# Is mediation violence? A critique of identity politics

**Marco Mazzone**
Università degli Studi di Catania
mazzonem@unict.it

**Abstract** By «identity politics» (see Lilla 2017) I intend a political project closely based on the defense of the rights of individuals and minorities. Here, I analyze a problematic assumption that is sometimes made by the advocates of that project: the idea that, since difference is a value, no mediation is necessary, or even that behind every search for mediation lies a claim to universality that constitutes a form of violence. The dual purpose of this article is to challenge that critique of mediation through an analysis of the notion of universality, and to argue that the strategy proposed by identity politics is ultimately anti-political.

## 0. Introduction

In his book *The Once and Future Liberal*, Mark Lilla (2017) passionately critiques what he calls «identity politics», referring to a political project essentially based on the defense of the rights of individual and minorities. The underlying thesis is that identity politics is inadequate in providing «a comprehensive vision of society, economy, and culture», and as such, cannot constitute (nor replace) a political platform for left-wing parties. This thesis is well summarized by the epigraph of the book, a quote from Senator Edward Kennedy: «we can and we must be a party that cares about minorities without becoming a minority party. We are citizens first».

Lilla's book specifically analyzes how, in the political debate (in both the United States and Europe), the use of the notion of identity has gradually shifted from indicating minority rights to becoming a vehicle for purely individualistic demands, thus dissolving any possibility of constructing a common-good oriented political program. «Identity – Lilla summarizes – is Reaganism for lefties». In the background is the idea of a proliferation of the «culture of narcissism».[1]

The aim of this article is to analyze a sort of theoretical premise of identity politics: the thesis of the value of differences, in its extreme formulation whereby no mediation

---

[1] *The culture of narcissism* is the title of a well-known book by Christopher Lasch. For an enlightening analysis of the relationship between narcissism and the crisis of democracy, see Giovanni Orsina (2018), *La democraziona del narcisismo*, which draws on analyses by Tocqueville, Ortega y Gasset, and Canetti.

_____

between identities is possible – nor necessary.[2] From this perspective, every search for mediation would contain a claim to universality, ultimately constituting a form of violence: a negation of differences. I intend to show, firstly, that this accusation of violence is unfounded, since mediation can be conceived, rather than as a claim to universality, as an ideal aspiration towards it. At the same time, I will argue that the anti-universalism underlying the rejection of mediation entails a substantial, politically problematic repression of conflict and otherness.[3]

I propose to take the expression «politically problematic» seriously. One might think that focusing on a theoretical premise of identity politics takes us away from the concrete ground of political analysis, in which Lilla (2017) is firmly situated. I believe this is not the case, as I will argue by considering the theoretical opposition between Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, in Fraser and Honneth (2003). Albeit this opposition is framed against a sophisticated philosophical backdrop, a profound line of division between the two concerns the basic political strategy: while Fraser appeals to identity groups and their ability to constitute a counter-hegemonic bloc, Honneth advocates the construction of a political project capable of intercepting needs still lacking recognition. I will attempt to explain why the first strategy, essentially attributable to identity politics, risks being impolitic precisely because it is identity-based: which is another way of insisting on the risk that rejection of mediation leads to repression of otherness. Addressing these issues means examining cultural attitudes that, with the best intentions, might contribute to polarization of positions and the crisis of democracy.

## 1. The argument against universality

As suggested, identity politics seems to be linked with an individualistic psychological attitude (Lilla 2017; Orsina 2018; Mazzone 2020). Furthermore, precisely because it is based on identity, it is exposed to the costs of identity construction and defense: in Mazzone (2023), I provide an analysis of these costs in terms of what I call «ideological thinking».

A feasible solution to these problems, if there is one, seems to lie at the level of basic education for individuals: that is, it would lie in the formation of mental attitudes for constructively managing the processes of identity construction/defense. But, at a different level, identity politics also draws legitimacy from a complex of ideas that direct part of public opinion towards certain political strategies, blocking the path to others. If Lilla is correct in arguing that identity politics has its predominant base in culturally privileged affluent classes, and its driving force in academia, then a revision of that

_____

[2] By «mediation (between identities)» I intend a dialogic interaction intended to find which beliefs/values are shared and which are not, and to extend as much as possible the area of agreement, for the purposes of management of conflicts and promotion of cooperation. This dialogic interaction has a crucial role to play in the construction of social and political institutions, insofar as they require that some agreement is reached with regard to which rights have to be granted (see below, section 1). I thank an anonymous reviewer for their help to see the need of an explicit definition of the notion.

[3] An anonymous reviewer has suggested that this paper should make (more) explicit who are the targets of my criticisms, in order to avoid the risk of the straw man fallacy. I agree that this would be relevant, but there are two convergent reasons – apart from limitations of time and space – why I decided not to expand on this. First, my main theoretical target can be better described as a widespread tendency (which is difficult to single out «in its pure form») than an explicit thesis. Second, for my purposes it is enough to reach a conditional conclusion: to the extent that that tendency (i.e., the tendency to deny a role for mediation) exists, especially with regard to political attitudes, my arguments apply. To put it differently: this paper can be seen as an analysis of the merits of (political) mediation, based on the risks of an alternative view – whether or not the latter is actually defended in its pure form.

_____

cultural attitude can unleash intellectual energies in more politically promising directions.

Therefore, it is not pointless to look at how the anti-universalist argument is formulated in contexts that are not immediately political. Consider, for example, the following passage from Claudia Bianchi's *Hate Speech: Il lato oscuro del linguaggio*:

> Philosophers have believed to make universal statements about human nature, desires, and ideals, inclinations and capabilities of human beings in general, but theirs have turned out to be partial statements, able to promote the interests and values of privileged categories and individuals, to the detriment of ignored or discriminated minorities. Certain absolute norms of rationality and objectivity are now considered negative for philosophy itself as they mask the viewpoints of dominant groups, and must be rethought and reformulated (Bianchi 2021: 7; my translation).

There is certainly much to agree with in this passage. In particular, I do not dispute the idea that every belief system is perspectival, dependent on viewpoint, or that theoretical positioning implies dynamics of hegemony and social domination. But having said that, a crucial issue remains to be resolved. The idea that «absolute norms of rationality [are] negative [in that] they mask the viewpoints of dominant groups» suggests, at the very least, that any form of hegemony is to be considered exclusively harmful. Whether it be institutions or belief systems, any synthesis of social dynamics that becomes hegemonic would therefore become a vehicle of injustice, too. And again, the point is not that this is untrue. The point is rather the risk of unilateralism. We risk looking only at the limiting and subordinating side of institutions, and not also at their constructive and emancipatory power: at the fact that they emerge from the effort – ambiguous as it may be – to give voice to previously ignored needs.

Roberto Esposito, in *Vitam instituere*, has masterfully reconstructed this dialectic between life and institutions, insisting on the need not to neglect the constructive side of hegemonic forms. Analyzing Machiavelli's thought, for example, he writes:

> The life of the community gathers around the institutions it has instituted itself. But the institutions, in turn, are filled with a vitality that corresponds to the events that pass through them. We should not situate events outside, or against, the institutions (Esposito 2023: 49; my translation).

This is, indeed, the point: we should not think of life events, or the needs of individuals and groups, *only* «outside, or against, the institutions». Institutions, in other words, should be evaluated not only for the needs they exclude but also for those they successfully include. Precisely because it is impossible to build syntheses of social demands that do not entail some exclusion – as they represent some, and not all, viewpoints – we should not look at those syntheses only in negative terms. Otherwise, we risk closing ourselves off from every possible path to emancipation.

However, identity politics seems to suggest an alternative path to emancipation: a path that avoids the negatives accompanying every hegemony, while preserving the critical demands contained in the needs of individuals and social groups. In practice, each minority should be recognized alongside the others, by simple addition, without undergoing a mediation process that could limit that recognition: in the dual sense that each minority should negotiate which rights are included in the institutional agreement being signed, and that some minority would inevitably remain excluded from that agreement. In short, mediation in the name of universality would inevitably determine forms of limitation and disregard for needs, whereas identity politics, through a simple

---

sum of identities, would allow avoiding the costs of political and cultural hegemonies – the injustices they produce.

The first question I intend to pose is whether mediation is truly a form of violence in the described sense, and thus whether identity politics is the only political project worth pursuing. After answering negatively to this question, I will argue that identity politics itself is a politically unfeasible project, having a fundamentally anti-political nature.

## 2. Defense of universality

Let us return to Claudia Bianchi's observation that «philosophers believed to make universal statements about human nature [...] but theirs have turned out to be partial statements». As I said, it is difficult to deny the partial and perspectival nature of any attempt to synthesize experience, no matter how much effort we make to mediate between needs and viewpoints. This partial character affects both theoretical models and moral and political positions. On the other hand, we have also observed that the partiality of the forms of mediation reveals a dual face: they deny and exclude something in the very act of recognizing and including something else. They commit injustices while aiming to redeem others. This does not oblige us to resignedly accept the mediations that are currently hegemonic: it is always possible to criticize them so as to reopen access to what they have excluded. But this is different from abandoning any attempt at mediation to avoid paying the price of partiality.

Critics of universality, however, might insist: there is a different way to accept partiality, that does not force us to go through the construction of hegemonies and forms of domination. We should rather embrace the variety of viewpoints in their immediacy. Renouncing every attempt at mediation would indeed avoid the «closure» of experience that necessarily leaves something out: we must simply decide to open the door to differences, so to speak, once and for all.

This idea constitutes, I believe, a bad utopia, and a first formulation of what I mean when I say that identity politics is, ultimately, an anti-political proposal. To the extent that politics is (among other things)[4] the work of building collective decisions, with the burden of effort and conflicts that this entails, the idea that we can skip this work with a surge of willpower is a dangerous illusion.[5] We will return to this point in the next section when we analyze the theoretical problems of identity politics. Here, the objective is essentially defensive: it is about shedding light on the fact that the costs of mediation – namely the phenomena of hegemony and disregard that result from it – appear tolerable once recognized as intrinsic to the political dimension. Viewing them as an evil to be removed, rather than as part of the necessary work to be done, risks leaving the conflict of viewpoints to itself, with the illusion of being able to erase it with a wave of the hand.

This is an important first step towards the rehabilitation of the notion of universality. Hegemonies are not simply evil. As long as they are aimed at ensuring as inclusive forms of mediation as possible, they end up producing some degree of emancipation. However, an objection remains, foreshadowed in the expression that opens the quote

---

[4] I thank Toni Bondì for having drawn my attention to the limitations of a definition of politics in terms of «the work of building collective decisions»: this has prompted me to adopt a more cautionary phrasing. However, all my argument requires is that building collective decisions is at least part of what we expect from politics.

[5] By this, I do not mean to exclude, of course, that the defense of minorities can constitute part of a genuine political project. However, in such a case, it will have to accept paying the price of mediation with other political instances. What I am exclusively questioning is this conceptual core: the idea that mediation itself is a harm to be avoided.

_____

from Claudia Bianchi: «philosophers *believed* to make universal statements about human nature» (emphasis mine). Even conceding that there is no alternative to building universalizing syntheses (of experience as of needs), it is a separate problem that these syntheses end up being believed universal. The point in favor of anti-universalists, then, would not be so much the provisional fixation of hegemonies – which seems unavoidable – but rather the resistance of hegemonies to change, resulting from the claims of universality that nest within them.

It is difficult to deny the relevance of this phenomenon in social dynamics. But, again, it is a question of whether it implies the need to abandon any attempt at universalizing syntheses. Or whether, on the contrary, it is another of the costs that we must and can learn to bear. In favor of the latter option, there are analyses of the problem, within philosophy itself, that are quite enlightening. These analyses can help us become aware of the claims of universality, and resist them: in doing so, they show that the aspiration to universality has costs that we *must* learn to manage (since we *can* do it).

I will limit myself to a couple of examples.

The first is Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*, with his conception of the universal as a regulatory idea that can never be entirely actualized in positive norms. As Alberto Andronico (2011: 158; my translation) observes, for Kant, the universal «can only present itself [...] as a gap with respect to what is purely and simply present». In short, the universal is in no way a finite entity that we can capture and exhibit («present»): neither as a positive content of our worldview, nor as a rational norm capable of regulating the comparison between worldviews. In the «psychological dynamics» – so to speak – of hegemonic forms, Kant's universal legitimately plays the role of an aspiration, not that of a claim: we can aim towards the regulatory idea of universality, but this idea is «open», devoid of a positive content that can be grasped. Saying that there are no positive contents of universality, not even as rational norms, means that every mediation will have to negotiate, along with the contents, the very rules to which it must conform. It is not a matter of relying on shared rules to evaluate the reasons of each viewpoint, but of seeking, within their respective viewpoints, shared contents *and* rules. This is a «bottom-up universality», always provisional and revisable.

In short, the lesson we learn from Kant is one of a hope for universality, capable of motivating our efforts to mediate differences. This is as far as possible from the claims of universality that risk crystallizing hegemonic views, thus blocking the path to change.

The other example of philosophical understanding of universality that I intend to propose is the analysis of the notion of recognition in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. If Kant emphasizes the normative aspect, that is, how we should think about universality, Hegel illuminates what I have called the underlying «psychological dynamics». His starting point is the claim to universality as an individual psychological motive. As Emmanuel Renault (2007: 32; my translation) synthesizes, for Hegel, «every single will invests its particular contents (or the goals it pursues) with a universal (or absolute) significance». However, this claim to universality would not correspond to truth or authentic self-awareness:

> Access to the «truth» of self-awareness can only be achieved through the recognition of others [...]. I can obtain the certainty that my actions can actually aspire to a universal value and that the claims of validity I attribute to them do not derive solely from an arbitrary absolutization, only through the medium of the other (ibidem).

---

Mediation with the other is necessary, therefore, for the subject to constitute itself as authentic self-awareness. But to do this, the subject must first deny the finitude of its own action, in its claims to universality:

> In order for the recognition of a self-awareness by another to take place, it is therefore necessary for every self-awareness to deny the finiteness of its action (the particularity of its desires) by affirming the infinity of its will (affirming a universal value that can be recognized as such by another self-awareness) (ibidem).

In short, the subject must deny the claims to universality of its particular contents in order to affirm instead a universal value that can be recognized as such by the other. The infinity of the will is this universality, and it can be recognized by any other precisely because it is evidently devoid of positive content.

As can be seen, we arrive through this route at conclusions largely similar to those of Kant. The universality that matters for mediating differences is «empty»: it is the very aspiration to mediation, as pure will to universality. Therefore, the criticism of universality turns out to be doubly unfounded. Not only are the costs associated with it – in terms of hegemony and disregard – unavoidable ingredients of political action, inseparable from their positive effects of emancipation. In addition, even the risk of crystallization and resistance to change can be overcome. We are not condemned to claim the universality of our particular contents. On the contrary, we can have reflective awareness of this claim and deny it in the name of a will to universality that is pure aspiration to mediation.

To this conclusion, Hegel's analysis adds a crucial element. This is the fact that the claim to universality is not seen as a specific characteristic of hegemonic forms; it is held to be instead a constitutive trait of subjectivity in general. This has dire consequences for the prospects of success of identity politics. The idea that differences can simply be added to one another in a space devoid of conflicts overlooks this fundamental fact: if Hegel is right, identities already carry within them, in their immediate spontaneity, a claim to universal value. And this claim tends to generate conflicts, since each identity will claim universality against the others. If therefore mediation with the other were impossible, it would be bad news not only for attempts to produce universalizing syntheses but even more so for identity politics. It would mean that the predictable outcome, rather than harmony between differences, is the conflict of each identity with all the others.

Starting from these considerations – now that we have completed the defense of the notions of universality and mediation – it is time to turn to the constitutive defects of identity politics.


## 3. The problems of identity

Let us summarize the main results we have reached.

Firstly, we recalled (in section 1) the thesis according to which hegemonic forms do not only play a negative role of domination and denial of rights. Instead, they constitute balances, although always imperfect, between recognition and denial.[6] Identity politics is

---

[6] I would not want to give the impression of adopting a naively apologetic view of hegemonies. I am not oblivious to the fact that, once established, disciplinary mechanisms produce more or less severe phenomena of radicalization and abuse, often becoming self-referential: exercises of control for the sake of control, rather than for the balance among the needs they should ensure. However, these pathologies depend on factors intrinsic to human nature, including the tendency to absolutize hegemonies: that is, they do not depend so much on the aspiration to mediate, but on the claim that these mediations hold universally valid.

_____

wrong to adopt a purely critical view of hegemony: it sees only the sacrifices that hegemonic forms impose on desires and needs, not their ability to satisfy them through the imposition of rules aimed at limiting individual arbitrariness.

Another of our conclusions is embedded in this theme of individual arbitrariness. Identity politics may delude itself that mediation is unnecessary as it assumes that subjectivities, in the absence of external constraints, would coexist in spontaneous harmony. If this were the case, the imposition of constraints would not only appear unnecessary but rather downright oppressive. However, it is difficult to disagree with Hegel on this point: it is not spontaneous for subjects to deny the «finiteness of their action», the «particularity of [their] desires» to make room for mutual recognition with others. What mostly happens instead is that recognition is sacrificed in order not to give up universalizing one's desires. In this way, as Hegel observes, the desire for recognition turns into a struggle *for* recognition, and finally into a struggle *of* recognition: the «mortal struggle» that arises when the lack of recognition from others leads to resentment.[7]

If this Hegelian framework is correct, we cannot harbor illusions about the feasibility of identity politics. It is doomed to failure from the start: not only does it reject mediation as political management of conflicts between identities, it is unable to recognize those conflicts in the first place. Let us therefore test these considerations through a closer analysis of the present.

In studies of conversations on social media regarding gender issues, there is evidence - even in interactions between minority representatives - of a recurring pattern of discursive strategies aimed at positioning themselves in a conflictual manner to the detriment of positive relationship management. As the authors summarize, subjects

> are not inclined to negotiate their identity and social positioning [...]. What is striking is that in the social media debate on contentious topics [...] even users who are sensitive to an inclusive use of language, e.g. feminists, struggle to overcome an ideological positioning of closure (Campisi, Mazzone, Venuti in press: 167).

The surprise at this «struggle» to consistently adopt an attitude of inclusion tends to dissolve if we keep Hegel's lesson in mind. The drive for self-assertion is a powerful motivation in human subjects, and it transfers to the symbolic processes of identity construction without losing its strength (Mazzone 2023).

The shift from inclusion principles into concrete behaviors of exclusion, which we have observed in relationships between minority members, is equally evident on a different scale: that of the relationship with those who do not recognize themselves in the «politically correct». There are several signs of a difficulty in accepting this kind of otherness. A significant one is the idea of normative interventions aimed at correcting linguistic uses, an idea that is, not coincidentally, perceived by recipients as a form of «linguistic dictatorship». It would be naive to object that this accusation is entirely unfounded. Firstly, because, whether founded or not, it corresponds to an actual perception that makes the success of such normative policies at best uncertain:

> The official adoption of linguistic taboos or language and behavior held to be «politically correct» is only part of the picture, since these measures can be rejected as repressive impositions by those who do not understand why they would be needed (Sbisà 2021: 175, n. 21).

_____

[7] Regarding the distinction between «struggle for recognition» and «struggle of recognition», refer to Renault (2007: 42).

---

Moreover, as Judith Butler (1997) has observed, the demand for normative interventions on language is a sword that cuts both ways since «the same principles that are invoked for the protection of minorities could be marshalled against them» (Mazzone 2020: 119).

The issue is therefore twofold. On the one hand, there is the well-known theme of the balance between defending minorities and freedom of expression. Normative interventions risk being, and certainly being perceived as, limitations on freedoms, and this at least threatens to compromise their effectiveness – if not to cause resentment. But there is another theme: censorious interventions would pave the way for opposite ones, if opponents of political correctness came to have the political strength.

It does not seem to me that among supporters of political correctness there is great attention to this risk. And this seems to indicate a lack of awareness that the game is political, not purely moral. Identity politics preaches the inclusion of differences only within precise limits: it refuses to recognize the existence, let alone the legitimacy, of its political opponent. The point here is not that identity politics does not have the right to judge the alternative position as wrong. The point is, however, to recognize it as a political alternative, albeit wrong, and not simply push it out of the political field with moral motivations. This move is a form of radical disavowal, presupposing a claim of universality of its particular contents. «Populist polarization», which appears as a distinctive trait of the current political scene, could be at least partially rooted in this disavowal of a significant part of the population, and in the resentment that ensues. In Hegelian terms, it would be a «struggle of recognition».

I have already mentioned in the *Introduction* the theoretical opposition between Fraser and Honneth. In the present context, this opposition is quite instructive. Fraser focuses on social movements based on identity and their ability to constitute a «*counterhegemonic* bloc» (Fraser, Honneth 2003: 86; my emphasis) – against Honneth's proposal to intercept needs still lacking recognition. For Fraser, therefore, it is not about building a new hegemony, but simply about opposing an existing one. This may avoid any exercise of mediation (and the related injustices); but it can be doubted whether it constitutes a genuinely political strategy. Politics should aim to form majorities capable of governing, through the construction of political projects that intercept the widest possible range of needs. Conversely, *not* addressing the problem of intercepting new needs, and *not* building the relative hegemonies, seems to respond to the needs of identity positioning, rather than those of politics.

## References

Andronico, Alberto (2011), *Presentare l'universale. Il problema dei diritti umani*, in Pirrone, Pasquale (2011), *Circolazione dei valori giuridici e tutela dei diritti e delle libertà fondamentali*, Torino, Giappichelli.

Bianchi, Claudia, (2021), *Hate speech. Il lato oscuro del linguaggio*, Roma-Bari, Laterza.

Butler, Judith (1997), *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*, New York-London, Routledge.

Campisi, Emanuela, Mazzone, Marco, Venuti, Marco, *Politically Correct and In/Exclusion: A non-Ideal Perspective*, in Russo, Valentina, Piccirilli, Eduardo Maria, *Linguistica ed economia III. Inclusione e digitalizzazione*, Napoli, Academy School.

---

Esposito, Roberto (2023), *Vitam instituere. Genealogia dell'istituzione*, Torino, Einaudi.

Fraser, Nancy, Honneth, Axel (2003), *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, London-New York, Verso.

Lilla, Mark (2017), *The Once and Future Liberal. After Identity Politics*, New York, Harper Collins.

Mazzone, Marco (2020), *Performativity and the Ideological Construction of the Self. The Age of Narcissism and (Possibly) Beyond*, in Pennisi, Antonino e Falzone, Alessandra (2020), *The Extended Theory of Cognitive Creativity. Interdisciplinary Approaches to Performativity*, Chaim, Springer.

Mazzone, Marco (2023), *Razionali fino in fondo. Dal pensiero ideologico al pensiero critico*, Macerata, Quodlibet.

Orsina, Giovanni (2018), *La democrazia del narcisismo. Breve storia dell'antipolitica*, Venezia, Marsilio.
Renault, Emmanuel (2007), «Riconoscimento, lotta, dominio. Il modello hegeliano» in *Post-filosofie*, vol. 4, pp. 29-45.

Sbisà, Marina (2021), *(Im)politeness and the Human Subject*, in Xie, Chaoqun (2021), *The Philosophy of (Im)politeness*, Cham, Springer.