

# UNIVERSALISM VS RACE CONSCIOUSNESS

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the demand for recognition and fair treatment of distinct identity groups has become a central feature of our politics.

We are increasingly thinking in terms of granular group identities based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion and so on. Such "identity politics" poses a challenge to the values of universalism and individualism.

One of the greatest challenges facing our increasingly diverse democracies is deciding how and whether we want to emphasise what we share as a whole or what separates us, or to do both.

Are we all best served by stressing the existence of disparate ethnic groups within our societies or by emphasising what we share in common? Are either of these goals actually practical? Can you get rid of racism if you centre the notion of race at the heart of politics? What are the trade-offs of stressing multiculturalism as opposed to universalism? What do we lose by thinking of ourselves in racial terms? What do we gain? If we as humans desire group identities, which ones most satisfy our needs? If we are biologically determined to have in-groups and out-groups, is it better to let this tendency flourish or try to dampen its effects?



## GROUP IDENTITIES AND TRADE-OFFS

Universalism is the belief that we should emphasise how we are all members of the same human species, we all have dignity and worth as individual humans and what unites us as humans is greater than what divides us as specific (ethnic) groups. Past and present discrimination is real but cannot be overturned until we view everyone as kin. Racism will never go away while we categorise people by race—it provides a mental schema by which we treat people differently. Who has power might change and who is able to be racist without recrimination might change, but racism will remain.



The aim of getting us to think of all humans as our brothers and sisters is a utopian goal. For this, we would need to fight against and transcend millennia of encrusted tribal prejudices and possibly also against human nature itself. But we have jettisoned other long-practiced behaviours—patriarchal societies, monarchical rule—and replaced them with principles and institutions that better serve the security and prosperity of the majority. Critics of racial consciousness emphasise that our racial identities were created during the eras of the European Empires and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The concept of race was an axiom of white supremacist ideology undergirding those institutions and should be jettisoned as soon as possible.

The problem with this view is that the legacies of that age live on in the present. Race might not have any real biological basis, but the socially constructed notion of race does. Many people believe it matters and it will be very hard to give it up. Indeed, one of the hardest aspects of going beyond racial identity would be that minority identities formed in response to earlier racial bigotry have to be given up as much as the supremacist notions. Defenders of universalism respond that to continue to define oneself in terms of opposition to other people's bigotry, while understandable, seems pathological and limiting.

The belief that we should maintain race consciousness holds that our racial or ethnic identities are unavoidable and meaningful. Moreover, the interests of specific groups will only be furthered if these communities maintain awareness of their group's unique circumstances and interests. This position is also utopian in its way, founded as it is that the best way to build cohesive multiracial societies is by putting race at the center. It seems contradictory to believe continued use of categories that by definition divides us by race will help end differential treatment on the basis of race.

The utopian hope of the race consciousness position is that we will eventually hit upon a society in which the interests of all ethnic groups can be balanced in



ways that are deemed fair to all. Thinking that racial groups have incommensurate interests does not read like a recipe for cohesive societies and will, instead, lead to groups treating each other at arm's length in constant negotiations about who owes whom what. Yet, given the significance of such notions in both past eras and current thinking, the concept of race is seemingly not going away anytime soon.

Key to the current strand of anti-racism, epitomised by American diversity trainer Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* (2011), holds that it is incumbent upon white people to realise how central "whiteness" is to their identities and how corrosive such an identity is to ethnic minority populations. White supremacy is ubiquitous—i.e. all culture serves to further the interests of the white majority. White people's task is to understand "how—rather than if—our racism is manifest" and change their behaviour. Race consciousness is necessary for white people, so this argument runs, because only then will they realise how unfair society is for non-white people.

One naïve aspect underpinning DiAngelo's view is the belief that if white people are encouraged to develop their own racial identity, they willingly accept DiAngelo's depiction of them as inherently sinful by virtue of being white. Instead a re-racialised majority group might develop its own active set of political interests in opposition to other groups. Moreover, the sort of identity politics solution proposed by DiAngelo is characteristic of the general shift of our attention away from our previous focus on economic solidarity—which often cuts across race—in favour of our racial identities. It is highly debatable whether pitting white people against non-white people is the best way to improve the economic fortunes of working-class Britons of all groups.

What does the person who abandons their racial identity gain? According to the American social commentator Thomas Chatterton Williams, one answer is individual freedom. We do not need to act according to what "our" racial group expects of us or think of ourselves as carrying the weight of history—that we are more than "sites of racial characteristics and traits, reincarnations of conflicts and prejudices past". We get to choose what is important about ourselves rather than be bracketed according to a phenotypical trait we had no control over. This was always the biggest psychological attraction of liberal individualism: we all want to be the author of our own lives, to become ourselves and not proxies for broader social categories.

Would universalism and individualism provide us with enough? One of the major criticisms of liberalism in the early twenty-first century is that it has cast us off from community identities. We are isolated, atomised individuals, and our lives are all the psychologically poorer for it. Racial identity is one form of belonging we can experience. What does the racially or ethnic conscious person gain? Community and belonging is the short answer and, quite possible, greater power in numbers.

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