Does Identity Politics Reinforce Oppression?

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Abstract: Identity politics has been critiqued in various ways. One central problem—the Reinforcement Problem—claims that identity politics reinforces groups rooted in oppression thereby undermining its own liberatory aims. Here I consider two versions of the problem—one psychological and one metaphysical. I defang the first by drawing on work in social psychology. I then argue that careful consideration of the metaphysics of social groups and of the practice of identity politics provides resources to dissolve the second version. Identity politics involves the creation or transformation of groups in ways that do not succumb to the metaphysical Reinforcement Problem.

Key Words: Identity politics, oppression, social groups, social metaphysics

Identity politics has been critiqued in many ways. It has been argued that it confuses victimization with expertise and that it promotes tribalism. It has been claimed to reinforce oppression, essentialize, be exclusionary and non-intersectional. Others argue that identity politics fails to unify around shared liberal values, that it does not adequately recognize class disparities, and that it promotes tokenism in representation. Here I argue one central problem for identity politics can be diffused by examining the metaphysics of social groups and how identity politics was intended to be practiced. The Reinforcement Problem claims that identity politics reinforces group identities that are rooted in oppression.[1] Liberatory socio-political aims cannot be achieved while reinforcing oppressive hierarchies. There is, the objection goes, something paradoxical at the very core of identity politics. So, identity politics should be abandoned.

While there might be good reasons to be wary of identity politics, we ought to be clear on what objections have bite. By showing that identity politics can be defended from one challenge—a challenge that questions not just its consequences but its constitutive nature—we can better understand what is at stake in defending or objecting to the social political strategy. Moreover, our inquiry will serve to highlight connections between views on the nature of groups and projects in the political sphere.

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[1] Bhambra and Margee call this "the problem of the reification of politicised identities" (2010: 62).

The paper is structured as follows. First, I briefly consider what identity politics is (§*I*). Then, I outline and motivate two versions of the Reinforcement Problem for identity politics (§*II*). The primary aim of the paper is to show that a constitutive metaphysical version of the Reinforcement Problem can be avoided through careful consideration of social metaphysics and the metaphysical upshot of political projects. However, before turning to that task, I show that a psychological version of the Reinforcement Problem can be largely defanged given results in social psychology (§*III*). I then turn to social metaphysics. I sketch a view of social structures and offer a structuralist account of two sorts of social groups (§*IV*). I argue that social metaphysics provides resources for identity politics to avoid the Reinforcement Problem (§*V*). Identity politics often does involve bolstering groups, but it need not (and as best practiced does not) reinforce those rooted in oppression. Instead it involves the formation of new groups based on intentional and overt commitments to values, projects, and political goals. Identity politics involves the active and intentional transformation of the social world. Attending to the nature of groups provides a route for avoiding a central problem plaguing identity politics. Finally (§*VI*) I offer concluding remarks.

I. What is Identity Politics?

Attacks on identity politics are pervasive. So, one might assume that what identity politics *is* is well understood. Often, however, this is not so. Alcoff states that "[o]ne of the problems is that identity politics is nowhere defined—nor is its historical genesis elaborated—by its detractors. So the very thing we are discussing is surprisingly vague" (2000: 313). Here I briefly examine the historical roots of identity politics to argue for a way of understanding it. In addition to being rooted in historical usage, the conception I rely on makes manifest the worry posed by the Reinforcement Problem.

In its historical roots and how it is best practiced today, identity politics involves political mobilization around certain groups or identities. Heyes states that "[w]hat is crucial about the "identity" of identity politics appears to be the experience of the subject, especially his or her experience of oppression and the possibility of a shared and more authentic or self-determined alternative" (2018). Importantly it is not just about identity as an individual experience. That is, it is not about a person turning inward to focus solely on their felt identity.[2] Identity, in this sense, might be part of identity politics, but groups and larger coalitions of groups have and continue to be

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[2] Lilla (2017) takes identity politics (or what he calls 'identity liberalism') to involve a "special snowflake" largely solipsistic and individualistic worldview. Historically, this is not what identity politics is, even if some who practice what they label as identity politics fits this notion.

central to identity politics. It aims at using identity groups to argue for anti-racist, anti-heteronormative, anti-patriarchal, and other anti-oppression aims.

In the locus classicus of the expression *identity politics* the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist group, argue that "focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression" (1979). They argue that focusing on their oppression will promote ending oppression in general stating "[i]f Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (1979). As proposed by the Combahee River Collective, identity politics is intersectional and has broad non-exclusionary emancipatory aims.

Identity politics involves political mobilization striving towards liberating groups that have been oppressed. For instance, while CEOs can lobby for their interests, they do not form an oppressed group so they would not thereby be engaged in identity politics. Moreover, it seems implausible that being a CEO is an identity in the same sense that racial and gender identities are. Alcoff takes social identities to have "causal determinacy over our epistemic and political orientations to the world… [and] profoundly affect how we are seen and interacted with by others" (2006: 90). Some identities are visible and others are not or are to a lesser degree. For instance, being an opera singer or doctor are less visible than racial and gender identities. Alcoff states that "our 'visible' and acknowledged identity affects our relations in the world, which in turn affects our interior life, that is, our lived experience or subjectivity" (2006: 92). How one is racialized (in a context) has profound effects on one's experiences and perhaps on one's inner life. Being an opera singer, a CEO, or a doctor are roles that one plays. These roles certainly have effects on a person, but they do not have widespread effects on our actions, the norms we are subject to, and how we are treated across contexts in the ways that racial or gender identities do.

While there is certainly more that could be said about the way roles affect identities, the main upshot to draw from the preceding discussion is that identity politics is focused on identity groups that are related to oppression. This leads to the question as to whether identity group must *actually* be oppressed or whether group members *believing* that they are oppressed is sufficient. For instance, whites (those with a white identity) qua being white are not oppressed in contemporary American society. If actually being oppressed is required for identity politics, then there are is no white identity politics. If, in contrast, belief that the group is oppressed is what is required, then there could be white identity politics. Given that here we are considering the force of the Reinforcement Problem,

our focus is on identity politics as carried out by groups that actually are oppressed. If a group is not actually oppressed, it cannot reinforce its own oppression. Reinforcement requires that there is something there to reinforce to begin with.

On its historical conception, identity politics involves mobilizing around social groups rooted in oppression in order to achieve liberatory aims. The sorts of anti-oppressive aims that identity politics involves come in two broad sorts. The first involves valorizing, bolstering, or supporting a group. This might be done through working to emphasize group perspectives, interests, or experiences. The second sort of aims carried out by projects in identity politics involve seeking to eliminate certain groups. For instance, one might aim at eradicating gender or racial groups through broad social restructuring. Both aims rely on the existence of identity groups. The paradoxical tension of the Reinforcement Problem looms. Can identity groups that are grounded in oppression be appealed to or banded around as part of a social justice project? Might identity politics merely *reinforce* oppression?

II. The Reinforcement Problem

The Reinforcement Problem has been posed in recent articles as a part of a larger criticism purporting that identity politics promotes tribalism and confuses victimhood and knowledge. For instance, in the *National Review*, David French states "Identity politics… exploits suffering for the sake of power. Ambitious politicians hitch their wagons to other people's pain." In a column in *The New York Times*, David Brooks argues "From an identity politics that emphasized our common humanity, we've gone to an identity politics that emphasizes having a common enemy. On campus these days, current events are often depicted as pure power struggles—oppressors acting to preserve their privilege over the virtuous oppressed." Both columnists hint at the Reinforcement Problem. The problem is not just posed in popular media, but is seriously considered by theorists in feminist philosophy and legal and political theory.

Linda Alcoff, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Iris Marion Young suggest, although do not endorse,[3] the Reinforcement Problem in more straightforward terms. For instance, Alcoff states "if identity is something created by oppression then our goal should be to dismantle [identities] rather than celebrate or build a politics around [them]" (2000: 319). Crenshaw states "[r]ace, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or

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[3] Alcoff's treatment of the worry is discussed in §*V*. Crenshaw argues for intersectionality as a way to avoid the worry. Young argues that "it is foolish to deny the reality of groups" and argues that group identifications can be important to many people (1990: 47), so she finds the argument wanting.

domination… According to this understanding, our liberatory objective should be to empty such categories of any social significance" (1991: 279). Young says that "Oppression, on [one] view, is something that happens to people when they are classified in groups … Eliminating oppression thus requires eliminating groups" (1990: 47). Each of these worries points to the view that identity politics that involves banding around oppressive groups will reinforce rather than reduce oppressive social structures.

The Reinforcement Problem is both posed and endorsed by the political scientist Wendy Brown. She argues (1995: 73) that

> In its emergence as a protest against marginalization or subordination, politicized identity thus becomes attached to its own exclusion both because it is premised on this exclusion for its very existence as identity and because the formation of identity at the site of exclusion, as exclusion, augments or 'alters the direction of the suffering' entailed in subordination or marginalization by finding a site of blame for it.

She goes on to say "[p]olitical identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in its politics; it can hold out no future— for itself or others—that triumphs over this pain" (1995: 74). Identity politics should be avoided, she argues, as its foundations involve oppression in a way that necessitate the maintenance and reinforcement of the exclusion and oppression it supposedly aims to obliterate. Bhambra and Margree argue that Brown takes identity politics to operate "to maintain and reproduce the identity created by injury (exclusion) rather than—and indeed, often in opposition to—resolving the injurious social relations that generated claims around that identity in the first place" (2010: 62). I'll formulate the problem as follows:

> *The Reinforcement Problem (RP):* Identity politics involves (further) reinforcement or reification of groups based on bias, oppression, and disenfranchisement and, thus, cannot be part of a successful liberatory project.

My primary aim here is to show the practice of identity politics is not antithetical to social justice aims. In order to show that this, we need to further clarify the Reinforcement Problem.

Notice that the RP as formulated above ends with the claim that identity politics *cannot* be part of a successful social justice project. If it is merely possible but quite unlikely for identity politics to reinforce oppression, that does not yet give us reason to avoid identity politics itself. Rather, it provides reason to consider other liberatory political practices and to weigh the pitfalls

they bring with those that identity politics can bring. We might conclude that identity politics still ought to be practiced, but in ways that are careful to avoid the Reinforcement Problem.

Consider an analogous argument: Writing can reinforce oppression. Therefore, writing cannot be part of a successful liberatory project and, if we are aimed at promoting justice, we ought to avoid writing. This argument is obviously invalid. While it is certainly true that writing *can* reinforce oppression, that does not entail that writing could not also be part of a liberatory project (it can be!). The argument fails to support the conclusion that we should avoid completely writing or that there is something about the nature of writing that is oppressive. The RP can only show that identity politics should be avoided full stop if it is impossible or unlikely for one to engage without reinforcing oppression. If the RP is to undermine the practice of identity politics, it needs to be read as a claim that identity politics is sufficient for or makes it likely the reinforcement of oppressive systems. If that is the case, then identity politics should be avoided. Here our focus is on this strong claim.

There are two versions of the RP that need to be considered. The first is psychological. It states that identity politics as it is practiced by us is sufficient to reinforce oppression. If it turns out that given human psychology, identity politics always or is overwhelmingly likely to reinforce oppression, we ought to avoid identity politics.[4] The second is constitutive; its target is the nature of identity politics itself. The constitutive version of the RP is a metaphysical problem—one that takes identity politics to be an active route to the continued persistence of oppressive identity groups thereby working to reinforce oppression.

Determining whether identity politics succumbs to either version of the RP requires answering different questions. Addressing the psychological version of the RP involves considering (i) empirical questions about the psychological affects of identity politics and emphasizing group identity and (ii) theoretical questions about the relationship between psychological states and oppression.[5] Answering the constitutive version of the RP requires addressing metaphysical questions about the nature of certain sorts of political projects, the groups they involves, and their effects on the existence and nature of groups. My main focus here is on the constitutive version of the RP as the psychological RP requires answering open empirical questions that go beyond what can be done in a philosophy paper. I do, however, offer reasons to doubt that the psychological RP is damning to identity politics. We turn to those next.

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[4] Thanks Robin Dembroff for suggesting considering the psychological version of the RP.

[5] Thanks to Jonathan Kwan for comments that helped draw out this point.

III. Defanging the Psychological Reinforcement Problem

Evidence from social psychology can be used to call into doubt the view that identity politics elicits negative psychological effects. There is overwhelming evidence that humans tend to favor ingroup members over outsiders (e.g., Tajfel, et. al. (1971); Dunham (2018)). Ingroup bias reveals itself in along various dimensions. For instance it manifests itself in preference for ingroup members, in the extent to which one empathizes with another, and in the extent to which one attributes humanity to a person (Cikara et. al. (2011); Haslam & Loughnan (2014); Kteily & Bruneau (2017)). While the finding that there is strong tendency to have ingroup biases is robust, a group's status in society also affects implicit ingroup and outgroup biases. For instance, studies have found that individuals in lower status racial groups (e.g., Black Americans) have little or no implicit ingroup bias towards their own racial group and may even have implicit biases towards privileged outgroups (e.g., towards white Americans) (Nosek, et. al. (2002); Rudman et al. (2002)). To engage with the empirical questions underlying the psychological RP we need evidence about the effects that highlighting a socially stigmatized group identity has on attitudes.

Recent research showed that college students at a historically black college (HBC) had implicit pro-Black biases that their peers at colleges that are racially heterogeneous did not (Gibson et. al. (2017)). Gibson et. al. found that students at HBCs reported a stronger sense of belonging to their racial group. They also found a positive correlation between strength of sense of belonging and implicit pro-Black biases. In a study on reasons why students chose to attend historically Black colleges and universities, van Camp et. al. (2009) found that students emphasized racial self development and the race focus of the institution (e.g., in terms of classes and student body). If the psychological construal of the RP were correct, we would expect that sustained emphasis on racial identity would reinforce attitudes connected to oppression. For instance, in this case we would expect that being in an educational setting focused on Black identity would further diminish ingroup biases towards Black people or augment implicit pro-White attitudes. Yet, Gibson et. al. (2017) found the exact opposite. In settings in which Black identity is highlighted, implicit ingroup bias was higher. While there are many factors at play, the studies provide some evidence that being in a setting that emphasizes Black identity can have positive psychological effects.

Studies on the appropriation of slurs provide further evidence that identifying using derogatory terms mitigate rather than reinforce oppressive attitudes. Researchers found that when an ingroup member self labels with a slur it increases both a speaker's sense of their own power and

others' perceptions of the speaker's power and of the group targeted by the slur (Galinsky et. al. (2013)). For instance, after self-labeling with *bitch*, women are apt to feel more powerful. Those who witnessed the self-labeling also judge the self-labeler and women in general to be more powerful than in circumstances that did not involve labeling with a slur. While identity politics involves more than reappropriating slurs, the finding that using explicitly derogatory terms can increase perceptions of power provides evidence that banding around an oppressive group can have psychological effects that promote feelings and perceptions of power in marginalized groups.

Evidence from social psychology points towards the view that highlighting identity can lead to changes in ingroup biases, a sense of belonging, and perceptions of power. Research on the relationship between self-esteem, group identification, and attitudes, shows that increases in positive attitudes towards one's group are correlated with increases in self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner (1986); Greenwald et. al. (2002)). This suggests that increased ingroup bias would be correlated with increased self-esteem. To see how the experimental findings might undermine the psychological RP, let's turn to the relationship between psychological states and oppression.

Oppression can have a multitude of psychological effects. Sandra Bartky states that "[t]o be psychologically oppressed is to be weighed down in your mind; it is to have a harsh dominion exercised over your self-esteem" (1990: 22). It involves an internalization of feelings of inferiority in terms of autonomy, rationality, and reliability. The studies considered here provide evidence that emphasizing group identity may reduce feelings of inferiority and promote a sense of belonging, strength, and positive attitudes towards one's group. That is, we have reason to think that emphasizing identity could mitigate psychological oppression. Marginalization and powerlessness are two central characteristics of oppression (Young 1990). We saw that highlighting identities rooted in oppression can diminish the ways these manifest psychologically again potentially working to undermine oppression.

Yet, oppression is not just psychological; is also structural and material (e.g., Frye 1983, Young 1990). Moreover, some psychological effects that might appear positive can in actuality work to further enshrine oppressive systems.[6] For instance, oppressed people might form adaptive preferences in which they come to prefer oppressive conditions even though they are inconsistent with flourishing (Khader 2011). Having high self-esteem is plausibly central to human flourishing. While preferences for ingroup members can surely contribute to oppression, the sorts of preferences that would do so are those that involve bias towards privileged groups. For instance, white, Black, or brown people having pro-white attitudes could contribute to white supremacy. We

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[6] Thanks to Jonathan Kwan for pressing this worry.

saw that when Black identity is highlighted at HBCUs, Black people had stronger implicit pro-Black rather than pro-white attitudes. Highlighting Black identity looks to mitigate the strength of what we might call "adaptive implicit attitudes," which some Black and brown people had outside of HBCU settings.

More research is needed to on the psychological effects of identity politics and on how these relate to structural oppression. Here I have offered evidence that emphasizing group identities can work to promote self-esteem, a sense of belonging, and feelings of power. These are antithetical to promoting oppression. The psychological RP is partially defanged.

The second version of the RP is not empirical or about the connection between psychological states and oppression. The constitutive version of the RP poses a metaphysical challenge for identity politics. In the remainder of the paper I argue that the constitutive Reinforcement Problem can be avoided by considering the nature of different sorts of social groups and the effects identity politics has on group persistence and identity.

IV. Views of Groups and Distinctions in Social Structures

In other work I develop a structuralist account social groups (Ritchie 2013, 2015, forthcoming). Here I outline the elements of the metaphysical framework needed to combat the constitutive RP.

Social structures are structures that constitutively depend on social factors. A **structure** is a network of relations. Structures in this sense can be represented as (although not identified with) graphs composed of nodes and edges. Nodes represent positions or places that can be occupied by entities. They are defined in terms of (i) the relations they bear to other nodes and (ii) (possibly null) restrictions on occupiers.[7] Edges represent relations that hold between nodes (or node-occupiers). For instance in the figure below, the nodes are labeled A-F and the relations between them, of which there might be many, are represented by directed edges.

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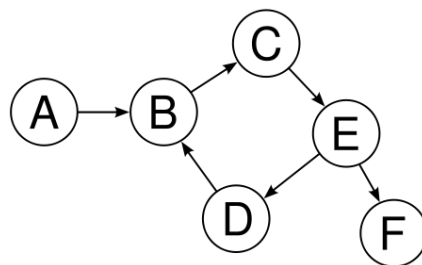
[7] Koslicki (2008) argues for a view of structures that include type restrictions for occupants of positions in a structure must satisfy.

fig. 1—simple directed graph

A structure, S, *constitutively* depends on social factors just in case: (i) in defining what it is to be S reference must be made to some social factors or (ii) social factors are metaphysically necessary for S to exist or (iii) social factors ground the existence of S (or the fact that S exists).[8]

Social factors include social beliefs, systems, patterns, conventions, processes, actions, rules, norms, properties, facts, and arrangements. Rather than attempting to give an analysis of social factors, I point to illustrative examples. Constitutions and charters are social. Legal adoption is social. *Being working class*, *being Norwegian*, and *being Prime Minister* are social. Systems of class, race, and gender are social. Dollar bills, universities, and basketball teams are social. The economy, economic growth, and money are social. The fact that the NBA has two conferences is social. The convention of giving gifts on birthdays is social.

Social structures can differ in two ways that are relevant for our purposes. First, epistemic access to a structure's dependence on social factors can be obvious or not. Something's dependency on social factors is **overt** if its dependence is or can be "openly acknowledged" (Griffiths 1997: 147). In contrast, something's dependency on social factors is **covert** if it is taken to be wholly natural and independent of social factors. Organizational structures of government bodies are overt; gender or class structures might be covert. Second, a structure can be intentionally or unintentionally instantiated. A structure is **intentionally instantiated** when some people intend to instantiate it, perhaps by intending to play certain roles. Otherwise it is **unintentionally instantiated**. Structures of clubs or teams are plausibly intentionally instantiated, while caste structures might be (at least partially) unintentionally instantiated.

The view of social structures just sketched can be used to give accounts of two sorts of social groups. **Feature social groups**—for example gender and racial groups—have members that are (taken to) share some features. They are a variety of social kind. I use 'shared feature' in a way that is very broadly construed. Views on what features are relevant might be more or less mind-independent and more or less intrinsic or relational.

Recall that nodes in social structures are defined in terms of relations and restrictions on node occupiers. They allow for features that are intrinsic as well as features that are relational. They provide us with resources to capture a range of views of gender, racial, and other feature groups. In Ritchie (forthcoming) I argue that feature social groups are nodes in social structures. More

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[8] I develop this definition in Ritchie (forthcoming). It is an adaptation of views of constitutive social construction proposed by Haslanger (2003: 318) and Mallon (2014).

specifically, they are nodes in social structures that restrict occupation to people (or other social creatures) and which allow for multiple occupiers at a time and world.

To illustrate the view of feature social groups in a way that is too simplistic, but will be useful for getting the view on the table let's consider gender groups. Again, to allow for greater clarity while keeping the discussion fairly simple, I adopt a particular view of gender groups (Haslanger (2000)). I am not arguing that this view is correct, but it will make the illustration clearer to adopt a specific view. Haslanger argues that "S is a woman iff S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) and S is 'marked' as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction" (2000, 39). Given this view, the feature group women is a node in a social structure defined in terms of subordination and restrictions on occupiers of nodes (i.e., having certain observed or imagined to have bodily features). The example illustrates how the view that feature social groups are nodes in social structures can be applied.

Feature groups are often in structures that are covert. For instance, many take gender, race, castes, or economic classes to be natural and not socially dependent. They are also often (perhaps in part due to being part of covert structures) unintentionally instantiated.

In Ritchie (2013, forthcoming) I argue that **organized social groups**—like teams and committees—are structured wholes. They are particulars with internal structures[9] and members that occupy nodes in their structures. A group's organizational structure involves roles that can be represented as nodes with relations between them. Consider, again in toy form, an organizing committee for a political group. The committee might have a chair, a treasurer, a secretary, a mobilizing coordinator, and a social media coordinator. The structure can be represented as involving nodes for each role. Organized group structures are plausibly overt and intentionally instantiated.

As in all structures, nodes in organized group structures are defined in terms of relations and restrictions on occupation. All nodes in the structures of organized social groups require that they be occupied by a person (or social creature). They might also place restrictions on an occupiers' age, citizenship, gender, etc. Relations that define nodes can hold between nodes in the structure (e.g., the treasurer might report to the chair) or to other entities (e.g., the social media coordinator bears relations to social media platforms like Twitter). Relations might require certain actions. They could also involve norms. For instance, someone might be normatively bound by the node they

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[9] They may also be positioned in larger structures.

occupy even if they are not always carrying out the requisite action or if they fail to "live up to" the demands of the position.

Organized groups have structures; they are not merely structures. They are structures that have been realized by individuals. Both structures and members matter for their persistence and identity conditions. Some individuals realize a structure and are the members of an organized group by collectively occupying the nodes in the structure by bearing the relations the nodes require.

The exposition of social structures and social groups given here will suffice for the purposes of our objective—to show that the Reinforcement Problem can be avoided through appeal to the metaphysics of social groups. There may be other accounts of the metaphysics of groups that could also provide ways to avoid the Reinforcement Problem. I am not arguing that a structuralist metaphysics is the *only* way to dissolve the problem. Rather, it is to use the resources of a particular metaphysical view to demonstrate how social metaphysics provides resources to diffuse a central problem posed against identity politics.

V. Dissolving the Reinforcement Problem—Social Metaphysics at Work

The Reinforcement Problem claimed that identity politics involves further reinforcement or reification of certain identity groups—like racial and gender groups. To use the terminology from the last section, it involves the claim that certain sorts of feature groups are reinforced. If the Reinforcement Problem is to have any bite, some feature groups must metaphysically depend on relations of oppression, bias, or disenfranchisement. Let me explain. If identity groups were not intimately related to oppression at all, then banding around them would fail be sufficient for reinforcing oppression. By way of comparison suppose that wearing red sneakers is not related to oppression. Then, coming together with other red sneaker wearers will not be sufficient nor will it make it likely that oppression is reinforced. Certainly it is possible that red sneaker wearers will end up oppressing others, but there is nothing about red sneaker wearing in and of itself that further entrenches injustice. There is no intimate connection between reinforcing a group that is not connected to oppression and reinforcing oppression. If identity groups are not at least partially dependent on oppression,[10] the Reinforcement Problem is sidestepped.

This provides the first metaphysical strategy for avoiding the constitutive RP. If identity groups are not metaphysically dependent on oppression, the constitutive RP is avoided. Yet, the view that racial, gender, and other groups are constitutively dependent on relations of oppression is

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[10] For arguments that gender identity should be understood as distinct from gender as a position in a social structure see, e.g., Jenkins (2016).

prominent in feminist and critical theory (e.g., Hardimon (2014), Haslanger (2000), Mills (1998)). Here I argue that even if identity politics involves identity groups that are dependent on oppression, the RP can be avoided.

Consider identity politics as carried out by Black Lives Matter. On their website they state "Four years ago, what is now known as the Black Lives Matter Global Network began to organize. It started out as a chapter-based, member-led organization whose mission was to build local power and to intervene when violence was inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes."[11] The organization is a network of organized groups. It currently includes 20 chapters. Some of their members have defined leadership roles. BLM has founders (Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi) and a full-time staff. It is not a feature group. It is not a social kind. Feature groups are not the sorts of entities that are founded. They do not have chapters. They are not staffed. For instance, the social group women does not have a staff. It was not founded in the 1700s.

A movement like BLM does not involve merely reinforcing a feature group that is a node in a structure that is (largely) composed of oppressive hierarchical relations. The organization is not just based on shared social position, but involves organizing and mobilizing. It involved the creation of various organized chapters in cities and states across the United States. While their foci are different, the Black Lives Matter Global Network resembles the structure of a league of teams (e.g., the National Basketball Association) much more than a social kind like African Americans, Blacks, or women. Insofar as identity politics involves forming organized groups, it fails to involve just reinforcing feature groups in oppressive power structures. The social structuralist view of social groups provides resources to show that identity politics does not merely involve reinforcing groups constituted (in part) by subordination or domination.

In order for new organized groups to avoid reinforcing oppressive groups, the metaphysics of feature groups is also relevant. If the organized group was aimed at maintaining a group linked to bias, oppression, and domination, then the RP would rear its head again. At the end of section *I* I noted that projects in identity politics have two types of aims—eliminativist and valorizing. Identity politics with eliminativist aims seeks to destabilize and ultimately abolish certain identity groups through social restructuring. Identity politics of this sort involves appealing to racial, gender, or other identity groups as part of a political project that will ultimately lead to their destruction. It involves a strategic reliance on identity groups in a way analogous to strategic uses of essentialism (Spivak 1996).

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[11] Retrieved from https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/what-we-believe/ on January 10, 2019.

Identity politics with abolitionist aims can avoid the constitutive RP. The aims of the political project is not to reinforce or form further attachments to a group. While identity politics with eliminativist aims may face the psychological RP and there may be worries about its viability as a strategy, it does not face the constitutive RP. To draw the point out further, compare abolitionist identity politics with a group aimed at eradicating malaria. If its aims are met, malaria is eliminated, not reinforced. Even if the groups appealed to by abolitionist identity politics are rooted in oppression, the strategy does not seek to reinforce groups. So the worry that further reification of groups elicits more oppression does not arise.[12]

Second, identity politics might have valorizing aims to support and bolster identity groups and emphasize group perspectives, experiences, and values. To avoid the constitutive RP, identity politics with valorizing aims must involve feature group transformation.

Feminist philosophers have argued against the view that identity politics involves merely banding together around oppressive categories or social groups. For instance, Alcoff argues that "a realistic identity politics … is one that recognizes the dynamic, variable, and negotiated character of identity" (2000: 341). In a similar vein Young argues that "those who identify with a group can redefine the meaning and norms of a group identity" and that "oppressed groups have sought to confront their oppression by engaging in just such redefinition" (1990: 46). Feature groups or social identity categories that depend on shared positionality might be a starting point for identity politics, but they are not the end point of identity politics.

Ann Ferguson (1996, 1998) argues that identity politics should focus on "building bridge identities," which require those involved to "reconstitute" identities rather than "reaffirming or revalorizing them as essentialist identity politics supposes" (1996: 580). Again, we are seeing that identity politics is taken to be about renegotiation, creation, or transformation. She goes on to suggest that "[w]e can develop an identity politics … by agreeing with others defined by a similar positionality to fight for certain social justice demands, such as abortion rights, freedom from male violence, affordable childcare, or adequate research on women's health issues" (Ferguson 1996: 581). These political aims and a vantage point that recognizes certain wrongs, biases, and forms of

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[12] Thanks to Katharine Jenkins for helpful discussion and suggestions on this point.

oppression might be rooted in being a member of a certain feature group, but these do not just "fall out of" being positioned in a particular way. Rather they take discussion, education, and theorizing.[13]

Gurminder Bhambra and Victoria Margree argue that "[w]hile a recognition of historical (and contemporary) suffering is an important aspect of the political process of seeking redress for the conditions of suffering, it does not constitute identity singularly" (2010: 65). They argue that taking identity politics to involve an attachment to oppressive categories fails "to recognise (or accept) the processes of change associated with movements" (*ibid.*). Like Alcoff, Young, and Ferguson, they stress that identity politics involves movements that aim at change and the destruction of groups centered on or grounded in oppression.

To give a final example, Allison Weir argues that identity politics is about transformation. She states (2008: 119)

> [i]dentity politics has always been a complex process involving finding ourselves identified as belonging to a particular category (women, blacks, gays), and identifying with these particular "we's," and constructing our identity through active processes of resistance, of making meaning, through political struggle, through identifications with each other, through creating new narratives, and thereby (re)creating ourselves, and our identities.

If identity politics is about transforming or creating new identities from which to develop political platforms, how might the views and tools from social metaphysics prove useful?

Let's consider an example to help answer the question. Suppose we start with the simplified view that the feature groups women and men are nodes in a structure defined in terms of subordination and privilege as in Haslanger's (2000) definition given above. Then suppose some individuals who are women begin to engage in identity politics. They develop shared aims in overturning laws and in providing better legal protections for abortion rights. They work with those in the LGBTQA+ community to defend partner rights and accessibility and inclusion. And so on. The group is still a feature social group. It involves relations to other groups. It might involve relations to petitions and laws. It requires that one have several shared goals and desires. These can all be understood in the structuralist framework as being either relations between nodes or

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[13] There is a striking similarity between arguments made in feminist standpoint epistemology and the points made here. In standpoint theory, standpoints are not taken to be just given from being socially positioned (i.e., a member of some oppressed feature group). For instance, Harding states "a standpoint can not be thought of as an ascribed position with its different perspective that oppressed groups can claim automatically. Rather a standpoint is an achievement, something for which oppressed groups must struggle" (2004: 8). Hartsock argues "the vision available to the oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement which requires both science to see beneath the surface of the social relations in which all are forced to participate, and the education which can only grow from struggle to change these relations" (2004: 37).

constraints on who (or what, when non-persons are at issues as in the case of petitions) can occupy nodes.[14]

Is this the same group as that defined in terms of oppressive power structures? Whether it is depends on the persistence conditions of the feature group. The structure that involves relations of subordination and privilege and being assumed or imagined to have certain bodily features does not involve relations to laws. That structure does not require that one can be a member of the group women only if one aims to protect abortion rights or wants to make marriage accessible to everyone. The structures are different. The nodes are different. The group of women engaged in identity politics is a distinct feature group!

Further, recall the two distinctions drawn in the last section. I claimed that many feature groups are nodes in covert and unintentionally instantiated social structures. In contrast, the group formed when engaging in identity politics is intentionally instantiated. Its instantiation involves political, social, and ethical work. The structure is also overt. Social factors (whether in terms of education, political engagement, coalition building, and so on) are relied on in identity politics and in the renegotiation of identity that it involves.

While the feature group is distinct, it is still a group that is engaged in identity politics. The group is historically related to a group defined in terms of oppressive relations. A group might be rooted in oppression in two ways.[15] First, it might constitutively depend on oppression. In this sense, if the relevant forms of oppression are eliminated, the group ceases to exist. Second, a group might be rooted in oppression in a causal-historical sense. On this view, a group need not presently be oppressed in order to depend on oppression. Since the new feature group is not a node in an oppressive structure, it fails to be rooted in oppression in the first sense, but it still might be in the second sense.

There is a robust historical connection between the formation of the new group, the group's shared goals and interests, and the group's political platform. When engaged in identity politics, one is aimed at using experiences to foster solidarity and construct new identities. Young argues that the sense of identity relevant in identity politics involves "self-ascription as belonging to a group with others who similarly identity themselves, who affirm or are committed together to a set of values, practices, and meanings" (1994: 734). The feature group involved in identity politics is distinct, but it

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[14] Young (1994) argues for a distinction between gender as seriality and gender as involving what she calls groups in order to avoid essentialist worries. On my view, both serialities and groups (in her sense) are feature groups. Their differences rely largely on whether intentions are required. I do not take this to require a metaphysical difference in the nature of the entities involved.

[15] Thanks to Rebecca Mason for suggesting the two ways a group might be rooted in oppression.

is related in causal historical and material ways to a group based in oppression. It can be rightfully said to be engaged in identity politics without thereby reinforcing oppression. Views and distinctions from social metaphysics provide a new way to frame and understand the transformative response to the Reinforcement Problem.

We saw that feminist and critical theorists have argued for transformative solutions to avoiding RP. Their arguments are often explicitly anti-metaphysical. For instance, Weir argues that what she call 'transformative identity politics' should not focus on categories or groups like women or Blacks. Rather, it should focus on "identifying with," which does not involve social categories or groups, but "identification with others, identification with values and ideals, identification with ourselves, as individuals and as collectives" (2008: 111). She argues that a shift from identity politics focused on groups or categories to a transformative identification-with model requires "a shift from a metaphysical to an ethical and political model of identity" (*ibid.*). Metaphysics should be abandoned, Weir claims, as it reinforces identity politics that are rooted in categories that merely oppositional and cannot promote the needed solidarity.

I agree that an emphasis on transformation and on building relationships, platforms, and commitments are components of how identity politics ought to be practiced, but I reject the notion that metaphysics is irrelevant or antithetical to anti-oppressive aims. The constitutive RP takes identity politics, in virtue of its very nature, to reinforce social relations and identities that are subordinate and marginalized. It claims that certain political projects ensure that certain oppressive relations or groups persist. This is a metaphysical claim, which demands a (partially) metaphysical solution.

We saw how metaphysical theorizing about the nature of social groups and social structures allows identity politics to avoid the Reinforcement Problem. New organized social groups or categories that are intentional, political, and based on interests, values, and relations come to be through the practice of identity politics. Metaphysics need not be divorced from ethics or politics. Our options are not identity politics that merely reifies social groups that depend on bias and oppression or avoiding metaphysics all together. Rather, there is room for social metaphysics that is ethically and politically engaged.

VI. Concluding Remarks

Attending to social psychology and the metaphysics of social groups reveals that identity politics need not be self-undermining. The Reinforcement Problem does not sink the entire possibility of

emancipatory identity politics. Even so, identity politics could be practiced in a way that promotes oppression. For instance, identity politics that is focused solely on white women or the arguments made by Incels (the shorthand term for a group of so-called involuntary celibates) might reinforce oppression. Identity politics does not necessarily succumb to the Reinforcement Problem, but careful normative and political analysis is certainly still needed.

Focusing on social metaphysics in order to better understand and dissolve one argument against identity politics also revealed that metaphysics and political and normative projects need not be in tension. Recent work in social ontology requires us to rethink boundaries between sub-disciplines. Normative and political concerns can be relevant to metaphysics and metaphysics can be relevant in normative and political projects. Social metaphysics has a role to play in vindicating identity politics from a central challenge. Work on ameliorative projects and in conceptual ethics or conceptual engineering poses another point at which ethics, politics, and metaphysics come together (Haslanger (2000), Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, 2013b), Cappelen (2018)). By breaking down barriers, fruitful exchanges can be brought to the fore.

There are various other theoretical and practical problems that have been posed for identity politics that I have not addressed here. Some of these might be solved through analyses involving social metaphysics. For instance, worries with essentializing or failing to be intersectional might benefit from metaphysical as well as ethical and political analyses. Other challenges might be beyond the scope of an analysis relying on the nature of social entities or might be unresolvable. Nevertheless, I have argued that taking social metaphysics seriously shows that one prominent argument problematizing identity politics as a liberatory strategy fails.

There is growing interest in social metaphysics within ontology. Social ontology is interesting in its own right. In addition, social metaphysics is metaphysics that can have a political and ethical upshot. It is not just metaphysics, but metaphysics that matters.[16]

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