



Identity politics and social justice

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Introduction

Is identity politics (hereafter IP), in its various historically and spatially contextually diverse forms, conducive to sustained social justice? Or does it hinder struggles to achieve a resiliently just and sustainably egalitarian world? These questions stimulated a conference roundtable discussion late in 2021.¹ Given the current widespread practice of IP, however, they merit further discussion. This article introduces a collection of essays focused on diverse contemporary manifestations of IP and their relation to social justice. The collection sheds light on various context-specific forms in which identities underlie political action and modes of organisation, driven by activists, academics, government policies, or market forces. The resulting scenario allows for broader reflections, which we briefly attempt here.

Many contemporary progressive political struggles seem, often to a great extent, to mobilise IP. In doing so they frequently rest to some degree on ‘strategic essentialism’, since each instance in practice requires some working agreement about acceptable forms and contents of the particular identity/ies being mobilised, and thus crystallises each of them into a specific form. Such identity based struggles

¹ The roundtable and a linked panel at the IUAES2021 Congress were sponsored by the IUAES Commission for the Study of Difference, Discrimination and Marginalisation. Earlier versions of various articles in this collection were presented there.

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include, among many others, identitarian heritage and memorialisation claims, identitarian calls for political autonomy, identitarian demands for enforcement of equity employment laws that challenge inequalities based on gender or race in hiring or pay gaps, and identitarian calls for revision and diversification of teaching curricula with unequal identity representations. In what follows, we consider a variety of strategies that might be used to define IP, and whether, and how, they encompass other social phenomena which are not commonly understood as exemplifying IP – for example, governmental migration policy that regulates mobility based on identities, or far-right nationalist agendas of exclusion of national or ethnic others. To this end, we begin by considering whether IP can be neatly defined, and then discuss various critiques of IP, many presented in the collection's articles, which question its potential to achieve sustained social justice. We conclude with a brief reassessment of the usefulness of the concept of IP.

Challenges for defining identity politics

The notion of IP is difficult to define and, in writing this introductory article, we have struggled with how, and whether, to do so. This is a question to which we return in our conclusion. As is evident in the articles included in our collection, IP is utilised in a plurality of ways: contributors to this collection have understood and used the concept differently from each other and related it to diverse social phenomena. Such a multiplicity of meanings might not, however, be conducive to comparative analyses or general assessments of practices that might be considered to exemplify IP at work. Hence some of the challenges we faced when preparing this overview.

IP can, from one perspective, be understood as a concrete historically practised phenomenon, bound to the socio-historical specificities in which it occurs. Moran (2020), who works from this perspective, argues that the term should be limited to those forms of political action that mobilise *explicitly* around identity, which, she adds, is a phenomenon that arose in the second half of the twentieth century along with nascent uses of the term in academic literature. Similarly, many trace IP to specific non-governmental progressivist movements, mainly stemming from the social justice struggles of the 1960s and 1970s in the USA. Its origin is often traced back to the Combahee River Collective Statement (2017[1977]) – a manifesto arguing for a type of IP that reflects the specificity of the oppression faced by queer racialised women. In our view, however, such an understanding limits application of the term to a specific socio-historical manifestation and renders it a concept of limited theoretical utility. For us, examples of what we currently call IP can be found across history and socio-geographic contexts, even if the vocabulary of the time or place did not categorise those forms of political action as such.²

² Smith (2021: 187) similarly contested ideas that *racialisation* occurred only after a scientific biological concept of race emerged. He consequently argued that notions of sharply distinctive natural kinds existed before scholarly theories of race, and insisted that “folk-biology is biology too”.

An alternative to this approach is to view IP as a conceptual tool for categorisation, analysis and comparison of diverse socio-political forms. This is the path we have chosen for our discussion of the concept as a general analytical tool instead of as an historically specific phenomenon. We begin, in this section, by considering the various characteristics that might lead to practices being considered as IP, and the extent to which such characteristics can or cannot be seen as definitional (that is, as necessary and sufficient conditions for a specific kind of political activity to be understood as IP). In doing this we also focus on various counter-arguments, as we believe that a precise understanding of IP, and of what practices are best described by that couplet, is related to how one deals with various critiques of the concept and its operationalisation. The recurring characteristics we identify can be divided into three distinct, albeit sometimes overlapping, sets which we consider in three separate subsections focused, respectively, on political grievances, on political practices, and on the political aims and outcomes of a particular array of processes and actions.

Identitarian grievances that mobilise political action

IP is very often understood to be motivated by a sense of injustice, a recognition of forms of inequality, misrecognition, oppression or exploitation which are interpreted as deriving from identitarian causes. Such recognition of identitarian injustice in turn serves as motivation to advocate corrective measures aimed at achieving recognition and condemnation of the identified injustice, recognition of people defined by the given identity, and/or other corrective measures.

To what extent should the presence of identitarian grievances and a consequent sense of injustice be central to considering particular practices as exemplifying IP? It is certainly the case that various political movements and their practices that are commonly understood as representing IP are those motivated by injustices such as, to take just two examples, racialized police violence or a gender pay gap. This suggests that the presence of those characteristics might indeed render such movements' activism examples of IP. But that does not show that an identitarian political motivation, or a sense of identitarian injustice, are either a necessary or a sufficient condition for something to be understood as IP. There are several arguments against asserting that they are.

Firstly, it is difficult to assess to what extent a sense of identitarian grievance and injustice is central to any particular movement's mobilisation, and to what extent, and how, it intertwines with other motivations. Secondly, social movements which are at one time strongly motivated by a struggle against an identitarian injustice may, and often do, later change their main motivations. That is so even when, rhetorically, they continue to assert identitarian injustice to be their motivation. Thirdly, there are movements which, despite asserting that they are motivated by specific identitarian grievances and injustices, work towards non-identitarian solutions. Examples include those movements operating in racialised colonial contexts where class-based material injustices are suffered primarily by one or more sets of racially categorised persons, and which nonetheless work to overcome class discrimination

and exploitation. Conversely, a group could be considered as practising IP because it advances a strongly identitarian agenda even when it does not perceive its grievances as based on identity, or when it is not motivated at all by a sense of injustice.

Moreover, authors disagree over whether, and to what extent, the presence of identity categories, understood as socially constructed or not, plays a causal role in specific social injustices, and whether or not they are core causes of such injustices or they derive from other, non-identitarian causes. We are inclined to assume a position that responding to a sense of identitarian injustice is not the main, nor a necessary and sufficient characteristic for recognising political action as IP.

Identitarian political practices

The mobilisation of identities as central to political processes is another way of understanding IP. This includes, for instance, affirmation of positive images of an ethnic minority, limiting political mobilisation to those considered to be of a particular identity, applying identitarian quotas in the organisation of public political debates, or reference to identities in political slogans. Moran's (2020) definition, cited above, reflects a commitment to seeing IP only in political practices where this characteristic is evident and the main, if not the only, motivating factor.

Applying that perspective broadly means that much of today's world politics could effectively be seen as IP, at least in a general sense: notions of and appeals to national identities underlie the post 19th Century world political order and continue to be its fundamental building blocks. Although the term is usually deployed in contexts other than nation-states' identity construction, when taken to its logical consequences a definition of IP that centres on identitarian political practice would need to recognise much of conventional international politics, and of the politics within various nation-states, as a form of IP: note, among other measures and practices, the extensive contemporary identity-based border controls, regulation of national markets, and preclusions, during times of conflict, of individuals from global sports events on grounds of their national identity. Although IP tends to be regarded as an attribute of progressive movements, identitarian strategies and agendas are also often mobilised by those (commonly right-wingers) intent on resisting such progressive movements. White supremacism, nationalism and trans-exclusionary feminism all employ identitarian strategies to affirm their values and to undermine the advancement, respectively, of racialised populations, migrants, and trans people. Under this second characterization of IP, as political process where identity is the core mobilising component, such reactionary movements' activities could be considered as examples of IP.

How useful is it then to assume that the key defining characteristic of IP is the mobilisation of identities as an approach to political change? Or to argue that that is the case only when identities are the primary drivers of such mobilisation? Does the extent to which identity is mobilised matter for the purpose of defining IP, and if so, how is that extent to be assessed? Political action is often accompanied by some mobilisation of identities, which might, to different degrees, be related to political motivations or desired outcomes. But often those are not the only motivating forces

nor aspired for outcomes. As Becker (2023) shows in her contribution to this collection, political mobilisation can take various forms, some of which appear identitarian even whilst its ultimate aim is to achieve egalitarian outcomes. Identity can be deployed alongside demands to effect egalitarian social justice without demanding codification or reinforcement of a specific identity. By analogy, a socio-political movement that aims to improve workers' conditions need not be defined as religious on grounds that its members pray to God to achieve that goal, or otherwise evoke religious imagery in making their plea. Similarly, when identity, albeit present, is not central to a movement's desired political outcomes, some might not define it as IP.

Identitarian political aims or outcomes

IP also commonly appears in discussions of political standpoints aimed at prioritising issues concerning, and the interests of, categories of people defined by a socio-cultural identity. Alongside, but not necessarily in accord with the above-mentioned understanding of IP in relation to grievances and political practice, another set of characteristics that are used to identify political action as exemplifying IP is the intended or achieved result of such action. From this viewpoint, one would see IP at work when the interventions are aimed at, or achieve, an identitarian outcome, such as the reinforcement or reproduction of identities as politically meaningful categories in order to ensure differentiated treatment.

Such a perspective enables one to encompass within IP instances of popular and non-governmental political mobilisations that aim at identitarian goals – as, for instance, when gender (or anti-racist) activists seek legal or other authorised recognition for specific genders (or racial categories) and also aim to have their respective members granted distinctive socio-political rights or protections.³ It also includes, for example, governmental affirmative action policy that codifies ethnic identities and allocates certain rights on that basis, activists' struggles to expand the list of identities that benefit from such a policy, as well as other activists' resistance to that list's expansion. Bouchard et al (2023) in this collection describe precisely that kind of scenario as it plays out in Canada. In addition, there are instances where a state policy aims to achieve egalitarianism but results in identitarian outcomes. An example is the Soviet national identity policy which Simon et al (2023) discuss as backdrop to the present situation in Russia. Another is the rhetoric of 'separate development' that lay behind South Africa's apartheid ideology and its bantustan policy that asserted that each ethnic-racial category would have similar but separate developmental paths within its own land area.

Various factors constrain efforts to understand IP in terms of political actions' aims and outcomes. Most political movements are internally diverse and often include proponents of identity-reinforcing outcomes as well as proponents of non-identitarian agendas. For example, some persons within a movement that focuses on

³ Often provision of those rights is in terms of principles of restitutive/compensatory affirmative action.

addressing homophobia might aim legislatively to codify and operationalise specific sexual identities whilst others within that same movement might propose legislation against any and all forms of sexual-identity based oppression, but without referring to or seeking to reify specific sexual-identity categories. Two such positions can coexist internally without their seemingly conflicting agendas gaining saliency or leading to confrontation. For that reason it might be analytically more accurate to speak of extents to which a desired identitarian outcome is central, overall, to a political movement, rather than characterise it binarily as either IP or not IP.

The analytical imprecision of identity politics as concept

The three conceptualisations of IP presented above each focus on a distinctive aspect of political action: the grievances that mobilise it, its political practices, and its aims and outcomes. Using any one of these to characterise political manifestations as examples of IP has its own distinct analytical potential as each effectively relates to a distinctive facet or phase of socio-political phenomena. These facets can be, and often are, related in practice, but not necessarily so. As mentioned above, identitarian political mobilisation that is motivated by grievances can occur without a goal of achieving identitarian political outcomes. Similarly, as the Soviet example shows, a politics of egalitarianism can have an identitarian outcome. Precisely because the term IP is often employed in relation to combinations of the various aspects described above, it is an analytically imprecise tool. This imprecision results in much contestation over IP and a conceptual quagmire when trying to assess its political value. Whilst one solution to the term's imprecision might be to agree on one definition and its logical consequences, another is to abandon the broad concept of IP and focus on more precise concepts and empirical examinations. There is much value in the discussions of the social phenomena understood to be IP (as we try to show below), but perhaps the analytical scope of the term is simply too wide.

One possible route for extricating ourselves from this morass of analytical imprecision might be to assess the extent to which identities play a role in a given political action's motivations, processes, practices, goals and outcomes, rather than to try to define the term and/or characterise a concrete case in a binary fashion as either entirely IP, or not IP at all. These are issues that have arisen whilst we have worked on this introduction and attempted to find common points of understanding about IP in the collection's papers, particularly since all their authors, including ourselves, have worked with their own (often implicit and tentative) notions of what constitutes IP.

Identity politics and the struggle for social justice

Just as what constitutes IP and its boundaries is a matter of debate, so too is its value as an approach in struggles for social justice. This collection of essays seeks to contribute to these debates by presenting diverse positions regarding IP, evaluating its relationship to social justice and injustice, and suggesting alternatives. The

collection's various authors provide a variety of understandings of IP which are situated not only in different theoretical stances, but also – and perhaps most importantly – in a broad scope of geographical and political contexts in which what is apparently IP has taken various forms, with varying results. Whereas some essays take a more theoretical approach, others adopt an ethnographic methodology, resulting in a collection that explores a wide range of manifestations of contemporary IP in regions as diverse as Colombia, Canada, Russia, and Namibia. In particular, ethnographic research contains enormous potential for the study of IP, however defined or characterised, as it grounds abstract analytical discussions in specific examples, thus enabling an informed assessment of its concrete deployments and outcomes. In this section, we present the essays by inserting them into wider debates on the relationship of IP with social justice, and by stressing their contributions to these ongoing discussions.

Debates over IP have focused both on the functioning of social injustice and of struggles against it. As regards how social injustice functions, the core issue is whether and to what extent identities play any causal role in it. Regarding IP's function in struggles against injustice, discussions abound over the role identities can or should play in addressing oppression and in struggles for social justice in specific contexts. Defenders of IP often argue for the necessity of a political solidarity based on given identities such as womanhood, Africanness, blackness or indigeneity. For them, IP carries the potential to expose injustices and oppression that are based on specific identitarian social categorisations. They also assert that IP enables united and corrective actions by those affected.

Amongst the collection's various perspectives, some are critical of the form IP has taken over time and/or of specific instantiations of it, alleging that the problems they signal are not due to IP in itself, but to defective applications. For others who are critical, IP is, in and of itself, an inadequate or even detrimental approach for addressing injustice. These latter positions often originate in Marxian, queer or cosmopolitan scholarly perspectives and argue that identitarian approaches are not conducive to achieving social justice because they fail to understand structural forms of injustice, and/or the workings of political struggle, and/or identity in itself as a socially constructed and historical phenomenon. In what follows, we discuss such contentions with a particular focus on how the essays in our collection stand in relation to them.

IP and structural injustice

Amongst IP's strongest critiques is the contention that it poses no real challenge to the status quo as it leaves the roots of structural inequalities unaddressed. Some contend that this happens because such movements are often hijacked by identitarian elites; others that IP fights the symptoms of exploitation and oppression rather than their causes. This is the position adopted by Das (2023, cf. 2020), perhaps the strongest critique of IP in this collection. From a Marxist position, Das argues that IP fundamentally misunderstands the causes of oppression, and neglects the causal primacy of class relations. This theoretical flaw, he says, leads to a political

deficiency, falling into relatively insignificant symbolism and a representational politics in which only a relatively small number of individuals, commonly those of the elite, receive some limited material benefits. Das argues that IP is a “bourgeois politics” which has no potential to unite different interest groups based on their objective class interests, and that only class politics constitutes a viable alternative as it offers an effective strategy against both oppression and exploitation. Das’ position resonates somewhat with that of Fraser (2008), who, whilst not being entirely critical of IP, argues that the politics of identitarian affirmation (i.e. contemporary IP) is consistent with a surface redistribution characteristic of a liberal welfare state. Fraser argues that a deconstruction of identitarianism, one that has the potential for a deep restructuring of relations of recognition, of blurring group differentiation, is consequently consistent with political aims towards a deep restructuring of relations of production.

Cabarcas Ortega (2023) presents this problem through a specific case drawn from Cartagena, Colombia. He explores the history and current use of *Champeta*, a musical genre originating in Cartagena as a form of expression by the racialised poor. He describes how this music, that draws on African traditions, was played at loud informal parties, and was initially unwelcome by Cartagena’s rich elite and city officials, among other reasons because of its public-space display of Afro-Colombianity and because it openly exposed the elite’s racism. Over time however, and under the influence of governmental identitarian multicultural policies, *Champeta* became a marketable product which aided in promoting an exotic image of Cartagena as a popular tourist destination. The musical form’s political dissent also became a “cultural heritage” product – one seen as representing an innocuous Afro-Colombian identity. As Cabarcas Ortega argues, such an IP promotes a positive image of the city and increases the profit of the music and tourist industries through instrumentalization of certain groups and their cultural practices – doing that even while it ignores, in fact reinforces, the injustices at *Champeta*’s roots and the suffering of social groups that create and consume it.

Both Kurzweilly (2023) and Robins and Spiegel (2023) also contend that IP is conceptually and politically ineffective in addressing structural injustice. Kurzweilly takes the case of contemporary German institutional provenance research and restitutions of human remains to argue that IP uses imprecise categories and is an indirect and inadequate means to address the injustices related to such collections. He argues that while restitutions can be seen as effective in exposing historical injustices and in providing a podium for those affected, they are ineffective in addressing the related injustice of “race science’s” development and its legitimisation of racism. In their article, Robins and Spiegel focus on a struggle in South Africa for equity between, on one hand, memorialisation of colonial victories over indigenous people and of the Holocaust and, on the other hand, memorialisation of Black people’s suffering and struggles under colonialism, apartheid and in the present post-apartheid neo-liberal context. Describing how some deeply marginalised Black South Africans resist memorialisation, they argue that the identitarianism underpinning efforts to improve Black people’s memorialisation undermines efforts to overturn the structures that continue to reinforce poverty and deprivation. Kurzweilly’s and Robins and Spiegel’s respective points are that restitutions and memorialisation as a political

tactic have limited potential to go beyond symbolic recognition, conclusions that resonate with Das's (2023) contention about the limits of IP's focus on the symbolic.

Political limitations of IP as a category

Other lines of work have found limitations in the use of IP as a political category for understanding socio-political resistance and how it is effected. This is the case for Becker (2023) who contends that it is analytically problematic and reductive to categorise the actions of internally diverse movements as IP. She describes examples of political manifestations in Namibia where a number of grievances and political narratives emerged that were broadly framed by the activists involved as “decolonial”. In light of recent criticism of decolonial activism, and decoloniality in general, as a form of IP, Becker argues that the Namibian protests she describes had egalitarian goals that effectively opposed IP that was government driven. She argues that the protesters' activism towards removing colonial monuments, renaming streets and simultaneously opposing sexual violence and police brutality, demonstrates that their efforts constitute what she calls a political form of “intersectional decoloniality”. Her article illustrates well our earlier suggestion that one should assess the extent to which identities manifest within or are otherwise central to a political movement's motivations, practices and intended outcomes, rather than attempt to categorise a movement as one characterising IP (or not).

Working from a theoretical perspective, Pérez (2023) also offers a compelling critique of IP as an adequate political concept or category. She argues that IP is neither a sufficient nor even a necessary tool to capture the actual functioning of subjection and oppression which, she suggests, is driven by diverse social structures and cultural processes and not only by those commonly assumed by IP's defenders. On these grounds, Pérez takes some examples from contemporary feminism to contest the idea that identity is always an adequate interpretive tool to understand social injustice. Whilst not entirely dismissing the political relevance of identity which, she grants, has an important role in both oppression and resistance, she argues that IP has acquired almost a monopoly as a political tactic in today's world, and that that in turn undermines social movements' ability fully to understand oppression, to identify connections between various forms of exclusion (and therefore to establish broader alliances), and to imagine alternative paths to social justice. Albeit not derived from a Marxist perspective, Pérez's argument is another that resonates with Das (2023).

Identity politics and essentialism

Analyses critical of IP have also focused on its conception and use of identity, for instance by stressing how it can overemphasise identitarian differences and/or reproduce essentialism, often in the form of “strategic essentialism”. Those criticisms, at least implicitly, indicate that a consequence is a failure to address social injustice, or a failure to understand the limitations of identitarian (and essentialist) thinking in efforts to address social injustice. This is exemplified by Robins' and

Spiegel's (2023) descriptive analysis of a media war that has repeatedly erupted in South Africa around Holocaust memorialisation. They point to a persisting failure adequately to memorialise Black Africans' suffering (including genocides), and to how the protagonists in this dispute draw essentialist boundaries around themselves and their antagonists.

It is clear that much of today's socio-political world relies on social essentialism – that is, on an assumption that individuals, understood as members of a specific identity group (often described as an ethnic group), possess certain necessary characteristics without which they would no longer be themselves and which they share with other members of that group (see Kurzweilly et al. 2020). Such a logic contradicts much contemporary social scientific scholarship which sees identities as historically constructed and essentialism as potentially dangerous. As Smith (2021) has argued, essentialist assumptions lie at the core of many, if not all, dehumanising ideologies – ideologies that, when mobilised, lead to social injustice. Moreover, since much IP relies on such essentialism, one might argue that IP too has the potential to result in or at least reinforce social injustice.

That argument is at the core of Kurzweilly's (2023) examination of contemporary restitutions of human remains appropriated from colonial contexts that are held by academic and museum collections. Kurzweilly shows that all the protagonists in such restitutions (academics, academic administrators, politicians and claimants) understand the process in identitarian terms that misrecognise the interests based fission lines between various claimants and between them and those asserting the right to represent them. Moreover, he demonstrates that exercises to identify sets of human remains for purposes of restitutions rely on the same error of social essentialism as does "race science". This occurs because the human remains are ascribed social identities based on their phenotype, genotype, or other arbitrarily selected biological or historical characteristics. Consequently, he indicates, restitutions not only fail to address injustices, but they perpetuate an erroneous essentialist logic. Moreover, they serve mainly symbolic political agendas that cannot necessarily be assumed to be just. In so doing, what is effectively a form of IP which homogenises identities, creates normative expectations over what is used to constitute identities and risks forcing, respectively, human remains and living people into ex-post facto and unwanted homogenising identities. One potential solution to the problem of essentialism in this context, Kurzweilly suggests, is to move away from static identity categories and focus instead on terms that emphasise each person's relative positionality, such as their class position (a relative positionality, not as a class identity) or as reflected in what Macklin (2007) calls the "heft of citizenship" (a measure for estimating a person's factual access to rights. This, perhaps, would have greater potential for effecting just political measures that can successfully target specific injustices.

Pérez (2023) too expresses concern over how IP, through an underlying implicit assumption, and for logistical political reasons, tends to homogenise identities and to treat them as self evident. In line with critiques of hegemonic feminist activism from the perspective of those left at its margins, she shows how, behind an apparently unproblematic "we", there is actually a hierarchization of subjects and, consequently, of the issues regarded as relevant to the feminist movement's agenda.

IP as policy: state, market, and social-media

The centrality of IP to many social movements' advocacy and increasingly also to state policies has also been the focus of much comment and criticism (Pérez & Radi 2020; Reed 2018; Haider 2018). In this collection, the articles by Bouchard et al. (2023), Simon et al. (2023), and Cabarcas Ortega (2023) all discuss cases in which IP manifests in state policies, on occasion in parallel with market forces and social media. Through their in-depth studies, respectively, of specific cases in Canada, Russia and Colombia, they show how the diverse identitarian tactics employed in these contexts fall short of delivering sustained social justice.

Bouchard et al. examine Canadian state policies that aim to recognise historical injustices suffered by indigenous people, including policies recognising so-called "Status Indians". This is, effectively, an example of official state regulated IP which recognises disadvantages experienced by people and "communities", assumedly because of their identity, and which sets rules to mitigate those disadvantages. However, as they explain, problems arise when individuals who do not belong to an officially recognised group, or are of "mixed heritage", claim to be indigenous. This case study illustrates well how IP ultimately relies on constructing boundaries around, and reifying, if not essentialising, identities; and how it thereby excludes some individuals. They also show how, in the Canadian instance, such boundary construction is reinforced by vituperative social media postings from members of recognised groups who accuse others of being "Pretendians" and of falsely appropriating an indigenous (including Métis) identity and the consequent rights to specific benefits intended by the state as restitution for historical injustices. Reflecting on the complexity of indigenous and Métis identity construction, and that it requires diligent ethnographic and historical analysis to comprehend. They conclude that Canadian state policy needs to draw on such analyses in order to become more inclusive than it has been so far. In so doing, they defend state-administered IP as a means to achieve social justice, but on the condition it is based on diligent identity-affirming research.

Simon et al. also consider state policies that might be characterised as IP. They describe the post-Soviet Russian state's 'nationality policy' that regulates ethnic minorities' activities and reduces them to stereotypical cultural expressions. Whilst the policy portrays harmonious ethnic cohesion, other state policies forbid, through threat of incarceration, migrant non-citizens from any political manifestation, notably that intending to overcome material disadvantages suffered by those with other than Russian identities. Consequently, Simon et al. indicate, Russian state policy effectively inhibits resistance that might be based on a shared sense of injustice or a shared recognition of the exploitation and oppression experienced by racialised minorities. In other words, they argue, official state IP policies which regulate expressions of ethnic identities effectively preclude the possibility of minority IP and inhibit organisation of dissent about a common sense of injustice as also an identitarian attempt to address it.

Cabarcas Ortega provides another example where state policy, here in collaboration with city policy, has utilised IP. In this instance that has been done in order simultaneously to acclaim a cultural identitarian practice in musical form whilst

smothering its radical potential to enable achievement of social justice for the community encompassing the genre's originators. He describes how officials in the Colombian city of Cartagena and the city's and country's tourism industry worked assiduously to project a polished image of the city's diversity, promoting both the music genre and carefully selected artists. As he argues, this represents an instrumental use of IP in order only to generate political and economic profit for the state, the city and the elite, whilst leaving unattended, and indeed exacerbating, historically created structural inequalities.

Although not explicitly mentioned by Robins and Spiegel (2023), state-driven IP is also at issue in the South African context of the identitarian struggles over memorialisation on which their paper focuses. One facet derives from a long history of state supported monumental memorialisation of general colonial conquest, of Boer settler conquest of indigenous people and of Afrikaner nationalist settlers' struggles against British imperialism. In each instance, that memorialisation celebrated colonial and settler identities. Another facet is the history of state sponsored IP that manifested in the apartheid policy which legislatively divided the population along ethnic identitarian lines and explicitly disadvantaged those othered by the elite. A third facet is post-apartheid state-sponsored identitarian restitution in all spheres of life, including the economic, the educational and the political, and which plays out in expectations, amongst protagonists for memorialisation of Black indigenous people's suffering, of similar state-sponsorship to realise their identitarian goals.

Kurzweilly (2023) describes a similar but differently directed set of state-motivated expectations in Germany, where a self-critical gaze on the horrors of the Nazi era, along with pressure from groups of affected people from abroad and media attention, has generated a parallel but more recent critique of Germany's colonial history, including a genocide in early 20th Century Namibia, and in relation to which the present German state has found it necessary to intervene. In that context, restitution efforts and monetary reparations, both in the Namibian and in other cases, have, as already mentioned, resulted in identitarian modes for establishing who are legitimate claimants, and also in identitarian struggles between claimants.

Conclusion

The collection which this article introduces addresses a very broadly posed question: does contemporary identity politics lead towards sustained social justice? Although the contributions that follow position themselves differently from one another as regards evaluation of IP as a political tool, they all reveal, from their diverse perspectives and contexts, a variety of shortcomings of IP in relation to social justice.

At least in part, those variations derive from the various authors' different ideological positions. Those differences may also be behind the markedly diverse understandings of the concept of IP and the consequent vagueness and imprecision arising from the different ways the authors have used the couplet in reference to the wide variety of political forms, and the equally wide variety of characteristics of political practices on which they focus. As we have suggested earlier, this leads us to ask what are the characteristics of a political action or movement that enable one

to recognise it as practising IP. We have sought to answer that question by describing three different possible ways of characterising IP in relation to specific facets of (or phases in) political processes: identitarian grievances, mobilisation of identities, and identitarian aims and outcomes. Nevertheless, in producing these characterizations we found that all of them are insufficient to establish when, exactly, a political process is (or is not) definitively an exemplar of IP as it is commonly understood today. This lack of consensus over what comprises IP, the imprecision in how the term is used, hinders its use as a comparative analytical tool. Does that mean we need to generate and then demand general use of a thoroughly considered and therefore very precise definition? Or does it mean that we should abandon use of the term and improve our precision when we describe socio-political phenomena in detail? Efforts to use the term for classificatory purposes require something akin to the former; efforts to be analytically clear may be possible by following the latter path.

This choice is particularly delicate as IP is far from being a merely conceptual issue: it is a political tactic that is currently being applied and defended in all sorts of contexts around the world. The practices usually described by the couplet have gained what Pérez (2023) calls a monopoly within change-oriented social movements and now have currency well beyond the confines of the social sciences, with diverse and often incompatible meanings attached to it. In this context, we would suggest that investing effort into defining what constitutes IP has little if any value. Rather, what is needed is assiduous analysis of concrete political interventions in which identitarian thinking is present, and of the extent of success those have in achieving sustained social justice.

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