

Leo Vinicius Maia Liberato^a <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9407-7559>

^aFundação Jorge Duprat Figueiredo de Segurança e Medicina do Trabalho, Escritório Avançado de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, SC, Brazil.

Contact:

Leo Vinicius Maia Liberato

E-mail:

leo.liberato@fundacentro.gov.br

How to cite (Vancouver):

Liberato LVM. Universalist politics in the face of identity politics. Rev. Bras. Saúde Ocup. [Internet]. 2024;49:e20. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1590/2317-6369/01124en2024v49e20>



Universalist politics in the face of identity politics

Política universalista face à política identitária

Mounk, Y. *The Identity Trap: a story of ideas and power in our time*. New York: Penguin Press, 2023. ISBN 9780593493182; eISBN 9780593493199.

Yascha Mounk is a West German-born political scientist based in the United States of America (USA). On the political spectrum, he places himself on the left and takes a liberal philosophical perspective in the analysis of identity politics developed in *The Identity Trap*. Although they have in common the defense of universalism as a principle and a means, Mounk's liberalism makes his critical perspective on identity politics different from that adopted by socialist and Marxist authors such as Finkelstein¹ and Haider².

In the book's Introduction, Mounk mentions examples of public policies implemented in the US based on identity politics. At first, the examples tend to shock some Brazilian readers. One of them is from a public health policy. In its initial recommendations for the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) was advised by its advisory committee not to distribute the available vaccines to the elderly, as other countries were doing, but to "essential workers" (which included, for example, bank employees and film crews). Since the elderly (over 65) were a group in which ethnic and racial minorities were under-represented, unlike the "essential workers", they ended up being chosen to receive the vaccines. The predictable result of this policy was a higher number of deaths from COVID-19 - even in the minority groups whose well-being it was concerned with prioritizing - than if the vaccines had been distributed according to age. Still in the Introduction, Mounk explains that he uses the expression *identity synthesis* instead of *identity politics*, because the latter has gained a pejorative meaning in the US. In order not to prejudice the debate, he preferred to coin a new name.

The Identity Trap is divided into four parts. In the first part of the book, the author presents the origins of this "identity synthesis". With the end of the Soviet bloc, the left began to focus more on cultural and identity issues than on class issues. This new emphasis would have transformed intellectual life in academia, giving greater focus to marginalized groups. The triple influence of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and critical race theory would then have given rise to the identity synthesis, a new ideology characterized by seven main themes. Among these themes would be: a preference for public policies that explicitly distinguish people on the basis of the groups to which they belong; and intersectionality as a political organizing strategy. *Ideology* is used by Mounk as a set of ideas and not, as in the Marxian concept, a set of ideas that covers up class antagonisms. This new ideology of identity synthesis would be born, according to the author, from a change in perspective on the left, by setting aside the aspiration for a more harmonious future in which the common ground between groups and individuals would prevail over differences, replacing it with a vision of the future in which society would inevitably be defined by its

division into groups with different identities. In this perspective, to ensure that each ethnic, religious, or sexual community receives a proportional share of income and wealth, both private agents and public institutions should treat people according to the group to which they belong.

In the second part of *The Identity Trap*, the author tries to trace the path that led the identity synthesis to become hegemonic in private corporations and public institutions in the United States. This path is being formed through the social media used by young people, passing through universities and the major press outlets. In the third part, Mounk points out the shortcomings of the identity synthesis. Basically, he argues that the application of the identity synthesis in public policies and political action is counterproductive to what is formally proposed. The policy of distributing COVID-19 vaccines is a case in point. In the fourth and final part of the book, the author argues in favor of universalism and universalist policies from a liberal philosophical perspective, sometimes using contributions from social psychology.

In Brazil, identity synthesis or politics is also gaining ground in public policies in the field of work and health^b. In this sense, by suggesting three criteria for adopting a public policy based on identity markers, *The Identity Trap* can also be useful to this field. Based on one of these criteria, a policy based on identity markers should only be adopted if it is impossible to adopt a policy not based on these markers. As Mounk tries to show, it would be a moral and practical mistake for identity-based public policies to become standard.

In the Brazilian academic field related to labor studies and workers' health, the introduction of the identity politics paradigm can be seen more clearly through the use of the concept of intersectionality^{3,4}, used in these cases to analyze, explain, and treat the vulnerabilities and multiple discriminations of specific groups. Mounk's critical analysis of the concept of intersectionality differs substantially from that of another American political scientist, Norman Finkelstein¹. For Mounk, the concept of intersectionality, in the supposedly original version created by Kimberlé Crenshaw, would be an intuitively plausible concept. However, the concept would have been expanded beyond what Crenshaw had suggested in her articles, becoming an amorphous concept, used, for example, to claim that groups with different identities could not fully understand each other's experience. By treating the concept of intersectionality as something invented by Crenshaw, Mounk falls precisely within the scope of the critique already made by Collins and Bilge⁵. These authors point out that the origin of the concept should be traced back to previous practices and elaborations by social movements and activists, and not to an *ex nihilo* creation by Crenshaw. Finkelstein¹ notices this when he analyzes Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, mentioning that one of the three propositions inherent in the concept would be much earlier than the author's elaboration. Unlike Mounk's book, Finkelstein's¹ study of Crenshaw's works and practices explicitly exposes to the reader that this concept of intersectionality is itself an ideology in the Marxian sense, which serves to mask class divisions and economic exploitation.

Although it makes a valuable contribution to the critique of identity politics, of course *The Identity Trap* has its own limitations, as does every book. Some of them are inherent to the liberal perspective adopted, which focuses more on the history of ideas (idealism) than on the conditions of existence (materialism), as well as not focusing on the class interests involved. Although there are elements that may suggest and reinforce this understanding, the fact is that Mounk's work overlooks the fact that identity politics is also a class strategy (of the capitalist classes). A form of recuperation, for example, of anti-racist and feminist movements, for: i) a re-signification of equality that hides class and economic issues^{6,7}, perpetuating and deepening segregations based on relations of production⁸; ii) a channeling of dissatisfaction that obstructs class struggles⁹.

With their limitations and merits, critical analyses of identity politics, such as the one carried out by Mounk, are relevant to those working in the field of worker health and safety. In Brazil, this perspective has been increasingly present in this field. As well as influencing public policies, identity politics can influence collective class actions in the workplace⁹. Actions which, intuitively and empirically, are determining factors in the organization and conditions of work^{10,11}.

^b The participation of the *Fundação Jorge Duprat Figueiredo de Segurança e Medicina do Trabalho* (Fundacentro) in the Empodera+ Program of the National Secretariat for the Rights of LGBTQIA+ People can be seen as an example of this trend.

References

1. Finkelstein, NX. I'll burn that bridge when i get to it! heretical thoughts on identity politics, cancel culture, and academic freedom. Portland: Sublation; 2023.
2. Haider, A. Armadilha da Identidade. São Paulo: Veneta; 2019.
3. Vieira CEC. Violência no trabalho: dimensões estruturais e interseccionais. Rev. Bras. Saúde Ocup. 2023;48: edcinq2. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2317-6369/24922pt2023v48edcinq2>
4. Silva JG, Jard S. Gênero e raça no contexto da escravidão contemporânea: debates insurgentes durante a pandemia de Covid-19. Laborare. 2023;6(11):277-94. <https://doi.org/10.33637/2595-847x.2023-209>
5. Collins PH, Bilge S. Interseccionalidade. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2021.
6. Propmark. Flow Podcast perde parceria com iFood após posts de Monark. Propmark. 29 out 2021 [citado 11 jan 2024]. Available from: <https://propmark.com.br/flow-podcast-perde-parceria-com-ifood-apos-posts-de-monark/>
7. Polese, P. A política identitária do iFood. Passa Palavra. 2021 [cited 2024 Jan 11]. Available from: <https://passapalavra.info/2021/11/140796/>
8. Liberato LV. iFood: a herança do apartheid no Brasil. Le Monde Diplomatique Brasil. 2 nov 2021 [cited 2024 Jan 11]. Available from: <https://diplomatique.org.br/ifood-a-heranca-do-apartheid-no-brasil/>
9. Fang L. Breaking unions with the language of diversity and social justice. The Intercept. 7 june 2022 [cited 2024 Jan 11]. Available from: <https://theintercept.com/2022/06/07/union-busting-tactics-diversity/>
10. Grunberg L. The effects of the social relations of production on productivity and workers' safety: an ignored set of relationships. Int J Health Serv. 1983;13(4):621-34. <https://doi.org/10.2190/F31H-9V3H-CNM1-9GT0>
11. Wallace M. Dying for coal: the struggle for health and safety conditions in American coal mining, 1930-82. Social Forces. 1987 Dec;66(2):336-64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2578744>

Received: January 16, 2024

Revised: April 16, 2024

Approved: April 23, 2024

Editor-in-Chief:

Ada Ávila Assunção



Available in:

<https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=100577588037>

How to cite

Complete issue

More information about this article

Journal's webpage in redalyc.org

Scientific Information System Redalyc
Diamond Open Access scientific journal network
Non-commercial open infrastructure owned by academia

Leo Vinicius Maia Liberato

Política universalista face à política identitária
Universalist politics in the face of identity politics

Revista Brasileira de Saúde Ocupacional

vol. 49, e20, 2024

Fundação Jorge Duprat Figueiredo de Segurança e Medicina
do Trabalho - FUNDACENTRO,

ISSN: 0303-7657

ISSN-E: 2317-6369

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/2317-6369/01124pt2024v49e20>