

Engaging with Identity Politics in Canadian Political Science

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Identity politics [...] is what those “others” do.

Himani Bannerji (1995)

Introduction

Writing twenty-five years ago, Jenson provocatively asserted that “all politics are identity politics” (1991: 50) since all politics are shaped by the subjective positioning of the actors involved. Yet in common circulation, not all politics are labelled as such; the moniker “identity politics” is used to demarcate some politics as situated in particular identities in contrast with more universal conceptions of the political. In the aftermath of the November 2016 election of US president Donald Trump, news media commentators seized on this differentiation between disembodied universal politics and parochial identity politics as an explanation for this jarring turn of events. The *New York Times* published half a dozen articles on identity politics promoting an opinion piece, “The End of Identity Liberalism,” with a tweet declaring “identity politics never wins elections. But it can lose them.”¹ In subsequent weeks, mirroring the tenor of American commentators, the Canadian news media blasted identity politics as a losing strategy for both the federal Liberals and Conservatives.² In this brief sampling of news media identity politics is imprecisely defined, but strongly associated with divisiveness and undesirable political outcomes.

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While questions of identity have long preoccupied Canadian political and social scientists, little academic research has interrogated how the term identity politics is taken up by Canadian academics. Increasingly, scholars have challenged the treatment of race, ethnicity and gender in Canadian political science (for example, Dobrowolsky et al., 2017; Nath, 2011; Thompson, 2008; Vickers, 2002), and some have written critically about the use of the label identity politics (for example, Abu-Laban, 2017; Bannerji, 2000), yet there has been little systemic inquiry into how the discursive use of identity politics is implicated in the treatment of scholarship that foregrounds race, ethnicity and gender. In this article, we aim to interrogate whose politics are being labelled identity politics in Canadian academic discourse, and what work is done by this analytical distinction. This paper does not purport to review all Canadian scholarship on identity but rather seeks to provide insight as to when and how political claims-making comes to be specifically labelled identity politics through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the term identity politics in six journals in the Canadian social sciences. Our argument is rooted in three tendencies we find in the literature. First, we observe that the deployment of identity politics is disproportionately used to characterize political engagement that decries political exclusion or marginalization on the basis of ethnicity, race and gender. Second, we argue that the use of the label identity politics is often marked by a lack of analytical rigour: engagement is rarely accompanied by a definition, references to specific scholars or detailed exposition. Finally, we point out that few scholars refer to their own work as falling within an identity politics framework. Rather, the label identity politics is often used as a rhetorical tool of negative juxtaposition to distance authors from particular types of scholarship and inscribe a materialist/culturalist division in claims-making. Taken in concert, we argue these three tendencies in the discursive application of identity politics in the Canadian academic literature remarginalize critiques mobilized on the basis of certain categories of difference; especially ethnicity, race and gender.

Our article is structured as follows. First we discuss key theoretical debates concerning the political relevance of identity categories in Canadian political science. Then we describe our methodology and use of CDA. Then we share our findings considering whose politics are designated identity politics, what constitutes identity politics and how identity politics is informed by broader debates in the Canadian social sciences. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for further inquiry. Our findings lead us to consider the extent to which Bannerji's (1995) observation that identity politics are just politics performed by "others" continues to hold salience.

Abstract. This paper critiques the deployment of the term “identity politics” in Canadian political science. Through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of research articles in leading English language academic journals in the Canadian social sciences, we examine whose politics are labelled identity politics and what intellectual work transpires through this label. Identity politics tends to be applied to scholarship that foregrounds analyses of ethnicity, race and gender, but with a lack of analytical rigour, indicating a degree of conceptual looseness. Moreover, the designation identity politics is not neutral; it is often mobilized as a rhetorical device to distance authors from scholarship that foregrounds analyses of ethnicity, race and gender, and to inscribe a materialist/culturalist divide in claims-making. We argue that the effect of this demarcation of identity from politics is to control the boundaries of political discourse, limiting who and what gains entry into the political. This serves to reassert an exclusionary conception of Canadian identity.

Résumé. Le présent article critique le déploiement du terme « politique identitaire » en science politique canadienne. Au moyen d’une analyse critique du discours (ACD) d’articles de recherche publiés dans les principales revues universitaires de langue anglaise en sciences sociales canadiennes, nous examinons quelles politiques sont ainsi étiquetées et le travail intellectuel que cette étiquette laisse entrevoir. Une « politique identitaire » tend à s’appliquer à la littérature qui met en avant les analyses de l’ethnicité, de la race et des sexes spécifiques, mais avec un manque de rigueur analytique indiquant un degré de laxisme conceptuel. De plus, la désignation « politique identitaire » n’est pas neutre : elle est souvent mobilisée comme un dispositif rhétorique pour éloigner les auteurs qui analysent l’ethnicité, la race et la sexes spécifiques, et pour inscrire un clivage matérialiste/culturaliste dans les revendications formulées. Nous soutenons que cette démarcation entre l’identité, d’une part, et les politiques, de l’autre, a pour effet de baliser les frontières du discours politique en limitant les acteurs et les facteurs admis dans la sphère politique. Cela sert à réaffirmer une conception exclusionnaire de l’identité canadienne.

Theoretical Debates

Our theoretical exploration of identity politics within Canadian political science focuses on three dominant and overlapping themes: the “recognition versus redistribution” divide, the so-called “culturalist turn,” and finally the ongoing quest for a unified pan-Canadian identity. These discussions all grapple with the role of “difference” within broader collectives.

The recognition/redistribution debate hinges on competing understandings of what constitutes material-based oppression and the extent to which cultural and materialist claims can be cleanly distinguished either analytically or in praxis. Butler objects to accounts which render “certain oppressions as part of political economy and relegates others to the exclusively cultural field” (1997: 270). She faults both orthodox Marxists and feminist theorists such as Fraser (1997a) with treating “new social movements” (a designation discussed with greater scrutiny below) as “merely cultural” and relying on a false cultural/economic dichotomy which belies the extent to which economic capitalist relations depend on a particular racial and sexual social order. Fraser (1997b) disputes that the recognition/redistribution distinction subordinates claims of recognition as “merely

cultural” and instead avers that misrecognition and maldistribution are separate, but equally primary, forms of injustice requiring contestation.

The second, and related, theme influencing discussions of identity politics within Canadian social sciences concerns the recognition and accommodation of cultural difference. The interdisciplinary popularity of the liberalism of Kymlicka and Taylor has meant that discussions around the politics of identity have largely been framed under the rubric of culture at the exclusion of the material. Kymlicka (1998) portrays the liberal democratic values and ideological commitments of the Canadian state as largely fixed and allows for cultural accommodation only within the confines of these non-negotiable norms. While Kymlicka is optimistic about the potential to publicly reconcile cultural claims within liberal representative democracy, Taylor (1994) is explicitly concerned that the “politics of difference” pose a threat to liberal values framed as “the politics of universal dignity.” Accordingly, Taylor seeks to reinscribe the public/private divide and confine claims for cultural recognition to the private realm. Although there are important differences in Kymlicka’s and Taylor’s thought, both scholars fit within a liberal nationalist political project (Nath, 2011) and both posit limits to cultural accommodation within the framework of the liberal state.

In response to this culturalist dominance, critical race and Indigenous scholars have raised several concerns. Bannerji’s critique faults Taylor for failing, “to make any distinction between different kinds of differences, those which could be called cultural diversities and those structured through power relations and which could be encoded as gender, ‘race’ and class” (2000: 131–132). Bannerji accuses the Canadian state’s multicultural policies of reducing the material and structural demands of marginalized groups to “officially constructed communities” based on identity (1996: 105). Similarly, Mackey describes Canadian liberalism as dependent on “its ability to construct itself as *not cultural* (in that it is not presented as the project of one cultural or ethnic group), but as *universal and rational*” (1999: 174, emphasis in original). More recently, Coulthard (2014) offers an Indigenous critique of the politics of recognition, arguing that in the context of fundamental power imbalances the terms of recognition are largely set by the colonial state and operate symbolically in concert with ongoing material dispossession. Building on these critiques, our research is animated by a concern that the deployment of the term identity politics has become a strategy for obfuscating the extent to which cultural and identity-based attachments inform ostensibly universal politics.

Finally, references to identity politics are frequently situated within broader discussions about how to identify and theorize “Canadianness” as a distinct identity. Whitaker observes that, “for much of Canadian national history, there was only limited conceptualization of Canada as a stand-alone sovereign nation” (2000: 221). Canada’s relatively young and

fragile sovereign nationalism has thus been a source of much debate surrounding the enduring influence of Britain and France, as well as the encroaching influence of the United States. Vickers has critiqued this nationalist preoccupation within Canadian studies as obscuring the intrinsically raced, gendered and settler-colonial nature of the Canadian state. In her 1992 address at a conference organized by the Association for Canadian Studies, she described Canadian studies as founded on a radical conservative and anti-modernist consensus that makes it “hard for anyone other than white males of the majoritarian culture to find *a sense of identity* in the discourse represented in the founding consensus” (1994: 363, emphasis added). As a consequence of this restricted view of “Canadian selves,” those other marginalized Canadian selves are designated as “special interest” when they collectively mobilize on the basis of shared marginalization or shared identity (Dobrowolsky, 1998). This perennial debate over Canadian identity, in conjunction with theoretical debates over redistribution/recognition and culturalism, inform our later discussion of how *identity* politics are discursively demarcated from politics.

Methodological Approach

We examined the use of the term identity politics in research articles in the leading English language peer-reviewed academic journals in the Canadian social sciences. We chose peer-reviewed journal articles because journals act as “gate-keepers” (Thompson, 2008) for academic disciplines, serving as the major site of publication by experts in the field. Consequently, journals perform a hegemonic role in defining the boundaries and conceptual language of academic practice. To facilitate comparison with Thompson’s examination (2008) of discourses of race in the Canadian social sciences we chose to focus on four of the same journals: *Canadian Journal of Political Science* (CJPS), *Canadian Public Policy* (CPP), *Canadian Public Administration* (CPA), and *Canadian Journal of Sociology* (CJS). To these we added *Journal of Canadian Studies* (JCS) and *Studies in Political Economy* (SPE) to increase our breadth. As our interest is in how identity politics is mobilized in mainstream journals that do not primarily focus on race, ethnicity or gender, our case selection was guided by an attempt to include journals that reflect dominant research areas in political science where the concept identity politics was likely to circulate, including political economy (SPE), political sociology and political behaviour (CJS), and Canadian national identity (JCS). To track the use of the term identity politics in our selected journals we conducted a full text search for both “identity politics” and “politics of identity” for the years 1985–2015, inclusive.³ The 1985–2015 time frame was chosen because it corresponds with the date the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

came into effect and the ensuing concern with political claims-making based on identity (Abu-Laban and Nieguth, 2000; Cairns, 1991; Dobrowolsky, 1998; Morton, 1987). We then manually removed any search results that were not peer reviewed research articles or were false positives.⁴

Once a dataset of peer reviewed research articles was established for each of the journals, the publication information was recorded, as well as any discourse fragments pertinent to the article's use of identity politics. Then the following questions were considered.⁵

- Do the authors use identity politics to describe their own scholarship or that of others?
- Does the article provide a definition of identity politics and/or references?
- Who are described as the subjects of identity politics?
- Do authors tend to use the term in a laudatory, neutral or pejorative manner?
- Is engagement with the term substantive or cursory?
- Does the prevalence of the term identity politics in academic literature vary over time?
- What overall purpose does the term play in the article's argument?

Multiple responses were allowed for categories that were not mutually exclusive, as our goal was to capture the full range of discursive expression. Both researchers categorized each individual article independently and responses were cross-checked between researchers. Responses were then coded to identify patterns and common themes. In keeping with Silverman's observation (2000) that complex, predetermined coding schemes can be too deterministic to capture the data accurately, thematic categories were inductively drawn from a close reading of discourse fragments.

In our work we adopt a form of discourse analysis known as critical discourse analysis (CDA). Building on traditional practices of discourse analysis, CDA applies a lens of social criticism to consider how social power relations are implicated in discourses. Practitioners of CDA argue that even scholarly discourses are not neutral, disinterested exercises but rather are embedded in social relations, ideology and power (Fairclough, 2002; Van Dijk, 2003). As a result, analyzing scholarly discourses can shed light on how academic writing, as a form of elite discourse, can "enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society" (Van Dijk, 2003: 353).

Following Fairclough (2001) we analysed journal articles using the moniker identity politics in three steps. First, we engaged in a surface reading of the text, to identify references to identity politics: assessing

the location, content and prevalence of the term. Then we undertook a critical engagement with the text to examine how assumptions embedded in the concept of identity politics were mobilized by the author. This engagement included noting coded language, argumentative positioning, tonality and the marginalization/augmentation of particular voices. Tonality was assessed by examining the adjectives and descriptors associated with identity politics, for example, the negative presentation of identity politics as divisive, threatening, and/or undesirable, or conversely the use of positive or ambivalent descriptors (Young and Soroka, 2012). This tonality assessment enabled consideration of whether the use of the term identity politics was intended to augment or detract from a particular line of scholarship. Finally, we drew linkages between broader socio-political developments and the discursive use of identity politics.

Finding Identity Politics

Overall, we found 83 occurrences of the term “identity politics” or “politics of identity” from 1985 to 2015 in peer reviewed research articles in our six journals.⁶ References were not distributed evenly: JCS contained the most references with 27, while CPP had the fewest with three mentions of identity politics (see Fig. 1). One journal, CPA, had no references at all. Temporally, there was only one reference prior to 1990 and the majority of references occurred after 1994. Mentions of identity politics peaked in a cluster around the year 2000, with subsequent high points in 2008 and 2013 (see Fig. 2).

As political events often precede academic engagement with these developments, this leads us to explore what happened in Canadian politics

FIGURE 1
Distribution of references to ‘identity politics’ by academic journal

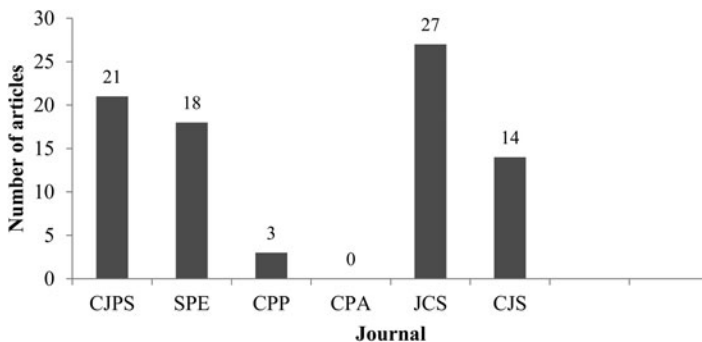
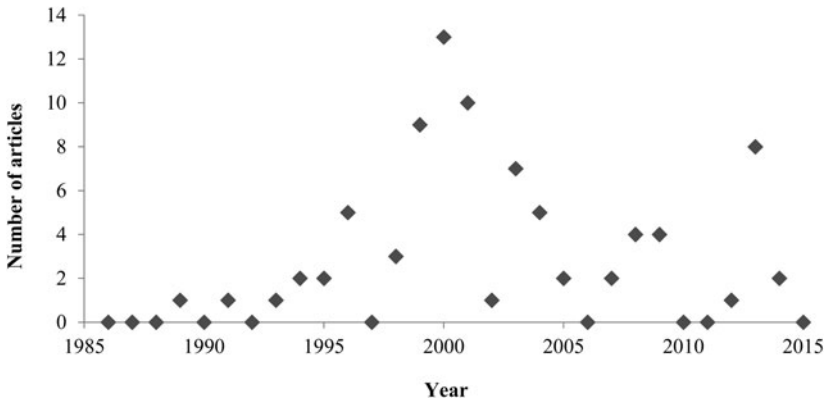


FIGURE 2
Distribution of references to ‘identity politics’ by year



to stimulate ongoing discussion of identity politics in the 1990s, a term virtually absent in earlier literature. We suggest debates around constitutional reform, multiculturalism and free trade may be historical factors informing the heightened identity politics references in the late 1990s. The non-ratification of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords spurred a national discussion about the role of so-called “special interests,” including women and state-identified groups such as visible minorities and Aboriginal peoples⁷ in the failure to arrive at a national consensus (Lusztig, 1994; Tully, 1995, but also Abu-Laban and Nieguth, 2000; Dobrowolsky, 1998 for dissenting perspectives). These constitutional conversations overlapped with discussions of increasingly entrenched state multiculturalism which was introduced in 1971, but not legislated into enduring existence until 1988.⁸ Finally, the 1990s were also marked by concerns around free trade, especially the implications of NAFTA for Canadian manufacturing and the labour movement. These concerns were particularly dominant in the left political economy tradition (Gill, 1995; Robinson, 1994), and arguably aggravated by the perceived vibrancy of so-called “new social movements,” popular movements not organized through unions or labour affiliations (Carroll and Ratner, 1995; Conway, 2000; Rose, 1997).

The prominence of constitutional debates, multiculturalism and free trade discussions may also help illuminate why identity politics has had more traction in JCS, CJPS, and SPE. We would expect JCS (a journal focusing on all facets of Canada) to include extensive discussions both around constitutional reform and free trade, as well as scholarship related more generally to questions of Canadian identity, including multiculturalism. Similarly, we would expect CJPS, as a journal that publishes

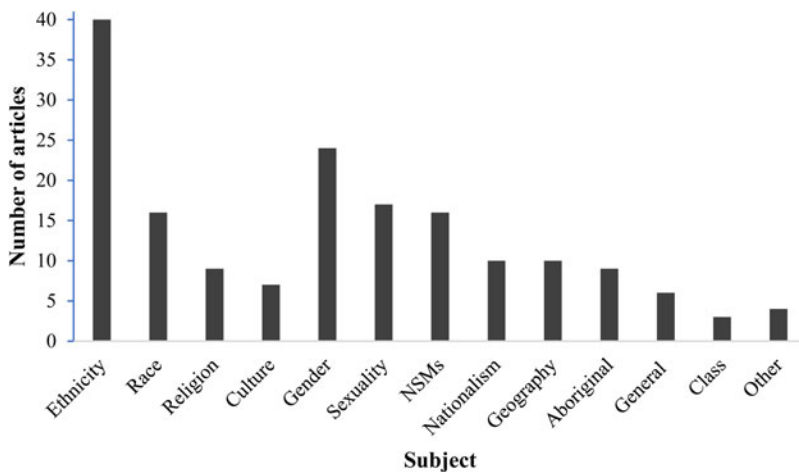
extensively on constitutional and economic issues to engage more heavily in discussions around identity politics than CPP or CPA, which are more narrowly focused on the issues of public policy and administration.

In the next section of our analysis, we move from this snapshot of the general landscape of distributions of the label identity politics to consider three areas of inquiry. First, who are the subjects ascribed to identity politics? Second, is the term used in an analytically rigorous manner? Finally, how does the term contribute to the overall argument of the article? Each of these questions is considered below.

Subjects of Identity Politics

Identity politics could refer to any group drawn together by a common social marker. This view harkens back to Jenson’s observation that all politics are the politics of identity in that all politics are situated in particular subjectivities (1991). Nevertheless, our analysis found that only some subjectivities were commonly labelled identity politics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, identity politics most frequently referenced ethnic groupings, with 40 articles linking identity politics to ethnicity. Ethnicity was followed at some distance by gender, sexuality, race and new social movements (NSMs) with several other categories receiving occasional mention (see Fig. 3). Broadly speaking, we can identify three overlapping clusters of referents: an ethnoracial/cultural grouping that includes mentions of ethnicity,

FIGURE 3
Distribution of subjects of ‘identity politics’



race, religion and culture; a gender/sexuality cluster of references to feminism, gender, sexuality and LGBTQ+ organizing; and a smaller nationalism and NSM cluster including references to nationalism, sub-national geopolitical identities, and new social movements.

A recurrent theme within each grouping is the general absence of a specific referent, as well as internal inconsistencies in the usage of the term. These concerns are discussed in greater detail below, as well as in the following section on analytic rigour.

Ethnoracial/cultural cluster

Consistent with Nath's suspicion that "the discourses of identity in CPS [Canadian political science] sift 'race' out" (2011: 162), our findings reveal an overwhelming preference of authors to take up questions of ethnicity (40 articles) over questions of race (16 articles)⁹ in relation to identity politics.¹⁰ These terms are frequently conflated, but Li suggests the following distinction: "Ethnic groups are distinguished by socially selected cultural traits, and racial groups are determined by socially selected physical traits" (1999: 8). While ethnicity is significantly informed by, and entangled within, processes of racialization, scholars engaged in studies on race have held that the "conflation or equation of race with ethnicity often diminishes the claims of racial minorities" (Thompson, 2008: 527). This diminishing mechanism is evident in the absence of any distinct consideration of race, as every instance when race is referenced in the context of identity politics, it is discussed in concert with ethnicity. Articles that treat various ethnicities as the subjects of identity politics are preoccupied with questions of belonging, integration and interest representation within the context of a broader body politic. This articulation is exemplified by Acheson and Laforest's account of "identity-based claims [as] seek[ing] out the recognition of the particular character that distinguishes a group from others in a way that highlights their unique design and life circumstances" (2013: 605). Understood under the liberal rubric of the politics of recognition, ethnoracial identity claims are reduced to calls for distinctive acknowledgement by, and/or representation within, the state rather than collective mobilization aimed at challenging disadvantages structurally embedded within the state.

There was a clear pattern wherein those who did include race within the purview of identity politics spoke of identities as material and contextual rather than as essentialist or exclusively interest-based. Authors who included race in their discussion of identity politics (for example, Briskin, 1989; Conway, 2000; Jhappan, 1996; MacDonald, 1998; Pearson, 1998/1999; Rankin, 2000; Starvo, 2007) all stress the significance of social location to identity formation, with Conway noting that "identity politics had emerged partly in response to the failure of socialist-inspired politics to

adequately address oppressions based on gender, race and sexuality and a myriad of cultural and other questions not reducible to class” (2000: 46–47). Jhappan is particularly concerned with how entrenched academic disciplines have “proved stubbornly resistant to any sustained analysis of racialization” (1996: 18) and considers how both strategic essentialism and positionality offer pathways to understanding race in the context of political organization. This suggested relationship between race-based analyses and historically/spatially specific articulations of identity raises questions about what is being left out of discussions of identity politics that are silent on race.

We discerned among articles that took up race and ethnicity a tension between those engaged in critical race scholarship that saw identity politics as an imposition on racialized ¹¹ groups and those that viewed it as demands arising from racialized groups for recognition or redress. Mensah describes how “underhanded identity politics in such areas as employment, education, housing, and law enforcement continue to undermine the settlement and incorporation of many Black Africans in Canada” (2014: 6), linking identity politics to institutional discrimination. Similarly, Bannerji draws attention to the “role played by the [Canadian] state in identity politics” (1996: 119) through the institution of state identified communities and multicultural practices, which she differentiates from historically enduring communities such as First Nations, and categories of difference “constructed through ‘race,’ class, gender and other relations of power” (1996: 113). Official multiculturalism for Bannerji is the mechanism employed by the Canadian state to manage the politics of identity: “We demanded some genuine reforms, some changes—some of us even demanded the end of racist capitalism—what we got was ‘multiculturalism’” (Bannerji, 1996: 105). In stark contrast, Whitaker understands identity politics as referring to community-based demands for “special programs for targeted groups” on the basis of race, ethnicity and other group identities (2000: 225). Similarly, Howard-Hassmann sees the “academic and social movements of identity politics” (1999: 527) as calling for recognition from the state based on a conflation between ethnicity and ancestry, which threatens to undermine a strong sense of Canadian identity.

Thus while identity politics is frequently applied to discussions that take up cultural difference, articulations of the relationship between identity politics and racialized groups is varied and inconsistent. Identity politics are cast both as state-imposed mechanisms for coping with the growing reality of racial/ethnic difference within Canada, but also as arising out of racialized groups’ demands for structural changes. References to identity politics also reflect a preference towards foregrounding discussions of ethnic and cultural differences to the exclusion of race-based analyses.

Nationalism and NSMs cluster

A second cluster of articles referenced identity politics with respect to questions of Canadian identity, nationalism and new social movements. A preoccupation emerges with the existence of a consolidated national identity and association of identity politics with divisive new challenges to Canadian unity. The newness of these challenges relies on a historical narrative of Canadian politics as predominantly produced by the negotiation between French and British settlers. This narrative excludes the ongoing political contestation of Indigenous peoples, as well as the long-standing presence of racialized people in Canada.

Exceptionally, a small number of articles (10) did associate identity politics with Canadian nationalism itself. Patten describes how the “identity politics associated with defining a nation will establish the status of various political identities and the legitimacy of different interests” (1999: 30) and Devereux references “English-Canadian identity politics” (2001: 16). These articles are connected by their recognition of Canadian nationalism as falling within the scope of identity politics. They also share an animating concern with the viability of a uniquely Canadian identity in a context of globalization, migration and Americanization.

Nonetheless, identity politics are more often situated as a new and divisive force, oppositional to national identity. Bashevkin argues that identity politics, through “the strengthening of gender, aboriginal, multicultural and other identities since the 1960s,” has been a “significant challenge” to English-Canadian nationalism, which in her narrative stands separate from identity politics. Moreover, “the rise of these increasingly politicized interests cast doubt on nationalist assertions” (2000: 111). Here, the politicization of ethnicity, gender and Indigenous peoples is something new and challenging for Canadian unity. Similarly, Whitaker associates identity politics not merely with the existence Bloc Québécois (which he refers to as “the most developed form of identity politics on the national stage”), First Nations and feminist interests but with these interests “superseding national identity” associated with multiculturalism (2000: 226). In his telling, multicultural policies, and therefore identity politics, are the dominant condition of contemporary Canada. Slightly harsher in their assessments are comments such as “[the] identity politics that result from multiculturalism facilitate social conflict” (Huey, 2003: 6), and Howard-Hassmann’s defense of “Canadian” as a viable and unified ethnic category against an “identity politics [that] has in some cases gone too far” (2000: 492). These comments indicate concern with the fragmentation of Canadian national identity as a consequence of identity politics.

Nationalist preoccupation with identity politics overlaps with discourses of new social movements (NSMs) as the locus of identity politics because NSMs are often associated with multicultural, gendered and

Indigenous claims making. In the literature reviewed, there was a tendency to describe NSMs as the subject of identity politics, without locating or historicizing the emergence of these movements. While two early pieces contested the newness of identity politics in social movements (Jenson, 1991; Weir, 1993) these stand in contrast to several later publications that reference newness without explicitly explaining what is new about these movements (for example, Angus, 2001; Howard-Hassmann, 1999; Lucas, 2013; Otero, 2004). The “newness” of NSMs is predicated upon an association of these movements with ethnic and racialized identities taking up space in national discussions that have been historically premised on maintaining exclusions.

Conversations about Canadian nationalism and NSMs are linked. Although there are attempts to de-race Canadian national identity, Abu-Laban points out that “identity was critical in Canada’s settler-colonial foundation [...] The Canadian state played a key role in these processes through policies and practices that maintained the power and advantage of white, particularly British-origin, males” (2001: 265). As a settler-colonial state, the very existence of Canada is premised on the exclusion of Indigenous claims to nationhood, just as the “threat of multiculturalism” is premised on a harkening back to a Canadian identity evacuated of non-anglo/franco ethnicities and races, that is, a white Canada (Coulthard, 2014; Mackey, 1999).

Gender/sexuality cluster

Although some authors specifically excluded gender from their definition of identity politics (for example, Howard-Hassmann, 2000), gender was the second-most referenced subject of identity politics (24 articles), followed by sexuality (17 articles). References to gendered subjects of identity politics were often associated with divisiveness. For example, in discussing Canadian contributions to political psychology, Nesbitt-Larking discusses women “dominating” identity politics in a split from mainstream political psychology (2003: 888); Davies locates disciplinary fragmentation in sociology in “new identity studies,” like women’s studies (2009: 636); and Friedmann cites “divisive identity politics” as a hallmark of second-wave feminist organizing (2001: 96).

The use of identity politics in discussions of gender and sexuality was often incongruent across articles. Both Acheson and Laforest (2013) and Friedmann (2001) generally associate identity politics with second-wave feminism. Similarly, Whelen (2001) associates identity politics with feminist organizing before the postmodern turn of the 1990s. On the other hand, Ross (1995/96) associates identity politics only with “stunted,” “self-righteous” and ultimately “reactionary” aspects of second-wave feminism, in contrast to materially and historically grounded modes of 1970s lesbian

organizing. In contrast, Briskin originates the term identity politics in the Black feminist thought of the 1970s as an important discursive strategy for speaking to the limits of white feminism (1989: 111). Some authors did not associate identity politics with second-wave feminism at all. Scala and colleagues (2005) argue that identity politics refers to third-wave feminism's fragmentation that led to the decline of National Action Committee (NAC). This association is echoed by Crawford and Herland who call third-wave queer organizing of the early 1990s identity politics (2013: 120). To sum up, identity politics is expressed as a defining feature of second-wave feminism by some authors and an exclusively third-wave development by others.

Unmoored from any temporal anchoring, Angus cites "identity-politics feminism" as a form of gender essentialism that enables "feminists [to] claim to speak for 'women' even though not all women are feminists" (1996: 146). This point is echoed by Jhappan, who associates identity politics with the notion of "the 'essential woman' assumed by white feminists" (1996: 17). In direct contradiction of essentialist views, Dobrowolsky argues that identity politics "stresses that collective identity is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed out of social and political struggles, and that it is not essentialist, static or fixed" (2001: 245). In Dobrowolsky's narrative, identity politics contribute to political action in ways that are strategic, fluid, and shifting. Thus, even within the selection of articles that understand gender and/or sexuality as the subject of identity politics, there is no consensus as to the temporal or social referents of the concept. Indeed, many of the authors offer directly contradictory assessments of exactly what type of gendered politics count as identity politics.

Lack of Analytic Rigour

In outlining the various subjects of identity politics, we observe a lack of specific referent in terms of whose politics are cast as identity politics. This implies a degree of conceptual looseness around the term, which is concerning as we agree with Nath that "a lack of clarity/transparency around the level of analysis we adopt when we speak about 'identity' jeopardizes our analytic rigour" (2011: 162). The issue is not solely that many groups are associated with identity politics but more importantly that the usage of the term often references oppositional theoretical framing. The lack of analytic rigour was further compounded by the absence of references linking the term identity politics to particular scholars and/or definitions clarifying the concept. Seventy per cent of the articles surveyed provided no references to support their use of identity politics, despite the noted absence of a common sense meaning attached to the term in the academic literature. We applied a broad understanding of what constitutes a

definition a definition could be either explicitly stated or implicitly read out of the surrounding text. Even so, out of 83 articles that used the term, only 16 offered a definition.

Of the articles that did offer implicit or explicit definitions, three dominant, though not necessarily exhaustive, groupings emerged. One grouping consists of definitions that emphasized culture or ethnicity. For example, Lecours understands identity politics as seeking rights and recognition in relation to “cultural distinctiveness” (2000: 503); Lucas christens identity politics “the politics of diversity” (2013: 95); and Redhead argues these are claims based on ethnicity, particularly those that mobilize an essentialist view of identity (2003). For these scholars, identity politics is very closely linked to ethnoracial and cultural demands. A second cluster emphasizes collective action without singling out ethnicity. This perspective is exemplified by Haklai who views identity politics as “collective identity on the basis of shared identity” within a social movement (2003: 793), Conway, for whom the term encompasses all non-class based “equality-seeking movements” (2000: 67), and Michalski who describes identity politics as general issues related to “group memberships and human rights” (2008: 522). A third grouping is marked by generality, arguing identity politics is just “politics” (Jenson 1991: 50); or the general “naming or identifying of subordinate groups” (Stavro 2007: 440).

Very broadly these definitional groupings are linked by a concern with collective claims making, though they lack unity otherwise, and again definitions were absent from the majority of articles mentioning identity politics. Both the preponderance of cursory references and the absence of references and/or definitions are indicative of a lack of analytic rigour in the usage of the term. The dominance of cursory references indicate the term is being “name dropped” rather than substantively engaged. Furthermore, an absence of references to specific scholarship or political interventions enables the term to be used as a derogatory rhetorical tool without specifying precisely what scholarship commits the alleged fallacies of identity politics.

Analytical Distancing

We now turn to the role identity politics played in the argument of the articles in which it was used. We discuss these findings through two questions. First, did authors position their own work within an identity politics framework? Second, what was the role of the reference to identity politics in the overall argument?

We differentiated between authors who described identity politics as a framing within which their own analysis could be included and those who used identity politics as a point of contrast to describe a body of work that

differed from their own. No author offered a declarative statement explicitly referring to themselves as an identity politics theorist or fitting their work within a politics of identity framework. Of the more than 83 articles reviewed, only 12 used identity politics to describe a framework applicable to their own work. In contrast, 54 articles applied the label identity politics to others' work, usually as evidence of some deficiency. For instance, scholars engaged in identity politics were described as erroneously "prioritiz[ing] differences and attach[ing] political rights to them" (Pickup et al., 2004: 622). These rhetorical dismissals of identity politics reflect differing political orientations; while social political economy interventions decry identity politics as a movement away from materiality, liberal-based critiques portray the focus on difference as antithetical to universal politics. Even feminist and critical race scholars used the terminology of "mere identity politics" (Smith, 2009: 837) and "traps of identity politics" (Jhappan, 1996: 18); and even "infinite traps of identity politics" (de Seve, 2000: 63) to distinguish between their own work (positioned as more substantive and nuanced) and the work of those *other* scholars who are rarely explicitly named or referenced. Sometimes identity politics was connected with an element of duplicity. For example, language such as "identity-politics gambits" (Reid, 2012: 117) and "underhanded identity politics" (Mensah, 2014: 6) adopt a negative tone and hint at a dishonesty embedded in identity politics.

In work that described identity politics as something that others do, there was a tendency to associate the concept with reified formations of ethnicity and gender. In contrast, when authors did take ownership of the concept of identity politics, they discursively resisted caricature by framing the concept as expanding democratic engagement through attending to issues of inequity and uneven power relations. For example, in responding to what they decry as Howard-Hassmann's misrepresentation (1999) of their work on multiculturalism, Abu-Laban and Stasiulis argue that rather than being a danger to Canadian identity, "it is precisely such social movements that seek to enlarge and enrich Canadian citizenship in the sense of broadening the sense of social justice and equality for all" (2000: 482). Similarly, Maclure differentiates between identity politics grounded in a "hermetic and essentialist conception of culture" and more fluid conceptualizations "fraught with symmetrical and asymmetrical power relations" arguing for the adoption of the latter perspective (2003: 4). This observation points to a significant dissonance between the way alleged practitioners of identity politics were accused of deploying the term and the way it actually was taken up by authors who accepted the moniker as an appropriate characterization of their work.

Considering the role that reference to the term "identity politics" played in a given article also supports this observation of conceptual distancing. Rather than being used to provide background, context or exposition, most often identity politics was used in an act of juxtaposition: typically mobilizing a negative

tone, to provide a contrast with an article's own discursive positioning. This tendency was present in over half the articles we reviewed. Juxtaposition was often done in opposition to class (for example, Conway, 2000; Major, 2013; Mooers, 2001; Mookerjee, 2013; Otero, 2004). By attaching "identity" to "politics" authors were more frequently signalling a normative position wherein they distanced themselves from the term, rather than offering a rigid designator. Taken in conjunction with the fact that identity politics often references actors outside the traditional hetero-white-male subject of Canadian politics, this usage produces a subtle reinscription of hegemonic conceptions of what politics is, where it happens and who does it.

Immaterial Identities?

As noted above, the discursive movement away from identity politics was frequently followed by an insistence that the author was motivated by a concern more materially pressing than "mere" identity (Butler, 1997). These discussions repeatedly invoked the recognition/redistribution debate, either through explicit reference to Fraser (for example, Angus, 2001; James, 2004; Vosko, 2002) or through reference to a cultural/material divide (for example Haklai, 2003; Mooers, 2001), though often the focus was on overcoming the limitations of this debate. For example, Vosko asks, "How might feminist political economy scholarship advance prevailing debates over the 'politics of recognition' and the 'politics of redistribution'?" (2002: 76). Similarly, James (2004) uses the case of the Chinese head tax to demonstrate the redistributive components of what is often understood as an issue of recognition, seeking to add nuance to dichotomous discussions. Yet throughout these discussions, the distancing of the subjects of identity politics (ethnicities, gender, sexualities, race, culture and so forth) from class or materially based distinctions remained persistent. Even authors who appear to be contesting the disjuncture between class- and identity-based movements take the existence of this division as the starting point. For example, Angus searches for a way of integrating "identity-politics of new social movements" with "the socialist emphasis on use-value, or subsistence" (2001: 129). Similarly, McMichael states, "transcending undifferentiated class interest and identity politics are necessary and likely" (1999: 37). There is a tension then between attempts to transcend the debate that consequently revivify the centrality of the debate itself by taking it as a starting point for analysis. Crucially, authors who cite Fraser and/or Butler and engage in a sustained analysis of the recognition/redistribution debate (for example, Vosko, 2002) may be discursively resisting this tendency to separate class and other articulations of identity.

The culturalist/materialist divide is also central for those authors in dialogue with cultural theorists like Kymlicka and Taylor, for it is only through

the maintenance of this divide that these authors are able to address their apprehensions regarding the ability of the liberal, civic oriented values of the Canadian state to survive the divisiveness of identity-based group demands.¹² These interventions often clung to public/private boundary lines and sought to articulate which form of identity-based demands could receive recognition in the public arena. Whitaker references Kymlicka as an example of a “temperate and reasoned defence” of multiculturalism and ties identity politics to Taylor’s “politics of recognition” (2000: 226). Pickup and colleagues similarly reference Kymlicka with respect to his position that “group rights are not antithetical to liberalism” (2004: 642n) as a possible rejoinder to the concern that identity politics “can be seen as a threat to civic society” (2004: 642). Continuing with the theme of the threat of identity-based political divisions, Redhead offers a rereading of Taylor’s contributions “to address political fragmentation” (2003: 61) as the antidote to schisms created by identity politics. The crux of these contributions relies on rendering the demands of identity politics as immaterial to the non-negotiable liberal civic oriented norms already cemented within the Canadian state.

Concluding Thoughts

In her 2017 presidential address to the Canadian Political Science Association, Abu-Laban referred to the “ideational construction of Canadian political science” as “identity politics *par excellence*” in that it sought to build and defend “a white settler colony whose institutions, practices and language derived from Britain” (2017: 905, italics in original). If identity politics have been integral to politics throughout the formation of Canadian political science, what is the analytical purpose of differentiating identity politics from politics? Our review has demonstrated that identity politics tends to be deployed as a method of controlling the boundaries of political discourse and limiting who and what gains entry into the political. This serves to cement an exclusionary conception of Canadian identity reflective of what Mackey describes as “a notion of Canadianness in which the real and authoritative Canadian people are defined as white, culturally unmarked and assimilated Canadian-Canadians” (1999: 212). Moreover, so-called identity politics have been positioned as threatening to traditional conceptions of Canadian identity, a position that only is tenable if one accepts the possibility that at some point there was a Canadian nationalism free from racialized and/or gendered content; a position indefensibly oblivious to the context of a settler-colonial, capitalist, patriarchal state.

As Canadian political scientists engaged in studies which place gender and race centrally within our work but rarely under the banner of identity politics, we sought inquiry into whether the use of the term “identity politics,”

much like the accusation of political correctness, masks a turning away from substantive engagement with marginalized voices. If identity politics is what those “others do” what language do others use to speak about their own political interventions? If scholarly research dealing in depth with issues of ethnicity, gender, race and sexuality frequently does not contain reference to identity politics, is there a chasm between this scholarship and mainstream social sciences research? Notably, there has been increasing attention to diversifying political science scholarship, as evidenced by the “Finding Feminisms” special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* (Dobrowolsky et al., 2017) wherein contributors describe their work as engaging in intersectional analysis or anti-oppression, rather than embodying identity politics.¹³ These self-selected theoretical framings connect political science scholarship with nuanced interdisciplinary analyses that work through questions of positionality, power and representation, while eschewing the tenuous demarcation of identity from politics. The danger of identity politics lies not in its imagined penchant for trapping us in difference, but rather in the appellation’s success in reifying disciplinary and political boundaries. Without recourse to the euphemism identity politics, those unwilling to engage in scholarship that foregrounds social relations such as race, ethnicity and gender will be required to do so explicitly.

Notes

- 1 Tweet released by @nytimes in promotion of Mark Lilla’s November 18, 2016 Opinion Piece, “The End of Identity Liberalism.” *New York Times*.
- 2 For example, see Segal (2017) and Todd (2016).
- 3 The search engines used were Scholars Portal Journals and JSTOR. Where possible, we verified our results by conducting identical searches using both search engines for the same journal. There were seven different articles that used the term “politics of identity.” Of those, three also used “identity politics” as a synonym within the context of the article. Of the four that solely used politics of identity, they referred to political action on the basis of a shared affinity, which is one of the primary ways identity politics was used, so we use the terms interchangeably in our analysis.
- 4 An example of a false positive would be an article that referred to “identity politics” or “politics of identity” in the works cited, but not the research article’s text.
- 5 For a full list of analytical questions, please contact the authors.
- 6 See Appendix 1 for a full list of the articles comprising our data-set.
- 7 We use the term “state identified” as well as quotation marks to draw attention to the way the labels “visible minority” and “Aboriginal” are terms used by the settler-colonial Canadian state to identify and govern certain peoples, but not necessarily the language these groups prefer to use themselves.
- 8 For more on the staged implementation of state multiculturalism see Canada. Department of Canadian Heritage (2017).
- 9 Drawing on race scholars such as Goldberg (1993) and Hesse (2004), we take the category of race to be a fluid concept which is historically and socially specific. As articulated by Thompson, though, the category of race has a history of constructed biological racialism based on visible attributes. “Race is not simply about skin colour or morphological characteristics, but rather should be understood as the signifier of a complex set

- of power relations” (2008: 528). Accordingly, we do not follow the convention of placing the term “race” in quotation marks to denote that the term is problematic and lacks scientific legitimacy, since we do not consider the material “realness” of race to depend on biological determinants, but rather social relations of power.
- 10 While only five articles included race/racialization, it is important to note that other articles referred to race but did not refer to it as constituting identity politics; in particular, Thompson (2008) and Smith (2009) take up race as a distinct analytic category.
 - 11 While we are all subject to racialization, we use the language of racialized to designate those marked as divergent from a socially and historically constructed, though often unarticulated, racial norm.
 - 12 Notable exceptions to this demarcation of the cultural from the material include Lecours (2000), Maclure (2003) and Abu-Laban (2001).
 - 13 “Identity politics” appears once in the entire special issue (MacDonald, 2017).

Supplementary materials

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423918000318>

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