

social world that they take to be races: racialized groups. There may, of course, still be normative arguments against retaining the race term to refer to racialized groups. But following his own retention criteria, Hochman would have to say much more than he does in his book to establish that race, on this view, is explanatorily and politically superfluous.

Despite these reservations, *The Race Illusion* stands as a significant achievement. Hochman offers the most complete picture to date of the state of the art in theoretical philosophy of race. The book's breadth is matched by its argumentative rigor, particularly in part 1, where Hochman provides a superb overview and critique of biological accounts of race. This thought-provoking book sets a high standard for future debates in metaphysics of race.

KAL H. KALEWOLD  
*University of Leeds*

Holtug, Nils. *Identity Politics: Left and Right*.  
Oxford University Press, 2025. Pp. 272. \$115.00 (cloth).

In *Identity Politics: Left and Right*, Nils Holtug brings remarkable clarity to a “particularly slippery” set of phenomena (10). Whether you embrace the banner of identity politics or reject it, you’ll find much to excite and challenge you in this wonderful work. With chapters dedicated to the demarcation, justification, and downstream consequences of identity politics (chaps. 1, 2, 3, and 9) and to specific topics such as affirmative action (chap. 4), cultural appropriation (chap. 5), cancel culture (chap. 6), deplatforming and statue removal (chap. 7), and even white supremacy (chap. 8), this comprehensive, careful, and insightful text should be required reading for anyone hoping to learn more about, or weigh in on, this vexed collection of issues.

What is identity politics? Decades after its 1977 coinage by the Combahee River Collective, “identity politics” is now often invoked as a term of derision—much like “woke”—for leftist attempts to confront injustices related to race, gender, sexuality, and other salient social identities. The derision may derive from centrists and “popularists” (who say we should moderate, stick to “kitchen-table issues,” and avoid polarizing debates), from other progressives and thinkers on the left (who think we should focus on supposedly wider or deeper concerns like class exploitation or wealth inequality), and from conservatives and thinkers on the right (who are hostile to these social justice projects altogether).

Holtug argues that pretty much all these criticisms are wrongheaded. A central contribution is that a relatively straightforward or traditional (dare I say normie?) liberal egalitarian framework—focused on the guarantee of basic liberties and equal opportunities for all—not just is consistent with but requires certain identity-conscious policies and practices, including race-based affirmative action and moral prohibitions against white people donning blackface. Holtug’s core case is that the past and present of identity-based injustices have disadvantaged and stigmatized certain social groups in ways that demand targeted forms of redress. The policies may be identity specific; their underlying rationale is not.

That these policies can be defended with “unitary justifications” grounded in our common humanity or citizenship gives the lie to portrayals of identity politics as inherently postmodernist, partial, or divisive (sec. 2.7; chaps. 3 and 9). In fact, Holtug responds to the charge that identity politics is divisive on both normative and empirical grounds. He cites evidence that identity-conscious policies need not undermine social solidarity and may sometimes promote it (sec. 9.6), that various alternative approaches (e.g., to foster a superordinate “national identity”) can themselves stoke divisive ethnocentrism (sec. 9.5), and that all liberal progress is apt to be met by strong, even violent, resistance, whether that progress is recognizably identity related or not (sec. 9.7).

Yet Holtug’s normie egalitarianism puts him at odds not just with advocates of moderation and colorblindness but also with more radical thinkers who claim that resisting identity-based oppression requires novel conceptual frameworks and social-political orders (as in Iris Marion Young’s criticism of the Rawlsian “distributive paradigm”; sec. 3.8). Indeed, in lieu of an unqualified, context-general defense, Holtug’s verdict on the viability of identity politics is a thoroughgoing “it depends.” Some forms of it are obviously unjust. This is clearest in the context of Holtug’s decisive case that, despite being associated with the left, identity politics is just as much practiced by certain illiberal and inequalitarian factions on the right, under the guises of nationalism, ethnocentrism, and white supremacy (chap. 8). But Holtug further argues that some forms of left-leaning identity politics are unwarranted. He concludes, for example, that “most actual cases of no platforming [i.e., disinviting campus speakers] are not justifiable” on any grounds (169), be they epistemic, moral, pedagogical, or prudential (secs. 7.2–7.5), and that many criticisms of cultural appropriation are misguided (secs. 5.4–5.11).

As lucid as the text is in navigating these nuances, some questions remain. One small but persistent question has to do with the book’s rhetorical self-positioning: Why does Holtug, in any given case, frame his argument as supporting versus opposing identity politics? The overwhelming thrust of chapter 4 is to defend affirmative action, focusing on the plight of Black Americans and even concluding with a section on the misrepresentation of Martin Luther King Jr. as an advocate of colorblindness. Here Holtug positions himself as aligned with a salient kind of identity politics. The overarching emphasis of chapter 5 is to rebuff a different manifestation of identity politics, opposition to cultural appropriation. “I fail to see,” he writes, “that there is anything intrinsically wrong, or bad, in cultural appropriation” (103). Although Holtug grants that specific (disrespectful) instances of appropriation are wrong, he notes that “this does not show that cultural appropriation is morally problematic *per se* but only that it can be insofar as specific instances thereof express disrespect” (107).

What’s puzzling about these self-positionings, as alternatively ally and foe of identity politics, is that across these two and every other topic, Holtug consistently argues that the normative standing of a specific policy or practice depends on the details. Some race-based preferences are warranted (namely, those promoting equal opportunities), and some are not (e.g., those promoting white supremacy). Similarly, some cultural appropriation is acceptable (white people singing the blues), and some is not (white people singing in blackface, which, Holtug argues, is irredeemably degrading; secs. 5.2–5.3). Although the arguments have much the

same structure across cases, the self-positioning vis-à-vis identity politics varies widely. Since Holtug doesn't defend all affirmative action, or argue that it is "intrinsically" right or good "per se," why consider later whether appropriation is intrinsically bad, or intrinsically anything? Holtug's underlying political aims are demandingly progressive (building a world with truly equal opportunities would be hardly *normie* and quite radical indeed). Perhaps distancing oneself from absolutist critics of appropriation and the "radical flanks" of identity politics casts one's own identity-conscious proposals as the more inviting middle course?

A deeper question lurks in the background: What isn't identity politics? Chapter 2 investigates what makes "identity politics" distinctive. Reviewing a series of candidate definitions and attendant counterexamples, Holtug concludes that identity politics is characterized by two types of projects, involving either group-differentiated rights or esteem recognition (sec. 2.5). Group differentiation is exemplified by affirmative action, which seeks to counter historical and ongoing injustices via preferences for members of oppressed groups, in lieu of fighting these injustices through color-blind policies alone. Esteem recognition involves efforts to counter stigma and the devaluing of social groups, for example, through pride celebrations, moral sanctions against racial slurs, and campaigns to pull down Confederate statues. (Now is as good a time as any to emphasize the compelling richness of Holtug's treatment of statue removal debates, such as the way he neatly dispenses with the question of judging the figures commemorated in prominent statues by the standards of their times—vs. reckoning with the statues' social meaning in our own; 182–3.)

Notable in its exclusion from Holtug's account is one of the most prominent glosses on identity politics, as involving efforts to mobilize on behalf of oppressed groups. While recognizing that this activist-oriented understanding was central for the Combahee River Collective (17), Holtug rejects it on several grounds, for example, because it risks being "overinclusive" by countenancing generic opposition to discrimination as identity politics (20). But perhaps the phenomenon should be understood inclusively.

Consider the question of which types of identities "count" as relevant to identity politics (sec. 2.6). Here Holtug's list is more inclusive than it could be. Critics of identity politics decry the political focus on certain categories, like race, gender, and sexuality, and urge that we direct attention elsewhere, to (ostensibly less controversial) categories such as shared citizenship or the broad struggle of the 99 percent against the billionaire class. Holtug, by contrast, believes that these identities and a few others, for example, rural resentment of "urban elites" (21), are all relevant to the organizing debates in his book. But why include this many identities in identity politics—and no more?

Consider occupation. The privileges afforded to active and veteran military personnel involve both group-differentiated rights and esteem recognition. In the United States, these privileges can include affirmative action, dedicated financial and health services, national holidays, dedicated parking spots, and opportunities to board planes early. What about social campaigns to valorize (and offer group-differentiated retail discounts to) teachers, firefighters, and "essential workers"? What about identities based on interests? The unparalleled effectiveness of the National Rifle Association's campaign against US gun regulations is widely

attributed to its success in cultivating a strong sense of gun-owning identity among its members, drawing divisions between freedom-loving, self-reliant gun enthusiasts and various outgroup threats (see, e.g., Matthew Lacombe, *Fire Power: How the NRA Turned Gun Owners into a Political Force* [Princeton University Press, 2021]).

This brings us, finally, to political party affiliation. That party affiliation has become a totalizing, polarizing matter of identity is both a cause and an effect of profound contemporary challenges around information silos, compromise, civility, and extremism (see, e.g., Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* [Simon & Schuster, 2020]). Contests over stigma, discrimination, and recognition are front and center in this domain, as anyone thrown into a “basket of deplorables” can attest. Group-differentiated rights are at stake too. Take the explicitly (i.e., self-reportedly!) partisan fights over gerrymandering and policies designed to variously harm or help members of “red” versus “blue” states and districts. If even interparty politics meet Holtug’s criteria for identity politics, what won’t?

To get a better sense of why Holtug partitions the political-conceptual domain as he does, consider the following passage:

Of course, it may be suggested that *any* identity that, for example, forms the basis for esteem recognition or group-differentiated rights would thereby give rise to identity politics. This, however, would render identity politics a very broad category indeed, and certainly broader than it is usually conceived. Consider again that all rights differentiate between those who hold the right in question and those who don’t. For example, the right to vote is usually restricted to adult citizens; that is, those who hold this particular identity. But we do not usually consider the right to vote an instance of identity politics. (26)

Holtug refers to how identity politics is “usually conceived,” but conceived by whom? Although there is ample polling around specific issues like affirmative action and removing Confederate statues, there is, as far as I know, little empirical research on what “we” (or anyone) think about identity politics. This renders Holtug’s appeals to our pretheoretic intuitions about the domain hard to evaluate. (My bet is that the term “identity politics” is viewed negatively by most people, but responses will vary with the identities of those polled and the ways specific questions are framed. I’d further bet that overall views among both the folk and the educated elite about what constitutes identity politics are basically a mess, providing excellent opportunities for philosophical interventions like Holtug’s.)

So why belabor these questions about demarcation? In more skeptical moments, a reader might wonder whether what really unites policies like affirmative action with movements to disinvite transphobic speakers and criticize white rappers is that political actors lump them together for the purposes of stigmatizing them. The crux of this political strategy (which is hardly a secret) is to signal-boost (and often to deliberately mischaracterize) concrete examples of the identity-political left “going too far” and then to paint all identity-conscious efforts and ideals as similarly absurd or reverse-discriminatory.

It’s striking, then, that Holtug singles out the right to vote as something “we usually do not consider” identity politics (26; see also 22, 34). Some may now think

of the right to vote as universal rather than group differentiated or tied up with esteem recognition, but voting is as ripe for analysis in identity-based terms as anything. This right has been among the most defining and paradigmatic aims of feminist and antiracist struggles. Were only their political opponents, those seeking to preserve group-differentiated voting rights (e.g., for white landowning men), engaged in identity politics? We can imagine hypothetical non-identity-political battles over voting restrictions, like the use of lotteries to select a subsample of citizens who can vote. But most real-world voting restrictions, along with the struggles against and for them, haven't been and won't be anything like that anytime soon.

What's more, the right to vote (along with other political rights, e.g., to run for office) is supported through group-differentiated policies. In the United States, the 1965 Voting Rights Act included some colorblind antidiscrimination elements, such as prohibitions on poll taxes and literacy tests, but it also set up political forms of affirmative action, for example, by creating majority-minority districts and stringent federal oversight over trenchantly racist jurisdictions. As I write this, the Supreme Court seems eager to declare that the scourge of state-sponsored racism and the resultant need for race-differentiated policies are over and to strike down the act's last vestiges of race-based differentiation (see Abbie VanSickle, "Supreme Court Appears Skeptical of Key Provision of Voting Rights Act," *New York Times*, October 15, 2025). They'd have us think that voting is now just ordinary politics. Many of us know better. Various other democracies (and autocracies) around the world have a range of explicit group-differentiated electoral policies, including gender- or ethnicity-based parliamentary quotas.

Although Holtug notes that the right to vote is "technically" group differentiated (24), since it is not open to children and noncitizens, the restrictions on voting in contemporary liberal democracies can go further. Some convicted felons in the United States, like Donald Trump, can vote, but many cannot. The desire of the disenfranchised to achieve this right, as well as their opponents' desire to stop them, is not just about the value or fairness of equal political participation per se; it is—and according to some has always been—as much or more about esteem (see Judith Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* [Harvard University Press, 1998]). Michelle Alexander, for example, shares the testimony of one formerly incarcerated person, Willa Womack, who, upon regaining the right to vote, said, "I got a voice now. . . . I feel like somebody. It's a feeling of relief from where I came from—that I'm actually somebody" (Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* [New, 2010], 156). When something as putatively colorblind and universal as voting shows itself to be incurably entangled with group-differentiated rights and recognition, perhaps we should give up trying to cordon off identity politics from everything else and accept that "all politics is identity politics" (see, e.g., Ann Friedman, "All Politics Is Identity Politics," *American Prospect*, July 29, 2010).

The threat of reduction to demarcative absurdities may be most acute in Holtug's treatment of disability politics. He notes that both "extra time for dyslexic children at written exams" and "parking spots reserved for people with disabilities" involve group-differentiated rights and so count as identity politics (25).

Later he observes that adding ramps to make buildings wheelchair-accessible wouldn't count as identity politics by his definition: "Ramps would not be put up to promote esteem recognition of people with disabilities but to give them wider access to the labour market. And nor would ramps involve group-differentiated rights (unless the able-bodied were restricted from using them)" (218). Disability activists will be surprised to learn that fights for ramps don't count as identity politics but fights for parking spaces do (unless they're parking spaces reserved for veterans or other non-identity-political social groups). Note in particular that building ramps will typically be much more expensive and difficult than painting over some pavement—or reserving a few spots in college admissions for students disadvantaged by race or class (see Daniel Putnam et al., "Disability and Justice," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta [Stanford University, 2019], <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/disability-justice/>). Disability activists have also long tied the failure to make the public world accessible directly to failures of esteem recognition.

At one point, Holtug concedes that his "proposed conceptualization is not intended as an exhaustive definition but rather as an operationalization or guide to the kinds of issues" he takes up in the text (26). And, of course, he can't talk about every political debate related to identity in one book. His choices of demarcation may be reasonable enough, especially since Holtug argues that these "kinds of issues" can't be lumped together and stigmatized in the ways critics of identity politics intend and that many of their preferred tactics and ideals are also manifestly identity-political. Still, the force of demonstrating that "your politics are identity politics too" might be stronger if it were also shown that no politics can credibly escape the label.

When it comes to mixing identity and politics, the question has never been "whether"; it's always been "how." This question can be posed both in terms of normative first principles and in terms of strategy. Holtug offers more insight about the former than the latter, which, again, is reasonable enough for a philosophical text. One example of research into how to do identity politics well is the Race-Class Narrative (see Ian Haney-López, *Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America* [New, 2019]). This approach begins with a populist acknowledgment of the ways elites use identity-based tactics like racism and xenophobia to divide the public and promote elites' own interests. But instead of dwelling on identity-based differences, the Race-Class Narrative pivots to calling for intergroup unity and solutions that work for everyone. In important respects, this is the StratCom version of Holtug's call for identity-targeted policies in service of equal opportunities. Approaches like these resonate with that of the Black feminist pioneer who declared that white women's "freedom is shackled in chains to mine, and she realizes for the first time that she is not free until I am free" (Fannie Lou Hamer, "It's in Your Hands," presentation for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund [1971]).

ALEXANDER MADVA  
Cal Poly Pomona