Political New Sincerity and Profilicity: On the Decline of Identity Politics and Authenticity

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ABSTRACT: The past few years have seen a dramatic backlash against identity politics from academics such as Michael Sandel, Kwame Appiah, Mark Lilla, and Francis Fukuyama. In the vocabulary of identity conceptions, we can classify this as a reaction to a growing dissatisfaction with the perceived hollowness and ineffectiveness of "authenticity" that calls for a return to "sincerity"—or a "Political New Sincerity." We argue that a third identity paradigm is in play as well, namely "profilicity." This profile-based approach to understanding oneself, others, and the world has had a major impact on social and political life, and yet has gone largely unnoticed or otherwise been mis-diagnosed. Our analysis provides a critical reflection on the emergence of profilicity to pave the way for developing insights into our changing sociopolitical and inter-personal landscapes.

KEY WORDS: identity politics, profilicity, new sincerity, authenticity, individualism

1. INTRODUCTION: IDENTITY POLITICS AND ITS CRITICS

The past few years have seen a dramatic backlash from academics such as Michael Sandel, Kwame Appiah, Mark Lilla, and Francis Fukuyama against identity politics. While the identity politics discourse tends to conceive of identity typically in terms of an individual's ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, its critics want to replace such a notion of identity with one derived from a sense of belonging to a community bound together by shared values. The ensuing communal identity tends to be reminiscent of Robert Bellah's "classical" outline of "Civil Religion in America" defined in terms of "a strong moral consensus" grounded in the "rights of man."[1] Thus, the debate can

be understood in terms of different normative approaches to what identity is or ought to be all about. However, given the ethical and political emphases on both sides, conceptual reflections that might help clarifying what is actually at stake—namely the concept of identity—remain somewhat rare.[2]

To reduce the confusion about the concept of identity in the identity politics debate, it may be useful to refer to the following definition of different semantic dimensions of "identity" found in a programmatic paper on "The Past, Present, and Future of Identity Theory" published nearly two decades ago:

> Three relatively distinct usages exist. Some use *identity* to refer essentially to the culture of a people; indeed they draw no distinction between identity and, for example, ethnicity (see the collected papers in Calhoun 1994). . . . Others use identity to refer to common identification with a collectivity or social category, as in social identity theory (Tajfel 1982), or in contemporary work on social movements, thus creating a common culture among participants (Snow and Oliver 1995). Finally, some use the term . . . with reference to parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary society.[3]

Clearly, the focus on race, gender, and sexual orientation that characterizes the identity politics discourse corresponds to the first usage of "identity" described by Stryker and Burke. Here, race, gender, or sexual orientation *constitute* identity. Current critics of identity politics, however, almost exclusively advocate a different notion of identity that corresponds to the second type listed by Stryker and Burke. Here, identity is derived from a "common identification with a collectivity or social category." This view is delineated in Michael Sandel's suggestion to find identity "as members of this family or community or nation of people, as bearers of this history, as sons or daughters of that revolution, as citizens of this republic."[4] Such an appeal points to the ideal of "creating a common culture among participants" which is supposed to override individual race, gender, or sexual orientation identifications—and to somehow bring us all together again: *e pluribus unum*.

To summarize:

1) The debate between identity politics and its critics is grounded in different normative approaches to identity.

2) Identity politics argues that identity is equal to categories such as race, gender, or sexual orientation, and that individual identity formation as well as public politics ought to affirm and empower such identity formation.

3) Critics of identity politics argue that a more civil religious and ethical conception of identity aimed at "creating a common culture among par-

ticipants" ought to integrate individual aspects of identity and be regarded as more binding.

4) Often, the different notions of identity are not clearly distinguished by the proponents of either camp. Thus, the debate tends to lack theoretical precision.

In our view, however, the third dimension of identity listed by Stryker and Burke also needs to be taken into account when trying to understand how identity operates—and when reflecting on identity politics. We think that identity is a complex issue that should not be reduced to a single dimension. The critics of identity politics are justified to point out that race, gender, or sexual orientation do not completely constitute or determine identity; importantly neither do shared values or civil religious commitments exhaust the phenomenon of identity. Identity can neither be limited to "genealogical" categories such as race or gender nor to ethical practice. In addition to these levels of identity, there is the social-psychological dimension described by Stryker and Burke as emerging from the sense of "meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary society." Based on the different personae or social roles we take on in society, this dimension consists in the "self-identity" or the notion of selfhood that individuals develop—who we think and feel we are—and society then reaffirms. We will argue that this third level of identity constitutes a crucial subtext of the identity politics debate which, however, is rarely reflected upon by either side.

To address and analyze various ways of achieving identity is essential in order to avoid over-simplifications limiting the identity politics debate today. We think identity is best understood neither solely on the basis of categories such as race or gender nor only on the basis of civil religious or ethical virtues, but that it needs to be conceived of in relation to various technologies of identity construction, or identity paradigms, which in turn inform how racial, gender, or community-related aspects of identity are existentially experienced and expressed. People are not only black or white, they are also members of various communities. In addition to this, they are who they are in authentic, sincere, and, as we will argue, profilic, ways—and this, is crucial for developing robust accounts of identity.

Concretely, we will discuss three identity paradigms that are at work in the social-psychological construction of selfhood. First, we will present the paradigms of *sincerity* and *authenticity*, referring broadly to the work of Lionel Trilling and Charles Taylor. Sincerity is an identity paradigm where identity is achieved by a sincere commitment to the fulfillment of social roles. Conversely, authenticity is based on the idea that each person is unique and original, and that one's social persona ought to be a faithful expression of one's inner self. Then, we will introduce a third paradigm which, we believe, is currently eclipsing both sincerity and

authenticity. We call this paradigm *profilicity*.[5] Profilic identity is profile-based. Here, identity is achieved by the social validation of a publicly presented personal profile. We will relate all three paradigms to the current identity politics debate not only to constructively critique it and reveal its blind spots, but also to exemplify all three paradigms and to show how they each function continuously in the formation of identity and the discourse about it.

In particular, we will show how the current debate about identity politics not only reflects different emphases on either race, gender, sexual orientation, or communal vales, but relatedly also different emphases on either authenticity or sincerity. The critics of identity politics accuse it of being overly individualistic—or too much focused on authenticity. Such a criticism aims at favoring a sincerity-based approach to identity over an authenticity-based. The current critics of identity politics therefore represent a *Political New Sincerity*.[6] However, both sides, the authenticity-leaning identity politics discourse as well as its sincerity-oriented critics, ignore a profound development in identity formation, namely the emergence of profilicity. We suggest that without understanding profilicity it is difficult to properly describe the formation of identity in current times.

Thus, the main argument of this paper focuses on demonstrating three points:

1) Identity is not merely constituted through categories such as race or gender or by a commitment to shared values, but also formed in accordance with "technologies" of identity formation that can be described in terms of *sincerity*, *authenticity*, and *profilicity*.

2) Given their anti-individualist, and thus anti-authenticity, leanings, along with their normative emphasis on the fulfilment of communal duties and roles, current critics of identity politics can be classified as representatives of a *Political New Sincerity*.

3) Both identity politics proponents and their critics remain within the sincerity-authenticity framework and fail to take account of a newly emerging paradigm of identity: profilicity.

2. Sincerity and Authenticity: A Brief Account

Before analyzing the identity politics debate, we wish to outline the sincerity-authenticity framework that has shaped it both explicitly and implicitly. This outline is also needed to ground our conception of what we believe is now surmounting the sincerity-authenticity distinction, namely the rise of profilicity.

The sincerity-authenticity binary was the topic of Lionel Trilling's brilliant 1972 monograph *Sincerity and Authenticity*. At its center is a distinction between pre-modern identity formation through whole-hearted commitment to the socially prescribed roles that one is often simply born into and a modern identity forma-

tion model according to which one's social persona is supposed to be an authentic reflection of an "inner self." Trilling derives his notion of sincerity, which we adopt here, from his understanding of Hegel:

> The historical process that Hegel undertakes to expound is the self-realization of Spirit through the changing relation of the individual to the external power of society. . . . In an initial stage of the process that is being described the individual consciousness is said to be in a wholly harmonious relation to the external power of society, to the point of being identified with it. In this relation the individual consciousness renders what Hegel calls "obedient service" to the external power and feels for it an "inner reverence." Its service is not only obedient but also silent and unreasoned, taken for granted; Hegel calls this "the heroism of dumb service." This entire and inarticulate accord of the individual consciousness with the external power of society is said to have the attribute of "nobility."[7]

Also relying on Hegel, Charles Taylor summarizes the standard account of the sincerity paradigm, and the challenge put to it by authenticity, in the following words: "People were often locked into a given place, a role and station that was properly there and from which it was almost unthinkable to deviate. Modern freedom came about through the discrediting of such orders."[8] Thus sincerity is largely conceived of as conforming to external social demands, often heavily reliant upon the individual's social roles.

Hartmut Rosa describes the transition from pre-modernity to modernity in terms of social acceleration, and in his model, too, the distinction between sincerity and authenticity resurfaces. Modernity, Rosa argues, is marked by social changes occurring with increasing rapidity, individuals are thereby more and more held responsible for "shaping their own lives" as "social change [happens] in the form of a liquefying of traditional standards and role patterns."[9] Once role patterns become sufficiently fluid, individualization occurs. Each person must engage in a "task of discovering and choosing identity-constituting roles and relationships for oneself . . . and then bearing the consequences."[10] The old sincere role identification loses its meaning when social institutions (including roles themselves) are subject to constant dissolution and reconfiguration. Returning to Hegel's terminology, authenticity or individualism arises at the historical moment when the "nobility" of sincere role commitment begins to lose its traction and slips into appearing as mere "dumb service." The inherent contradiction in sincerity—i.e., the inevitable mismatch between socially determined roles and the entirely contingent placement of individuals into these roles by birth—becomes obvious, and the ideal of sincerity bears itself as impossible to realize. Rosa explains that

> if families, occupations, residences, political and religious convictions and practices can *in principle* be changed or switched at any time, then one no

longer *is* a baker, husband of X, New Yorker, conservative, and Catholic per se. Rather one is so for periods of an only vaguely foreseeable duration; one is all these things "for the moment," i.e., in a present that tends to shrink; one *was* something else and (possibly) *will be* someone else.[11]

As an effect of individualization and the dissolution of role-based sincerity, authenticity emerges as the new primary paradigm for constituting identity. Charles Taylor defines it succinctly:

[By "authenticity"] I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.[12]

Taylor further expounds:

Authenticity (A) involves (i) creation and construction as well as discovery, (ii) originality, and frequently (iii) opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality. But it is also true, as we saw, that it (B) requires (i) openness to horizons of significance (for otherwise the creating loses the background that can save it from insignificance) and (ii) a self-definition in dialogue. That these demands may be in tension has to be allowed. But what must be wrong is a simple privileging of one over the other, of (A), say, at the expense of (B), of vice versa.[13]

It is interesting to note that in the first part of his definition (A i), Taylor conflates two opposing trajectories: creation and construction which point outward, and discovery which points inward. We do not find this overly problematic, however, and much of the literature on authenticity, individualism, or the self and identity echoes this conflation. Authenticity can be based on "discovering" one's true and essential individual self that is somehow conceived as given and persistent, or one can "create" a unique self in the course of one's life in the form of a "narrative" or "projection." In a strict sense the discovery of an essential individuality can be conceived of as individualism in a narrow sense, while creation and construction are linked with authenticity in a narrow sense. Here, we only differentiate between individualism and authenticity in these narrow senses when necessary, otherwise we follow the literature in using authenticity as an umbrella term for both. In theory, or in practice, authenticity combines these contradictory trajectories in complex ways. This very combination, we think, speaks to the inherent paradoxes of authenticity contributing to its slow demise and (already) partial replacement by profilicity.

3. Political New Sincerity

Having now outlined the sincerity and authenticity frameworks introduced by Trilling and Taylor, it should be easy to see how, along with its focus on a "common identification with a collectivity or social category," the recent surge in criticism of identity politics is also a wave of a Political New Sincerity. It accuses identity politics of being too individualistic, and thus too much aligned with the authenticity paradigm of identity.

A well-known thinker who arguably represents the most popular form of Political New Sincerity is Michael Sandel. His ideas provide an overall framework within which the more explicit critiques of identity politics can be located. Sandel hopes to "revitalize public discourse" in order to fill "a vacuum of public meaning." In this context, he wishes to develop certain notions of nationalism in order to strengthen a sense of (national and local) community and solidarity. Real debates need to take place about important issues concerning personal and shared senses of meaning. Sandel provides some examples,

> What is the moral significance, if any, of national borders? Do we owe more to our fellow citizens than we owe citizens of other countries? Is patriotism a virtue or a vice, a prejudice for our own kind? In a global age, should we cultivate national identities or aspire to a cosmopolitan ethic of universal human concern?[14]

These questions reflect on deeply held conceptions of the person. Firm belief in rugged individualism and an unencumbered self are the core, Sandel argues, of income inequality, meritocratic hubris, de-dignifying work, and a lack of patriotism and national community in America today. Sandel's position can be summarized in the words of Charles Taylor who argues that "the dark side of individualism is a centering on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society."[15] From *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* through *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020) Sandel has continually criticized individualism and argued for an encumbered conception of the person. Sandel does, however, incorporate some sense of individualist agency in his conception of the person[16] and call for political sincerity, thereby making his theory part of the Political *New* Sincerity movement.

Kwame Appiah's latest book *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity* (2018)[17] is a staunch and thoughtful rejection of identity politics. Ultimately Appiah's criticism comes in the form of asking readers to take a broader and historical view of (wrong) "essentializing" assumptions about identity. Appiah acknowledges that gender, religion, race, nationality, class, and culture are identity markers that are foundational for our being-in-the-world. But what brings people together, according to Appiah, what binds them as members of a specific community, has more to do with their shared *praxis* than with the concrete content of their self-

identification. "[M]ost of the things that most people do aren't done *because* they are women or men, of this or that ethnicity or race or religion"[18] but as part of the communities from which their identity is derived.

For Appiah, identity politics poses a significant danger in promoting an essentialist lie that can serve to bind groups, but thereby also to divide people. Supposing innate elements of difference between groups crowds out the possibility for drawing larger lines of inclusion necessary for moral conduct in a world of strangers. On the level of country or nation the problem of divisions is particularly detrimental as it impedes productive political activity. Appiah writes,

> And so, if you want to build states around nations, you're going to have to do more than simply summon an existing people and make a constitution. You're going to have to *make* a nation: you will take a population most of whom wish, for some reason, to live under a shared government, and then, after wresting them from whatever states they currently live in, you will need to build in them the shared sentiments that will make it possible for them to live productively together.[19]

In effect, Appiah is appealing to a democratic consensus that allows people to "participate in the life of the society."[20]

Probably the first major monograph targeted directly against identity politics and in support of a Political New Sincerity was Mark Lilla's *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (2017).[21] Here, Lilla presents a crushing depiction of identity politics: "Every advance of liberal *identity* consciousness has marked a retreat of liberal *political* consciousness."[22] The focus on identity is nothing more, Lilla says, than a "pseudo-politics" which only serves to unravel the state. With this concentration "[c]itizenship dropped out of the picture." And "[t]he only meaningful question became a deeply personal one: what does my country owe me by virtue of my identity?"[23] This "turn toward the self"[24] and the devaluation of the "democratic *we*"[25] is a result, Lilla argues, of a "hyperindividualistic culture in which personal choice and self-definition have become idols."[26]

Identity politics became heavily informed by individualism and the attached identity paradigm of authenticity. Echoing Zygmunt Bauman, Lilla speaks of the "fluidity" of personal identity and the ensuing need to be continuously preoccupied with it. One's "unique identity is something she gets to construct and change as the fancy strikes her."[27] Describing how identity construction has affected politics, Lilla speaks of the "Facebook model of identity" which has inspired the "Facebook model of political engagement." Here everything is about presenting one's self, and "common history or the common good or even ideas" are left out.[28]

Francis Fukuyama addresses identity politics, populism, and the decay of liberal democracies in his newest monograph *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (2018). A good part of this book is devoted to providing a theoretical-historical account of identity from pre-modern to modern

times. Referring to Trilling (1972) Fukuyama describes identity in pre-modern society in accordance with the standard model of an "old sincerity," i.e., a demand to form identity in accordance with the social role that one is born into and that is not subject to much individual choice or agency.[29] As societies accelerated through technological and ideological changes, a new concept of identity was born—and Fukuyama uses the model of authenticity to describe it. In large cities, he says, individuals were suddenly confronted with more choice and a plurality of views, and "with new horizons opening up, the question 'Who am I?' suddenly became more relevant, as did perceptions of a vast gulf that existed between the inner person and external reality."[30]

According to Fukuyama, people now start to care about an "authentic self buried deep inside us" and fear that "society doesn't give it adequate recognition." Compared with the pre-modern world "modern society is different because the problem is not how do you bring the individual into compliance with society, the problem becomes how do you change the society. Society is wrong and the inner self is right."[31] It is precisely this attitude that eventually gives rise to identity politics where people feel that "the authentic people in my group are the good people and everyone else is bad."[32] Identity politics is accordingly a demand for the recognition of authenticity, and for being granted dignity on the basis of one's authentic being. This dignity is coupled with moral agency. People are acknowledged as capable of making free moral choices, and political rights are conferred or denied in reflection of this quality. Social problems finally arise because of demands for an exclusive recognition and dignity by increasingly particularized groups, emphasizing incomparable or even incommunicable uniqueness, and demanding that society not only accommodates, but prioritizes their own particularized "authentic" identities.

Fukuyama suggests that the social problems created by identity politics may be addressed by revitalizing the conception of a "national identity"—which is supposed to replace the primacy of the authentic identity paradigm. In a public lecture he says: "National identity is one of my solutions because I do think we need to get back to the idea of an overarching identity."[33] To be sure, for Fukuyama, equal rights for marginalized groups, such as blacks, women, or LGBT communities are an integral part of the American national identity (or civil religion). He fully endorses these values. But we also need, he argues, to rely on an overarching notion of national identity in many social and political forums—in other words, we need a Political New Sincerity to combat the problematic consequences of an obsession with authenticity.

Fukuyama sees authenticity not only at the heart of the identity politics of the political left, but equally at the heart of the electoral successes of the political right. Citing the title of Charles Taylor's *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992),[34] he writes: "Trump was the perfect practitioner of the ethics of authenticity that defines our age: he may be mendacious, malicious, bigoted, and unpresidential, but at least he

says what he thinks."[35] Trump's Twitter postings are cited as illustrative examples for Trump's "authenticity." 3am tweets suggest, states Fukuyama, that Trump is perceived to be saying what he really thinks and feels. Unlike the tweets of Bush or Obama, which were obviously vetted for political incorrectness and staged to garner appeal, Trump is harsh, offensive, but precisely therefore, above all, *authentic*. Mirroring central features of the identity politics of the left, Trump's success is, in Fukuyama's analysis, all about the inner authentic self desiring recognition for is particularistic identities.

Sandel, Appiah, Lilla, and Fukuyama all appeal to a new form of sincerity; i.e., an identity conception based on a primary commitment to the larger community and one's place in it rather than what, for them, seems to be the only alternative; namely a priority given to the authenticity of the unique individual. Sandel emphasizes community encumberedness in an attempt to steer away from abstract individualism. Appiah similarly argues that identity is largely constituted by the communities we inhabit. Lilla blames our hyperindividualistic culture for an obsession with the self. Fukuyama wants the "age of authenticity" to be replaced by a new national identity. Despite its connection with authenticity and individualism, though, all four hold the individual's (moral) agency in utmost regard, and seek to integrate personal choice, plurality of ways of life, and openness into a model of sincere identity and citizenship. This is what makes them all representatives of a *Political New Sincerity*.

We feel, however, that their diagnosis tends to mis-ascribe notions of individualism and authenticity to some phenomena that can be better understood as part of a new paradigm of identity beyond authenticity, namely a profile-based way of understanding oneself, others, and the world. In a word, "profilicity." In this way, their call for a (partial) return to sincerity is bound to edge on anachronistic conceptions, and, ultimately, to misconceive some important aspects of the sociopolitical phenomena they describe. We offer "profilicity" as a way to better appreciate these phenomena and the social conditions which shape them.

4. Profilicity: Profile-Based Identity Assemblage

Against the background of the sincerity and authenticity paradigms of identity and their relation to pre-modern and modern social structures, it becomes evident that the current backlash against identity politics generally consists of a combination of three movements:

1) Current social developments tied to identity politics are regarded as excesses of authenticity (e.g., "hyperindividualism").

2) Given the explicit or implicit conceptual limitations of the sincerity-authenticity framework, a return to sincerity (e.g., a new civil nationalism) is taken to be the only available alternative to authenticity.

3) In order to save the merits of authenticity while not returning to an altogether conservative call to turn the social clock backwards, a *New* Sincerity is promoted. That is a sincerity which is supposed to maintain and preserve positive aspects of authenticity (individual uniqueness and agency) under the guidance of sincerity (commitment to community values).

Our main reservation about this New Sincerity framework is grounded in the suspicion that it misinterprets the signs of the times and the conditions of its own emergence. Thus, we propose: What, from the perspective of Political New Sincerity, is described as an excess of authenticity is rather the opposite, namely the gradual dissolution of authenticity and replacement of it by a newly emerging paradigm of profile-based identity that we call profilicity.[36]

Profilicity is a profile-based framework for identity assemblage. It reacts to the two core paradoxes of authenticity. Firstly, as Niklas Luhmann outlined in his account of *The Reality of the Mass Media*, modern individuals learned about authentic identity by reading literature about original individuals—and then copied authenticity back into their own lives.[37] In other words: "Without reproductions there would be no originals."[38] Secondly, personal authenticity cannot be verified by the "original" individual him/herself, but only by the public: "A person can . . . not really know who he is, but has to find out whether his own projections find recognition."[39] This means that the authenticity of one's true inner self, when projected to society, is validated by a social audience, and not by the inner self. Authenticity is paradoxically, authenticated in an inauthentic way. Profilicity addresses the inbuilt paradoxical inauthenticity of authenticity by focusing on the public presentation of the self, on the profile, rather than on the inner self. It finds identity in the "recognition," of the profile, and not of the "inner self".[40]

Arguably, the extraordinary success of the social media can be explained as a response to the paradox of authenticity by providing a viable format for achieving profilic—rather than authentic—identity for (almost) everyone. In short, unlike in the authenticity model, profilicity validates identity not by finding or creating a unique "inner self" that truly underlies one's public persona, but, to the contrary, a public profile is created with the aim of being validated by public affirmation. Sean Parker, the first president of Facebook, provided an excellent description of the function of Facebook and social media, and thereby of the functioning of profilicity: they create identity through establishing "social validation feedback loops."[41]

Validation now again (as in old sincerity) concerns the "outside" (or public) element of the self, but, and this is a crucial difference, profilic validation is not based on an inner commitment to specific social roles or community values; it is performative. And perhaps even more importantly, validation does not come (as in sincerity) from one's actually present peers (e.g., family members, other members of an organization or "team") but from a "virtual," i.e., non-present and largely

anonymous "general peer." Thus, validation comes, for instance, from the number of likes or clicks of a social media post, or the number of citations of a paper, or a scholar's "H-index." The validation now does not come from simply being seen (as), but from *being seen as being seen*. Speaking with Niklas Luhmann, proficility is a specifically modern phenomenon since it is grounded not in first-order observation (being observed), but in "second-order observation" (being observed as to how one is being observed).

Similar to "brand recognition," the validation of proficic identity is not primarily based on the confirmation of a specific "essential" characteristic of a person or product, but rather assesses, as Naomi Klein has already amply demonstrated in her bestseller *No Logo*, if something is "cool" or not. Similarly, just as "successful corporations must primarily produce brands, as opposed to products"[42] individuals today require "proficic" brands as opposed to authentic selves. Identity value becomes "exhibition value," to use a term employed by Walter Benjamin in his famous reflections on "Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction."[43] It emerges in correspondence with social second-order observation processes and is measured and compared in the now ubiquitous ratings and rankings showing how the "general peer" reacts to, for instance, the display of one's facial features, family life, product purchases, opinions on political events, artistic performances, or professional output (e.g. academic papers like this one). Under conditions of proficility, identity value is increasingly derived from profiles subjected to metrics. These metrics, importantly, neither reflect sincere "devotion" or authentic "originality." Instead, they reflect the degree of acclaim of whatever is presented to a public forum. What is presented is commonly attributed to a personal profile (or brand), and this profile is then the source from which identity value is generated.

To say that identity value is generated from the exhibition value of private and professional profiles is not to say that sincerity and authenticity play no role at all in proficility—to the contrary, they can very much be put in the service of "being cool," or "being proficic." They are not measured or even considered "as such" but in the context of their proficic presentation or exhibition. Speaking in Jean Baudrillard's terms, proficility can well be achieved by *simulating* sincerity and/or authenticity. When a politician, a celebrity, or a person commenting on a Youtube post, expresses, for instance, his or her sincere commitment to a set of community values, then this display of sincerity generates proficic identity value. Similarly, the display of authenticity, for instance through use of "unconventional" language, can generate public attention and be "liked" in public forums and contribute to proficic "recognition." (At the same time, it should be noted that we are not saying that sincerity and authenticity can no longer be utilized for their own sake. All three approaches to identity assemblage co-exist. We do, however, hold that proficility is becoming the most dominate.)

The crucial distinction between authenticity and the profilic simulation of authenticity can be illustrated with the help of a rather striking misdiagnosis by one of the Political New Sincerity authors reviewed above: Francis Fukuyama's analysis of the Donald Trump phenomenon. We question whether Trump can really be conceived as the "perfect practitioner of the ethics of authenticity." Trump is a self-made mass media project through and through, well-known for his prior successes and failures in "branding" everything from steaks to hotels. And, as is widely acknowledged, his electoral victory was to a large extent due to his and his team's social media savvy. Very few people will seriously consider the former host of *The Apprentice* to be a role model of authenticity. His authenticity is clearly staged, and perceived and validated by those who like him, *as a staged performance.*

Users of mass and social media know well that a photo of a group of people simultaneously jumping into the air on a beach is staged and posted for an effect rather than an attempt to depict an authentic moment. This type of photo is taken and valued as a display. The Trump phenomenon works similarly, as Trump himself explained on more than one occasion—or, as is said from an authenticity perspective, he is "weirdly honest about his lying."[44] One of the clearest examples comes from Trump himself explaining his use of a successful catchphrase in a profilic, and not authentic, way:

> Funny how that term caught on, isn't it? I tell everyone: I hated it! Somebody said, "Drain the swamp." I said, "Oh, that's so hokey. That is so terrible." I said, "All right. I'll try it." So like a month ago, I said, "Drain the swamp." The place went crazy. I said, "Whoa. Watch this." Then I said it again. Then I started saying it like I meant it, right? And then I said it, I started loving it.[45]

Trump neither represents the sincere statesmanlike father of the nation, nor the rugged individual whose every utterance reveals his unique inner self and convictions. Trump embodies a triumph of profilicity revealing the impossibility (and potential hypocrisy) of the attempt to be authentic or sincere. Trump loves what he says precisely because it furthers his profilicity-based popularity, and not because it is authentic. He is loved not because he actually deceives many of his followers into taking him as authentic, but because his staged public persona, due to its openly visible profilicity, is validated more than the increasingly unconvincing attempt to be authentic (by some of his political opponents). While profilicity appears from the perspective of authenticity as a "weirdly honest lie," authenticity appears from the perspective of profilicity as a weirdly dishonest truthfulness. In short, Trump's displays are like photos of people jumping on a beach, they are presented for social validation and to generate exhibition value of a profile.

Not unlike Fukuyama's misdiagnosis of Trump as the "perfect practitioner of the ethics of authenticity," Lillia, we believe, wrongly conceives of what he calls

the "Facebook model of identity," in terms of authenticity. Arguing, like Fuku-
yama, from the basis of the sincerity-authenticity binary, Lilla mistakes profilicity
phenomena for what he calls "hyperindividualism," and dismisses it as a form of
"narcissism" (alluding to Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*). In the
same vein as Lasch, Lilla complains that the "Facebook model of identity" is un-
dermining a culture of sincerity and its commitment to "citizenship, the central
concept of democratic politics."[46]

Lilla's "Facebook model of identity" mirrors (without referring to) the no-
tion of the "Facebook Eye" coined by Nathan Jurgenson and recently adapted in
Roberto Simanowski's analysis of our present "Facebook Society."[47] Interestingly
enough, however, while Simanowski regards the "narcissism" that he sees coming
to the fore in a Facebook Society as essentially *inauthentic*,[48] Lilla regards it, to the
contrary, as overly authentic. This difference can be explained with the different
foundational assumptions applied by the respective authors: For Lilla, the New
Sincerity advocate, authenticity is bad, and therefore for him, the problems of the
Facebook model of identity stem from being all-too authentic. For Simanowski
on the other hand, who could be classified as a representative of a Political New
Authenticity, authenticity is good, and therefore the problems of a Facebook So-
ciety stem from not being authentic enough. The trouble with both perspectives,
though, is that they lack a third concept, namely profilicity, that can describe
contemporary sociopolitical phenomena—on and off the social media—beyond
sincerity and authenticity, and thus without a perhaps somewhat premature verdict
on what is wrong with them.

Under the conditions of second-order observation, or under the logic of
profilicity, "seen as being seen" is more important and generates more identity
value than merely "being seen as." In the political arena, just as in the economic
market place, or in the new social or traditional mass media, or, in fact, in the
contemporary academic world, more attention generates greater exhibition value.
And greater exhibition value generates a stronger identity value.

The four Political New Sincerity authors reviewed here are themselves with-
out exception *high profile* authors. They are traditional and, more importantly,
social media stars whose videos receive thousands if not millions of clicks and
likes. Their books are published by publishers that now function just as much
commercially as academically. And what these authors say and write about New
Sincerity contributes to strengthen and proliferate their own profilicity as well. In
their case too, sincerity is in the service of profilicity. And this cannot be otherwise
in a society where profilicity has become the reigning identity paradigm. To say
otherwise would only give in to a "weirdly dishonest truthfulness."

5. Conclusion

The main point of this paper has not been to prove the authors of Political New Sincerity wrong—we agree with most of what they say about the problems of identity politics—and much less to indicate that they are somehow insincere. To the contrary, we think that they are sincere, but sincere under the conditions of profilicity. Our goal then is to demonstrate that the third paradigm of identity has been largely overlooked and should be incorporated into an updated view of identity assemblage.

The conditions of profilicity, we stipulate, have now emerged as dominant in practically all social systems, including the economy, politics, and academia. In all these systems value, and specifically identity value (of a politician or a party, of a brand or company, of a university or scholar, or even of a person), is produced in line with the paradigm of profilicity, and this is the main point of this paper: Profilicity is a technology of identity formation. Here, identity is achieved through the exhibition of a profile that is validated by a "general peer," (the electorate, "the market place", the "peer review system," "likes," and other forms of ratings, reviews, and rankings) and maintained through perpetual "social validation feedback loops" (constant polls in politics, marketing in the economy, a never-ceasing publication industry, status updates, etc.).

The new social media did not, we believe, bring about profilicity—it has existed long before, and its basic structures were already described many decades ago, for instance by Walter Benjamin when he showed how the exhibition value of art had replaced its "cult value,"[49] and when John Maynard Keynes described the production of financial value in the modern economy with the analogy of a "beauty contest."[50] Rather than having invented profilicity, social media has immensely benefitted from this pre-existing paradigm (which is related to older forms of reputation) and from being able to provide a platform to switch to this mode in the social realm of personal relationships. With this switch towards profilicity even on the most intimate levels of social life, profilicity is gradually overcoming sincerity and authenticity.

People can still be sincere and derive identity value from enacting their roles, for instance, in the family, a religious community, in sports, or in the military. Here, they can identify as, for instance, committed mother, devoted believer, or loyal teammate. In other life situations, the same people may well be able to generate a sense of identity via authenticity, for instance through being regarded as unique and special by their partners, or by identifying as the original creator of a garden or philosophical essay. Increasingly, though, sincere commitment and authentic originality are perceived as truly significant only if validated not by one's immediate peers, but by the general peer and as part of one's public profile.

Profilic aspects of identity are amplified by the clamor of the social media and thus become more powerful and prevalent. By curating our public personae in a profilic way—geared towards generating exhibition value through acclaim from the general peer—we also become mentally and emotionally more concerned with our profilic identity. We care—and must do so—more about it than about being "merely" sincere or authentic.

Profilicity should not be seen as "worse" or morally more dubious that either authenticity or sincerity. Of course, when regarded from the perspective of sincerity it appears insincere, just as it appears inauthentic when seen from the perspective of authenticity. But both sincerity and authenticity (like profilicity) have their respective limitations: authenticity is inherently paradoxical, and sincerity enforces the internalization of external social roles. None of the three paradigms of identity is inherently correct or better than the others. They all need to be seen in the context of a social environment, and perhaps today's highly differentiated society along with ubiquitous social media make sincerity and authenticity less practicable and less convincing. Profilicity allows people to shape identity in the context of large-scale social visibility and transparency, and to reshape it constantly along with increasing social acceleration. More than sincerity and authenticity, profilicity makes personal identity diverse and flexible, and thus perhaps more credible in a highly dynamic society.

Identity should neither be regarded as constituted only by "genealogical" attributes such as gender, race, or sexual orientation, nor solely by ethical commitments to communal belongings. These dimensions of identity are mediated by social-psychological technologies of self-making—strategies by which the performances of one's social personae are connected with one's mental and emotional experience. Sincerity, authenticity, and profilicity represent such technologies of self-making. This is to say, for instance, that being black or white, or being American or German, gay or straight (or neither), can be enacted in the modes of sincerity, authenticity, or profilicity. It seems to us that this socio-psychological dimension of identity has not been sufficiently reflected on by the proponents of identity politics or by their Political New Sincerity critics. We believe that the current identity politics debate would benefit from a reflection on profilicity—specifically so because the debate itself is performed under conditions of profilicity. By taking a public stance for or against identity politics one necessarily establishes a public profile and inevitably hopes to thereby generate profilic identity value.

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Notes

1. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America."
2. The intention of this essay is not to argue in favor of one political stance over another, but to critically analyze conceptual issues on both sides.
3. Stryker and Burke, "The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory."
4. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 179.
5. We would like to thank David Stark for suggesting this term to us. We outline the notion in detail in our book *You and Your Profile*.
6. The term "New Sincerity" is loosely associated with the literary works of David Foster Wallace (1962–2008). Since we do not focus on literature, art, or culture here, but on social and political thought, we use the expression "Political New Sincerity."
7. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 35.
8. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 3. Other major social theorists who operated with variations of this description include Anthony Giddens, Niklas Luhmann, Zygmunt Bauman, and Hartmut Rosa, to name only a few.
9. Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 227.
10. Ibid., 228.
11. Ibid., 147.
12. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.
13. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 66.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 4.
16. See D'Ambrosio, "A Sandelian Response to Confucian Role Ethics."
17. See Appiah, *The Lies that Bind*.
18. Ibid., 27.
19. Ibid., 77.
20. Appiah and Wright, "The Lies that Bind."
21. See Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*.
22. Ibid., 10.
23. Ibid., 67.
24. Ibid., 111.
25. Ibid., 133.
26. Ibid., 136.
27. Ibid., 87.
28. Ibid., 89.
29. Fukuyama, *Identity*, 35.
30. Ibid., 36.
31. Fuluyama, "Ezra Klein Show."
32. Fukuyama, "Commonwealth Club."

33. Ibid.
34. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*.
35. Ibid., 119.
36. See Profilicity, video.
37. Luhmann, *The Reality of Mass Media*, 61.
38. Ibid., 86.
39. Luhmann, *Theory of Society* 2: 22.
40. If "recognition" is detached from the "inner self," one should technically no longer speak of "recognition" at all. For Hegel, from whom the current use of the concept of "recognition" is commonly derived, recognition is tied to the constitution of self-consciousness, and in this way to the "inner self."
41. Stockland, "Don't Blame Social Media for Human Bad Behavior."
42. Klein, *No Logo*, 3.
43. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."
44. Lopez, "Donald Trump Can Be Weirdly Honest about Lying."
45. Ibid.
46. Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 87–88.
47. See Simanowski, *Facebook Society*.
48. D'Ambrosio and Moeller, "From Authenticity to Profilicity."
49. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."
50. See Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*. See also D'Ambrosio and Moeller, "From Authenticity to Profilicity."

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