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Opinion

Go Ahead, Speak for Yourself

Not every opinion needs to be underwritten by your race or gender or other social identity.

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“As a white man,” Joe begins, prefacing an insight, revelation, objection or confirmation he’s eager to share — but let’s stop him right there. Aside from the fact that he’s white, and a man, what’s his point? What does it signify when people use this now ubiquitous formula (“As a such-and-such, I ..”) to affix an identity to an observation?

Typically, it’s an assertion of authority: As a member of this or that social group, I have experiences that lend my remarks special weight. The experiences, being representative of that group, might even qualify me to represent that group. Occasionally, the formula is an avowal of humility. It can be both at once. (“As a working-class woman, I’m struggling to understand Virginia Woolf’s blithe assumptions of privilege.”) The incantation seems indispensable. But it can also be — to use another much-loved formula — problematic.

The “as a” concept is an inherent feature of identities. For a group label like “white men” to qualify as a social identity, there must be times when the people to whom it applies act as members of that group, and are treated as members of that group. We make lives *as* men and women, *as* blacks and whites, *as* teachers and musicians. Yet the very word “identity” points toward the trouble: It comes from the Latin *idem*, meaning “the same.” Because members of a given identity group have experiences that depend on a host of other social factors, they’re *not* the same.

Being a black lesbian, for instance, isn’t a matter of simply combining African-American, female and homosexual ways of being in the world; identities interact in complex ways. That’s why Kimberlé Crenshaw, a feminist legal theorist and civil-rights activist, introduced the notion of intersectionality, which stresses the complexity with which different forms of subordination relate to one another. Racism can make white men shrink from black men and abuse black women. Homophobia can lead men in South Africa to rape gay women but murder gay men. Sexism in the United States in the 1950s kept middle-class white women at home and sent working-class black women to work for them.

Let's go back to Joe, with his NPR mug and his man bun. (Or are you picturing a "Make America Great Again" tank top and a high-and-tight?) Having an identity doesn't, by itself, authorize you to speak on behalf of everyone of that identity. So it can't really be that he's speaking for all white men. But he can at least speak to what it's like to live as a white man, right?

Not if we take the point about intersectionality. If Joe had grown up in Northern Ireland as a gay white Catholic man, his experiences might be rather different from those of his gay white *Protestant* male friends there — let alone those of his childhood pen pal, a straight, Cincinnati-raised reform Jew. While identity affects your experiences, there's no guarantee that what you've learned from them is going to be the same as what other people of the same identity have learned.

We've been here before. In the academy during the identity-conscious 1980s, many humanists thought that we'd reached peak "as a." Some worried that the locution had devolved into mere prepositional posturing. The literary theorist Barbara Johnson wrote, "If I tried to 'speak as a lesbian,' wouldn't I be processing my understanding of myself through media-induced images of what a lesbian is or through my own idealizations of what a lesbian *should* be?" In the effort to be "real," she saw something fake. Another prominent theorist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, thought that the "as a" move was "a distancing from oneself," whereby the speaker became a self-appointed representative of an abstraction, some generalized perspective, and suppressed the actual multiplicity of her identities. "One is not just one thing," she observed.

It's because we're not just one thing that, in everyday conversation, "as a" can be useful as a way to spotlight some specific feature of who we are. Comedians do a lot of this sort of identity-cuing. In W. Kamau Bell's recent Netflix special, "Private School Negro," the "as a" cue, explicit or implicit, singles out various of his identities over the course of an hour. Sometimes he's speaking as a parent, who has to go camping because his kids enjoy camping. Sometimes he's speaking as an African-American, who, for ancestral reasons, doesn't see the appeal of camping ("sleeping outdoors *on purpose*?"). Sometimes — as in a story about having been asked his weight before boarding a small aircraft — he's speaking as "a man, a heterosexual, cisgender *Dad* man." (Hence: "I have no idea how much I weigh.")

The switch in identities can be the whole point of the joke. Here's Chris Rock, talking about his life in an affluent New Jersey suburb: "As a black man, I'm against the cops, but as a man with property, well, I need the cops. If someone steals something, I can't call the Crips!" Drawing attention to certain identities you have is often a natural way of drawing attention to the contours of your beliefs, values or concerns.

But *caveat auditor*: Let the listener beware. Representing an identity is usually volunteer work, but sometimes the representative is conjured into being. Years ago, a slightly dotty countess I knew in the Hampstead area of London used to point out a leather-jacketed man on a park bench and inform her companions, with a knowing look, "He's the *head gay*." She was convinced that gays had the equivalent of a pontiff or prime minister who could speak on behalf of all his people.

Because people's experiences vary so much, the "as a" move is always in peril of presumption. When I was a student at the University of Cambridge in the 1970s, gay men were *très chic*: You couldn't have a serious party without some of us scattered around like throw pillows. Do my experiences entitle me to speak for a queer farmworker who is coming of age in Emmett, Idaho? Nobody appointed me head gay.

If someone is advocating policies for gay men to adopt, or for others to adopt toward gay men, what matters, surely, isn't whether the person is gay but whether the policies are sensible. As a gay man, you could oppose same-sex marriage (it's just submitting to our culture's heteronormativity, and anyway monogamy is a patriarchal invention) or advocate same-sex marriage (it's an affirmation of equal dignity and a way to sustain gay couples). Because members of an identity group won't be identical, your "as a" doesn't settle anything. The same holds for religious, vocational and national identities.

And, of course, for racial identities. In the 1990s the black novelist Trey Ellis wrote a screenplay, "The Inkwell," which drew on his childhood in the milieu of the black bourgeoisie. A white studio head (for whom race presumably eclipsed class) gave it to Matty Rich, a young black director who'd grown up in a New York City housing project. Mr. Rich apparently worried that the script wasn't "black enough" and proposed turning the protagonist's father, a schoolteacher, into a garbage man. Suffice to say, it didn't end well. Are we really going to settle these perennial debates over authenticity with a flurry of "as a" arrowheads?

Somehow, we can't stop trying. Ever since Donald Trump eked out his surprising electoral victory, political analysts have been looking for people to speak for the supposedly disgruntled white working-class voters who, switching from their former Democratic allegiances, gave Mr. Trump the edge.

But about a third of working-class whites voted for Hillary Clinton. Nobody explaining why white working-class voters went for Mr. Trump would be speaking for the millions of white working-class voters who didn't. One person could say that she spoke *as* a white working-class woman in explaining why she voted for Mrs. Clinton just as truthfully as her sister could make the claim in explaining her support for Mr. Trump — each teeing us up to think about how her class and race might figure into the story. No harm in that. Neither one, however, could accurately claim to speak *for* the white working class. Neither has an exclusive on being representative.

So we might do well to ease up on "as a" — on the urge to underwrite our observations with our identities. "For me," Professor Spivak once tartly remarked, "the question 'Who should speak' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?'"

But tell that to Joe, as he takes a sip of kombucha — or is it Pabst Blue Ribbon? All right, Joe, let's hear what you've got to say. The speaking-as-a convention isn't going anywhere; in truth, it often serves a purpose. But here's another phrase you might try on for size: "Speaking for myself ..."

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