

STUDY GUIDE

# CIVIL RIGHTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

LECTURE 9

## IDENTITY POLITICS TODAY

### OUTLINE

#### 0:00-5:32— The Regime of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

- A radical reinterpretation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 laid the foundation for a fundamental transformation of the American regime.
  - In just a few years, a law that promised to ban discrimination was used to justify it.
  - As a result, America finds itself saddled with a vast, powerful, and increasingly illiberal anti-discrimination state that discriminates in favor of racial minorities and women.
- Concurrently, identity politics and critical race theory arose to justify the existence of this new illiberal state and push for its expansion.
  - Although the two can be distinguished, these political ideologies share much in common.
  - The more prominent of the two is identity politics, since its scope is broader.
- Identity politics is now the dominant ideology in America.
  - Almost all major elite professions in the country affirm it or are deferent to it.
  - Identity politics is so powerful that saying anything that is considered offensive to protected identity groups is now among the gravest sins one can commit.

#### 5:33-13:04— The Moral Framework of Identity Politics

- The most important thing to grasp about identity politics is that it is not really about identity.
  - Rather, it is first and foremost a theory about oppression.

- The centrality of oppression is seen most clearly in the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement, authored by a group of radical black feminists.
  - The statement focuses on identifying and denouncing the multiple interconnected systems of oppression in America.
- Identity politics has two key features:
  - First, its focus on race, sex, sexual orientation, and gender.
  - Second, it privileges and elevates these oppressed identity groups.
- The first principle of the moral framework of identity politics is the moral superiority of the oppressed.
  - As a result, civil rights laws are applied selectively. As two members of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights explained in 1985, civil rights laws were passed because some Americans were part of “disfavored groups” and therefore needed the protection of these laws.

### **13:05-19:16— The Worldview of Identity Politics**

- The worldview of identity politics is based on the notion that America is systemically racist.
- Because of this worldview, partisans of identity politics refuse to acknowledge the progress that has been made regarding race-relations since the middle of the twentieth century.
  - In other words, systemic racism has not diminished but changed forms: from slavery to Jim Crow to the “new Jim Crow.”
- If this worldview is correct, it would seem that non-white Americans have two options:
  - Either they might leave America and form their own nation;
  - Or remain in America, accept its racism, and resign oneself to second-class citizenship.
- This worldview, therefore, promotes a stance of hopeless resistance: fight against racism, but have no expectation that it can be cured.

### **19:17-27:55— The Identity Politics Agenda**

- The central demand of identity politics is the complete eradication of discrimination.
  - Doing so requires going beyond legal discrimination and attacking subtle discrimination as well.
  - This requires making sure that all historically oppressed groups are proportionately represented in all desirable realms of life, and that all groups are succeeding and failing at the same rate.

- Partisans of identity politics seek to achieve their agenda through two approaches:
  - Either selection standards need to be lowered for certain groups in order to increase their likelihood of success;
  - Or all such selection standards need to be eliminated entirely.
- The effect of identity politics is that the presumption of innocence has been replaced by a presumption of prejudice.
  - As a result, identity politics requires that individuals and institutions discriminate against oppressor groups in order to eliminate discrimination.

## KEY PASSAGES

"This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression."

**- Combahee River Collective Statement**

"Civil rights laws were not passed to give civil rights protections to all Americans as the majority of this commission seems to believe. Instead, they were passed out of a recognition that some Americans already had protection because they belong to a favored group and others, including blacks, Hispanics, and women of all races, did not because they belonged to disfavored groups."

**- "Statements of Commissioners Blandina Cardinas Ramirez and Mary Frances Berry"**

"'It only takes one person to make a change,' you are often told. This is also a myth. Perhaps one person can make a change, but not the kind of change that would raise your body to equality with your countrymen."

**- Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me***

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How does identity politics constitute a fundamental change in the American regime?

How does the moral framework of identity politics compare to the principles of the American Founding and the moral teachings of Christianity?

Is progress in race-relations possible according to the worldview of identity politics?

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