

SYMPOSIUM  
IDENTITY AND LIBERAL POLITICS



APPIAH ON COLLECTIVE  
IDENTITIES AND LIBERALISM

BY  
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## Appiah on Collective Identities and Liberalism\*

Volker Kaul

**W**e prepared this special issue of *Philosophy & Public Issues* on Kwame Anthony Appiah's latest book *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* to explore in detail a political philosophy that is rather unique on the contemporary scene. Appiah is a staunch liberal and cosmopolitan but defends at the same time an ethics of collective identities. Generally, liberalism has great problems with collective identities.<sup>1</sup> Feminists, multiculturalists, African Americans, postcolonial critics, the LGBT movement, indigenous people and let's not forget Marxists, to name only the politically most outspoken, all turned eventually against liberalism because of this inherent difficulty to recognize, for good or for bad, the foundational character of collective identities in society. There have been of course many efforts to reconcile liberalism with identity,<sup>2</sup> but Appiah is among the first to provide a comprehensive liberal theory of identity that is supposed to accommodate not only

\* I would like to thank Marcello di Paola for his helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> See in particular Barry 2001.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Kymlicka 1995 as much as Raz 1994 and Tamir 1995.

questions of nationalism and multiculturalism but also the other collective identities.

*The Lies That Bind* addresses the question of what exactly social phenomena such as religion, nation, race, class and culture are. Appiah believes that a more thorough understanding of their nature could help to overcome some of the worst political excesses of our time, be it the worldwide rampant populism, chauvinism, racism or religious extremism. Moreover, the truth about identities would finally make explicit their compatibility with liberalism and underline their constitutive role in a liberal democracy, a point that Appiah seeks to show in his earlier *The Ethics of Identity*.

Appiah makes two claims: First and foremost, those collective formations are about *identity*. Secondly, those identities are currently surrounded by *lies*. In the book Appiah sets out, chapter by chapter, to uncover the lies behind first religion and then nation, race, class and culture. I am going to argue that Appiah is right in criticizing a certain tendency in politics and popular discourse to essentialize social groups. The question is whether, according to the alternative account of identity that Appiah presents throughout the book, collective identities can be anything else than lies and forms of self-deception, although I stop short of drawing this conclusion. However, my broader aim is to show that collective identities stand *in opposition* to liberalism. Collective identities, contrary to widespread theoretical trends, are neither a challenge nor an opportunity for liberalism but the most evident expression of its *failure*.

According to one possible interpretation of Appiah's theory, collective identities emerge on the basis of social rules that put different social *groups* and not just individuals into competition, creating thereby inequalities between those groups. My thesis is, first, that identities on these grounds might lack normativity. It is

at least a question if there is anything ethical in identity. And secondly, that liberalism with its radical conception of equality among individuals cannot justify social rules that divide society into groups independent from individual action and attributes individuals to those groups independent from their consent. Given that in this interpretation collective identities are the result of social institutions that provide access to life prospects and primary goods on the basis of group membership, any social contract among individuals must strictly rule out collective identities as the basis of politics.

I am going to build my argument on Appiah's account of class, where he rejects the Marxist conception of class conflict in favor of an understanding of class in terms of inequalities among individuals, and not groups, that arise in an efficiency-oriented market economy. I argue that in Appiah's own theory of liberalism class identities actually cannot arise and have no place in a liberal society.

## I

### **The Argument Against Essentialism**

Appiah's argument is that today identities have fallen prey to so-called 'essentialism.' Appiah provides in the text two possible interpretations of essentialism: one in terms of generics, another in terms of properties. In the first interpretation essentialism is a sort of unwarranted generalization of the sort "Women are gentle" (Appiah 2018, 26) which wrongly implies that *all* women are gentle. In this sense, identities would be mere illusions, since there is not one property that all the members of a social group share. Although I am called a German, people actually do not refer to

anything specific. Some Germans are blond, others are dark haired, some Germans are racist, others are cosmopolitan; some Germans are rude, others have very gentle manners and so on. To summarize, generics and along with them identities are stereotypes, nothing more and nothing less.

Should this interpretation be right, Appiah would be a skeptic on identities and *whatever* talk about identities would be tantamount to lies. Yet, as I stated earlier, Appiah is a firm defender of collective identities and, as a matter of fact, when he defines essentialism, quoting the developmental psychologist Susan Gelman, he introduces an alternative interpretation of essentialism: “Essentialism is the view that certain categories have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly, but that gives an object its identity, and is responsible for other similarities that category members share” (*ibid.*). Here the use of identity labels is not arbitrary and identities have meaning and reference. To go back to our example, the German nation exists and all Germans share something, have something in common. However, the commonalities that members of a certain group have are not due to some underlying property – be it natural, metaphysical but also social. Appiah’s conclusion confirms this reading in terms of mere contingency: “It’s worth insisting from the start that essentialism about identities is usually wrong: in general, there isn’t some inner essence that explains why people of a certain social identity are the way they are” (*ibid.*, 29).

In this regard, religion, though existent as a category, is not about scriptures. The nation is not rooted in blood or “something spiritual, the soul or spirit of the folk: the *Volksgeist*” (*ibid.*, 82). Race has nothing to do with skin color. Cultures do not have their origin in certain values. And class not only is not determined by

the possession of means of production but does neither depend on merit, as more recent theories propose.

Appiah's objection is that identities in today's world do not correspond to any essences. Identities cannot be traced back to any particular property. Scriptures are the result of historical contingencies and religious believers "can also disagree about what's *in* the books. (...) Scriptural passages can get new readings" (*ibid.*, 54-55). Given that "all of us in fact belong to more than one group with shared ancestry," Appiah asks "what, beyond a putative shared ancestry, makes a nation yours?" (*ibid.*, 74). Moreover, "the reality of linguistic and cultural variation within a community can be in tension with the romantic nationalist vision of a community united by language and culture. Indeed, this tension is the rule, rather than the exception" (*ibid.*, 86). Gregor Mendel's discovery of genes makes the biological concept of race obsolete. Merit is a matter of moral luck and therefore cannot be the basis of class. Last but not least, values are shared among cultures: "The values that European humanists like to espouse belong as much to an African or an Asian who takes them up with enthusiasm as to a European" (*ibid.*, 211).

And as a matter of fact, essentialism seems to be *the* problem in many of today's political conflicts. A literalist reading of the Koran is at the basis of much of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. An understanding of the nation in terms of kinship has contributed to the exclusion of immigrants around the world. The culturalist interpretation of the nation has led to the forced assimilation of minorities. The division of the world in naturally superior and inferior races has provided the grounds for racism, colonialism, slavery and genocide. As also Michael Sandel in *The Tyranny of Meritocracy* argues, attributing class status to individual effort and merit in our increasingly unequal Western societies is at the root of

populism and the current class wars. Declaring human rights and democracy as Western inventions and products has indeed given rise to something similar as a clash of civilizations.

I believe Appiah is fully right that those conflicts are in fact all *group* conflicts and that they won't be overcome denying the social reality of groups, as many postmodern and postcolonial thinkers tend to do, who categorically refute essentialism.<sup>3</sup> Which is then the reality of social groups? Which is the truth about collective identities that helps to avoid this conflictual stance?

## II

### Collective Identity as Practice

Appiah puts forth a notion with regard to identities that goes back to Pierre Bourdieu. It is a certain *habitus* that underlies and constitutes identities, a *habitus* that Bourdieu defines as a “bodily hexis, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” (quoted in Appiah 2018, 21) and which is largely unreflective and unconscious (*ibid.*, 25). In other words, the reality of collective identity consists in shared social *practices*.

Appiah illustrates this point with respect to religions when he distinguishes the three dimensions of belief, practice and community. He affirms that “abstract beliefs mean very little if you lack a direct relationship to traditions of practice, conventions of interpretation, communities of worship” (*ibid.*, 37). Hence, what makes a Muslim or, as a consequence, a German is not the Koran

<sup>3</sup> See Bayart 2005 for a very vivid illustration of this point in international politics. For a more theoretical account see Bhabha 1994.



or a particular ancestry but simply forms of life, common patterns of beliefs and action.

It is important to note here that Appiah's conception of religion in terms of *identity* is quite different from the one proposed in contemporary liberal theory. Both Rawls and Habermas conceive religion in purely doctrinal terms and as a consequence see the moderation of religion as a matter of practical reason and justification. Appiah's practice-based account indicates, as we are going to see, that the sources of religious toleration might be found in society rather than in the single individual and its reason.

Identities based on practices are clearly more open, fluid and porous than those grounded in some objective criteria. Though white, living for a sufficient time among Africans, I could indeed become at least in part a *black* person, as much as the African Anton Wilhelm Amo was a *German* philosopher (*ibid.*, 107-110). Identities stop to be exclusive, yet this does not entail that they must become properly liberal. In *Islam Observed*, Clifford Geertz shares Appiah's practice-based notion of religion, however he does not therefore sustain that the more open-minded, progressive Indonesian Islam is more Islamic or better than the conservative, doctrinal Moroccan Islam.

Although I believe that Appiah is right to conceive social groups in terms of shared practices, I also think that the argument is not yet sufficient for sustaining that common practices constitute identities that are fundamentally *liberal* and tolerant. Appiah's larger claim, that takes already shape early on in *In My Father's House*, is that there is not only a compatibility between identity politics and liberalism, but that social identities are the sources of individualism and allow for individuality in the first place. Appiah maintains on the basis of John Stuart Mill's theory that with the help of social

identities individuals are in a position to fashion a self.<sup>4</sup> Therefore he cannot avoid discussing the sources of shared practices, also because a theory of *habitus* is largely compatible with essentialism.

### III

#### The Sources of Collective Identities

Appiah makes different claims in this regard. The first theory he takes into consideration is that of voluntarism. He refers here to Ernest Renan who “argued, what really matters in making a nation, beyond these shared stories, is ‘the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life.’ That’s why he said that a nation’s existence ‘is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite.’ What makes ‘us’ a people, ultimately, is a commitment to governing a common life *together*” (Appiah 2018, 102). The *habitus* has its origins in the individuals’ will and is basically their voluntary creation. “Recognize that nations are invented and you’ll see they’re always being *reinvented*” (*ibid.*). If identities are indeed the result of practical reason, then it is plausible, as Christine Korsgaard (1996) demonstrates, that identities are *moral* constructions. However, in the conclusion of the book Appiah clearly stresses the limits of the voluntarist position: “There is a liberal fantasy in which identities are merely chosen, so we are all free to be what we choose to be. Identities work only because, once

<sup>4</sup> Appiah argues that “collective identities provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their projects and in telling their life stories” (Appiah 2005, 22). Discussing the example of the butler in Mr. Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *The Remains of the Day*, Appiah claims that “he plans to live *as* a butler, his father’s son, a man, a loyal Englishman. What structures his sense of his life, is something less like a blueprint and more like what we nowadays call an ‘identity’” (*ibid.*, 16).

they get their grip on us, they command us, speaking to us as an inner voice; and because others, seeing who they think we are, call on us, too” (Appiah 2018, 217).

With regard to race, Appiah mentions further the theory of social constructionism – “race is a social construct” (*ibid.*, 131). Although also social constructionism considers identities to be the result of human inventions and imaginations, it does not see them as individual voluntary and intentional creations. The theory sustains that certain, such as racial labels emerge in the context of in particular scientific discourses that seek to constitute knowledge and truth and as a consequence result in the control and domination of certain subaltern groups of people. A constructionist understanding of identities leaves at least in theory room for ideological critique,<sup>5</sup> subversions and new counterhegemonic constructions,<sup>6</sup> although Appiah concedes that “the recognition that these differences are produced by social processes has not made it any less difficult to alter them” (Appiah 2018, 131).

In a sense, Appiah is neither a convinced voluntarist nor a social constructionist on identities. And I believe again that he has good reasons for this. Voluntarists face an objection that already Hegel raises against Kant<sup>7</sup> and that in the case of social identities gains particular significance. Hegel maintains that practical reason remains empty and merely subjective. And what reason could a person have to invent or endorse some practical identity rather

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Haslanger 2017.

<sup>6</sup> For the critical role of agency within regimes of truth see in particular Bhabha 1994 as well as Butler 1990 and Mbembe 2001.

<sup>7</sup> See Hegel 1991, 120-139 (§§ 135-140).

than another? Any choice is by definition arbitrary and therefore this existentialist stance can never give rise to a veritable commitment.<sup>8</sup>

Also social constructionists face the problem of arbitrariness, since it is not clear why certain discourses emerge and not others. Is it really the case that discourses about race, class or nation arise spontaneously without any underlying causes? Moreover, why should individuals identify with those labels, in particular in cases where these draw negative pictures fraught with prejudice? Against what Appiah sustains in his earlier work,<sup>9</sup> it seems that people just do not have reasons to identify with insulting stereotypes and that the simple enunciation of labels cannot have social and psychological effects, determining how people are supposed to conduct their lives.<sup>10</sup> By the way, essentialism runs into similar problems when it has to explain why certain properties are supposed to be socially and politically salient.

Yet, Appiah mentions repeatedly in the text a third possible theory of social groups that explains *why* individuals develop a certain *habitus*, but also identification, and thereby avoids the arbitrariness of both voluntarism and social constructionism. Next to *habitus* and a certain psychological tendency towards essentialism, Appiah lists clannishness as a third constitutive feature of identity. He reports the Robbers Cave experiment<sup>11</sup> where preadolescent boys with similar sociological background were sent to a remote summer camp in Oklahoma and divided into two groups, while neither group was aware of the other's existence.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kaul 2020, *Identity and the Difficulty of Emancipation*, 29-42.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Appiah 2005, 66.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Kaul 2020, 145-168.

<sup>11</sup> This is the reference: Sherif et al. 1988.

After about one week (phase 1), the two groups were introduced and brought into competition with each other through games and activities that created winners and losers. Situations were also devised whereby one group gained at the expense of the other. In the course of the four-day series of competitions between the groups (phase 2) initial prejudices escalated into fierce antagonism, aggressions and violence. The groups also gave themselves names, the Rattlers and the Eagles, and identified with different, partly opposing norms of behavior (Appiah 2005, 63).

The conclusion Muzafer Sherif, the experiment's lead researcher, draws is that social *identities* develop and conflict between groups occurs only once two groups are put in competition for limited resources. The formation of social groups (phase 1 of the experiment) takes place through the pursuit of common goals that require cooperative discussion, planning and execution. During this organizational process social norms develop, leadership and group structure emerge. However, group identification as much as group differences, prejudices and stereotypes seem to be the result of competition and conflict over scarce resources. Appiah states that “these quasi-cultural differences could be recognized in the way each group talked about itself and the other group. The boys didn't develop opposing identities because they had different norms; they developed different norms because they had opposing identities” (Appiah 2018, 30). In his earlier work, Appiah quotes Jean-Loup Amselle who argues that cultural identities “might be seen, in the first instance, as the consequence, not the cause, of conflicts” (Appiah 2005, 64).

The experiment shows that groups with their shared practices, *habitus* and one could even say *culture* develop spontaneously once individuals need to cooperate to achieve determinate goals.

However, group *identity*, the fact of a second-order endorsement of the group itself with its presumed norms, and the resulting distinction from other groups happen only at the moment other groups are perceived as threats. In this sense, culture is a first-order theory in fact different from identity that is a second-order theory,<sup>12</sup> a psychological reaction to social rules or facts putting at risk the well-being of similarly situated individuals. The important point here is that identities are a byproduct of the rules that organize society. The more these rules introduce competition between groups, the more social identities will be accentuated and conflictual.

Appiah's studies of in particular culture and race confirm Sherif's theory that goes under the name of realistic conflict theory. With regard to the idea of the West and its civilization, Appiah remarks that "the first recorded use of a word for Europeans as a kind of person seems to have come out of this history of conflict," resulting from the Muslim conquest of Europe from the 8th century onwards. "Simply put, the very idea of a 'European' was first used to contrast Christians and Muslims" (Appiah 2018, 193-194).

Concerning race, Appiah observes that "many historians have concluded that one reason for the increasingly negative view of the Negro through the later eighteenth century was the need to salve the consciences of those who trafficked in and exploited enslaved men and women" (*ibid.*, 117). And today, "the persistence of material inequality gives a mission to racial identities, for how can we discuss inequities based on color without reference to groups defined by color?" (*ibid.*, 132). This means race was first functional

<sup>12</sup> For an account of identity as a second-order theory see Bilgrami 2014, 241-259.

to colonialism and slave trade and became then a source of identification in the struggle against resulting inequalities between races.

## IV

### Collective Identity and Group Consciousness

Still, the question is if the Robbers Cave experiment really provides the elements for a theory of collective *identities*. One might think that the theory of collective identity Appiah presents is largely confirmed by the experiment, though the theory might need some integration. According to Appiah, collective identities come first with labels and rules that pick out the members of a group. Secondly, identities have a specific *content* that provides reasons for action. In this sense, identities are sources of *normativity*. Thirdly, identities require or give other people *reasons* to treat the bearer of an identity in certain ways (Appiah 2018, 8-12).<sup>13</sup>

As Appiah is very much aware, in particular the latter two points that involve normativity and ethics are despite a certain sociological correctness problematic from a liberal point of view. He states that “gender, sexuality, and racial and ethnic identity have all been profoundly shaped (even, in a sense, produced) by histories of sexism, homophobia, racism and ethnic hatred” (*ibid.*, 69). However, in Appiah’s theory of identity, it is not only alright but almost obligatory that we live according to our identities and others are *justified* to treat us as such. To put it somewhat provocatively, if you are born as a girl into a working class family, you have all the reasons to live your life as a working class woman and others are right to treat you as such. Liberal intuitions suggest

<sup>13</sup> See also Appiah 2005, 66-69.

that in contexts of classism, racism, sexism and so on something might be wrong here and indeed the Robbers Cave experiment adjusts the picture.

It is true that identification with the group takes place. Yet, group identity itself is only the result or, as Appiah puts it in the quote above, the product of society's organization. Identity is not the cause but the effect. Should we change the rules of the game, identities are going to change with them, as in the last, third phase of the experiment that I am going to describe in a moment. Moreover, although group identity involves some form of normativity, identification is merely of psychological, reactive nature rather than purely volitional.<sup>14</sup> We should therefore only add a fourth point in Appiah's theory that states that identity, consisting in group labels and identification, has its origin and distinguishable cause in social institutions that distribute resources along group lines. This way we seem to keep together the ethics of identity as much as individual rationality, agency *and* causation, first-person *and* third-person perspective.

However, it is interesting to note that, in the Robbers Cave experiment, identification turned rapidly from an apparent solution into a problem, diverting attention from the real cause of the group conflict. Moreover, the youngsters developed something close to a full-blown moral identity. Of course the context was that of a game, but applied to larger social conflicts identity really risks to be a sort of opium making people blind to what is going on. The problem with the social-psychological approach is not so much, as Akeel Bilgrami holds, the risk of a certain "surplus phenomenology of identity," according to which identity acquires "a momentum of

<sup>14</sup> For the distinction see Strawson 2008 on reactive attitudes and Frankfurt 1988 on volitional identity.



its own that may survive even after the function has lapsed” (Bilgrami 2014, 229). The fundamental problem is that this way identity is *not* functional to individual well-being *in the first place*, at least in the cases of class, gender and race where identification goes to the expense of the oppressed group.

Marx, different from later Marxists like E. P. Thompson whose position Appiah embraces (Appiah 2018, 142-143), avoids, to my knowledge, entirely the term class *identity* and prefers that of class *consciousness* to underline that class is not about ethics and the good life but a product of capitalism that is going to be overcome through collective action. Group consciousness might be a rational necessity given the way society is organized, but it shouldn't be attributed any kind of normative significance. Some people of the working class might of course come “to view manual labor as a source not just of income but of pride” (*ibid.*, 159). But this for Marxists would be a matter of *false* consciousness.

Robbers Cave suggests nevertheless that identification in certain situations seems to be inevitable, although it therefore must be neither rational nor functional. Later Marxists explain this conundrum differently attributing it either, as Gramsci, to the cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie (Gramsci 2011) or, as Althusser, to processes of *subjectification* (Althusser 2013). Although identity in this sense is not an outright lie tantamount to false consciousness and involves probably even a form of dignity, I think the Robbers Cave experiment shows that identification is still *not* a source of normativity.

Appiah derives from Robbers Cave the “psychological truth that we humans ascribe a great deal of significance to the distinction between those who share our identities and those who don't, the insiders and the outsiders” and the fact that “we are

*clannish* creatures” (Appiah 2018, 30-31). In reality, I believe that the experiment shows that individuals *under particular circumstances* tend towards identification, but clannishness does not therefore have to go along with moral attributes. The Robbers Cave experiment was made up of a third phase in which Sherif tried various means of reducing the built-up hostility and low-level violence between the groups. He came to the conclusion that superordinate goals (goals that require both groups to achieve them) reduced animosities significantly and more effectively than other strategies (e.g., communication, contact) that involve practical reasoning.

Appiah’s theory of identity focuses on the moral self, whereas Robbers Cave puts at the center the question of justice. Insofar as social groups and the conflicts among them are not about morality but anchored in society’s organization, Robbers Cave shows that social divisions can be overcome *politically* with the right institutional design. In this last section, I would like to suggest that, in Appiah’s analysis of class, liberalism appears precisely as the theory that is supposed to put an end not only to identity conflicts but to identity as such.

## V

### **Class Identity and Liberalism**

To some extent, the concept of class with its emphasis on class conflict and class struggle should be the test case of the Robbers Cave experiment. In fact, Marx comes to identify the capitalist system as the origin of classes in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, substituting the hereditary class system with its different estates characteristic of feudalism that, as Appiah rightly remarks (Appiah 2018, 171), resembles in many respects today’s

caste system in India.<sup>15</sup> The caste system ascribes explicitly individuals to different social groups on a hereditary basis, in the sense that there are social rules that determine from the outset the distribution of resources, privileges and rights. The emerging liberalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after the French Revolution sought precisely to abolish those social rules that divided society into estates and introduce the individual's will as the sole criteria that decides about his or her place in society.

Hegel, who anticipates this transition, states clearly, despite his recognition of the *objective* legitimacy and necessity of estates, that “the question of which particular estate the individual will belong to is influenced by his natural disposition, birth, and circumstances, although the ultimate and essential determinant is *subjective opinion* and the *particular arbitrary will*, which are accorded their right, their merit, and their honour in this sphere. Thus, *what* happens in this sphere through inner necessity is at the same time *mediated by the arbitrary will*, and for the subjective consciousness, it has the shape of being the product of its own will” (Hegel 1991, 237, § 206).

Accordingly, liberalism and its radical system of formal equality among citizens were supposed to gradually overcome the old class system. Not in the sense that it would not allow for substantial social and economic inequalities, but that those inequalities had their origin only in individual freedom and not in some social institution. Now Marx contests the very fact that liberalism is the end of history and does away with social barriers and social conflicts. His thesis is that the laws of capital introduce social divisions similar to feudalism, that individual will alone cannot overcome, and thereby constitute social classes. Capitalism divides society irreconcilably in those who own the means of production

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Dirks 2001.

and those who do not own them, the capitalist class and working class.

Appiah is skeptical about Marx's notion of class, because it is both too reductive and too narrow. He criticizes its economism and prefers Max Weber's and Bourdieu's richer accounts in terms of status, honor, power as much as cultural, social and human capital other than financial capital. Yet he repeatedly recognizes that "the connection between class and wealth, though complex, is indissoluble" (Appiah 2018, 144) and "there's an intrinsic association between class and money" (*ibid.*, 163).

Moreover, according to Appiah there are more than the two opposing classes of capitalists and proletarians, even though he reports a certain erosion of the middle class even among those with graduate degrees in the United States. This trend towards a two-class society with a tiny upper class and a immense lower class find some confirmation by Thomas Piketty's well-known study on the rise of inequalities (Piketty 2014)<sup>16</sup> as well as Appiah's own observation that "many elite schools take more students from the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from the bottom 60 percent" (Appiah 2018, 173). Richard Reeves observes that "there has been no increase in inequality below the eightieth percentile. All the inequality action is above that line." (quoted *ibid.*).

My idea is that Appiah rejects Marx's conception of class not necessarily because of its sociological inaccuracy, although his objections are certainly well taken. Appiah is aware that, historically, the formation of class identity takes place within the context of an irreducible social conflict. He quotes E. P.

<sup>16</sup> See also the study by Leonhardt and Serkez 2020 on inequalities in the United States over the last decades where the income of the richest rose by 420% and that of the lower classes by a maximum of 50%.

Thompson in this regard who sustains that “class happens [when shared experience leads some men] to feel and articulate the identity of their interests . . . as against other men, their rulers and employers” (*ibid.*, 143). Only in the face of this insurmountable difference, “people in what had once been called the ‘lower orders’ developed a growing sense of self-respect, something that manifested itself in the development of a self-conscious working class” (*ibid.*, 158).

Appiah rejects Marx, because, as a *liberal*, he cannot accept a society in which class division is a matter of social institutions rather than individual freedom. If Marx should be right and the institution of capitalism divides society into something similar as a caste system, liberalism would lose all its justification but also appeal. Therefore Appiah has a conception of class in terms of more basic economic and social inequalities. He believes that “money and status are social rewards that can encourage people to do the things that need doing” (*ibid.*, 181). And “the social rewards of wealth and honor are inevitably going to be unequally shared, because that is the only way they can serve their role as incentives for human behavior” (*ibid.*, 183). Social hierarchies and with them different classes arise because meritocracy is the only way to guarantee efficiency.

But for Appiah already meritocracy and the resulting class system risk to have illiberal traits. “Neither talent nor effort, the two things that would determine rewards in the world of the meritocracy, is itself something earned” (*ibid.*, 180), since both do not depend on the will of individuals but on their natural endowments and upbringing. As a consequence, in a truly liberal society, institutional desert, the fact that people are rewarded according to certain criteria laid down by institutions on the basis of their respective needs, should not be confused with the

worthiness of individuals. An individual's place in a fully liberal society is "a matter of luck" (*ibid.*, 181), the result of the "massive contingency of human life" (*ibid.*, 182). Class positions are purely accidental and as such do not contradict the spirit of liberalism.

Yet, it is not exactly clear if Appiah's liberalism can actually account for class identities. Appiah reports Tocqueville's point of view in this regard who maintains that "what is most important for democracy, is not that there are no great fortunes; it is that great fortunes do not rest in the same hands. In this way, there are the rich, but they do not form a *class*" (*ibid.*, 151, emphasis mine). Tocqueville certainly has in mind here the rigid, hereditary caste-like system in feudal Europe with which he contrasts American democratic society, but there is something to the point that class in an actual liberal society is almost an oxymoron.

How could class labels apply in an open society in which citizens cannot only move from rags to riches at any time with some luck or effort but are supposed to change social positions incessantly? If class goes along with an attitude, a consciousness and even identification as Appiah suggests, how could those develop in a social system that is constantly in flux? As a matter of fact, any form of identification that attributes "normative significance" to class would be counterproductive and avoid the desired mobility. Moreover, individuals have little reason to identify with class labels that relegate them to the bottom of society, if their social position is a matter of bad luck or personal failure. At best they can feel ashamed, embarrassed or depressed but not empowered and proud of their destiny. I think it is no accident that in current Western societies, constituted around the ideal of meritocracy, class and class solidarity have lost their political salience and have become substituted by populism. If it is

up to the individuals to carve out their lives, only the people as a whole and not classes can oppose injustices.

## VI

### **Towards a Comprehensive Liberalism**

Appiah is of course aware that in today's societies it is not so much luck or meritocracy that determines in which positions people end up but the socio-economic background of the family, their class. He quotes Richard Reeves' work *Dream Hoarders* to exemplify the "hoarding mechanisms" by which "nearly all parents are going to try to gain unfair advantages for their offspring" (Appiah, 2018, 172). As Appiah further quotes Daniel Markovits, "American meritocracy has thus become a mechanism for the dynastic transmission of wealth and privilege across generations" (*ibid.*, 173), "a modern-day aristocracy" (*ibid.*, 174) in which class is as fixed as in a system of caste. This brings us back to Marx's point and seems to underlie much of Trump's claim that the system is rigged.

The question is if the game is irreparably fixed. Both populists and Appiah do not believe so, though of course on a different basis. Libertarian populists share the belief "that America mostly is and certainly should be a society in which opportunities belong to those who have earned them" (*ibid.*, 169) and accept the class system on that basis. But they believe that globalization and immigration have undermined the meritocratic system, so that the people receives much less than what it deserves.

Given that libertarianism tends to solidify class boundaries rather than to make them permeable, Appiah relies on an account of social justice to realize liberalism's promise of equality and social

mobility. He maintains that “historically, we have used inheritance taxes to help even out the opportunities. Further democratizing the opportunities for advancement is something we know how to do” (*ibid.*, 183). As Rawls and luck egalitarians, he believes that redistribution is the key to equal opportunity, helping individuals to enter the market more or less on an equal footing but also to social security, once they exit the market.

In the last decades, liberal politics has been far too complacent with inequalities on the basis of class, gender, race, culture, ethnicity but also of the nation. The reason is a misunderstood pluralism that attributes moral value to collective identities<sup>17</sup> and therefore results in a neutral state and laissez-faire politics. Concerns with pluralism have displaced questions of social justice and in this sense the rise of populism is little surprising.<sup>18</sup>

I think Susan Moller Okin’s work on gender equality shows to what extent a liberal theory actually requires substantial public interventions even in the private sphere and family (Okin 1989). From this perspective, it would be surprising that equality among the other identities would not require the same institutionalist approach in the domains of the market, civil society and international relations. As a consequence, traditional identities might slowly disappear. To make just one example: The increasing equality of opportunity between men and women in at least some parts of the world over the last decades has contributed to what the magazine *National Geographic* (2017) calls a gender revolution and a continuous blurring of gender roles.

<sup>17</sup> For an account of the different types of pluralism see Kaul and Salvatore 2020.

<sup>18</sup> See also Sandel’s criticism of political liberalism in Sandel 2020.



How this new liberal theory will look like is the big question. It is the merit of *The Lies That Bind* to have initiated the search for this new, more comprehensive liberalism.

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