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The Aggrieved Subject: Culture Wars and Recognition Rights

Andrew Fagan

School of Law, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

Correspondence: Andrew Fagan (fagaaw@essex.ac.uk)

1 | The Age of Polycrisis

Across the world presently there is a great deal to feel aggrieved about. Rising poverty and inequality expose many people within even many of the world's most affluent societies to lives of entirely preventable precarity and insecurity.[1] Within and across many of the poorer and more politically unstable parts of the world, the lives of hundreds of millions of people are severely blighted by absolute poverty, armed conflict, political repression, and increasingly uninhabitable environments. Global warming and climate change adversely impact a great many lives in a multitude of ways.[2] The interminable conflict between Ukraine and Russia has been punctuated by Vladimir Putin publicly contemplating the use of tactical nuclear weapons against NATO states.[3] The effective lack of legal restraints upon Israel's retributive response to Hamas' murderous attack of October 7, 2023 provides further evidence of the profound limitations of international law, even as a liberal democratic state allegedly perpetrates genocide against the Palestinians. [4] We have only very recently emerged from a devastating global pandemic in which, according to the World Health Organization, over 7 million people died and the financial costs of which continue to adversely impact many states.[5]

Disorder and crisis extend to affect many rights-based liberal democracies. A large gross domestic product (GDP) and established liberal democratic institutions offer limited and increasingly tenuous protection against external and internal mayhem. Thus, trust in government is declining sharply across the nation-states of the OECD.[6] Many voters in many ostensibly liberal democratic states are increasingly drawn towards overtly authoritarian political parties and candidates who brazenly proclaim their illiberal commitments (Mounk 2019; Muller 2016). A growing number of liberal democracies have been and continue to be governed by openly authoritarian leaders, thereby raising the question of how much longer we may be able to label many of them as genuine liberal democracies[7] (Freedom House 2024). A growing number of people feel increasingly insecure and pessimistic about the future, which adds to and compounds widespread disenchantment with the liberal order amongst broad cross-sections of society (Ipsos Mori 2023), Donald Trump's re-election as US President in 2024 provides the most eye-catching and arguably most consequential example of liberal democracy's descent into authoritarianism (Langfitt 2025).

The palpable sense that our rights-based liberal order is in turmoil contrasts sharply with an earlier liberal triumphalism, which marked the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. According to many influential scholars, commentators, and political actors at the time, the implosion of liberal democracy's principal ideological adversary confirmed the moral legitimacy of the rights-based liberal order. The most fervent advocate of this position brazenly declared that liberal democracy's triumph over all of its ideological adversaries was grounded in a purportedly innate human striving for individual freedom. Liberal democracy was thus, so it was claimed, grounded in human nature (Fukuyama 2012).

In little more than a generation, the hubristic narrative of the end of history has given way to a far darker discourse and reality of turmoil and existential crisis. Liberal democracy no longer enjoys the hegemonic status some claimed for it and has instead become a component, a symptom even, of the wider global predicament we face. I include liberal democracy's plight within what the historian A. Tooze (2022) has recently termed the "polycrisis."

An academic paper can only engage with so many existential challenges at once. The polycrisis comprises many elements and extends far beyond matters of political and legal philosophy. My

specific focus in this article is the pervasive socio-cultural conflict, which has become such a prominent and divisive feature of many liberal democratic societies in recent times: the culture wars.

In parallel with the broader move from collective optimism to foreboding and pessimism, which has so indelibly marked the past 30 years or so, the politicization of identity has also undergone profound changes within many liberal democracies, transitioning from the so-called age of multiculturalism, in which equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) were (allegedly) publicly celebrated and protected, to the current climate of conflict, mistrust, and an unwillingness to peacefully coexist with different others. The age of multiculturalism has largely descended into the age of culture wars (Doyle 2023; Ipsos Mori 2019; Sotirakopoulos 2021). Defined succinctly by the Oxford English Dictionary as "a conflict between groups, especially liberal and conservative groups, that have different cultural ideals, beliefs, or philosophies," the ubiquitous culture wars have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (Appiah 2018; Hunter 1991; Mounk 2023). Although domestic cultural conflict is not necessarily the greatest threat confronting liberal democracy, it is clearly extremely important and must be taken seriously.

As neighbors have become adversaries and identities have become weaponized, a growing constituency of scholars have sought to analyze the socio-cultural conflicts that threaten to destroy any semblance of the modest degree of normative consensus that generations of liberal political philosophers have argued is essential for sustaining liberal democracy (Appiah 2018; Galston 2018; Rawls 1993). Beyond the theoretical literature, there is extensive empirical evidence of the socio-cultural conflicts so many of us spectate upon, are afflicted by, or are active combatants within. Although the extent and significance of cultural conflict is itself a topic of debate and disagreement, the conditions it denotes are real enough.

Thus, studies in the United States (the epicenter of so much contemporary cultural warfare) have catalogued the increasingly embittered divisions between so-called conservatives and progressives. Conflict continuously plays out across social media platforms, on the streets, in the conservative-dominated Supreme Court, and across the floors of federal and state legislatures over a wide range of issues, including abortion and the rights of women, racial injustice, EDI policies, the role of religion in the public sphere, sexuality and gender, the rights of minorities, and the limits to freedom of speech (Chapman 2015; Hartman 2019). This conflict extends to include political violence and even assassination.

In the United Kingdom, academic research and surveys into the cultural conflicts afflicting that country catalogue continuing divisions over the consequences of Brexit, attitudes towards the monarchy, the legacy of Britain's colonial past, national identity, gender and sexuality, and immigration as key grounds for continuing conflict (Duffy et al. 2021).

Across all liberal democratic societies, profit-generating social media algorithms herd like-minded groups of people into self-affirming echo chambers from which dissent is stifled and suppressed. Technology massively intensifies and reinforces human beings' propensity to seek out and engage with those who share,

rather than question, one another's beliefs and commitments. (Haidt 2013) We increasingly seek to either avoid, "cancel," or, failing that, to quite literally do battle with those who do not share our political, religious, or socio-cultural beliefs and commitments (Ipsos Mori 2019). Relationships with others are increasingly based upon distrust (Pew Research Center 2019). The much-lauded melting pot of the earlier age of multiculturalism has quickly mutated into a toxic archipelago of irreconcilable and conflicting individuals and groups.

Identities provide the culture wars with a never-ending supply of ammunition. A state of deep and sustained grievance drives the hostility and hatred that ground and sustain the culture wars. There are a great many identity-based grievances, which span the political spectrum. What constitutes a grievance and whether anyone is entitled to lay claim to their specific grievances are themselves contested and are part of the culture wars (Smelser and Alexander 1999). Are all white people the bearers of racial privilege? Are all African Americans the continuing victims of the legacy of slavery? Is burning a national flag treasonous or a legitimate act of free speech and expression? Does patriarchy exist, and does it continue to blight the lives of all women? Who, indeed, is a "woman"? Should free speech extend to protecting people against attacks upon their character, as opposed to their humanity? Deeply personal and cultural questions such as these (and a great many others) have become core to the cultural conflict currently affecting many liberal democracies.

2 | The Rise of the Aggrieved Subject

Widespread, intractable grievance is the fuel and key product of many of the culture wars. Indeed, many of these grievances are now so deep and widespread that a new form of subjectivity is emerging from them. I call this new subject the "aggrieved subject."[8]

I formulate and deploy the aggrieved subject as a heuristic, ideal-type construct, much like those other long-established constructs such as the utility maximizer, the rationally autonomous individual, and *homo economicus*. Like these other heuristic constructs, the aggrieved subject provides a crucial frame through which we can begin to make sense of the integral connections between self and other within our present age. It also enables us to better understand how and why so many of those relationships have become so conflictual and divisive.

The aggrieved subject does not simply have or experience grievances, such as those we all suffer from in our daily lives. Akin to the contrast between being occasionally "blue" and suffering from clinical depression, the aggrieved subject is constituted from a pervasive state or condition of grievance. The aggrieved subject exists in a state of persistent, one might even say chronic, grievance, which acts as a dispositional frame through which aggrieved subjects structure their political beliefs, actions, interests, and (perhaps most importantly) their views of those others they oppose. The varying grievances of the aggrieved subject are typically reactive to the perceived identities of other aggrieved subjects, who are construed as posing a threat to the most constitutive attachments, commitments, and beliefs of each other.

Aggrieved subjects no longer seek recognition of grievance as a necessary legitimizing *prelude* to the pursuit of emancipation and a state of non-grievance. Rather, being aggrieved and being recognized as being aggrieved in the deep constitutive sense is increasingly an end-in-itself for many.[9] Aggrieved subjects are not fundamentally motivated to overcome or remedy the grievances that shape their identities. Rather, what follows from aggrieved subjectivity is wider recognition and affirmation of the status of being an aggrieved subject. Being recognized and affirmed as a victim or as suffering from some form of significant vulnerability is a defining end state for the aggrieved subject.

The aggrieved subject spans the political spectrum and, within the culture wars, extends to include "progressives" and "conservatives"; the religiously fervent and secular atheists; the middle class and working class; those of different sexualities and gender identities; and those who identify with different racial categories (Clifton 2021; Goodhart 2020). Although I will consider more specific examples of the aggrieved subject later in the article, for the moment, I believe that the deep and widespread mutual hatred and hostility that characterize so many exchanges within the culture wars provide a powerful illustration of the existence of the aggrieved subject, as large numbers of culture warriors relentlessly prioritize a state of being aggrieved over any alternative efforts to seek political compromise, understanding, or reconciliation with each other. In its refusal to seek constructive dialogue with others, the aggrieved subject is, thus, profoundly anti-political.

Aggrieved subjects' aversion to constructively engaging with opponents in the culture wars draws heavily upon and adds to the current and pervasive state of political pessimism and hopelessness, which many see liberal democracy as descending into (Gray 2023). As it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine, let alone build, a better world (or any world) for the future, our collective political imaginary becomes increasingly captured by and fixated upon our present grievances (Case and Deaton 2020). Liberal democracy's progressive ethos is giving way to an increasingly chronic nihilistic despair, which threatens all of us (Adorno 2003; Gertz 2019; Severino 2016).

As I have stated, aggrieved subjectivity affects all sides in the culture wars. It is clearly prominent amongst much illiberal authoritarian rhetoric and thinking.[10] Indeed, scholars have consistently noted the importance of grievance for illiberal authoritarianism over many decades. There is an extensive body of academic literature concerned with charting and understanding the deep grievances, which appear to drive many towards illiberalism (Brils et al. 2022; Hochschild 2016; McGarvey 2017). Other studies document the importance of grievance for illiberal authoritarian policies and programs (Engels 2010; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Although I will engage with illiberal authoritarian expressions of aggrieved subjectivity, my discussion focuses primarily upon examples of this phenomenon at the other end of the political spectrum. Specifically, I will critique what I refer to as the liberal regime of recognition rights, which many liberal supporters insist provides key emancipatory resources for the continuing protection of many vulnerable and marginalized individuals and communities within liberal democracy.[11]

3 | Taking Identity Seriously

To be clear, my critique of recognition rights and the wider politics of recognition, which they emanate from, does not argue that identity either does not warrant political or legal consideration or that many people are not adversely affected by the ways of being and believing that they either identify with or are associated with by others. Identity has been and remains a key factor in widespread, systemic harm. My critique of the recognition rights regime takes it to task for the fuel it provides for aggrieved subjectivity. The questions we must persistently raise are not *whether* we should recognize the importance of identity, but what the *purpose* of our doing so is, *how* we do so, and what the consequences of our doing so might be. The recognition rights regime constitutes liberal democracy's principal institutional mechanism for taking identity seriously.

The mere assertion that one should take identity seriously reveals nothing about one's understanding of "identity" and, indeed, which specific identities one takes seriously.

Some scholars who are critical of identity politics generally have consistently rejected extending recognition rights to specific communities and individuals on the grounds that no such identity can ever essentially exist (Appiah 2018; Barry 2001). I share this broadly anti-essentialist perspective upon identities and agree that all identities are socio-historical constructs (Atrey 1999; Crenshaw 2017). We are all of us social beings (Fuss 1989; Geertz 1973; Honneth 1996; Mead 1967; Taylor 1994).

However, the rejection of an essentialist account of identity does nothing to remedy or mitigate the harms, which many suffer as a direct consequence of how their socially constituted identities are framed and treated by others (Phillips 2010).

Although no identity exists essentially, profound harm continues to impact many people within and across liberal democracy. Thus, antisemites, homophobes, Islamophobes, misogynists, racists, transphobes, and those who denigrate others on the lower rungs of the social ladder are not particularly interested in and, under current circumstances, not likely to be dissuaded by the insistence that no such identities essentially exist. Anti-essentialism offers little protection against the very real discrimination and xenophobia so many experience on the grounds of their ostensive identities. The collective identities of many, if not all, marginalized communities are significantly shaped by the reactive hostility of others (Liebkind 2006; Shachar 2001; Tajfel 1978). As one anti-essentialist advocate of recognition rights has written, "One can hold without contradiction that racialized identities are produced, sustained, and sometimes transformed through social beliefs and practices and yet that race is real, as real as anything else in lived experience, with operative effects in the social world" (Alcoff 2006, 182).

Being vulnerable to widespread or systemic harm as a consequence of how some people perceive other people has thus become a key ground upon which to claim legal recognition and to seek the desired-for protection this purportedly offers. As the legal philosopher Martha Fineman (2008) has written, being vulnerable to the hostility of others is a vital prerequisite for legally recognizing some forms of identity. One must take identity

seriously precisely because so many people's identities (or at least certain salient aspects of their identities) expose them to various forms of significant harm, including, of course, violations of their rights to be who they are. As one gay rights activist and academic has written, "How do you protest a socially imposed categorization except by organizing around the category" (Epstein 1987, 93)?

4 | Politicizing Identity and Recognition Rights

Multiculturalism, the promotion of EDI, and legally enshrined recognition rights more specifically have been central to many liberal democracies since at least the early 1980s. The legal protections afforded to marginalized individuals and communities have also been a vital component of the wider liberal ethos, which lauds the principles of EDI. Despite continuing discrimination and xenophobia, many marginalized peoples through activist groups such as Black Lives Matter and Stonewall continue to frame their interests and strategize through a rights-based perspective (Ransby 2018; Farmer 2020).

Why Do so Many People Continue to Ground and Shape Their Striving for Justice Upon and Within the Liberal Recognition Rights Framework?

Civil, or human, rights, have dominated liberal accounts of justice and individual emancipation for many decades. As many have argued, rights have long enjoyed a hegemonic power over the liberal imagination and are a key promise of liberal democracy (Seligman and Montgomery 2019). Recognition rights are a subcategory of human rights and thus have largely shared in the wider normative authority and legitimacy enjoyed by human rights. As the hegemonic instrument for justice and emancipation within liberal democratic societies, it is not surprising that so many marginalized and vulnerable people continue to place so much store in defending and gaining recognition rights. The very dominance of human rights obscures and suppresses alternative forms of political imagination, after all.

Recognition rights are grounded in and develop from the acknowledgement that the category of "human being" is simply too vague and too generalized for the purposes of providing protection against the specific harms that many individual members of many vulnerable communities suffer. As already stated, discrimination and inequality target and impact distinct and specific communities of people. Against continuing criticism from those who oppose the legal recognition of distinct communities of individuals, defenders of recognition rights typically insist that, for example, countering sexism requires the granting of rights specifically to women, that homophobia and transphobia can only be effectively overcome by the establishment and implementation of LGBTQ+ rights, or that remedying racism, antisemitism, or Islamophobia requires bestowing specific rights upon the individual members of racial and religious communities, which only they are entitled to exercise (Patten 2014).

Recognition rights are grounded in and justified by their recipients' vulnerability (Sikkink 2017; United Nations 2012). Recognition rights are intended for and reserved to those individuals and communities whom the state has recognized as in need of and deserving the additional or specific protections the rights purport-

edly confer. The granting of such rights is thus a political act and decision. It is based upon a specific characterization of the rights' recipients as victims of some forms of harm that conventional, identity-blind rights are insensitive to. Victimhood is integral to the granting of recognition rights. You have to be recognized as being a victim of a distinct type of wrong in order to make a claim for recognition rights (Lowe-Walker 2018; Young 2011).

5 | An Instrument of Limited Value

As I have already stated, xenophobia, inequality, and discrimination continue to blight the lives of many peoples within most, if not all, liberal democracies. Although no regime can be reasonably tasked with making "angels" of all of us, the continuing, if not increasing, incidents of identity-targeting harm raise significant questions for the efficacy of the liberal recognition rights regime, which demand an urgent response.

A key factor in the limited efficacy of the recognition rights regime consists of the partial account of harm it contains. The key wrong that recognition rights are intended to protect against is real enough, but it is not the only wrong many suffer.

The wrong that recognition rights are fundamentally concerned to protect against is discrimination, particularly in the civil and political spheres of liberal democracy. They offer ostensive redress and protection against discrimination in public settings, in education, in the workplace, and, to a limited extent, in the private sphere.

The recognition rights project has, to cite just a few select examples, successfully established equal voting rights for all citizens, has extended rights of marriage and adoption to gay couples, has sought to prevent racial, sexual, and religious discrimination in the workplace, has sought to redress educational disadvantages amongst some communities, and has more generally sought to promote a liberal ethos of equal respect amidst diversity.

Many vulnerable and marginalized individuals and communities do not only suffer from forms of civil and political discrimination. Many also suffer the effects of relative inequality, poverty, and even destitution in many, if not all, present-day liberal democracies. Many members of many marginalized communities remain disproportionately exposed to an extensive range of conditions that systemically and significantly blight their lives and that cannot all be encompassed within the wrong that is discrimination.

Rates of poverty and destitution are significantly higher amongst many ethnic minority communities in many liberal democracies (UNDP 2021). Rates of criminal conviction and subsequent imprisonment are similarly shockingly high amongst many ethnic minorities in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere (ACLU 2020; UK Parliament 2024). Exposure to and subsequently dying from Covid-19 was significantly higher amongst many ethnic and minority communities across western societies (Bosworth et al. 2023). Women and girls remain systemically discriminated against in many areas of life within many liberal democracies (Womankind Worldwide 2024). Notwithstanding the collective rights that many indigenous people have successfully secured in many liberal democracies, their rates of

poverty, criminality, substance abuse, and premature death are disproportionately much higher than other parts of the population (Saul 2016). In most such cases, members of these communities possess a range of recognition rights, which offer little to no protection against these more material, socio-economic harms.

Thus, although the poor and destitute include many people who cannot claim recognition rights, many who can claim such rights have no specific, rights-based protection against the more material harms that characterize inequality, poverty, and destitution, even as they enjoy legal protection against discrimination. As others have written, recognition rights are based upon an unduly narrow account of vulnerability and victimhood, which simply ignores and is blind to an entire category of harm that large numbers of people across racial, sexual, religious, class and other relevant forms of identity are disproportionately exposed to (Benn Michaels 2016; Fagan 2023; Fraser 2008; Scholte 2004). Typically, recognition rights are not blind towards identity, but they are blind towards social class and significant socio-economic inequality. This limitation is increasingly significant as relative inequality, poverty, and destitution continue to worsen across most liberal democracies and as the social class of voters and citizens appears increasingly pertinent to politics and the backlash against liberal democracy (Ares 2022).

The neglect of socio-economic adversity by the liberal recognition rights regime is no accident. As others have argued before me, the refusal to recognize social and economic rights as human or constitutional rights in liberal democracies such as the United States reflects a relentlessly ideological support for capitalism in its various manifestations (Marks 2011; Moyn 2019). Indeed, even where social and economic rights have been legally recognized by some liberal democracies, the redress they provide often fails to provide even relatively basic protections for the poor and destitute (Alston 2022). One of the principal emancipatory instruments of liberal democracy, despite the civil and political rights it has established, remains limited and ideologically partial. As some have argued of late, the benefits afforded by the liberal recognition rights regime have been disproportionately enjoyed by materially privileged, middle- and upper-class members of minority communities (Holt-White et al. 2024). They offer little, if anything, to the poor and destitute.

6 | Recognition Rights and the Aggrieved Subject

The above critique of the recognition rights regime is not new. Indeed, the origins of this materialist critique of the false emancipatory promises of rights more generally can be found in Karl Marx's (1975 [1844]) essay, *On the Jewish Question*, which first exposed the economic basis of so-called bourgeois rights and rejected their emancipatory promise. Although many subsequent critiques, including my own, eschew the economic determinism of Marx's analysis, what is retained is an understanding of recognition rights as a manifestation, if not a symptom, of deeper, more structural conditions, which continue to inflict harm and suffering upon a great many people. Recognition rights are, at best, palliatives for a pathology they are incapable of curing (Benn Michaels 2016; Neiman 2023).

This article aims to advance a wider critical perspective upon the liberal recognition rights regime by specifically connecting it to the rise of the aggrieved subject within the culture wars. What, then, are these connections, and what implications does aggrieved subjectivity hold for the ongoing crisis of liberal democracy?

Although so much of the content of the culture wars comprises representational forms, symbols, narratives, and contested norms, the conflict itself is significantly influenced by more overtly material, tangible phenomena. Having said that, the culture wars being waged within most liberal democracies are not merely the superstructural symptoms of the latest development of a capitalist economic base. The culture wars are not limited exclusively to different sections of the "have nots" and the "left behind" (Žalec and Štivić 2024). An exclusive focus upon the economy is not going to eradicate the animating power of the culture wars and aggrieved subjectivity. However, material inequalities that appear to be unfair, precarity, poverty, and destitution all contribute directly and indirectly to the deep grievances that are expressed through the culture wars (Duffy et al. June 2021). How does the recognition rights regime connect with and compound these conditions?

As I stated earlier, unresolved, if not irresolvable, conflict is both the fuel and the product of so many of the culture wars currently being waged within and across liberal democracy. This extends to include most, if not all, cultural combatants, but it is particularly pronounced amongst illiberal authoritarian constituencies. These grievances comprise a complex collection of beliefs, myths, false assumptions, illiberal commitments, frustrated aspirations, and a pervasive resentment grounded in a perception that the so-called indigenous majority within many western societies are themselves the victims of a diffuse set of injustices, which liberals and progressives largely refuse to recognize (Finlayson 2021). The demographics of this loose collection of aggrieved subjects are diverse and complex, but it includes many people who are experiencing varying degrees of socio-economic inequality and precarity. Not all poor, working-class people are "deplorable," and not all "deplorables" are poor and working-class, but there is no denying the presence of this constituency of people in the ongoing illiberal assault against liberal democracy. Although one may assume that supporters of the liberal recognition rights regime do not intend this, the regime is a source of deep grievance to many who are excluded from it (Bhopal 2018; Fitzi et al. 2019).

As I have argued above, the liberal recognition rights regime is based upon a partial and unduly narrow account of harm and injustice. Its characteristic concerns reflect the wider neoliberal economic ethos of which it is a part (Moyn 2019). It excludes any concerted recognition of or concern for socio-economic inequality. It is blind towards social class and the effects of class upon diminished opportunities. It conceives of identity-based harm as consisting entirely of discrimination. In so doing, it ignores both socio-economic inequalities in themselves and how socio-economic inequality can often undermine people's enjoyment of the civil and political rights of even those who possess recognition rights (Alston 2017; Neiman 2023).

Against the backdrop of stagnating real wages, the increased deregulation and insecurity of work for many, and swingeing cuts to welfare budgets, liberal democracies have largely restricted their redistributive, "progressive" efforts to promoting the civil

and political rights of marginalized minority individuals and communities. By largely ignoring wider forms of inequality and systemically diminished opportunities, which afflict many who do belong to these communities and many more who do not, they have necessarily sidelined or simply ignored the wider injustices increasing numbers of people suffer from in many, if not most, liberal democracies. The message is clear enough to many. The only people who can legitimately claim to be the victims of injustice within liberal democracy are members of marginalized minority communities, who suffer identity-based discrimination. Anyone who does not belong to one of these communities can thereby be held responsible for their own plight. Their suffering is the result of their having squandered the privileges they were allegedly born with because of their skin color or sexual identity.

As others have recently argued, liberalism's prioritization of the recognition rights of certain minorities is perfectly consistent with the competitive ethos of neoliberal society (Fraser 2019). It appears to be progressive and inclusive. In truth, the way it is implemented and the dominant position it occupies within liberal democracy's prevailing accounts of justice simply ignores the suffering of many, including many poor and destitute members of those communities who are afforded the limited anti-discriminatory protections the recognition rights regime consists of. Some might counter that liberal democracy cannot be reduced entirely to the recognition rights regime. This is true enough. However, this objection fails to adequately appreciate just how many disillusioned voters in many liberal democracies have come to understand and reject liberal democracy on these terms (Main 2022). Many of these disillusioned voters and culture warriors have concluded that liberal democracy does not care for them, so why should they care for liberal democracy?

Many of the grievances consistently expressed by illiberal authoritarian culture warriors are demonstrably false. It is not the case that "migrants" are the cause of so much despair and hopelessness. The nuclear family is not in terminal decline because of recognizing the moral equality of all forms of consensual love and sex. Systemic precarity, poverty, and destitution will not be overcome by building walls or deporting "foreigners."

Scapegoating the vulnerable and marginalized will not fix the many challenges that confront so many ostensibly liberal democratic societies. The illiberal authoritarian manipulation of hurt and suffering is depressingly familiar and effective. However, these grievances predate the onset of this current assault upon liberal democracy. What must be acknowledged, if we wish to honestly and fully understand how we have arrived at this current juncture, is the extent to which the partiality and exclusivity of the recognition rights regime inadvertently contributes to these grievances and continues to fuel the rise of the aggrieved subject.

Despite its limited benefits, the protections that the liberal recognition rights regime affords to many marginalized minority individuals and communities are clearly a source of deep resentment amongst many illiberal authoritarian culture warriors (Megret 2022). My argument includes a more ostensibly provocative claim that the recognition rights regime is also fueling the rise of the aggrieved subject amongst those who are often the ostensive beneficiaries of the regime.

7 | An Unsustainable Refuge

Aggrieved subjectivity thrives on a diet of the unresolved and apparently irresolvable conflict through which the culture wars are waged. So many of the specific battlegrounds of the culture wars go all the way down into many people's most constitutive ways of being and believing. Although political economy remains a crucial factor in generating large parts of the culture wars, previous political debates about taxation, fiscal policy, or state investment in public infrastructure have been largely overshadowed by intractable disputes over identity (Bauer 2023).

Many politicians across the political spectrum have learnt the electoral value of taking sides within the culture wars. Some have learnt this lesson regretfully and belatedly. Others have done so gleefully. Indeed, many commentators have concluded that the principal electoral beneficiary of the culture wars is illiberal authoritarianism (Chapman 2015). In many increasingly fragile liberal democracies, an anti-woke platform appears to resonate more effectively amongst some key electoral demographics than does a principled commitment to redistributive taxation or rebuilding aging public infrastructure (Sarkar 2025). It is clear that so-called progressive, liberal political parties and communities are still struggling to fully acknowledge the electoral and social power of the culture wars. A claim borne out by the US Democratic Party's failure to fully learn the lessons of Trump's 2024 presidential victory and its continuing reluctance to develop a new set of political strategies. As liberal democracy is being concertedly dismantled from within, so its defenders appear to have succumbed to a severely debilitating pessimism and despair. Even many progressive liberals do not seem to know what they stand for any longer. This space is increasingly being occupied and filled out by the aggrieved subject. One might go so far as to claim that liberalism is descending into a state of chronic grievance.

The liberal recognition rights regime is being concertedly dismantled in the United States (Packer 2025). It seems increasingly likely that other "liberal democracies" will follow suit as electorates swing towards illiberal authoritarian political parties. Barely a decade has passed since the US President was an African American, and a prominent academic declared that the steady accumulation of recognition rights in the United States was one of the greatest accomplishments of the human rights movement in that country (Sikkink 2017). In the United States and across many other liberal democracies, many marginalized minority individuals and communities are feeling deeply vulnerable and fearful: a reasonable response to a very real and very powerful threat. The prevailing response to this threat has been to largely double down on the core elements of the rights regime, even as core legal rights are being rescinded and xenophobia and discrimination are increasingly normalized. Despite the ongoing authoritarian assault upon the recognition rights regime, many of its subjects and defenders remain wedded to it as their principal means of self-defense.

As I have been referring to it throughout this article, the liberal recognition rights regime is complex and comprises several key elements. These include generic rights such as equal rights to free expression and rights to religion or belief, which everyone

formally possesses. More distinctively, it includes a collection of legal rights that provide specific protection to individual members of identifiable communities. It also extends to include policies that uphold the principles of EDI, and finally, it includes a more diffuse socio-cultural ethos that affirms cultural diversity as a collective moral good. Within and across many liberal democracies, each of these elements is under attack, and many are being systematically abolished and renounced. The culture wars are the most visible and pervasive example of this illiberal authoritarian backlash against the recognition rights regime and those it has sought to protect.

Despite my earlier criticism of its predominant concern for discrimination, the liberal recognition rights regime has sought to achieve several ambitious collective goals. At its height, the regime explicitly defended and promoted a public celebration of cultural diversity. As the populations of many, if not all, liberal democracies became increasingly diverse because of globalization and expanding liberal freedoms, so many governments and public bodies sought to espouse diversity as an intrinsic good, which everyone should recognize and acknowledge. This normative affirmation of diversity often included the development of more distinctively positive rights-based entitlements, which placed moral expectations and legal duties upon the state and others to actively support (in various ways) some peoples' opportunities to practice their ways of being and believing. These entitlements extended to include, for example, placing duties upon employers to support employees' religious practices, the printing of public materials in multiple languages, promoting active respect for specific religious holidays in schools, and efforts to "decolonize" teaching and learning in colleges and universities. These more positive duties, obligations, and expectations were built upon a more distinctively negative rights foundation.

The negative account of rights protection does not require of others that they recognize or esteem the equal worth of the ways of being and believing of marginalized individuals and communities: There is no call to collectively celebrate diversity, but the rights do impose a duty upon others to respect the sovereignty of the individuals who possess the rights. (Kukathas 2003) Negative rights do not require the state or others to positively affirm or approve of the practices and beliefs of others, but they do impose a duty of non-interference in the lives of those who may still possess legal protection under the liberal recognition rights regime.

A salient feature of the ongoing illiberal authoritarian assault against recognition rights is the increasingly vocal renunciation and abolition of the more distinctively positive elements and expectations of the recognition rights regime. The anti-woke agenda in many liberal democracies overtly rejects cultural diversity as a collective, public good. Federal and state legislatures (supported by constitutional courts in several places) are systematically dismantling a regime that placed positive duties and obligations upon government and society to protect and promote others' ways of being and believing.

As I stated earlier, the age of multiculturalism has descended into the age of the culture wars. This process is obviously not uniform and is opposed by many who seek to defend the recognition rights regime. Although some continue to cling to the objective of returning to a positive affirmation of diversity, many appear to have conceded that the most feasible strategy entails doubling down on defending a more negative account of rights and upholding the wider duty of non-interference.

This doubling-down approach is highly significant. It is apparent in a variety of responses to illiberal authoritarianism. One can see it in the continuing refusal by many Democrats and other "progressives" in the United States to countenance engaging with their political adversaries, or even some of those liberals who do engage with critics of liberalism. So-called cancel culture is another significant example of this doubling-down approach in which many people aim to banish from online or physical spaces those with whom they disagree (Lukianoff and Schlott 2023). Although the doubling down approach can be seen in many other areas across the culture wars, it appears to be particularly pronounced in conflicts concerning race and gender (Sarkar 2025). The doubling down approach seeks to construct and defend a liberal citadel from which all ideological opponents and critics can be excluded.

Faced with the relentless assault upon their recognition rights and, in some cases, their very humanity, it is understandable that so many seek to draw the defensive line around negative liberty rights. After all, several prominent philosophers and rights theorists have insisted that the only legitimate human rights are those that protect individual negative liberty (Cranston 1973; Dworkin 1977; Ignatieff 2001). Negative rights' protection of a non-interference zone around individuals' private lives offers the prospect, or so their advocates argue, of securing equal individual sovereignty against increasingly hostile others.

Negative rights and negative liberty are fundamental to liberal democracy. There are many areas of people's lives that do depend upon negative rights' protection. However, this approach is entirely inadequate for understanding and regulating identities. The desire to exclude others as the principal means for continuing to enjoy recognition rights is doomed. Identities cannot be ring-fenced from one another behind legal barriers of non-interference for the simple, but fundamentally important, reason that all identities are relational. As arguably the leading philosopher of the politics of recognition argued over 30 years ago, any individual's ability to equally be who they take themselves to authentically be depends upon the actions and reactions of others. No identity is, so to speak, an island unto itself (Taylor 1994).

Grounded in a neo-Hegelian phenomenology that views all human agency as both socially and relationally constituted, this alternative approach to understanding identity has been subsequentially developed by other philosophers (Butler 1997; Connolly 2002; Young 2011). We are social beings whose identities are inextricably and unavoidably shaped in a multitude of ways through our relationships with others from the moment of our birth to our dying day. Our identities are essentially interdependently constructed through our relationships with proximate and distant others. We do not and cannot exist in isolation. Our identities cannot exist independently of others (Christman 2009; Sandel 1984). As the philosopher Carolin Emcke (2000, 489) has written, "Since each person is intersubjectively interwoven with others, he or she is dependent on the reactions of others for his or her self-image and identity." No one can escape or shield

themselves from the constitutive effects of the wider, societal political economy of identity. Friend and foe fundamentally shape one another's identities in a multitude of complex ways. As Taylor understood, one cannot avoid the harm being inflicted upon one's identity by simply turning away from that harm or by seeking refuge within the legal fiction of inviolable individual sovereignty. Doubling down on negative rights, although understandable in some respects, is simply not going to protect people against the identity-targeting harms that the culture wars entail and expose so many to. The liberal citadel is a fantasy.

The deep and sustained grievances that fuel the culture wars testify to our relationality. Despite so many people's efforts to only commune with like-minded others and to "cancel" those who one disagrees with, the harm continues unabated. The culture wars play a crucial role directly and indirectly in the ongoing violation and removal of the recognition rights of many marginalized and vulnerable individuals and communities across many liberal democracies.

The doubling-down approach is demonstrably not working. As substantial numbers of people on the liberal, "progressive" end of the spectrum persistently refuse to either engage politically with their opponents or even accept that this strategy is increasingly incapable of protecting the rights of many marginalized individuals and communities, it is increasingly clear (to me, at least) that many amongst this broad constituency are thrown back onto their grievances. With their rights under attack and the severe limitations of the existing rights regime becoming increasingly clear, so many are left feeling deeply aggrieved. Cut off from any genuinely transformative political mechanisms, many marginalized, vulnerable individuals and communities are left with little more than their vulnerability and marginalization to "protect." The previous limitations of the liberal recognition rights regime are compounded by the recently emerged illiberal authoritarian backlash against them. As the recognition rights regime far-too-often failed to comprehensively deliver on its emancipatory promises, the harms it was meant to address continued. Aggrieved subjectivity rises as individuals and communities reject calls to develop more overtly political responses to the challenge of illiberal authoritarianism.

8 | Constitutive Grievance

The final component of my analysis of the relationship between the liberal recognition rights regime and aggrieved subjectivity focuses upon how grievance constitutes many identities, including many of those that have been accorded ostensive protection by the regime.

Grievance is an essential element of the liberal recognition rights regime. Individuals and communities must first be capable of demonstrating that their identities expose them to various forms of egregious harm. As I stated earlier, one must first be a vulnerable subject to make credible claims for seeking the ostensive protection of the liberal recognition rights regime. Being a victim and being vulnerable because of one's identity are necessary conditions for being granted formal standing and status within the regime. For its part, the regime functions to validate and legitimize the claims of specific groups of people as both being victims

of a certain wrong (discrimination) and deserving of the especial treatment the regime offers. Not every such group has secured this validation, and those who have done so have typically had to campaign relentlessly to achieve the recognition they desire.

As liberal democracy's principal emancipatory resource for marginalized minority groups, the recognition rights regime should provide a collection of legal, political, and more distinctly normative instruments that enable many to overcome the identity-targeting harms they have suffered. Those afforded protection by the regime should be able to expect expanding freedoms and opportunities. Their grievances should be steadily remedied and overcome if the regime is operating as it ought to. The regime should be gradually reducing so many people's justified grievances, rather than adding to them or even incentivizing them.

As I argued above, the regime's principal, if not exclusive, focus upon civil and political discrimination fails to recognize or provide any redress for wider and, in some cases, more egregious forms of harm that affect many who have been granted protection by the regime and many more who have not. Despite having secured standing within the recognition rights regime, many marginalized minority individuals and communities continue to suffer and lack the equal freedoms and opportunities that liberal democracy promises to all. Deep and justified grievances persist amongst many whom the regime is intended to protect. It is important to acknowledge that these limitations and their consequences predate the resurgence of illiberal authoritarianism, which adds an additional threat to the rights of many. These failings cannot be blamed entirely upon Trump and other illiberal authoritarians.

There is another way in which some identities are constituted from profound grievance, as others have argued before me (Brown 1993). From this perspective, grievance constitutes the heart and soul of the efforts of some members of some marginalized groups to produce a specific set of allegedly defining and distinguishing characteristics of some community or other. Contemporary identities are, so to speak, manufactured out of traumatizing wrongs that were inflicted upon previous generations of people. Contemporary descendants are invited to identify with these wrongs and to see themselves as continuing to bear the legacy of these wrongs. One's status and standing as a victim of some momentous instance of inhumanity is thereby etched into the metaphorical DNA of the community one identifies with. The grievances one bears are not reducible to a collection of contemporary practices and institutions, which, in principle at least, could be remedied. Being the descendant of African slaves, or of the victims of the Holocaust, or of white settlers' colonization of one's native land, or of the violence of millennia-long forms of heterosexist patriarchy are manifestly constitutive of many peoples' understanding of and connection to their identities. These "wounded attachments" (as Wendy Brown referred to them) have assumed a profoundly powerful, but increasingly contested, symbolic value for many who seek to defend their identities within the culture wars presently (Clevenger et al. 2024; Colliver 2021; Perez and Salter 2020; Rosenstein 2023).

I include this category of constitutive grievances not to cast doubt on the historical objectivity upon which they are based. Nor do

I seek to question many people's claims that these horrendous examples of inhumanity are not traumatizing for some who could not have directly experienced what their ancestors did. Rather, I contend that the continuing power and influence of these profound grievances adds to my argument regarding the ways in which the ongoing failings of the liberal recognition rights regime fuel aggrieved subjectivity. Although some have sought to develop proposals in which these constitutive wrongs might be overcome or forgiven (Elkins et al. 2021; Coates 2014), the foundational inhumanity of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the Holocaust, for example, continues to exert a powerful influence upon many peoples' increasingly aggrieved sense of their identities.

As civil and political recognition rights fail to protect many against severe socio-economic inequalities and xenophobia is increasingly mainstreamed throughout the culture wars, so it should come as little surprise that so many seek validation as victims in some of the worst forms of inhumanity. A consequence of this, however, is that many such identities are increasingly maintained through these utterly constitutive forms of profound grievance. Increasingly many such identities are reproduced and maintained by these grievances. As Wendy Brown warned over 30 years ago, many people become immersed in, if not constituted by, the very wrongs that the rights they sought and secured should have enabled them to overcome. As the emancipatory promise of the rights fails, so many become, in my terms, aggrieved subjects.

9 | Conclusion

This article has identified and provided a partial diagnosis of the aggrieved subject. I have argued that aggrieved subjectivity is in the ascendency within and across liberal democracy. I have argued that the culture wars offer a highly fertile terrain for the cultivation of deep grievance. Although these grievances extend to affect all constituencies within the culture wars, I have sought to demonstrate how the liberal recognition rights regime is contributing to and fueling the rise of the aggrieved subject. The aggrieved subject has risen as liberal democracy has failed to deliver on its promises. The ascendency of the aggrieved subject from within and in response to liberal democracy's failings marks a profound rupture in our age and in our providential beliefs about the progressive qualities of rights. The aggrieved subject is an effect of the widespread despair and nihilism that marks liberal democracy as succumbing to. As more people become increasingly shaped by their deep grievances, so the resulting aggrieved subjectivity acts to block and frustrate the development of any genuinely transformative political interests and desire. We have good reason to seek to overcome it. Indeed, our future may very well depend upon us doing so. Before we can begin to seriously engage in collective acts of reconstruction, we must first fully gauge the gravity of the challenges facing us.

Endnotes

[1] Around 20% of the UK population (13.4 million people) were living in poverty in 2022/23 (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2023, "UK Poverty 2023," January 23, 2023). In the European Union, some 95.3 million people were at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2022 (European Commission, "Key Figures on European Living Conditions; 2023 edition," 2023). In the United States, 11.5% of the population (some 37.5 million people) were living in poverty in 2023 (United States Census Bureau, "Poverty in the United States, 2022," September 2023).

[2] For a general assessment of the effects of global warming and climate change in Europe, see European Environment Agency, "Climate change, impacts, risks and adaptations" (May 2024). For the specific increase in heat-related deaths in the United States, see United States Environmental Protection Agency, "Climate Change Impacts" (accessed February 23).

[3] For an analysis of Putin's threats to deploy nuclear weapons, see Financial Times, "Leaked Russian military files reveal criteria for nuclear strike" (February 27, 2024).

[4] For a sophisticated critique of power within international law, see Anghie (2008). For an incisive analysis of some of the key consequences of Israel's response to Hamas's attacks, see Atul Alexander and Richa Maria Reginald (2024). At the time of writing, two United Nations courts (the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice) are pursuing charges of genocide and war crimes against key figures in the Israeli government. In addition, an expert UN panel has issued a report that accuses Israel of perpetrating genocide against the Palestinian population of Gaza (United Nations Human Rights Council 2025).

[5] See the World Health Organization's statistics of Covid-19 deaths. World Health Organization, "WHO Covid-19 Dashboard." https://data.who. int/dashboards/covid19/deaths?n=o

[6] For a study of declining trust in government across the OECD, see Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Trust in Government 2023 Survey" (accessed March 5, 2024, https://www.oecd. org/governance/trust-in-government/).

[7] I will continue to refer to them as liberal democracies without intending to imply that the changes currently occurring within many of them may not result in a radical transformation of these societies.

[8] The aggrieved subject is an established category of tort law. Grievance and grievability have also attracted sustained attention within some critical scholarship, most notably Butler (2009). However, and to the best of my knowledge, no one has yet to develop this phenomenon into an albeit constructivist ontological subject with far-reaching effects upon the many crises we face, as I am doing here.

[9] There is clearly a close similarity here with the notion of *ressentiment*. I do not engage with this directly in this article, but I refer the reader to Brown (1995) for a sophisticated discussion of *ressentiment* and contemporary politics.

[10] I use the term "illiberal authoritarian" throughout this article to denote a broad collection of ideological perspectives that others have referred to as, for example, right-wing populism, authoritarian nationalism, autocracy, and even fascism. I believe that my preferred label adequately captures and expresses the key elements of these otherwise differing positions.

[11] To their defenders, recognition rights are often more than simply the legal rights that exist in some jurisdiction or other. Thus, the liberal recognition rights regime includes distinct legal rights that afford specific protections to identified individuals and communities. The regime also includes a broader, more diffuse normative ethos exemplified by equality, diversity, and inclusion programs and policies, which typically seek to promote equal opportunities and marginalized peoples' access to public resources. The regime also extends to include state, regional, national, and international activists, organizations, public bodies, and institutions.

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