

Article

Identity Politics: Issues and Challenges in a Globalized World

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Abstract

Contemporary discourse and institutional practice persistently reduce human identity to surface-level visible markers – race, phenotypical features, names, and biometric identifiers such as fingerprints and DNA profiles. While these markers provide administratively convenient systems of classification, they fundamentally fail to capture the multidimensional complexity of identity in an era defined by migration, cultural hybridity, and rapid advances in genomic and surveillance technologies. This study addresses the enduring problem of essentialism: the oversimplification of identity into rigid racial and external categories that erase cultural heritage, intellectual contributions, personal agency, and the lived experience of selfhood. Such reductive frameworks not only reinforce stereotypes but also obscure the fundamentally constructed, contested, and dynamic nature of identity across historical and geographical contexts. Drawing on a qualitative methodology that integrates cultural studies, critical race theory, and anthropological perspectives on human variation, this research conducts a thematic analysis of interdisciplinary literature to examine how identity operates as a fluid social narrative rather than a fixed biological or legal datum. The investigation proceeds through three analytical registers: first, a genealogical critique of racial classification systems from Linnaean taxonomy to contemporary biometric governance; second, an examination of diasporic and hybrid identities that resist categorical containment; and third, an exploration of identity as performative and narratively constituted through cultural practice, intellectual achievement, and subjective experience. The findings indicate that identity is neither static nor self-evident. It is continuously shaped by historical forces, cultural ecosystems, personal accomplishments, and reflexive self-understanding. Crucially, the study identifies a persistent tension between external ascription and internal self-definition – a gap in which stereotyping, discrimination, and erasure take root. The analysis further reveals that even ostensibly "objective" biometric and genomic identity systems reproduce racial logics under the guise of scientific neutrality, demanding renewed critical scrutiny. The study concludes by advocating for a relational and narrative model of identity that accounts for multiplicity, change over time, and the interplay between structural constraints and individual agency. Such a model holds significant implications for policy fields ranging from migration governance and human rights to education and digital identity infrastructure. Recognizing identity as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed label offers a more ethically robust foundation for engaging with difference in increasingly pluralistic societies.

Keywords: Identity, Race, Essentialism, Social Construction, Biometrics, Cultural Hybridity, Narrative Identity, Critical Race Theory

Introduction

To the less sophisticated, identity is simply an explanation of self. It is what distinguishes an individual from another. It could be his fashion style, a distinct writing marker, or just a name. The more common form of identity is race: the white race, Caucasian- white-skinned or of European origin, Black or African, Asian and Arab, etc. Though it is difficult to find a pure race today, as humanity has so intermixed that one must be careful in outright categorization of races. Science has evolved to the point where everyone can easily be identified using fingerprints. Fingerprint markers have enabled detectives to crack very difficult crimes across the globe. Our individual signatures reflect our identity. Having come thus far, we realize how complex identity can be. However, identity reflects not just

an individual personality trait, but encompasses his culture, his intellectual achievements, his strengths and weaknesses.

Many scholars have interrogated the concept of identity and its various offshoots, such as identity crisis, identity theft, cultural identity, and identity politics. For a proper understanding of issues facing our globalized world, a brief explanation of each concept is necessary. According to Schlesinger, identity is a continually constituted and reconstructed category, a process of becoming which entails not a fixed position but positionality and locationsⁱ. Thus, identity is fluid and continuously in motion, in various hues and guises. An individual born a Christian may, upon adulthood, become a Buddhist or a Muslim. Identity has been further explained along multiple dimensions, such as the moment of experience, the mode of writing or representation in fiction or film and the theoretical modality. Again, identity is experienced in movementⁱⁱ. Those who have migrated from one country to another will understand. Often, we pay scant attention to our identity until we are about to travel to another country. Suddenly, we realize we are German, Dutch, Nigerian, Japanese or Chinese, etc. Our identity pops up at immigration checkpoints, and details about us come to the fore. Thorough scrutiny of our identity is undertaken before the issuance of a visa, a ritual rite of passage. Despite the increasing interconnectedness of the world, made possible by advanced technology in the form of telephony, social media, speed trains, and airplanes, our identity is highlighted at every entry and exit border.

Our topic dwells on identity in a globalized world. What then is globalization? Does globalization enhance our identity or diminish it? Globalization presupposes the growing interdependence of the world's economies, cultures, and populations, brought about by cross-border trade in goods and services, technology, and flows of investments, people, and information. Indeed, it has been concretized through economic partnerships to facilitate integration of economic blocks such as the European Union, EU, Association of South-East Asian Nations, ASEAN, Organization of American States, OAS, etc. Globalization gained popularity after the Cold War in the early 1990s, as the cooperative arrangements shaped modern everyday lifeⁱⁱⁱ.

The question on everyone's lips is: would globalization lead to a borderless world? Is a borderless world desirable or necessary? To many people from developing countries, a borderless world is not only necessary but imperative, as the world is a global village. This kind of thinking is poison. To allow for unrestrained immigration in the name of globalization will upset the world order and impinge on human competitiveness and development. While developing nations will stagnate, developed nations will become swamped and their infrastructure choked and distorted. Those who would transform developing countries will simply empty into the already bursting advanced nations. The issue of brain drain does not need to be emphasized, but the carrying capacity of the advanced nations will be stretched thin. Garrett Hardin's controversial 1974 book, *Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor*, illustrates in stark reality the issue of unrestrained immigration. In a nutshell, it posits that if the world were to be divided into three, two-thirds would be made up of the desperately poor countries of the world, while one-third is made up of the rich nations of the world. He further argues that if one-third of the nations of the rich represent a lifeboat with a carrying capacity of 50, it would be foolhardy to allow

on board an additional 100 passengers struggling to swim to the comfortable fortress of the rich, as the excess load could capsize the lifeboat, leading to everyone on board perishing. Those with the moral burden of being their brother's keeper can disembark from the lifeboat to create space for those who want to swim ashore^{iv}. It is worth noting that the so-called underdeveloped countries replicate at the rate of 2.5% of their population, whereas the advanced countries barely replicate at a mere 0.8% per annum. Thus, while global intercourse is encouraged, each race blossoms best on the soil the Creator ab initio planted it. However, in cases of political and religious persecution, emigration should be encouraged and supported.

Again, identity has been explained as the unique set of characteristics that can be used to identify a person as himself or herself and no one else. Identity can be used in different ways in different contexts. On a personal level, identity refers to a person's sense of self, meaning how they view themselves as compared to other people. Personal identity refers to the unique ways that define each individual. One person might choose to emphasize their family (for example, the British royal family, the Dutch royal family, the Saud royal family, etc.), religion (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hindu, etc.) and any other interests when describing their identity. Another person might emphasize their race, neighbourhood, and job as important parts of who they are. Simply put, Identity is a combination of one's physical and behavioural traits that define him or her. For example, one's name is part of one's identity, as is the form and colour of one's eyes and fingerprints^v. Furthermore, an identity crisis is a feeling of being uncertain about who or what you are. For some people, becoming a parent can bring on an identity crisis^{vi}. There is an interesting aspect of identity crisis that I want to share with you. Let me use my native country as an example. Nigeria fought a civil war in 1967-1970. The arrowhead for Biafran secession is the Igbo ethnic group of southeast Nigeria. After the war, some Igbo border communities, especially the Ikwerre people, did not want to associate with the mainstream Igbo. They have continued to argue that they are a distinct ethnic group even though they speak the same Igbo language, bear similar Igbo names and share common cultural practices, including the New Yam festival. The Ikwerre elite had gone even further to distort their village and town names with prefixes to distinguish them from similar Igbo names. The federal authority appears to encourage them with some juicy political appointments. Many scholars have termed this behavioural survival stratagem as an identity crisis. The more they distance themselves from the national Igbo cause for nationhood, the more federal benefits they get. Thus, an identity crisis can appear in different guises, as the above case illustrated. Children of mixed racial marriages are often torn apart between the nationality of the father and that of the mother. Even stepbrothers and sisters face similar challenges. Therefore, an identity crisis can erupt due to selfish desires or even unrequited love.

Another concept is that of identity theft. This happens when one's personal information, such as name, date of birth, and current or previous address, is stolen and used by someone else to impersonate another. Fraudsters steal people's identities to commit grievous crimes and often cause their victims irreparable damage. A good example is a case of someone who parks his personal car and travels to a distant country. A criminal steals that car and uses it for armed robbery, and abandons the car. The police investigation may drag the owner of the car into a messy situation, and if care is not taken, may lead to unpleasant consequences.

The concept of cultural identity refers to the shared beliefs, norms, values and practices that define a group of individuals, often linked to ethnicity, nationality or religion. This identity shapes individual's perceptions of themselves and their relationship to the world, influencing their behaviours, attitudes and interactions with others. Major elements of culture are symbols, languages, norms and artifacts. A few examples might suffice: Zulu identity is defined by their rich oral history, traditional music and dance like "Indlamu", a significant ethno-cultural identity within South Africa. Japanese identity is defined by a deep respect for harmony, hierarchy, and the blending of ancient traditions with modern technology. The United States extols values like individualism, competition and a commitment to the work ethic^{vii}. Whereas the Dutch cultural identity emphasizes equality, tolerance and a strong sense of community. Other core values of the Dutch include a down-to-earth, "no-nonsense" attitude, low hierarchy, and a progressive liberal approach to social issues. They are also known for biking, love for cheese and a history of maritime trade and artistic achievement. Indeed, every nation-state or ethnic group has a unique culture and a set of values. Thus, interactions or cultural exchange across nations lead to an appreciation of each nation's contributions to humanity. Take, for example, food cuisines among nations, their varieties and significance. No matter how sophisticated or backward a nation might be, there is at least one culinary dish that will make a tourist salivate.

Historical Background of Identity Politics

Man is a political animal. Politics has been described as the authoritative allocation of resources. Thus, in every society, groups congregate under political platforms to stake a strong voice in resource allocation. This often dissolves into identity politics. Desperate politicians weaponize everything, including religion, race, and economic disparities, to create divisions to capture power^{viii}. As Dominic Gustavo stated at the World Socialist Website, identity politics is an essential tool utilized by the bourgeoisie to maintain its class domination over the working class by keeping workers divided along racial and gender lines^{ix}. Again, could identity politics as embodied in critical race theory be a dangerous ideology and threat to the established order that the powers that be aim to stamp out? Indeed, the term critical race theory would require further explanation in this lecture.

It is indeed fortuitous that the term "identity politics" was first popularized by the 1977 Manifesto of the Combahee River Collective, an organization of queer, Black Feminist Socialists, supposedly to be about fostering solidarity and collaboration^x. The identity politics developed by Black women served as entry points for Black women to engage in politics rather than a blanket withdrawal from problematic organizations and movements. The turning point for black feminist groups is aptly captured thus:

The experiences that united these activists-the consistent sidelining and devaluation of their political priorities within different political organizations-were foundational to the stance they developed, which they christened "identity politics"^{xi}.

From time immemorial, politics has been more or less identity in colouration. Black American women's political solidarity chafed against the dominant white power control. Since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in the U.S. and the

granting of franchise to African-Americans, the dominant white elite have been uncomfortable. The Black women's attempt to negotiate for power has been derided and pejoratively dismissed as an extreme left-wing viewpoint.

Identity politics has sustained Western democracies. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the elite that control the two dominant parties, the Conservative Party or the more capitalistically inclined and the Labour Party or the more Liberal Welfarist, are in a competitive struggle for power. The Conservative Party appears more nationalistic, with policies aimed at economic growth and national renewal, while the Labour Party fights for the welfare of workers in areas of housing and healthcare. In the United States, two dominant parties prevail. The Republican Party, or the Grand Old Party, GOP, is capitalist-oriented as well as right-wing, whereas the Democratic Party is more liberal and worker-friendly, advocating for health care and social welfare benefits for workers. The common denominator of Western political parties is accountable governance with a strong ethical inclination. In Third World countries, particularly in Africa, the elite that control the levers of governance are profligate, indolent and unaccountable to the people. Identity politics is so weaponized that the masses are baited with religion and ethnic solidarity over competence and credibility. In Nigeria, the elite that captured power have turned politics into unique, dysfunctional prebendal politics, where political offices are traded for electoral support and in which the recipient of political offices hardly differentiates between the state treasury and personal purse. Corruption provokes no public outrage because it is seen as partaking in the proverbial "national cake". Whereas elite capture happens when the advantaged few steer resources and institutions that could serve the many towards their own narrower interests and aims. Elite capture also refers to the presence of unequal access to power; some have greater access to power (by virtue of their lineage, or caste, or economic wealth or gender or some other reasons) and consequently the ability to influence the transfer of funds/ resources disproportionately^{xii}. When the elite captures and dominates political institutions progressively, as is obtainable in advanced societies of the West, such societies do not suffer internal convulsions and strife. Leadership recruitment is open to talent in Western societies. Take the case of Mark Carney, the Prime Minister of Canada, a competent technocrat who had little partisan political experience. The ruling party of Justin Trauden drafted him, and the people overwhelmingly voted for him. In Nigeria, loyalty is priced highly against competence. Godfatherism is an industry in which the mentor sponsors the mentee for an agreed-upon outsourcing of juicy contracts and political portfolios. This is shamelessly ventilated in the media when the godson refuses to abide by the terms of the agreement. Thus, infrastructure decay is permissive while health care and education are neglected. There is nothing like a social welfare benefit for Nigerian citizens. Little wonder the desperation for survival at all costs, including abhorrent things like ritual killings, kidnapping for ransom, farmer-herder crisis, banditry, and non-state actors like Boko Haram, etc.

Challenges of Identity Politics

One of the major objections to identity politics is that it degenerates into elite capture. Identity politics forecloses scrutiny; it requires uncritical support for political figures based on their identities without regard for their politics, and it often reflects social preoccupations that are “really for the rich people”^{xiii}. Again, the elite that control the media set the agenda narrative. The lamentations of the havoc the elite causes in the Western democracies are child’s play compared to what obtains in developing countries when opposition figures are murdered, incarcerated or forced to flee their countries. In Nigeria or Cameroon, the party in power controls all the coercive apparatus of the state, such as the police and the army. In a situation where promotions are not based on merit, police and army chiefs fall over one another to support the party in power to retain their positions. In the worst-case scenario, the party in power turns democracy into a one-party state, muzzles the media and turns political struggle into a violent massacre of dissident voices. An appalling scenario is playing out in Uganda, where President Yoweri Museveni, who has been in power for forty years, has virtually turned the country into a one-party state. One of his sons is the Chief of Army Staff, his daughter is the governor of the Central Bank, etc. This feudal control of structures of governance is antithetical to democracy and accountability.

Another problem is the divisive nature of those who control the narrative. The emergence of social media moguls has set a different agenda. Some of the social media platforms are rife with abuse. A 2021 investigation by journalist Karren Hao found that the largest Facebook pages targeting “Christian Americans” and African Americans” were run by troll farms exploiting Facebook algorithms to send information to tens of millions of Americans with the aim of inflaming and exploiting social divisions. This is the war of the mind, and it is global. There is no social media platform that is safe from troll farms.

Elite capture suppresses collective action by people, creating more remote decision sites and encourages the rise of technocrats. These shifts are visible not only at the level of national and international policy, but at small levels of organizations as well. It also leads to regulatory capture. In Nigeria, for instance, the relative power of regulation versus profit is so low that oil companies have evaded regulatory fines or simply priced them into their business plan. A high-profile struggle of the Ogoni people in 1993 to hold Shell accountable brought international attention to the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta caused by Shell practices^{xiv}. The pushback to identity politics manifests in Critical Race Theory, Wokeness, and Cancel Culture. A brief explanation of these key concepts is necessary. Critical race theory describes a set of ideas holding that racial bias is inherent in many parts of Western society, especially in its legal and social institutions, based on their having been primarily designed for and implemented by white people.

Wokeness refers to being alert to social injustices like racism and discrimination, originating in Black culture as “stay woke” to systemic threats, but has evolved into a divisive political term, used by some to praise awareness and by others as a pejorative for left-leaning ideology or perceived oversensitivity. It signifies being

“awake” to social issues, but its meaning is contested, often used to describe progressive movements and policies, or as an insult in “culture wars”. Example: Black Lives Matter movement. Cancel culture is the phenomenon or practice of publicly rejecting, boycotting, or ending support for particular people or groups because of their socially or morally unacceptable views or actions. Cancel culture can ruin careers, but it can also make a public figure think twice before posting controversial comments. Example of cancel culture: Rapper Sean “Diddy” Combs, comedian Louis C.K., and actor Russell Brand, for example, were cancelled because of sexual misconduct allegations. Former New York governor Andrew Cuomo was also cancelled in response to allegations of sexual harassment, after which he resigned. Cancel culture is a check on public office holders in Western democracies. Public officeholders with weak moral fibre are compelled to stand down from important positions because of links with dubious or criminal elements in society. The unravelling going on in the Western world due to emails linking high-profile public figures with the convicted sex offender, Jeffrey Epstein, is food for thought for developing countries, especially in Africa. Can African democracies incorporate cancel culture to reclaim the moral high ground among public officials? How many African leaders and officials have faced retribution because of moral imperfections? Politics and governance will remain weak in societies with poor ethical consideration. Withdrawing public support for a leader with poor moral discretion is in tandem with the accountable governance paradigm. In a globalized world, Africa has no excuse not to emulate the West in calling out leaders with ethical contradictions. It has not yet taken root in Africa. It would be a welcome development if it gained currency in Nigeria.

Jeffrey Epstein’s email exposé has toppled high-ranking officials in the West. In the United Kingdom, the former Prince Andrew had been stripped of his royal titles, including that of prince, by King Charles III. He is now known as Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor. The U.K. government has faced scrutiny following new revelations about Peter Mandelson, a longtime Labour Party stalwart whom Prime Minister Keir Starmer brought out of political wilderness as U.K. ambassador in Washington. Though Mandelson was stripped of his post in September 2025, the Prime Minister, Starmer, has been pressured to resign his post by his opponents and from within his own Labour party^{xv}. He has been criticized for poor judgment in appointing Mandelson in the first place. The Epstein scandal has swept leaders in the corporate world in the United States. Kathy Ruemmler, the chief legal officer of investment bank Goldman Sachs, was forced to resign as part of the email revelations in which she described Epstein as an “older brother” and downplayed his sex crimes. Also, Brad Karp, chairman of the prestigious law firm, Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison since 2008, was forced to resign on February 4, 2026, noting that his exchanges with Epstein had “created a distraction.” Ex-French culture minister, Jack Lang, 86, stepped down as head of the Arab World Institute in Paris over alleged past financial links to Epstein that prompted a tax investigation^{xvi}. Indeed, many professors were caught in the web of the Epstein scandal. Some professors claim to have cultivated their friendship to raise funds

for their research endeavour. As federal grants in the U.S. became increasingly difficult to secure, many scholars resorted to private donations from wealthy benefactors. Attracting research grants helps to guarantee job tenures for academics, support graduate students and further their research. In a society where wealthy philanthropists endow chairs for research in universities, especially cutting-edge research in the sciences, many acclaimed academics scramble for support from such individuals, at times, of dubious means. Thus, highly acclaimed academics fell for Epstein and his filthy lucre. For instance, Dr. Mark Tramo, a neurologist at the University of California, Los Angeles, cultivated Epstein's friendship in order to attract research funding and occasionally offered free medical advice for his back pain. Tramo estimates he got about \$200,000 from Epstein to support his research. He concluded that his behaviour was "standard operating procedure" when dealing with potential donors^{xvii}. In a competitive academic environment for breakthroughs and patents, the allure of research funding can be tempting. Many reputable academics embrace grants from individuals without the usual rigour of scrutiny that government funding entails.

Leon Botstein, president of Bard College in New York, also got entangled with Epstein. In 2016, Botstein received \$150,000 from Epstein on behalf of the college. College presidents, equivalent to vice chancellors in Nigerian universities, are expected to raise funds for their institutions. Epstein also posed as a patron of the sciences. He gave more than \$9 million to Harvard, most of which went to a research facility overseen by Martin Nowak, a math and biology professor. Nowak was sanctioned by Harvard in 2021 for providing an office space for Epstein in the building. Indeed, Epstein maximized his trips to Harvard by meeting with prominent academics who sometimes became close friends. He met with Larry Summers, a former U.S. Treasury secretary and Harvard president, and with renowned linguist and activist Noam Chomsky^{xviii}. What is more, there appears to be a similarity between Epstein's image laundering with professors in the U.S. and Nigerian academics' romance with politicians and high-profile business figures whom they bestow with honorary awards with scant scrutiny. While their American counterparts suffer backlash for associating with dishonourable characters, the Nigerian academics bask in the limelight of possible juicy political appointments. When does the infamy that trails cancel culture affect Nigerian governance architecture and, indeed, African societies?

Conclusion

Identity is innate in human beings. Nature never set out to make all humans look alike. That is why some people are born tall, others short. The class consciousness inheres in a hierarchical order in every society. The beauty is in the value each contributes to the overall good of society. Without the gardener, the palace will look drab, instead of majestic. Thus, the king needs the support and contributions of all his subjects to advance society. A misaligned elite disrupts a society. Identity politics should be the endeavour for the right policies and goals to be articulated and executed in a given society. It should not purport to dominate, discriminate and dehumanize any group in the interest of social harmony. For instance, identity formation in Nigeria is warped, corrupted, and emotive.

Identity rooted in ethnicity and religion breeds poor governance, unlike one driven by issues such as gender representation in governance, healthcare, housing, education, electoral and political reforms. In parts of Africa where the elite abuse identity politics for self-aggrandizement, crisis and poor governance prevail. There is a need for an accountable governance structure and a strong code of ethics for public office holders, especially in Africa.

Endnotes

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