politics, leaving the aspect of power (agonistically understood) underdeveloped.

[4] A central question of philosophy, and more specifically, political theory, is whether the (political) world is fundamentally structured by reasonable (normative and universal) principles or by enduring domination through power, that is, by the "law of the strongest" as expressed by Thrasymachus in Plato's Republic. Reason (Vernunft, logos, ratio, intellectus, raison) is consequently a fundamental, complex, and much-discussed concept in philosophy, denoting, in its most general form, the higher human capacity to attain knowledge through reflection, independent of sensory perception (Gibbons, 2015, pp. 3152–3166; Wildfeuer, 2011). Despite the complexity of "reason," resulting from over 2000 years of continuous reflection (Ritter et al., 2007, Vernunft), the concept is more narrowly defined than "power," and not all schools of the concept of power (Dowding, 2011; Ritter et al., 2007; Röttgers, 2011) lead to a tension between power and reason. In the contemporary field of political theory, Jürgen Habermas and the Kantian tradition of deliberative democratic theory exemplify the pole of reason, while Michel Foucault and the Nietzschean tradition—of analyzing power relations and hegemonies—stand for the pole of power. Understood more broadly, the opposition of reason and power in contemporary political theory spans across approaches that engage in normative ideal theory against the background of analytic philosophy and those that engage in critical power analyses against the background of continental philosophy (Arnold, 2020). Reason is linked with universality because it is about truth that is independent of particular standpoints. Power is linked with particularity, as theories of power are critical of universal reason. While agonistic radical democratic theories are anchored—within this schematic mapping of political theory—in the pole of power, I will develop an account of the oscillation between power and reason by refining radical democratic theories with standpoint theories.

[5] I am using the plural of "knowledge," following Haraway (1988), to emphasize the plurality and particularity of knowledge systems.

[6] I draw mainly on the tradition of feminist standpoint theory (Anderson, 2019; Harding, 2004c) and the new generation of standpoint theory focusing on epistemic injustices and ignorances (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013; Mills, 2007). This newer

body of work is usually not called "standpoint theory." It is nevertheless justified to speak of a new generation of standpoint theory because of the continuous problematization of the entanglement of politics and epistemology (see also Toole, 2019).

[7] The tradition of Critical Theory offers further resources for a critique of the ideology of objectivity (Horkheimer, 1937; Jaeggi, 2009). However, from the perspective of radical democracy and standpoint theory, Critical Theory has itself been criticized for relying on an objectivist notion of undistorted and unideological truth. While newer works in Critical Theory that deal with those charges offer promising resources to connect classic Critical Theory with postfoundationalist approaches (Allen, 2008, 2016), discussing their implication for identity politics, radical democratic theory and standpoint theory requires an article in its own right.

[8] An earlier and shorter version of parts of this section's material has been previously published in Schubert (2022).

[9] Standpoint theory thus helps to specify the epistemological and social theoretical basis of the "politics of becoming" (Asenbaum, 2021) and the necessary entanglement of collective and individual transformation it entails.

[10] This problem is similar to the one of democratic judgment taken up by Zerilli (2016), compare Landemore et al. (2018).

[11] Key works of this new generation of standpoint theory are Fricker's (2007) work on epistemic injustice, Mills' (1997, 2007) work on White ignorance, as well as Medina's (2013) work on epistemic resistance (see also the collected volumes, Tuana & Sullivan (2007), and Peels & Blaauw (2016). For the relation between the two generations of standpoint theories, see Toole (2019).

[12] To state that this is not enough does not mean that it is in vain. On the contrary, there is extremely valuable work in political theory that develops proposals for institutional reform to include minoritarian voices; for example, Young (2000). The radical democratic framework I propose here is not meant to replace such works but to better account for the resistance against such proposals and the strategies to implement them.

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How to cite this article: Schubert, K. (2023). Identity politics and the democratization of democracy: Oscillations between power and reason in radical democratic and standpoint theory. *Constellations*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12715

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Karsten Schubert is an Associate Fellow in Political Theory at Humboldt University Berlin. His work focuses on contemporary critical political theory and social philosophy, covering a range of topics including radical democracy, legal critique, Michel Foucault's thinking, biopolitics, queer and gay theory, as well as intersectionality. Currently, his research is situated at the intersection of radical democratic thought and identity politics. Dr. Schubert earned his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Leipzig. His first book, 'Freedom as Critique: Social Philosophy after Foucault,' was published in 2018 in German by transcript. For more texts, videos, and current information, visit www.karstenschubert.net.