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Feminist Standpoint Theory vs. the Identitarian Ideology of the New Right: A Critical Comparison

Johannes Steizinger and Natalie Alana Ashton

Abstract: The term 'identity politics' is used to refer to a wide range of political movements. In this paper, we look at the theoretical ideas underpinning two strongly, mutually opposed forms of identity politics, and identify some crucial differences between them. We critically compare the identitarian ideology of the New Right with feminist standpoint theory, focusing on two issues: relativism and essentialism. In carrying out this critical comparison we illuminate under-theorized aspects of both new right identitarianism and standpoint theory; demonstrate how the two are distinct; reveal the depth and pervasiveness of the new right ideology's flaws; and show what a coherent left-wing identity politics could look like.

Keywords: identity politics, far-right ideology, feminist standpoint theory, relativism, essentialism

1. Introduction

The term ‘identity politics’ is used to refer to a wide range of political movements. Most basically, it refers to political movements which organise themselves, in one way or another, around a particular social identity. It was first popularised by groups such as the Combahee River Collective to carve out space for forms of political organisation informed by the experiences of, and responding to the material needs of, black women. It’s now increasingly—and disparagingly—used to refer to representationalist movements (or to individual representationalist invocations) which encourage power to be transferred to members of certain social groups, (for example Hillary Clinton, who hoped to be the first female president of the United States) with only minimal consideration given to their experiences or their political commitments. If movements with such different political mechanisms are thoughtlessly grouped together under a single label, there's a risk that they will all be tarred with the same brush. Those which make substantive, nuanced, and coherent points may be dismissed alongside those which are simplistic and incoherent. (See Taiwo 2020 for a discussion of how powerful groups have used this to their advantage). In this paper, we look at the theoretical ideas underpinning two strongly, mutually opposed forms of identity politics, and identify some crucial differences between them.

The first movement we’ll discuss is part of the radical right, which has been on the rise for some time across the world.[1] Radical right-wing activists have pursued an ideological renewal of right-wing politics which focuses on reclaiming an allegedly suppressed “ethnocultural identity” of white people, drawing political and, often, also epistemological consequences from the belief that the ethnocultural affiliation shapes a person’s character. This intellectual effort of the so-called New Right started in France in the late 1960s, has

[1] For a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon see Rydgren 2018.

spread across Europe in recent decades, and has shaped the emergence of the so-called Alt-Right (short for "alternative right") in the US.[2] We will refer to the entire movement as the New Right (NR) and its proponents as *identitarians*, a characterization that reflects the central role of identity claims for its ideology.

The second movement, or set of movements, we're interested in are those organising around various identities on the political left. One of the most prominent recent examples is the Black Lives Matter movement, which highlights institutionalised discrimination—usually physical violence and, in particular, police brutality—against black people. Like the NR groups already mentioned, these left-wing groups organising around other identities also often draw epistemological conclusions about the particular importance of their own understanding. For example the slogan "Nothing About Us Without Us", used by disability rights activists to emphasise the importance of disabled people's involvement in shaping policies that affect them, neatly captures the idea that disabled people have crucial knowledge of what social and political interventions they need.[3] A plausible theoretical basis for such activities is feminist standpoint theory—a view within feminist epistemology which highlights the epistemic advantages afforded to groups who experience systematic social disadvantages.

This kind of organisation around marginalised identities is nothing new. The Suffragettes fought for "Votes for Women" in Britain in the 1900s, and the earliest American Civil Rights movement began in the 1800s. But the current reception to, and public understanding of,

[2] For political analyses of these developments see, e.g., Bar-On 2007; 2013; Camus and Lebourg 2017; Hawley 2017; Mammone 2015; Minkenberg 2000; Shekhovtsov 2018; Woods 2007.
[3] The slogan has gained prominence in disability communities since being used as the title of a book by disability scholar James Charlton (2000), but has a long history in central and eastern European political organizing.

these movements, warrants philosophical attention. These left-wing groups are concerned with structural oppression - they object to laws and other institutions which actively cause them physical and material harm. While NR identitarians claim that the ethnocultural identity they embrace is politically suppressed, there are, as we will show, significant differences between their conceptualizations of social identity and oppression. But, despite this, left-wing groups are often described by the media and perceived by the public as engaging in much the same political strategies as, and having a very similar theoretical basis to, the New Right. This impression is reinforced by rhetorical strategies of the NR—key proponents of the radical right have emphasized their intellectual debt to left-wing theories of identity from the beginning, suggesting a blurring of political boundaries (e.g., Benoist 2014). Some scholars have even suggested that certain forms of left-wing identity politics have, unintentionally, set the ground for the ideological renewal of the radical right.[4] The distinction between left-wing and right-wing identity politics therefore requires careful philosophical analysis.

Our paper examines the two theories that can be seen as philosophical attempts to ground identity politics: NR identitarianism, and standpoint theory. Both of these theories develop concepts of social identity, combining politics and epistemology. While standpoint theory is primarily an epistemological endeavour within academic philosophy which has political motivations, NR identitarianism is a political enterprise whose authors emphasize the epistemological consequences of their commitments. Their usage of social identities is thus similar enough to be subject to a critical comparison combining conceptual analysis and philosophical critique.

[4] See, e.g., Spektorowski 2012 who argues that NR identitarianism draws an exclusionist conclusion from the left-wing politics of multicultural recognition.

To be clear, we don't endorse the equivocation between NR and standpoint theory, or between political movements on the right and left: this paper aims to show why such equivocations are wrong. But we don't think the mistake is so obvious as to dismiss out of hand, either. The surface similarities between these very different movements are sufficient to make sincere misconceptions understandable, and strategic misdirection easy. As such, a clear, philosophical analysis which straightens out the key differences will be valuable. We carry out such an analysis in this paper. In doing so we leave aside questions about the morality and the efficacy of these strategies. Instead we focus on whether they are theoretically coherent. We do this in three steps.

First, we analyse the central NR concept "ethnocultural identity" (section 2). We explore the key writings of the NR's main representatives in France (Alain de Benoist and Guillaume Faye) and the US (Richard Spencer and Jared Taylor), as well as representative articles from NR media outlets such as the German journal Sezession (edited by Götz Kubitschek), the website of Counter-Currents Publishing (edited by Greg Johnson) and the website altright.com (edited by Richard Spencer).[5] We believe these sources are crucial for developing a critical understanding of the identitarian ideology of the NR, but want to alert readers to the fact that we reference offensive claims these sources make about certain ethnic and racial groups.

Then, we introduce standpoint theory, a branch of feminist epistemology which also puts identity at its core (section 3). This comparison will seem surprising—even problematic—to

[5] Our selection of key thinkers of the NR largely follows Sedgwick's (2019b: XIII f.) criteria for his selection of representative thinkers of the far-right. We have chosen authors who are widely read in NR circles, are promoted in influential media outlets of the NR (esp. websites such as Counter-Currents Publishing), and are discussed as shaping the ideology of the NR in the scholarly literature. Note that the chapters in Sedgwick (2019a) introduce past and present key thinkers of the radical right, yet the authors abstain deliberately from a critique of their beliefs (Sedgwick 2019b: XV).

some, but we think it is helpful for clarifying both views and showing how they are in fact fundamentally different. In this section we describe the motivations and main features of standpoint theory, and make explicit two central features that it (apparently) has in common with identitarianism. Standpoint theory and identitarianism have both been described as rejecting epistemic absolutism in favour of socialised conceptions of knowledge, and of believing that a particular identity's approach to knowledge is superior to those of other identities.

Thirdly, we discuss common criticisms of the two views—each faces an accusation of relativism and an accusation of essentialism—and explore the scope for proponents of each view to respond to these (section 4). We show that in both cases there are responses available to the standpoint theorists which clarify or otherwise enhance their view, whilst identitarians are unable to coherently endorse analogous responses as these would be in tension with some of their central commitments.

Having shown that standpoint theory can avoid both problems, we draw out some conclusions for contemporary identity politics. First, our argument suggests that there's a fundamental difference between the theoretical bases of identity politics used by those on the right and left of the political spectrum. Unlike new right identitarianism, standpoint theory offers the potential for a coherent left-wing identity politics. And its lessons cannot be embraced by proponents of right-wing politics, unless they drastically change their views to the point that they are unrecognisable. Our argument thus results in a philosophical critique of identitarianism, which is a unique contribution to the recent literature focusing on the

political aspects of New Right ideology.[6] Second, we've highlighted a crucial limitation of left-wing identity politics. Although standpoint theory offers the potential for a coherent view, this potential will only be fulfilled by a left-wing identity politics which makes restricted claims about epistemic advantage of different groups, and which eschews essentialism. Any political ideology which makes unrestricted claims about the epistemic advantage of certain groups, or which depends on essentialist conceptions of culture and identity, should be subject to significant scrutiny, regardless of whether it is left or right wing.

2. The Identitarian Ideology of the New Right

Identity politics is at the core of the NR. Spencer describes the "rediscovery" of a white European identity in the US as the central goal of his political agenda: "I want us, the whole civilization, to become itself." (Spencer 2014 cited in Hawley 2017: 64)[7] Identitarians thus often focus on the question of "who we are" (Spencer 2015).[8] Spencer explicitly demands a "white consciousness" that unites all people with European roots in the US. The focus on reclaiming an alleged ethnocultural identity of white Europeans rests on the belief that collective self-consciousness is a prerequisite of political and moral agency. Identitarians claim that self-conscious communities are the true subjects of political life and the ultimate source of all values. Moreover, belonging to a certain community is regarded as the foundation of a person's identity. Identitarians emphasize that developing individual self-

[6] The main debate about the NR concerns its political character: several authors argue that the NR constitutes a new form of fascism (e.g., Anton-Mellon 2013; Bar-On 2007; Copsey 2018; Griffin 2000; Mammone 2015). Other commentators judge more cautiously, emphasizing that the NR is only vaguely connected with historical forms of fascism (e.g. Camus and Lebourg 2017; Minkenberg 2000). Pierre-André Taguieff argues that the ideology of the NR has developed from its early Nazi legacy (Taguieff 1981) to a "differentialist racism" that should not be identified with fascism (Taguieff 1993b; 2001; for a similar evaluation see Bastow 2002). Sedgwick (2019b) does not see a strong link between NR and fascism. He identifies fascism with fascist parties and remarks that contemporary proponents of the radical right have no intent to reestablish the Nazi party (Sedgwick 2019b, XIV).

[7] See also e.g. Faye 2016: 366 f.

[8] See also e.g. de Benoist and Champetier 2012: 17.

consciousness depends on knowing your collective roots. They characterize ethnocultural self-discovery as the revelation of a person's true self and identify the ignorance or suppression of one's communal bonds with alienation and forlornness (e.g. de Benoist and Champetier 2012: 19-21). Being white is construed as an essential aspect of a person's identity that shapes that person's character and circumscribes its capacities. Hence, the ethnocultural identity characterizes the entire person and the community is prioritized over the individual. Note that identitarians explicitly draw epistemic conclusions from the priority of community, deriving a kind of social dependence of knowledge from its normative authority, as we will show below.

Identitarians claim that white identity is currently suppressed. They construct white people with European roots as an oppressed group that suffers from the alleged prejudices of multicultural societies. On their view, multiculturalism is an ideology that encourages all other ethnocultural groups to embrace themselves. Only white people are not allowed to lobby for their group interest and to show pride in the great deeds of their ancestors [9]Anti-discriminatory initiatives such as political correctness or affirmative action are presented as means to suppress white aspirations. Identitarians argue that white people are forced to forget their identity and to submit to the demands of other ethnocultural groups. They thus call for an ethnic "reawakening" that ends the "ethnomasochism" of white people (Faye 2010: 81; 2011: 134; see also e.g. Sellner 2016). This "rebirth" of white consciousness is depicted as a solution to the social and economic crises of today's world. Humanity can only flourish when it accepts its "ethnocultural" formation. As de Benoist put it in the 1970s: "We have the right to be for Black Power, but on the condition of simultaneously being in favor of White Power, Yellow Power and Red Power." (de Benoist cited in Bar-On 2014: 140) Identitarians can

[9] See e.g. Spencer 2016, 2017; Faye 2016, 250 f.; Murray 2016; Sellner 2016.

disagree on what they consider as the actual source of the ethnocultural identities they promote. De Benoist, for instance, has moved on to the vision of a cultural renaissance of Europe based on the authentic identities of its allegedly organic ethno-regions, submitting that the latter are currently suppressed by the egalitarian agenda of the liberal nation state (for a detailed analysis see Spektorowski 2016). But regardless of the source, they agree that there are distinct ethnocultural identities that shape who we are.

In the following, we will examine the tenets of the identitarian ideology of the NR in more detail, outlining two of its basic tendencies. We focus on the contributions of de Benoist and Faye, since their views draw typical conclusions from the premises of far-right ethnonationalism. The ideology of the NR is rooted in the radical right of the early twentieth century and it is thus not surprising that similar views and tensions can be found in the völkisch particularism of figures associated with the so-called Conservative Revolution.[10] While the ideological affinities to radical right-wing thinkers of the Weimar Republic such as Carl Schmitt, Oswald Spengler, or Ernst Ernst Jünger are obvious, proponents of the New Right also emphasize their intellectual debt to communitarian thinkers of the so-called New Left such as Charles Taylor.[11] It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the genealogy of the identitarian ideology of the NR and to critically assess its relation to other communitarian views from a philosophical point of view. We focus on the key commitments of far-right thinkers that are relevant for comparing their outlook with current forms of left-wing identity politics that can be informed by standpoint theory.

[10] See, e.g., the discussion of the issue of relativism in the thought of Ernst Krieck and Alfred Baeumler in Steizinger 2019.
[11] For the political debate on the New Right and the New Left see, e.g., Bastow 2002; Taguieff 1993a; 2001; Minkenberg 2000.

a. The essentialist foundation of identitarianism

Identitarians argue that their political stance is rooted in anthropology and thus advance a concept of human nature that grounds their identity politics.[12] They hold that humanity consists of a plurality of clearly demarcated and internally uniform ethnocultural groups with particular characteristics. These characteristics are the essential features of the group and make it the particular group that it is. This particularist view is called "ethnopluralism", and it provides an essentialist foundation of social identities.

The distinct character of an ethnocultural group rests on four aspects: *First*, ethnocultural groups have a biological basis. They are specified as "organic communities" to which their members belong by birth.[13] The family is frequently presented as the biological source of ethnocultural communities. Benoit (1999: 13) defines the extended family as the origin of communal life. Some authors, especially in the US, emphasize the biological foundation of human groups. They insist on the significance of race for understanding humanity and define their position as "race realism."[14]

Second, the members of a community share a way of life. Their communal life is characterized by specific cultural practices and moral values. Ethnocultural communities also possess common spiritual goods. This cultural aspect of ethnopluralism is emphasized by European authors in particular. They often avoid the term race and consider "civilizations" as the broadest division of humanity.[15]

[12] De Benoist and Champetier 2012: 17 f.; Faye 2010: 75; 2016: 242 ff.; Taylor 2011; Clark 2016.
[13] See e.g. Sommerfeld 2018.
[14] Spencer 2017; Clark 2016; Taylor 2011; Faye 2010; 2011; 2016.
[15] See e.g. de Benoist 2011a; 2011b; de Benoist and Champetier 2012; Sommerfeld 2018; see also Faye 2011: 107 f.

Third, communities are characterized by a common history and cultural heritage. History is usually understood as the struggle for the realization of the particularity of communities. To fulfill this task is the common destiny of the members of an ethnocultural community.[16] Moreover, identitarians emphasize the necessity of historical continuity for the survival of a particular community. To preserve its distinct character, cultural traditions have to be passed on from generation to generation without significant changes. Identitarians often invoke mythical beginnings or supposedly glorious chapters of a community's past. They consider collective memory as an important aspect of identity building.[17]

Fourth, ethnocultural communities are characterized as socially and culturally homogenous groups. The individual has to conform to the social standards and cultural practices of the community she lives in. The often cited "right to difference" only applies to the relationship between groups.[18] Identitarians thus embrace social and cultural conformism. They also regard social homogeneity as a prerequisite of solidarity and, hence, advocate "ethnic nepotism": An ethnocultural community cares for its native members, and only for them.[19] The preference of the in-group secures the survival of the particular community. This conviction is based on biologistic arguments (e.g. the "genetic similarity theory" in Taylor 2011) or on culturalist arguments (e.g. mutual understanding is only possible, if one belongs to the same cultural context). Moreover, identitarians believe that social cohesion depends on the ethnic and cultural homogeneity of a group. They argue that social diversity causes most societal conflicts and thus leads to the dissolution of communities. This conviction grounds the ubiquitous attacks on multicultural societies. Identitarians consider "mixed cultures" as "failing cultures", suggesting that multicultural societies are worn down by the conflicts

[16] Faye 2011: 116; Sellner 2016; Sommerfeld 2018.
[17] Sellner 2016; Faye 2011: 189 f., 255 f.; de Benoist and Champetier 2012.
[18] See e.g. Faye 2011: 240.
[19] See e.g. Faye 2016: 372.

between its different communities. On this view, cultures can only flourish when they remain by themselves. The belief in "cultural isolationism" (Faye 2016: 330) grounds the most important political demand of the radical right: Identitarians call for preserving and creating ethnically and culturally homogeneous communities. They want to save the "white identity" of Europe by terminating immigration and deporting migrants from non-European countries.[20] In the US, identitarians promote the establishment of a "white ethno-state" that safeguards the European roots of the American population (Spencer 2017; Taylor 2011). Put briefly, ethnocultural purity is the imperative of identitarian politics, and this political demand directly follows from the essentialist concept of social identity.

The call for purity reveals the agonistic understanding of the relationship between ethnocultures. Identitarians believe that each ethnoculture is compelled to realize itself and that their encounter leads to conflict with rivals and enemies. The results of these struggles show the inequality of the different cultures. The distinction between rivals and enemies is crucial: Communities from the same "ethnic bloc" are akin to each other and only rival for the best specific realization of a similar way of life. Members of the same civilization may understand each other and cooperate with each other, despite their more or less significant differences. Yet different civilizations give rise to incompatible ways of life and, hence, deeply conflicting cultures. The confrontation with communities from other "ethnic blocs" is thus construed as a clash that threatens the collective identity of a community. Consequently, identitarianism is characterized by a relativistic tendency, since it insists on the distinct character of all ethnocultures, also against universal demands.

[20] See e.g. Faye 2010; 2016.

b. The relativistic tendency

The relativistic tendency of the ideology of the NR is spelled out by de Benoist's contributions in particular on which we thus concentrate in the following. Benoist advances a radical critique of universalism, focusing on its liberal currents. He characterizes globalization as a homogenizing and leveling force that eradicates the distinct identities of all ethnocultures, developing a critique of capitalism that condemns the imperialism of the Western way of life. Attacking the "ideology of human rights" in particular, he dismisses their introduction as nothing but a "'humanitarian' dress" of the "planetary extension of the market" (Benoist 2011a: 75 f.). De Benoist argues that values are always bound to the particular ethnocultural context in which they emerge and remain effective. Since humanity consists of a plurality of incommensurable ethnocultures, there can be no universal values. De Benoist concludes that universal claims abstract from the concrete reality of humanity and are thus false. Moreover he regards universal concepts of humanity as deceitful fictions, the "ideology of human rights" being a case in point: Announced as universal values, they indeed represent the Western way of life and, hence, "impose a particular moral norm on all people" (de Benoist 2011a: 23). For de Benoist, the universal aspiration of human rights is thus tantamount to their imperialistic character (de Benoist 2011a: 77). While de Benoist contrasts ethnocultural particularism with the universalism of the humanist tradition—his "principle enemy" (de Benoist 2014: 144)—, other identitarians use the same contrast to criticize Islam. They characterize Islam as universalist doctrine whose "imperialistic force" destroys the particular ways of life that are characteristic for the peoples of the European civilization (Faye 2016).

De Benoist advances a philosophical defense of the strict anti-universalism of the identitarian ideology, suggesting that all ethnocultures respond differently to the challenges of life (de

Benoist 2011a: 78 f.; de Benoist and Champetier 2012: 19). Since our evaluative standards depend on the ethnocultural contexts in which they emerge, there is no overarching perspective from which the different ways of life can be assessed (de Benoist 2011a: 79). De Benoist and Champetier (2012: 33 f.) thus abstain from ranking ethnocultures and distinguish their "differentialist" approach from racist hierarchies. They refer to Herder's well-known phrase that "all cultures have their own centre of gravity" (de Benoist and Champetier 2012: 19) to characterize their position. Similarly, de Benoist claimed in an early interview that "there is no superior race. All races are superior and each of them has its own genius" (de Benoist 1974 cited in Camus 2019: 78).[21] De Benoist nevertheless insists that his ethnopluralism does not amount to a relativist position. He believes that he can block the relativistic consequences of his view by allowing for the criticism of both one's own culture and other cultures, explicitly rejecting relativism as an "untenable position" (de Benoist 2011a: 78; see also 21 f.; de Benoist and Champetier 2012: 18, 25). Discussing this issue explicitly in epistemic terms, de Benoist dismisses the idea of an "abstract truth" which is "metaphysically established", on the one hand (de Benoist 2017a: 13). He derives a conventionalist concept of knowledge from its social embeddedness in which the justification of a belief depends on the subjectivity of a concrete community. Yet, on the other hand, de Benoist rejects the egalitarian consequence that "all opinions have equal value", insisting on the need for "having the means to *discriminate* or to *decide*" (de Benoist 2017a: 13) against "contemporary relativism" (de Benoist 2017b: XXIII). Envisaging the epistemic field as a kind of power struggle, he argues that the concrete manifestation of a worldview in history constitutes a factual normativity, facilitating "a new objectivity from a subjectivity that knows itself as such" (de Benoist 2017a: 15). The discerning principle de Benoist introduces

[21] Taguieff (1993a) and Camus (2019: 76-78) highlight the relativistic aspects of de Benoist's views, yet focus on their political consequences.

here is best summarized in his early distinction of the cultural potential of different races. Since the "European race is not the absolute superior race" but "only the most apt to progress", its distinctiveness manifests in the actual course of history (De Benoist cited in Spektorowski 2016: 126).

c. The supremacist reply

Yet several fellow identitarians reject de Benoist's version of ethnopluralism because of its relativistic tendencies. Faye (2010, 35 f.; 2016: 325 ff., 367–70) in particular attacks de Benoist for his cultural relativism, representing a supremacist position within the NR argues that there are objective criteria to assess the achievements of different ethnocultures. Faye's own evaluation has clear results: He believes in the cultural superiority of the European civilization and calls for its political affirmation. This "ethnocentric" (Faye 2016: 324; see also 2011: 134 f.) version of ethnocultural particularism is shared by most identitarians from the US.[22] These supremacist identitarians claim that the most advanced forms of civilization were developed by European ethnocultures. Gifted with a special "Faustian character", white Europeans are determined to become creators, inventors, and conquerors (Faye 2010: 71).[23] Here cultural creativity constitutes a distinctive feature of a certain ethnocultural family and grounds its specific cultural achievements. Faye characterizes, for instance, "techno-science" as the "Faustian spirit in action" (Faye 2010: 48) and, thus, as "a creation of European civilization" (2011: 252). He (2016: 331 f.) emphasizes that the European civilization was established without any foreign input, concluding that Europe should thus embrace the cultural "auto-centrism" (330) that is facilitated by its creative character.

[22] See e.g. Taylor 2011; Spencer 2016; 2017; Leonard 2018.
[23] See also Faye 2016, 325 ff.; Taylor 2011, 325 f.; Spencer 2016; Leonard 2018.

The belief in the cultural superiority of "white Europe" is often accompanied by overt racism. Leonard (2018) claims that "races" differ not so much regarding "individual traits" such as intelligence, but in their "overall character." They develop different attitudes to the world that give their "individual traits […] quality and meaning." Leonard (2018) applies this thought to the epistemic realm: He believes that logic, reason, and dialectics are cultivated only among European cultures. Truth is thus characterized as a distinct value of the "white race", while other races lack the concern for truth and are thus culturally inferior. Leonard (2018) claims that "black people" confuse truth with desire and describes them as natural liars. "Jews" are characterized as bright but accused of using their intelligence only for subjective interests.[24] Put briefly, Leonard (2018) ranks races according to their alleged epistemic attitude to the world, arguing for the epistemic superiority of white Europeans. He thus advocates a radically socialized and politicized concept of knowledge. Only certain groups of people possess the cultural characteristics that enable them to pursue and understand truth. On such a view, knowledge is not universal, but shaped by the social contexts we belong to. Since ethnocultural communities are defined as the source of epistemic values, there is no neutral epistemic perspective. Remember that a person's identity is rooted in its membership to a certain ethnocultural community whose character also shapes its (epistemic) capacities.

Our analysis shows that the identitarian ideology of the NR rests on specific assumptions about humanity from which its proponents draw cultural, political, psychological, and epistemic conclusions. Identitarians carve the world up into unified groups whose members share a particular identity, naturalizing social differences by referring to a collective essence

[24] Leonard (2018) thus revives the old anti-Semitic stereotype of an alleged Jewish egoism. Note, however, that anti-Semitism is controversial in the NR (e.g. Clark 2016, Murray 2016).

that combines biological and cultural characteristics.[25] They reject universalist concepts of humanity and insist on the essential differences between human ethnocultures. However this anthropological particularism gives rise to different interpretations of the inequality of the distinctive ethnocultures: Some (e.g. Benoist) extrapolate from the deep distance between different forms of human life to their incommensurability. Others (e.g. Faye) reject this relativist conclusion and insist on the superiority of certain ethnocultures. These supremacists often justify their belief in the superiority of the European civilization by referring to cultural achievements and assume a cultural as well as epistemic superiority of white Europeans. For identitarians, allegedly culturally superior groups are also epistemically superior. This epistemic superiority thesis is an important feature of the identitarian ideology.

3. Standpoint Theory and the Identitarian Ideology

In this section we will introduce a view known as feminist standpoint theory. This is a view within feminist epistemology which has some superficial structural similarities to the identitarian ideology of the NR. We will begin by briefly outlining the motivations of the view and its defining features. At that point the reader may already have identified the similarities we have in mind. Whilst these similarities are superficial, using them to draw a comparison between standpoint theory and NR ideology will help to draw out significant differences between them which are central to our critique of NR ideology. Hence, in the last part of this section, before moving on, we will make these similarities explicit.

[25] Taguieff (1993a; 2001) analyses the key ideas of the identitarian ideology well, but reads the different forms of naturalization as distinct ideal types of "differentialist" thinking (Taguieff 2001: 207). In contrast to Taguieff, we emphasize the mixed character of most arguments and we understand the focus on biology or culture as different justifications of the same ideological pattern of social thought.

Our discussion of standpoint theory in this and the following section does not amount to a thorough history or a neutral account of the view (for more detailed overviews that take different stances to ours see Intemann 2010 and Tanesini 2019). Our aim is to present a selective description of standpoint theory which allows us to highlight the features it might be thought to share with the identitarian ideology of the NR, and the objections raised against both of them. We will then explicate a version of standpoint theory we think avoids these problems, to show that the features standpoint theory and identitarian ideology have in common are not inherently problematic. We will then sketch out potential avenues of development for identitarian ideology which, as we will make clear in section 4, are not ultimately viable—because NR ideology has conflicting prior commitments which cannot be reconciled with its epistemology.

a. Feminist Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theory is a kind of feminist epistemology. Feminist epistemologies are approaches to the study of knowledge and knowledge production which take seriously the idea that social factors have an effect on our epistemic practices. This is in contrast with traditional Cartesian-style projects which invite us to leave behind all social—and sometimes physical—baggage, and contemplate our epistemic connection with the world as though we were purely rational beings, or even disembodied minds.

The asocial foundations of the Cartesian project perhaps seemed more plausible when the majority of people doing philosophy were very similar in terms of social position (almost uniformly white, cis, male, able-bodied members of the ruling classes). But when academia (slowly) began to diversify in the middle of the 20th century, some theorists started to question whether ignoring social factors was desirable, or even possible.

The result is a broad range of approaches to epistemology which start from the empirical claim that the world we live in is structured according to systemic oppression. More specifically, feminist epistemologists believe that it is inaccurate to view all epistemic subjects as equally representative of a mythically homogonous group 'mankind', and instead understand them as falling into many different groups—some of whom enjoy power and autonomy, and some of whose power and autonomy is substantially limited (often by members of the first group).

Proponents of feminist epistemology tend to think that this is an unjust way of structuring society, and are often explicitly committed to resisting it or working towards alternatives. And we often see elements of feminist epistemology in contemporary feminist and anti-oppressive movements (for example in slogans like "Nothing About Us Without Us" and "Listen to Black Women"). But it is worth noting that whilst this is a common background *motivation* for approaching epistemology in this way, such normative commitments are not required as premises in the arguments that feminist epistemologists make. Someone who accepted the empirical claim that structural oppression exists but took no normative or political view on whether this was good or bad could coherently take a feminist approach to understanding knowledge.

There are various forms of feminist epistemology,[26] but standpoint theory is characterized by two distinctive claims. The first is known as the situated knowledge thesis (or sometimes the standpoint thesis):

[26] The other main branches of feminist epistemology are feminist empiricism (e.g. Anderson 1995; Longino 1997), and feminist postmodernism (e.g. Haraway 1988).

Situated knowledge thesis: justification depends on 'socially situated' perspectives.

If, as the above feminist commitment (about the existence of structural oppression) says, different groups occupy different 'social locations' according to where they fall in a matrix of intersection dynamics of oppression and power, then instead of thinking that everyone's epistemic practices have broadly similar foundations we should allow for the possibility of different epistemic perspectives grounded in a range of different—though still roughly groupable—experiences. For example, black women occupy very different social locations to white men. If we look at the experiences of the members of these two groups we can identify some broad patterns of similarity within each group and differences between them (e.g. many black women undertake domestic and care work within and without their own homes, whilst relatively few white men do). Standpoint theorists argue that differences like these lead to a situation where members of those groups typically have access to different epistemic resources to one another.

The second claim is that the epistemic resources members of socially oppressed groups have access to are often better (in some important sense) than those that socially privileged groups often have access to. This is known as the epistemic advantage thesis (or sometimes the inversion thesis) and is sometimes expressed like this:

Epistemic advantage thesis: experiences of social oppression can contribute to epistemic benefits—such as greater knowledge or enhanced understanding.

This idea has its roots in Marxist historical materialism. On Lukács' (1923/1971) interpretation, Marx argued that the different social locations of the bourgeoisie and of the proletariat lead them to have different perspectives on economic exchange and the social relations that hold between the two groups. From the perspective of the proletariat—who have no choice but to sell their labor—the oppressive nature of these social relations is, or can easily be made, visible, whilst from the perspective of the bourgeoisie the oppressive nature of these social relations is obscured.

Standpoint theorists argue that something similar is true of the perspectives of other oppressed and oppressive groups. Different theorists argue for this claim in different ways. Sometimes the thought is just that the distinctive experiences associated with oppression can give people access to significantly beneficial evidence—e.g. evidence that (particular forms of) oppression occur, what that is like, and what effects it has on related phenomena (Collins 1990; Wylie 2003). Others argue that oppression makes people uniquely likely to have the motivation, and/or the tools to reflect on these experiences (Medina 2012). Either way, theorists agree that oppressed people are more likely than those who do not experience oppression to develop a "standpoint" —an epistemically privileged perspective from which the nature of relevant social relations is visible.

These two theses are the bare bones of standpoint theory. There are a variety of ways to flesh out the details of the theory which we won't discuss in this paper. There are also a number of important, common caveats, which we will cover in section 4.

b. Similarities to the Identitarian Ideology

Now that we have introduced both identitarian ideology and standpoint theory, the superficial similarities between them may have become apparent. Ultimately we believe there are very clear differences between the two views, and in the next section we will outline two particularly important ones which help to highlight some internal tensions within identitarian ideology. But in order to do this, we first need to look more closely at the features that identitarian ideology and standpoint theory do have in common.

The first similarity between identitarian ideology and standpoint theory is a denial of epistemic universalism in favor of localized understandings of knowledge. In section 2 we saw that some figures within the NR advance a radically socialized and politicized conception of knowledge, making epistemic access dependent on cultural belonging. Similarly, one of standpoint theory's central theses—the 'standpoint thesis' for which they are named—says that epistemic justification (and therefore knowledge) is dependent on particular perspectives associated with different social locations. The common idea here is that there is no absolute, perspective-independent (or community-independent) knowledge—all knowledge is local and situated.

The second similarity between identitarian ideology and standpoint theory is a privileging of the point of view of one's own group. We saw above that identitarians claim that white Europeans are culturally and epistemically superior to other groups of people, as the only ones with the intellectual capabilities for creativity, truth, and knowledge. This superiority thesis bears some resemblance to the second of standpoint theory's central theses, the epistemic advantage thesis. This epistemic advantage thesis says that the perspectives of marginalised groups can be epistemically better—in the form of having more, or better,

justification—than the perspectives of groups whose members do not face marginalization. So both identitarian ideology and standpoint theory say that some groups—the groups that their proponents are a part of—are epistemically privileged in some way.

We will argue below that a key difference between these two conceptions of epistemic privilege is where the privilege is thought to originate. For standpoint theorists the origin of epistemic advantage is contingent—it only exists because of the oppressive way that society has been structured, and even then it has to be achieved through collaborative critical reflection, something which does not always happen. Whereas for identitarians, the superiority is thought to be natural, stemming from the group's biological or cultural essence. However, it is interesting to note that some contemporary identitarians shying away from making claims about superiority (e.g. de Benoist and Champetier 2012; de Benoist 2011a) and instead adopt the language of oppression (e.g. Spencer 2017). We will consider this interesting development further in section 4.

On the surface, it appears that the projects of identitarian ideology and standpoint theory are structurally very similar, and are just recommended to different groups of people. Identitarians encourage the group that they identify as white or European to embrace their group identity in order to maintain what they see as a natural epistemic superiority. Meanwhile standpoint theory claims that if marginalized people reflect on the experiences of being oppressed they can develop an epistemic advantage. And we saw that some identitarians even adopt oppression as a locus of group identity as well. However, there are significant differences between identitarian ideology and standpoint theory. In the next section we will see the limits of these superficial similarities, and the importance of some central differences.

4. Critiquing Standpoint Theory and the Identitarian Ideology

Having introduced both identitarian and feminist standpoint theory, and highlighted some similarities between them, we will now offer our critique. The features they have in common make them susceptible to some of the same criticisms, and exploring how they each respond to these (or fail to) will tell us something useful about the political movements that are based on them. In this section we will consider two central criticisms. The first is related to the rejection of universalist views of knowledge. The second is related to essentialism.

We will consider each criticism in turn in the next two subsections. In each case we will explain the relevant criticism and show how standpoint theorists can, and have, responded to it. We will then consider whether identitarians are able to respond in a similar way. And, in each case, we will show that they are unable to: The options available to standpoint theorists are not viable for identitarians. In doing this we will highlight some irresolvable tensions in the identitarian ideology.

a. Rejecting Universalism and Embracing Relativism

The first feature identitarian ideology and standpoint theory are thought to share is a rejection of universal or absolute knowledge. The standpoint thesis says that that knowledge is dependent on situated perspectives, and so has a history of being connected with relativism. This connection is mainly discussed by standpoint theorists as a charge made by their critics (though it is difficult to find examples of this charge in writing). But there are standpoint theorists who have made this connection too (e.g. Harding 1991: 138-163). The thought seems to be that if all epistemic judgements are perspective-dependent then we have no independent way to rank, or decide between, different perspectives. All we have are situated judgements made from within various perspectives. This means that all perspectives are

equal, and so standpoint theorists are committed to a problematic 'anything goes'-style epistemic relativism.

Standpoint theorists have a couple of options when it comes to responding to this charge. The first option is to deny that their view is relativist. This is the route that standpoint theorists have traditionally taken. The typical strategy (e.g. Tanesini 2019) is to point out that standpoint theorists rank different perspectives, and so should not be thought to accept that 'anything goes'. The second of their two central theses, the epistemic advantage thesis, says that the perspectives of those who are socially marginalised are epistemically better than the perspectives of those who are socially privileged. This is the kind of judgement that a relativist could not allow. Standpoint theorists do allow it; and so they are not relativists.

There are two problems with this response. One is that it fails as a denial of relativism, because relativists *can* discern between different perspectives. (More on this later). But even if that were not the case, there is a more pressing problem. The strategy is to try and neutralize the relativism of their first central thesis with the anti-relativism of their second central thesis, but all this does is show that the two central theses are in tension, and that the two options the standpoint theorists have at their disposable actually amount to a dilemma.[27] If the standpoint thesis—as it is often understood—is a rejection of absolute, perspective-independent epistemic standards, then it is not compatible with an advantage thesis that justifies an anti-relativist hierarchy. So this horn of the dilemma leads to inconsistency. Standpoint theorists can only maintain that the advantage thesis reveals a commitment to absolute, non-relativist standards if they abandon their standpoint thesis, at which point the view is no longer recognizable as standpoint theory. Alternatively, if they want to retain the

[27] Cf. the "bias paradox" (Anthony 1993; Longino 1999; Rolin 2006).

standpoint thesis in its current form they cannot posit epistemic advantage as an absolute judgement which lets them avoid relativism. They can have an absolutist understanding of epistemic advantage or they can have the standpoint thesis. They cannot have both.

So, simply denying that their view is relativist is not an adequate defense of standpoint theory. The second horn of the dilemma is to embrace relativism of a non-problematic kind. Natalie Alana Ashton and Robin McKenna analyze the social constructivist elements of standpoint theory and argue that they are much less troubling than critics typically assume (Ashton and McKenna 2020). They acknowledge that standpoint theory makes justification dependent on social factors (commonly thought to be a relativist move), but point out it need not deny that there are any absolute facts about justification (2020: 43), nor does it allow these social factors to trump truth or empirical adequacy (2020: 44). Building on this, Ashton has argued for a relativist understanding of the epistemic advantage thesis, according to which the perspectives of socially disadvantaged groups have epistemic benefits *relative to some epistemic system* (Ashton 2020). This move allows standpoint theorists to judge that some perspectives are better than others (relative to certain values or commitments, which may even be widely shared by other perspectives) and, crucially, that some are unacceptable (again relative to certain, perhaps widely shared, values or commitments). This is a discerning relativism, not the 'anything goes'-style relativism that philosophers are most concerned by.

We saw in section 2 that identitarians make similar claims—rejecting universalism on the one hand, and endorsing the epistemic superiority thesis on the other—and so are vulnerable to the same tension. The solution for standpoint theorists is to embrace a relativist understanding of epistemic advantage in order to retain their standpoint thesis. The analogous solution for

identitarians would be to relativize their superiority thesis (such that groups are culturally and epistemically superior only relative to some evaluative system) in order to retain their starting point of localized, culture-specific (and anti-universalist) values and knowledge. Such an ethnocultural relativism seems to be a promising *theoretical* option for identitarians. For example they could argue that the group they identify with is superior from their point of view, and that other groups are superior from their points of view, then double-down on the fact that they care only about the judgements of the group they identify with. Benoist's "differentialist approach" gets on this path towards relativism by emphasizing that "there is no superior race. All races are superior and each of them has its own genius." (de Benoist 1974 cited in Camus 2019: 78).

Yet we have already seen in section 2 that Benoist's more relativist line of thought invites fierce criticism from his fellow identitarians who rightly point to political consequences of embracing a relativist understanding of ethnopluralism that contradict some of their key convictions. They emphasize correctly that the path of discerning relativism would imply acknowledging that each group is equally justified in believing in the superiority of its own culture. Faye thus rejects "ethnocultural relativism" as a "global egalitarianism" that levels the deep inequality of cultures (2016: 331, 374–77; 2010: 35 f.). He characterizes the implicit acceptance of the limitations of the European culture as a symptom of the "guilt-stirring *masochism*" (Faye 2010: 36) that he says oppresses white people in general. It is thus not surprising that Faye and other key figures of the NR, especially the "race realists" from the US, push more absolutist lines of thought. They correctly regard the belief in an objective hierarchy of cultures as a necessity for their particular political project. Ethnocultural relativism is thus not a viable *political* option for them, since it demands to acknowledge a kind of equality between cultures which identitarians fundamentally reject. This anti-

egalitarianism is rooted in their essentialist assumptions about social groups that ground their segregationist agenda. It is thus not surprising that the tension between relativism and anti-egalitarianism also characterizes de Benoist's account, as we will demonstrate in the following.

We thus argue that identitarians face an inversion of the dilemma we highlighted for standpoint theorists: If identitarians follow the standpoint theorists' lead and relativize their superiority thesis, they have to accept a kind of equality between cultures. This runs contrary to their key conviction that cultures and people are not only different, but unequal. Even de Benoist himself goes to great length to demonstrate the natural inequality of peoples, emphasizing that his doctrine does not imply that different cultures have the *same* value, despite his dismissal of an inherent supremacy of any of them (de Benoist 2017b: XXV f.; see also 2017a: 2 f.). He argues that the fundamental difference between cultures makes them incommensurable and explicitly contrasts incommensurability with equality (de Benoist 2017b). We believe that he has good reasons to insist on the anti-egalitarian character of his exclusionist differentialism, not only because of the political reservations against his more relativistic views within the New Right. After all, de Benoist shares the segregationist agenda of his fellow identitarians and justifies this political demand by claiming that cultural mixing endangers the existence of organically ordered communities. The idea that the integration of other cultures in one's society can pose a threat to one's identity (and that of the others too) depends, we contend, on an essentialization of cultural differences which is incompatible with any substantial concept of equality. If one assumes that there is a fundamental equality of cultures how could one arrive at the conclusion that their interaction might be dangerous to any of them? Note that de Benoist explicitly submits that the right to difference cannot be sustained if one assumes a fundamental equality of peoples (de Benoist 2017b: XXIII).

Egalitarianism in all its facets thus remains the political archenemy of the identitarian ideology and prevents them from embracing discerning relativism (e.g. de Benoist 2017b; 2011a: 81 f.; de Benoist and Champetier 2012: 11 f., 15; Faye 2010: 127-29).

One might worry that standpoint theorists run into a similar problem. Traditionally, their advantage thesis has been understood as involving a commitment to an objective advantage, and they may not want to accept a relativized version of it. We think this is likely, but maintain that a relativized advantage thesis is the only one that standpoint theorists can coherently accept.

Likewise, if identitarians take the second horn of the dilemma and retain an objective version of the superiority thesis, they encounter the same theoretical tension. The dependence of evaluative standards on their contexts of emergence is inconsistent with the belief in an objective hierarchy of ethnocultures. Insisting on the superiority thesis thus undermines the identitarian core belief that our values are shaped by the distinct social contexts we belong to. This issue becomes obvious when the supremacist Faye claims that "there are indeed objective and universal criteria that enable one to compare civilizations"—only to add in brackets "even if these criteria are indeed subject to mitigation in relation to different moral and ethical systems" (Faye 2016: 327).

b. Essentialism, Advantage, and Superiority

The second feature standpoint theory and identitarian ideology have in common is an (apparent) endorsement of essentialism. In the case of identitarians it is their view of culture which is essentialist. They see cultures as distinct, clearly demarcated groups, which are natural, internally homogeneous, and stable. It follows from this picture that interactions

between cultures take the form of ‘clashes’, and that if a culture is considered valuable then it needs to be preserved—because to change a culture is to destroy it.

Probably the most pressing—and definitely the simplest—criticism of this essentialist view of culture is that it is inaccurate. Andrew Mason (2007) says that this ‘billiard ball model’ (this term comes from Eric Wolf [1982]) is “virtually useless for understanding actual groups,” because, despite what the model suggests, “almost none of them” are actually “separate, clearly bounded, and internally uniform” (Mason 2007: 227). An example of where this affects the identitarian ideology is Faye’s claim, which we first discussed in section 2 above, that “European civilization” was established without foreign input. This overlooks the many formative influences that other cultures have had on Europe, including on Christianity (which comes from the middle east), the numerical system (which comes from India), and the alleged beginning of European art, philosophy, and science in ancient Greece (already a dubious claim), which originated in North African countries including Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Even just looking at more recent history, the infrastructure and economies of the US and UK are built on transatlantic slavery and colonialism.

Reliance on this inaccurate picture of culture can lead to serious negative consequences--most obviously for members of ‘other’ cultures who can find themselves the targets of right-wing hate, but also for members of the self-described in-group. Treating cultures as internally homogeneous can mask important differences between sub-groups within cultures. Andrew Mason points to diverging interests between ‘ordinary’ members of a group and the group’s elite as an example (Mason 2007: 227). We saw this exploited in the rhetoric that British people should ‘take back sovereignty’ through voting for Brexit. This idea is questionable for a number of reasons, but one of them is the false implication that all members of the group

'the British' would be more powerful following Brexit. In fact, any power that has been gained is concentrated in the hands of a select few, who are likely to use it only for *some* of the group's *varied and divergent* interests (and often, it seems, in ways that work directly against the interests of many members of the group). So the essentialist picture of culture that identitarians rely on is problematic even for someone on the right who is only concerned with the outcomes that it has for members of the in-group culture.

Standpoint theory has also been said to rely on essentialist ideas, though in this case the worry is that standpoint theorists rely on essentialist ideas about social kinds (such as 'woman') rather than about cultures.[28] This is a problem which can arise for any feminist theorist--not just standpoint epistemologists—though upper and middle-class, white, cishet feminist theorists, to whom axes of oppression other than gender are sometimes less obvious, are thought to be particularly susceptible (see Narayan 1998; R. Mason 2016; and Haslanger 2020 for relevant discussions). For example, Narayan talks about 'women's' emancipation being framed as being allowed to work outside the home at a time when many poor women of color already worked outside their own homes, often for low wages and in difficult and exploitative conditions.

In the context of standpoint theory, the risk of reliance on essentialist concepts most obviously arises in relation to the epistemic advantage thesis. The thesis is sometimes naively framed as 'women having a better standpoint than men', and if this is not cashed out with great care then it could replicate essentialist understandings of 'woman' and 'man' as biological - or at least natural and highly stable - and internally homogeneous categories. More sophisticated expressions of standpoint theory make the caveat that the epistemic

[28] Though see Narayan (1998) for how these two problems are connected.

advantage thesis need not hold for all domains of knowledge. On this understanding, the case for advantage is made on a domain-by-domain basis, starting with the least controversial domain: knowledge of and involving social relations (Ashton and McKenna 2020: 33). But even reframing the epistemic advantage thesis as 'women having a better understanding of the nature of social relations than men' risks smuggling in essentialist assumptions. There are a number of reasons why standpoint theorists should not—and do not—want an essentialist understanding of epistemic advantage.

First, an understanding of epistemic advantage which relied on an essentialist picture of social kinds could have the effect of naturalizing gender, race, and other categories. It could create, or reinforce, the impression that these categories are natural and unavoidable features of the world, rather than products of human decisions and assumptions. One of the aims of feminist epistemology is to highlight the effects of oppressive social relations, and naturalizing these categories has precisely the opposite effect (Narayan 1998; R. Mason 2016; A. Mason 2007). The naturalizing effect of essentialism would obscure the social and political history that feminist epistemologies are supposed to highlight.

Second, essentialist understandings of social kinds are often deterministic, and a determinist picture of epistemic advantage would lead to obviously inaccurate overgeneralizations. If the idea were that being a person of color or a white woman was a necessary and sufficient condition on having an epistemic advantage, even just with regard to certain social relations, then it would not be possible to explain the existence of oppressed people who lack a clear understanding of the nature of social relations, nor the existence of privileged people who have such an understanding.

Finally, an essentialist picture of epistemic advantage would encourage us to think of the advantage as automatically acquired. This is both prima facie implausible, and does not fit with the evidence that we see and the experiences that we have in the world, which suggest that understanding the nature of social relations takes significant, and usually collective, effort.

For these reasons, standpoint theorists typically emphasize a number of caveats when talking about the epistemic advantage thesis. In addition to, as already mentioned above, restricting the domains of knowledge to which the epistemic advantage applies, standpoint theorists also put forward three anti-essentialist caveats:

> *Anti-naturalism*: the epistemic advantage is not grounded in biology, or any other natural (i.e. pre-social) cause. It is a result of systematic oppression, and if different groups were oppressed/powerful then the advantage would arise for different groups (Medina 2012).
>
> *Anti-determinism*: there needn't be any properties which all, or only, individual members of the group possess (Hartsock 1997; Smith 1997; Wylie 2003). In particular, possessing epistemic advantage is itself neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition on membership of a particular group (Medina 2012).
>
> *Anti-nativism*: epistemic advantage is not automatic, but must be achieved through critical reflection. And this achievement is typically collaborative; not the work of an individual (Fricker 1999: 202–3; Wylie 2003; Medina 2012).

If standpoint theorists succeed in adhering to these caveats, and in general if they use social kinds cautiously and critically, then they can avoid the pitfalls of essentialism that we have discussed. Grounding the advantage in oppression, rather than nature, helps to avoid reinforcing inaccurate, damaging stereotypes, whilst avoiding deterministic and nativist conceptions of advantage guards against implausible and overgeneral conclusions.

Whilst standpoint theorists are at least partly motivated to make the above caveats and reject essentialism out of political concerns, the issue is not only that the outcomes of an essentialist picture are harmful or unjust. Essentialist understandings of social categories are also inaccurate; they leave out significant historical information and overlook nuanced differences within the groups that they are supposed to describe. This last problem applies regardless of political preferences and, as we saw above, it arises for identitarians when they make inaccurate claims about the creation of 'European civilization'.

Could identitarians follow standpoint theory's lead by rejecting cultural essentialism, in order to avoid these problems and salvage their view? Some identitarians are indeed less committed to discussing natural superiority, and hence avoid the overt racism of traditional neo-Nazi groups. They instead push the line that white Europeans are oppressed in contemporary western societies. Identitarians thus present themselves as "patriotic activists" who are simply concerned with responding to "uncontrolled immigration", "anti-white discrimination", and the "loss of traditions". Some even invoke a purported respect for other cultures to justify their segregationist policies, claiming that all distinct peoples suffer from the homogenizing effects of global miscegenation. This identitarian rebranding of far-right extremism has been very successful.

Note, however, that the role oppression plays in the identitarian ideology is different from the role it plays in standpoint theory: oppression is not the source of the specific characteristics of a group—its cultural or epistemic superiority—, but instead a threat to their actualization. The talk about oppression describes the alleged political circumstances of today and directly motivates the policies and actions of identitarians. Yet their references to oppression do not replace the essentialist foundation of their views. Oppression is construed as something that has happened to an already constituted group but it does not constitute this group. It is thus not surprising that the emphasis on victimhood does not lead to a significant shift in the substance of identitarianism. Some identitarians still focus on allegedly hard biological differences, especially in the US where „race realism" is a defining feature of their ideology. And the culturalists among the identitarians present cultures as internally homogeneous and stable, only highlighting cultural differences *between* groups, not *within* them. Respecting other cultures thus means to accept a fundamental and irreducible difference between distinct peoples that warrants their mutual exclusion.[29] The idea of differences arising within, or changes happening to, cultures is seen as a threat which jeopardizes social cohesion and cultural integrity.

We thus see that identitarians have not yet rejected essentialist assumptions, but stick to their views, and not without reason: if they did try to reject cultural essentialism, then it is hard to see how they could continue to justify their beliefs, policies, and actions. To the extent that anti-immigration and deportation policies, hostility and violence, are "justified", they are justified based on the model of cultures as distinct and stable. Rejecting this model and instead viewing cultures as flexible and dynamic would remove any justification for

[29] See, e.g., Benoist 2017b: XVI f. Spektorowski (2016: 133) criticizes Benoist's culturalist version as "perverse strategy of rejection 'of the other' through the recognition/exclusion principle."

preserving cultures, or keeping them separate. Interactions between them would not be seen as "clashes" or potentially destructive. Instead they could be viewed as an opportunity to increase both self- and mutual understanding. This is what we see in Medina's work on "productive friction" (Medina 2012).

5. Conclusion

Our goal in this paper was to determine which, if any, forms of the much maligned 'identity politics' are worth saving. We did this by comparing the theoretical underpinnings of both right- and left-wing identity politics.

We began by analysing the identitarian ideology underpinning contemporary right-wing identity politics, to show that it advances a radically socialized and politized conception of knowledge. Along the way we highlighted two important features of the identitarian view: it's essentialist understanding of ethnocultural identity, on which ethnocultures are defined as distinct, homogenous, and stable groups, and the tension between Benoist's relativist understanding of ethnopluralism and the explicitly supremacist claims made by authors such as Faye. We then took standpoint theory as a plausible theoretical basis of contemporary left-wing identity politics, and showed that it seems—at least superficially—to have some features in common with the identitarian ideology of the NR. They both seem to involve a rejection of epistemic absolutism in favor of socially situated knowledge, and to advance the belief that some social situations are epistemically better than others.

Next we introduced two objections that could be made against either view, and suggested that standpoint theorists are better able to respond to these objections than identitarians. The first objection was that rejecting absolutism seems to open the door to an anything-goes style

relativism which—as well as being independently problematic—is in tension with claims about epistemic advantage or superiority. We showed that standpoint theorists have the option to resolve this tension by embracing a non-problematic, discerning relativism, but that no such option seemed to be available to the identitarian. The second objection was that essentialism, which both views appear to rely on, is empirically inadequate as well as potentially harmful. We were able to clarify that standpoint theorists do not actually rely on essentialism, and so avoid this worry. Identitarians, however, do rely on essentialism, and it doesn't seem plausible that they could reject this without losing all justification for the political decisions that their theories attempt to support.

This points to two conclusions for contemporary identity politics. First, contemporary right-wing politics is based on views which are currently inconsistent. They could make their views consistent—by following the strategies that we attribute to standpoint theorists—but this would mean abandoning the foundations of some of their central political commitments. Second, there is a coherent theoretical basis available to support some forms of contemporary left-wing identity politics, but only some. If it is to avoid inconsistency, any political project which centres identity must avoid making unrestricted, absolutist claims about the epistemic advantage of any particular group, and must reject essential conceptions of culture and identity.

Johannes Steizinger
McMaster University, Canada
steizinj@mcmaster.ca

Dr Natalie Alana Ashton

University of Stirling, Scotland

natalieealanaashton@gmail.com.

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