

IDENTITY POLITICS AT ODDS WITH LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The author of this article is Stephen Chavura who teaches politics and history at Macquarie University, Campion College and the Lachlan Macquarie Institute.

Until relatively recently we in the West have defined oppression largely in terms of the absence of political and civil freedoms, and the solution was to introduce new rights such as universal suffrage, freedom of conscience, freedom of movement and freedom of speech. This is what we call liberal democracy, or that tradition of political thinking that sees the expansion of freedoms as the solution to oppression rather than its cause. Recent controversies in the US, Canada, Britain and Australia regarding race, culture, sexuality, and gender indicate a shift from political oppression to cultural oppression. Cultural oppression is caused by, among other things, feeling excluded from prevailing cultural norms regarding sexuality, gender and nationality, norms that are said to solely benefit white, heterosexual males.

Those who feel excluded from these norms based on their professed identity seek to change the prevailing culture and make it more "inclusive". This is the essence of identity politics. And yet identity politics coexists uneasily with liberal democracy, and for good reason. Culture is to a great extent carried along by the words we use, "male and female", "husband and wife", "Merry Christmas", "Happy Australia Day" and so on, and the texts, images, movies and songs we encounter. This is why identity politics must be at odds with liberal democracy, for if culture is to be made more inclusive then what we can think, say and see needs to be more tightly controlled.

In other words, freedom of speech and thought are part of the problem rather than the solution. The same-sex marriage debate in Australia confirmed this, for many citizens sincerely believed that Australians had no right to a public debate in the first place. Bill Shorten spoke for many when he castigated Malcolm Turnbull back in August as the person who "licensed this debate". Recall the boycott of Coopers beer by some pubs back in March. Same-sex marriage was the focal point of a "light-hearted" discussion over a Coopers beer organised by the Bible Society between MPs Tim Wilson and Andrew Hastie. Within minutes of the Bible Society uploading the debate, a storm of Twitter protests ensued, resulting in Coopers disassociating itself from the video and pledging its support for same-sex marriage.

The problem with Coopers, the Bible Society and advocates of a plebiscite was never that they criticised same-sex marriage. The crime was that they dared to suggest that anyone had the right to debate the issue in the first place. One of the most prominent activists of the Yes campaign, Michael Barnett, summed up a common attitude to the legitimacy of public debate in his tweets to Coopers Brewery: "So you're saying it's acceptable to debate the merit of supporting discrimination @coopersbrewery? Seriously?" Of course, the very issue in the debate was whether traditional marriage unjustly discriminates in the first place.

Barnett had the right to make his statements, but apparently, he thought those with whom he disagreed had no similar right. He was not alone. The case made against Coopers and the legitimacy of a same-sex marriage debate was that inevitably things would be said that would be detrimental to the mental health of members of the LGBTQI community, which could lead to an increase in self-harm. But these sorts of catastrophic harm arguments are very dangerous for freedom of speech and, therefore, democracy.

Of course, the state should be concerned about mental health and suicide, but its approach to these matters needs to be sensitive to other goods that are profoundly beneficial for societies, especially freedom of speech. Indeed, I invite LGBTQI rights advocates to name all the countries without a robust tradition of freedom of speech that have strong and effective LGBTQI rights movements. There is a democratic danger of linking what we can say publicly to mental health and other social maladies such as ethnic alienation from national culture.

Identity politics correctly assumes that for many of us part of our self-esteem comes from being integrated into a wider community or culture. However, if the wider cultural norms conflict with one's own identity as transgender, or genderless, or gay, or Muslim, or indigenous, then one can feel alienated. If one also believes one has a right that the wider culture embraces their identity, then this exclusion has all the weight of an injustice, and the person either becomes increasingly alienated from mainstream culture or seeks to manipulate culture, and therefore control others' speech and information.

Enter Safe Schools here in Australia, demands to widen 18C to include anti-Islamic speech, and demands to change the date of Australia Day. The conflict between identity politics and freedom of speech in a nutshell is that freedom of speech means unpredictable speech, and unpredictable speech means no guarantee against words that will emotionally wound, or the emergence of cultural norms that will exclude. Thus, to enjoy a life free from the anxiety of offence and cultural exclusion, speech and even thought needs to be controlled.

This is why movements to snuff out cultural oppression, unlike movements to snuff out political oppression, see freedom as the problem rather the solution. That is, they are deeply illiberal. Certainly, this mood against liberal democracy is taking hold among sections of the youth in the US, Canada, Britain and Australia. One of the great challenges for developed societies going into 2018 and beyond is the extent to which they can accommodate millennials' longing for inclusiveness while at the same time convincing them that the difficult task of balancing inclusiveness with freedom of speech and other liberal rights is worthy of their efforts. If this can be done then we would have achieved definite social progress.

But if not, then the future of liberal democracy becomes uncertain, for there is no shortage today of counter movements willing to take its place. Furthermore, recent debates in Australia over race, gender, sexuality and Islam have revealed no shortage of martinets who are willing to beat our brains and hearts into shape, always for the sake of love, diversity, and equality.

Source: *Stephen Chavura*