IDENTITY TRUMPS SOCIALISM

The Class and Identity Debate after Neoliberalism

EDITED BY MARC JAMES LÉGER

Identity Trumps Socialism

With essays by today's leading leftist social critics, *Identity Trumps Socialism* presents a rigorous and persuasive primer on the problems generated by postmodern and neoliberal challenges to the legacy of emancipatory universality. In addition to the ways in which capitalism has used racialized and gendered forms of oppression to divide the working class, today's activism must also understand how neoliberal capitalism uses identity politics to undermine socialism. *Identity Trumps Socialism* advances an emancipatory left universality that addresses the limits of diversity and makes the case for the centrality of class in the struggle against global capitalist hegemony.

Marc James Léger is a Marxist cultural theorist living in Montreal. He is the author of several books, including *Bernie Bros Gone Woke: Class, Identity, Neoliberalism* (2022) and *Too Black to Fail: The Obama Portraits and the Politics of Post-Representation* (2022).

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Contents

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

The Politics of Emancipatory Universality

Marc James Léger

The title of this book, *Identity Trumps Socialism*, is both a provocation and an invitation. As an allusion to the former United States president, it suggests that identity politics wields more political influence than socialism. This is not to imply that identity politics does or should succeed in doing so. Indeed, the class and identity debate is the subject of this volume. The title asserts that the politics of identity is not to be conflated with socialism. The word socialism is the most widely shared term of identification among leftists. It unites the social democratic and democratic socialist left as well as communists of various sorts and to a great extent allows for cooperation with progressive liberals who acknowledge the Marxist critique of capitalism. The term socialism tends to be rejected by anarchists who see it as a politics of state power. Often enough, however, there is cooperation between anarchists and socialists. The anarchism of old has undergone a good deal of transformation due to the emergence in the postwar period of a neo-bohemian countercultural tendency. Some of these energies have been directed towards different incarnations of the New Left, from the Civil Rights movement, the women's movement, environmentalism, LGBTQ rights and intellectual developments that fall under the rubric of postmodernism. These developments were followed by the erosion of Keynesian welfarism and the dismantling of the Soviet Union. The subsequent New World Order and neoliberal hegemony have led to the technocratic management of global markets in the interest of an international class of wealthy elites. The resulting financialization, militarization, global warming and precarization of labour have been accompanied by the rise of far-right and neo-fascist social forces. To counteract this trend, neoliberal centrists have sought to hegemonize identity politics, allowing it to further divide the left while at the same time doing nothing to reverse course on the upward redistribution of wealth. While not all agree on the extent to which we are still living in neoliberal times, most leftists believe that neoliberal regimes are not concerned with democratic representation and no longer oversee the basic necessities of social reproduction. If life after neoliberalism will be either authoritarian or socialist, then this book

argues that the struggle for emancipation must involve a universalist class analysis and critique of identity politics. That, in a nutshell, is what is encompassed by the phrase identity trumps socialism.

This book invites readers to consider how it is that the various forms of identitarianism, left, right and centre, are today working to the advantage of the wealthiest ten and one per cent of society. To even suggest this is no doubt enough for many to perceive this claim as a backlash against the gains made over the last several decades for civil rights, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, disability rights or the ecology movement. One might then reply that there was a turning point after which it was no longer credible to strike this naïve attitude of indignation, perhaps 9/11 or 2008, or perhaps the moment when the momentum behind Occupy Wall Street shifted towards the hashtag movements Black Lives Matter, MeToo, Extinction Rebellion and March for Our Lives. Unfortunately, for the historian, there is no such date. The debates and concepts that are at work in this book have been with us since at least the 1960s, if not the 1760s! Still, the reader might rightfully ask: who speaks, who benefits? This demand that private or individual interests be put on the table in advance of any public deliberation is symptomatic of our post-Enlightenment condition.

The postmodern suspicion of universality, which redoubles the neoliberal attack on collective rights and public institutions, tends to devolve broad social concerns from the level of society and government to group interests and individual entrepreneurial risk. This process, some say, can be reversed by ignoring questions of capitalist class exploitation and attending to the various forms of oppression. To take one example of this conundrum, the online Intersectionality Score Calculator invites me to discover my intersectionality score.[1] By filling out this privilege measuring system, the device informs me about how social identities of race, gender and sexuality define my individual level of systemic oppression. As a straight, white, cisgender male, who is poor, older and able-bodied, with English as a second language and who is native to his country of birth, highly educated, atheist and neither Muslim nor Jewish, my score is 13/100. The calculator indicates that I am 85 per cent more privileged than others and suggests that I should "give more" to those who are less fortunate than me. To provide a counterexample, the calculator scored Michelle Obama at 47/100. As an artefact of what Walter Benn Michaels refers to as post-historicity, where questions of epistemology are replaced by questions of ontology, the calculator substitutes an identity spectrum for the more familiar, and increasingly displaced, political spectrum.

Although the Intersectionality Score Calculator states that all of us are born with most intersectional factors, its function, along social constructionist lines, is to suggest that people can improve their score by becoming involved in Islam or Judaism, by donating to charity, or by exploring the "wild side" of their sexuality. For the reluctant, it says, the easiest thing to do is champion the intersectionality of people who would score better. The site quite rightly

mentions peanut allergies and other issues that are not covered by the score. These other metrics are seemingly unrelated to matters of equity and the struggle against racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, anti–Semitism, biphobia, cissexism, classism, homophobia, Islamophobia, transphobia, ethnocentrism, xenophobia and discrimination on the basis of race, country of origin and sexual orientation (bisexual, nonbinary, intersex, lesbian, queer, transgender, asexual). One of the comments on the site suggests that Donald Trump scores an absolute zero. My claim, in contrast, is that the sort of zero-sum, means-tested social justice that the calculator advocates compromises left politics and much else. By saying this, another suspicion arises – not only is my thinking defined by my identity, but my socialist critique colludes with the conservative defence of normative privileges, which includes white settler privilege.

Rather than indulge the injunctions to self-sacrifice that emerge from the realm of what Nancy Fraser defines in her contribution to this volume as "progressive neoliberalism," the demands of struggle and solidarity require a working concept of emancipatory universality. In academic and activist quarters, conventional wisdom insists that exploitation and oppression must not be opposed, that a materialist analysis must elaborate the tensions, intersections and synergies that exist between class and identity across distinct times and places. As Marxist materialism has been "postmodernized" by various pre-war and postwar intellectual strands, including semiology, phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, discourse theory and deconstruction, one tends to lose sight of what it is that could change the fact that billions of newly proletarianized people on this planet are paid starvation wages. As even the so-called new materialisms dispense with dialectics and concepts like emancipation, universality, alienation and totality, a presumably more egalitarian politics replaces relations of production with relations of power. Against the immanentism which considers that "there is no outside," a post-transcendental approach allows us to more adequately define the self-other dialectic in terms of concrete universality – global capitalism as self – and abstract universality – all of us as variously marked others. If in these terms the master-slave dialectic privileges the relation of the capitalist to the worker, Marxism reminds us that the formal freedom to sell one's labour is the source of a process of abstraction that in our global and post-Fordist times extends well beyond the workday. That the "social factory" subsumes ever more aspects of life, however, does not oblige us to accept the (impossible) reduction of subject to object and human to capital. One does not look forward to the day when intersectionality calculators are indexed to something like China's technology-driven Social Credit System, known as the sincerity score, which tabulates all social interactions in a condensed form of absolute credit. And so while we reject class essentialism and economic reductionism, we at the same time take our leave of vulgar identitarian versions of the same: zoological materialism (Trotsky), organic totality (Marcuse), race reductionism (Reed) and democratic materialism (Badiou).[2]

The readymade definition of politics as a struggle between left and right does a certain disservice to critical thinking. Modern macro-politics typically distinguishes between liberalism, communism and fascism. In the U.S., for example, it is safe to say that politics is locked in a bipartisan sharing of power that excludes the left. Postmodern micropolitics has unintentionally contributed to this situation by magnifying the problems of nationalism at the level of civil society. It is often assumed that the working class, middle class and upper class of any identity group have the same interests and that identity, like nationalism, is a far more motivating ideology than class struggle. Be that as it may, postwar consumer culture, the mediations of the professional-managerial class and the flourishing of a non-governmental third sector have emphasized the petty-bourgeois and middle-class character of production relations. Although the alternative to disaster capitalism is without doubt the refurbishing of working-class organizations, some worry that such "universalist" politics would hinder the kinds of worldmaking that are desired by non-normative subjects. Regardless, ecological destruction, great power conflict, billionaire control, the growth of the security apparatus, the attack on previously acquired rights and on left politics more generally mostly privilege the compulsion to capital accumulation. As for what life will be like after the revolution, Fredric Jameson's *American Utopia* was foresighted enough to plan for a Psychoanalytic Placement Bureau that could manage individual and group therapies in relation to employment offices, hospitals, statistical research centres and other agencies of social welfare.[3] Let us repeat once again that the issues that affect women, racial and sexual minorities, immigrants and foreigners are matters of concern to all leftists. What is at stake in *Identity Trumps Socialism*, however, and for the left in general, is not the detailed examination of such issues, but the intellectual and ideological struggle over the culture and politics that would allow the left to effectively intervene in a situation where the becoming of global humanity now seems more like a quaint catechism than a burning question.

Regime Change Now

Like any other hermetic system of measure, what the intersectionality calculator is unable to account for is the struggle for a world that does not yet exist. The French philosopher Michel Foucault rejected the idea of emancipation as idealist. His colleague, Gilles Deleuze, attempted to complete the dismantling of universalism by connecting critical theory to pre-Enlightenment philosophy. Rather than a horizon of progress and a vision of social change based on collective struggle against inequality and injustice, the polity we have created for ourselves is committed to everything all the time. A writer who goes by the name Aurora Borealis believes that this condition is at play in compulsive intersectionality. For example, when someone asserts that single-payer healthcare is for everyone, this author argues, the absence of an emancipatory universalist perspective obliges them to add to this the fact that it would disproportionately

benefit people of colour, single mothers or immigrants.[4] Or as Hillary Clinton once put it, breaking up the big banks will not end racism. This compulsion to intersectionality is deemed symptomatic of a mania that destroys what it metabolizes because its proponents cannot admit that such frenetic activity achieves no significant gains for the left and therefore for everyone.

There is enough "woke" fanaticism on display today to keep socialism at bay. Not only has a considerable part of academia gone the route of call outs and the cancellation of wrongdoers, from the problematic to the deplorable, but a sizeable portion has also dedicated itself to countering the "loony left." Policing woke absurdity is now a full-time occupation of conservative operations like *Spiked* magazine and the online Culture Forum Channel. In an article about the new forms of woke oppression, the conservative linguist John McWhorter worries that vilification has replaced criticism.[5] Demands that people be punished for their views, or because they are not sufficiently anti-racist, come too close to witch burning to qualify as Enlightenment, he argues. Anti-Enlightenment, however, is the point of much postmodern praxis. Although McWhorter is wrong to define these disparate phenomena in religious rather than political terms, he is right to be concerned. The idea that historical injustices can be rectified by scapegoating individuals and redistributing privileges to minorities has led to dubious actions, like for example the demand by members of the Poetry Foundation that its president and board chairman resign because the letter that these two men wrote in support of Black Lives Matter was not long and substantial enough. Liberals who complain that all of this defies reason and objectivity miss the point of what Ken Russell once said about the devil possessions and exorcisms of seventeenth-century Loudun: It's all true.

McWhorter's efforts to document today's capricious zeal for persecution also led Helen Pluckrose to create a support group that provides resources and advocacy for people who have been unfairly cancelled in the workplace. What started out as campus politics has now spread to the boardroom and government policy. If Jeremy Corbyn's suspension from the Labour Party – on the basis of his alleged anti-Semitism rather than his actual critique of capitalism – was not enough to raise eyebrows, the tepid response to the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6 has certainly incurred some confusion. The Stop the Steal riot had the purpose of overturning the results of the 2020 election. In this scenario, the "underground" was the sitting president, the majority of the Republican Party and tens of millions of supporters. After ample evidence was provided that intelligence, military, police and government officials had planned a coup, the incoming president, Joe Biden, called for unity with the Republicans and bipartisan healing. The only measure taken was a congressional vote in favour of a second Trump impeachment trial and an investigation committee dedicated to television spectacle rather than criminal prosecution. The journalist Joe Lauria of Consortium News defended Trump's constitutional rights and freedom of speech, referring to the impeachment as a form of cancel culture. As part of the retaliatory mood among Republicans, Colorado representative

Lauren Boebert blamed the left for setting a bad example by justifying BLM protests after the police killing of George Floyd. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a representative from Georgia whose campaign slogan was "Save America, Stop Socialism," said that she would file articles of impeachment against Biden on his first day in office. She defended the coup riot by arguing that the five who were killed are fewer than the 47 who died during the BLM demonstrations. Within less than three weeks of the riot, Republican Senators had blocked the Democratic opposition's half-hearted effort to impeach Trump. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's inscrutable claim at that time that "all roads lead to Putin" only made sense after Biden removed American troops from Afghanistan so that he could mobilize military efforts for what developed as the proxy war in Ukraine. The woke culture war then went global when Russian literature, art exhibitions, musicians, athletes and scientists were banned from participation in international events. The only known precedent to this boycott is the fate of Jewish artists in Nazi Germany nearly one century ago.

Great power conflict may seem remote from more common concerns like disparities, toxicity, microaggressions, privilege, allyship and virtue signalling. There is also the reaction to these concepts, which gives us more reason to think about the kind of culture that is created when deliberation on the common good is replaced with the ownership of topics and the nihilistic transgression of norms. When group-identified activists take justice into their own hands and pressure institutions to give in to their demands, the question of the public interest arises. The exclusionary appeal to emotion, passion, indignation and experience, if not to historical and contemporary traumas, pre-empts the possibility of solidarity and reanimates grievances that were previously settled or that could be dealt with otherwise. Vacillation between the position of victim and victimizer, facilitated by the replacement of political principles with the logic of empowerment, avoids questions of responsibility and accountability. With public discourse modelled on idiosyncratic experiences and the incommensurability of different standpoints, the autonomy that is necessary for solidarity is inverted. The high-mindedness of rights and justice is traded for the low bar of censorship and misdirection. Instead of equality of opportunity, demands are made that people "give more" to a repressive notion of collectivity that defines you in terms of your identity rather than your values, character, contribution, principles or beliefs. Even when outcomes are opposed to opportunities, neither option alters the nature of the political economy they operate within.

Beyond identity, people seem at a loss for meaningful interaction. Suffering tests, oaths of alliance and rituals of humiliation sow division and create an atmosphere of anxiety. In the midst of unprecedented access to education, the focus on identity produces an anti-working-class order of smug illiberalism. With a decimated left and a dysfunctional democracy, repugnant fascism makes a comeback. The insistence that not only are people different but that they should be treated differently counters the assumption that all people are

and should be treated the same. These are no longer questions of truth and universality but of power and obedience. The reality that neoliberal capitalism has adopted the woke agenda so as to deny people their rights, their achievements and their fair share is tied to the way in which even leftists today use the Marxist critique of class reductionism against Marxists.[6] Against reductionism, the Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre identified six forms of reduction that derive from the struggle between homogenizing powers and differential capacities: (1) the reduction of forms of knowing to information, and of art to epistemology, which is premised of the shift in production for the sake of human and social needs to production for the sake of accumulation; (2) the reduction of action and thought to operational schemas; (3) the reduction of action, theory and situations to tautology, classification and identification; (4) the reduction of the possible to the probable and the utopian to the transgressive; (5) the reduction of the aleatory to the predetermined; (6) the reduction of difference to indifference, of what is interesting to what is dull and what is complex to what is simplified.[7] Several decades ago, Lefebvre anticipated how the ideology of cybernetics would lead to the capture of difference by the technocratic class. Having professionalized politics against socialist goals, this class's notion of difference denies that a better world is possible.

O Brother Where Art Thou?

Identity politics today serves the reactionary agenda of the neoliberal establishment in government and in the culture and knowledge industries. Devised as a bulwark against conservativism, it more insidiously attacks the vanguard left and fuels right-wing identitarianism. This ideological programme is accompanied by ideas drawn from academic specializations that are injected directly into corporate media. The term "white privilege," for example, was used in only four *New York Times* articles in 2010. In 2020, the same term was used in 257 articles.[8] According to Steve Darcy, we have reached a terminological paradigm shift where phrases that were commonly in use by the New Left generation in the 1960s and 70s have been replaced by the lingo of the Twitter left.[9] Unifying terms that at one time worked to build solidarity have been changed to acknowledge difference and positionality. Knowledge of social, economic and political dynamics is reoriented towards interpersonal ethics. A concept like inequality is now converted into accusations of unearned benefits. Exploitation is now understood as a problem of elitism and oppression as a matter of privilege. Instead of future-oriented struggles, the emphasis is on the here and now, sometimes crowned with a "prefigurative" halo.

What has remained the same throughout the postwar period is the class character of progressive politics, which by and large is the product of middle-class professionals.[10] The campus politics of the 1960s, however, has shifted to a more desperate effort to fight the political right by assembling minority groups rather than building mass majorities around common concerns. However, as Rick

Fantasia argues, struggles for inclusion make little sense in a neoliberal world of deregulation, privatization and globalization, where the majority of excluded are made to fight one another.[11] The sociologist Barbara Ehrenreich noted in 2015 that the white working class that so revulses the liberal intelligentsia has now become noteworthy for its disparitarian particularities, like early death due to suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction as well as hazardous working and living conditions.[12] Whites, the corporate and pseudo-left media tell us, are worried about the "browning of America," thereby fuelling tensions that supply the raw material for those who specialize in mismanagement. The pseudo-conflicts that they generate are of course incapable of addressing the kind of worry that was generated among neoliberal centrists when Kshama Sawant, the East Indian socialist from Seattle, campaigned against Clinton with the slogan: "I'm not with her."[13]

One of the characteristics of discrimination is the denial of someone's universality. It is difficult to see how giving more attention to diversity can mitigate this general problem. In the manufactured controversies around the work of artists like Kenneth Goldsmith, Dana Schutz, Victor Arnautoff and Sam Kerson, or around Dr Seuss books and even Shakespeare, what concerns the offended is not the art but the identity of the artists and their subjects. Artists are now expected to only treat subjects that are determined by the identity group they belong to. To step out of line is to exert privilege, or, as Michaels puts it, to make the false assumption that, for instance, white people can do black things.[14] To adjudicate what belongs to whom, one must now appeal to origins to assess what is appropriate. A DNA test, as was the case with the Indigenous Canadian actress and director Michelle Latimer, is used to settle questions that should be matters of human right. According to Rick Sint, the appeal to identitarian authenticity is partly the product of American pragmatism, where the emphasis on meliorism without reference to ideology fails to displace extremism because it fails to distinguish between left and right. Whether or not postmodern academia is actually leftist is not an issue that concerns him, except for the sake of saving the reputations of intellectuals like Sam Harris, Steven Pinker, Christopher Hitchens and Christina Hoff Sommers, who, from our point of view, are less relevant to the world of ideas than they are to the conservative attack on Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Marcuse, Lacan, Derrida and whoever else can be blamed for relativizing objective truth and rejecting the possibility of a mind-independent reality. Such reductive intellectualism that is the stuff of continental theory, he writes, "saved religion by founding a secular critique of reason."[15] One of Sint's more pointed observations is the tendency of race-first thinkers to transform politics into power struggles, a trend that he says began when the Nazis distorted Marxist theory in order to cast Aryans in the role of the oppressed. This is the sort of criticism that used to come from the left but that now does so in only the rarest instances.[16] Having abandoned universalism, the postmodernists have made it easier for conservatives to attack welfarism and progressive policy by associating it with the excesses of wokeism.

Since today's alt-right has gone the way of a postmodernized Nietzsche, emancipatory universality is our strongest weapon against it. Meanwhile, the woke set does not seem particularly happy. Contrast the exuberance of the Talking Heads' stage show for *Stop Making Sense*, where the multiracial cast of musicians was hardly a matter of contention, and David Byrne's *American Utopia*, for which a diverse cast, all in grey and filmed for the big screen by Spike Lee no less, was a dutiful response to a few criticisms of an all-male recording personnel. "That's not me," Byrne replied defensively, filling his quota of multicoloured cheerfulness for the live performances. If there can be no poetry after Auschwitz, *American Utopia* offers very little to contradict that grim prognosis. Nor did the television version of Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* betray this observation as the unrepresentability of the Holocaust is summed up by Sylvère Lotringer's absorption into the identity racket, that is, after the Dick Hebdige character is made to eat his share of Jim Crow. Opposite the neoliberal marketing of social progress, culture war nihilism finds talents like Morrissey and Kanye West fighting fascism with fascism. Why has diversity been accepted as a substitute for equality and universalism? How does particularity displace or obscure the conflict between labour and capital?

Always Historicize?

Debates on the left about the failures of Cold War liberalism as well as Eurocommunism have led us from anti-globalization protest to a renewed interest in political party organization. Left politics generally takes place on two levels, around representative electoral politics and within new social movements. After Occupy Wall Street, this distinction was noticed in the divergence between support for the Democratic Socialists of America and the Sanders campaigns of 2016 and 2020, on the one hand, and around the constituent politics of Black Lives Matter, on the other, which in the summer of 2020 brought some 20 million people into the streets to protest police violence. In addition to this are the activities of trade unions and the influence of academia and the media. Aside from the organic link between the professoriate and teachers' unions, the middle-class academics who are concerned with innovation tend to favour neoliberal directives or new social movement progressivism. Given that academia does not overall identify with the socialist left, identity politics is now a significant point of convergence between the activist and creative class factions of the middle class.

Much of what can be said about the prehistory of today's situation was summed up by Ambalavaner Sivanandan in his essay, "All That Melts into Air Is Solid: The Hokum of New Times," which was published in 1989 in the journal *Race & Class*.[17] The text is a critique of the "New Times" tendency that is associated with Cultural Studies and that was advanced by the journal *Marxism Today*. New Times triangulated socialist politics and Thatcherism by placing more emphasis on lifestyles, identity and consumerism than on labour

and production. This coincided with the Labour Party's decision to give more attention to markets and technology. As the Communist Party of Great Britain split between revolutionary and bourgeois factions, those who formed around *Marxism Today* abandoned internationalist class struggle in favour of new intellectual directions around linguistics, semiotics, psychoanalysis, feminism, structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction. On the basis of a Marxist critique of economic determinism, it threw itself headlong into identity struggles and associated social progress with cultural politics that championed minority groups. Without a political base or an organizational structure, this belated New Left adopted the Labour Party as its political platform.

The *Marxism Today* tendency is summarized by Sivanandan with reference to Stuart Hall's 1988 essay "Brave New World," which argues that changes at the level of production, from automation and computerization to global marketing and the supposed emancipation of capital from labour, produce opportunities for new identities to be created through consumption practices.[18] Making economism into a taboo rather than a theoretical question, the economic was separated from the political, shifting the locus of struggle from factory labour to the service sector and culture. Margaret Thatcher's promotion of individualism and entrepreneurialism coincided with the personal politics of new social movements, where for example "women were oppressed as women" and "blacks as blacks."[19] Avoiding the centrality of class, romantic notions of refusal ignored the contradictions between and within movements. Socialist organizations were dismissed as male dominated. After Louis Althusser's transformation of Marxism through structuralism, discourse theory provided social theory with a new understanding of impersonal structures that was seemingly more comprehensive than the singular focus on labour exploitation. The politics of special pleading and desire surreptitiously gave multinational corporations a pass and justified problems like homelessness or unemployment as matters of individual idiosyncrasy. Struggles against leftist doom and gloom rather than intractable social ills reinforced the neoconservative moral agenda. After the yuppie 80s transmogrified even the counterculture, the various forms of rebellion were adduced to the logic of empowerment. To be female, black or gay was politics enough, Sivanandan says, according to the slogan: I resist, therefore I am.

The case of Great Britain reflects the overall trend in Western countries. As the culture of the professional middle class and its concern with status defined the social space, the flight of intellectuals from labour politics ratified post-Fordism and demoted Marxism. And as the neoconservative right gained control of mainstream parties and media platforms, the working class lost the leverage it previously had achieved against corporate control. The political strategy of the new liberal-left consensus focused on combining power blocs comprised of demobilized workers, students, women, minority groups, the poor and the unemployed. This new politics of demographics was given a Marxist veneer through a pseudo-Gramscian interpretation of the concept of hegemony,

which reassured identitarians that their middle-class ambitions served the cause of anti-oppression. The new Marxists rejected welfarism in favour of subjectivity and self-actualization. The neoliberal context in which the New Times project unfolded ultimately did very little to challenge the workings of multinationals or of unaccountable institutions like the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and the World Bank.

This shift to cultural determinism, from changing the world to changing the word, as Sivanandan puts it, and from collective politics to identitarian positionings, created a political and moral vacuum. Some of this ground was recovered by the anti-globalization movement and the movements of the squares, which rejuvenated macro-political thinking on the left. This resurgence has been accompanied by the intellectual re-evaluation of universalism, a task that has its most impressive demonstration in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, a three-way debate between Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek.[20] According to Linda Zerilli, the re-evaluation of universalism is due to the sense on the part of many that post-structuralism is politically bankrupt.[21] Zerilli raises the prospect that the "old" universal was a pseudo-universal and that the universal can be constructed in such a way as to be more inclusive. Although the appeal to universality seeks to save politics from particularism, the return to the universal cannot avoid what she describes as a toggling between the universal and the particular. For Laclau, because there is no transcendent God, Reason or Historical telos, the universal does not pre-exist the moment of construction in the endless language games of contemporary politics. For him, hegemony is a formal category that allows for and defines the inscription rather than the sublation of particular contents in the social process. The identity of each group is contingently articulated to other groups. This assertion of difference appeals to the principle of universality and to the politics of equivalence. One might reasonably object that there can be no equivalence between labour and the exploiting class. Laclau did not have a solution to this problem. The thrust of his method was to reject essentialism, which he did in a manner that is slightly different from Judith Butler. Not unlike the category of gender for Butler, the universal was for Laclau a placeholder for its own impossibility.

The crux of disagreement in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* is the historicity of concrete universality. Laclau's worry that the universal can never be complete or without the remainder of some particularity would hardly come as a shock to a post-structuralist. However, what this implies for a Hegelian and Marxist analysis is another matter altogether. Whereas Laclau views antagonism as the limit of identity in the social process, for Žižek antagonism is the traumatic void, or Real, around which the social field is structured. This antagonism cannot be positivized by competing particulars. Instead of subject positions, Lacanians speak about constitutively incomplete subjects. Antagonism is the subject's conflict with itself, and so in any actual social conflict there are at least two antagonisms at play, one that is constructed and one that is essential. Claims to identity are efforts to avoid the traumatic experience

of constitutive lack, which is covered over through fantasy and social scripts. In his work with Chantal Mouffe, Laclau shifts antagonism from one context to another, where the subject might encounter the male gaze, for example, the Western gaze, or even Donald Trump as the big Other. For Žižek, however, as for Lacan, the gaze can never be occupied. The most that one can say about the gaze as big Other is that it is inconsistent. While Zerilli would prefer a political theory that does not collapse into sociological or psychological reduction, she does want to be able to be specific about particulars. However, the resulting tendency is a discourse theory that associates power rather than reason with politics.

The suspicion of universalism and the worry that some claims have more validity than others is due in part to the reduction of social meaning to language games. What is important for postmodernists is to secure the undecidability of universal claims. Such paradoxical attempts to guarantee the grounds for contestation are like trying to grab the tiger of History by the tail. The relativism that is fundamental to social constructionism is inevitably accompanied by the attempt to fully separate or to collapse subject and object, self and other, imaginary and symbolic, universal and particular. Today's new historicism, discourse theory and new materialisms are in this respect far more totalizing modes of thought than what is commonly attributed to Enlightenment-oriented philosophy. While it is possible for specific groups to make reference to their particularity in order to claim universal status, it is universality that justifies that claim. This is why Marx could define the proletariat as the universal class that revolutionizes all of society. While feminism can seek to change social relations, feminism by itself can only do so within the existing totality. Short of eliminating men altogether, feminism cannot bring an end to gender difference. Contrary to the claims of postmodernists, the universal does not erase differences but qualifies them in relation to the totality.

By itself, universality is not a left politics. However, the postmodern rejection of universality is a hindrance to the left. According to Terry Eagleton, postmodernism prefers concepts like diversity to that of solidarity because it is suspicious of anything that is holistic.[22] This makes postmodernism indifferent to the role that diversity plays in class society. Capitalism is both diverse and unifying. Its culture of the commodity welcomes everyone, even socialists. Much of today's study of culture happily deals with race, sexuality and gender but not with the revolutionary overthrow of class society. "Neo-liberal capitalism," Eagleton writes, "has no difficulty with terms like 'diversity' or 'inclusiveness,' as it does with the language of class struggle."[23] In today's universities, museums and corporations, racists are cancelled but not exploiters. Suspicion of consensus and majority groups will do little to challenge state regimes and so the small gains that can be accrued by indexing culture to identity play its part in the justification of inequality. To say such things is not to disparage identity groups, and it is not to provide the right with means to attack the left. It is to strengthen the only kind of politics that is a threat to capitalism.

As a formidable proponent of what is reasonable and sensible, Eagleton does not deny that having an identity is preferable to disorientation. But here too postmodernism is suspicious of anything that appeals to humanity or human nature. The price we pay is that even political and economic issues come to be regarded as cultural, a phenomenon that relativizes shared values in favour of change for the sake of profit. Just as meaning cannot be limited to words, truth cannot be limited to the question of power. The upshot for Eagleton is that some culture is better and some politics is more true. The fact that a measure of cultural relativism helps us to appreciate what are universal characteristics does not solve issues that are related to the compulsion to capital accumulation. When political populism mirrors the "demotic effect" of commodification, disinterestedness is replaced with indifference and criticism with tolerance.[24] Even the word "we" and concepts like "society" are proscribed by academics on account of the harm that could result. And so the ersatz of identity displaces both culture and politics.

Explain or Describe?

Whereas none of the contributors to this book share an identical theoretical approach, each of these has made a rare intellectual contribution to the politics of emancipatory universality. Their work, however, is not without its critics. For example, the economist Michael D. Yates suggests that Adolph Reed, who is one of the key figures in the race and class debate in the U.S., has a class-first emphasis on race issues and considers identity politics to be in league with neoliberalism.[25] One could make the same assertion about Reed's collaborator, Walter Benn Michaels, as well as contributor Cedric Johnson and also Reed's son, Touré Reed. Others, Yates says, like Robin D.G. Kelley and Gerald Horne, maintain that capitalism has been racialized from the start and so one cannot talk about class without also talking about race. He mentions that people like Nancy Fraser and Richard Seymour make a similar claim for gender, sexuality, nationality and other social groups. Since all of these theorists are on the left, their disagreements are hypothetically concerned with the question of whether and how identity struggles contribute to anti-capitalism. Yates is mistaken to think that what he refers to as class-first proponents are in fact class-first. As Reed stated in a 2020 interview, his materialist analysis is capitalism first.[26] Yates makes the common complaint that stands in contrast to the thesis of this book. "The class struggle," he writes, "combining the organizing of workers and peasants globally, cannot be effectively waged unless racism, patriarchy, and ecological ruin are *central* to it."[27] Class-first approaches, he argues, are wrongheaded and bound to fail. One reason why this sort of claim is so common today is that it is disarmingly simple.

Two decades ago the cultural historian Eric Lott decried the demand by leftists as well as liberals that we go "back to class" so as to universalize the struggle.[28] Seeking to delimit the insurgent anti-globalization movement to

the postmodern camp, Lott argued that its only real basis is radical democratic, accommodating the contingent and temporary convergence of disparate left movements around common objectives that cannot be articulated through a fixed, pre-given unity, universality or totality. If we have come a long way since the advent of post-60s new social movements, it is because the identity aspect of anti-normative identity politics is less in question than the politics aspect. Of course, Lott could not at that time be aware of the dilemmas we are facing today. Nevertheless, his Foucauldian analysis and defence of marginalized "bodies" had the same counterpoints then that they do now. Universalism, he said, haunts the left on account of the lost category of totality. Among anti-postmodern socialists, Lott included Barbara Ehrenreich, Ellen Meiksins Wood, Todd Gitlin and Michael Lind, all of whom, he argued, advocate an old-fashioned totality. Alternatives to this impasse include Michaels' "neo-pragmatic" critique of identity, Paul Gilroy's diasporic black cosmopolitanism, Lauren Berlant's anti-normative citizenship, Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser's exchanges on recognition and redistribution, and Laclau and Mouffe's post-Gramscian theory of hegemony. In response to Lott, Michaels would likely retort that political positions are not subject positions. A political position is not correct because of who you are, or your difference from others, but because you assume it is correct for others as well. Such assumptions are collectively tested over time, and conclusions must also be drawn. Thinkers like Noam Chomsky and Étienne Balibar would likely agree. What Žižek would add to this, however, is the problem of ideology, defined in relation to the gap between knowledge and belief.

The possibility of a radical left politics today stands or falls against the sort of "reconstructed universalism" according to which capitalist hegemony can be contingently occupied but not altered. Priding itself on being able to walk and chew gum at the same time, this sort of populist post-politics is profoundly disabling. For Lott, the left could only move forward through post-structuralist difference or undecidability and not through the politics of class, which, he argued, only seeks to move the Democratic Party a few inches towards the possibility of reform. Meanwhile, "liberal boomer analysis," he said, gives priority to "crude" and "apolitical" redistribution rather than the cultural politics of recognition.[29] Why decry particularism as spurious voluntarism, he asked, when the labour movement has been obliterated? Why stress a political programme that leads back to the Third International as an organizational horizon? Contrary to Lott's patchy polemic, Marxists do not favour labour because they prefer white males to black lesbians. They favour labour because it is the source of capitalist profit. Even in the era of financialization and rent-seeking, the working poor have the greatest stake against global capitalism.

The rejection of class radicalism is typical of today's academic common sense. "Boomer liberalism" is also found among critics of so-called class reductionism, most notably, in the work of labour historian David Roediger. In *Class, Race, and Marxism*, Roediger challenges David Harvey's assertion that

BLM protests are not socialist and argues against the practice of making distinctions between anti-racism and anti-capitalism.[30] His charge is not only that this places an unfair burden on anti-racism efforts but that Harvey's Marxism is formalistic. Harvey's contention, however, is not that contemporary society is not permeated by diverse forms of oppression but that the analysis of the contradictions of capitalism can be understood without recourse to issues of race and gender, which vary in different contexts. As if to underscore the notion that theory is not enough, Roediger claims that Harvey's attitude at a symposium dedicated to discussing his 2014 book, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, was dismissive of his opponents.[31] Roediger's rejection of what was in actuality a polite argument in favour of an uncompromising prioritization of the Marxist analysis of capital is now typical on the cultural left. The issue that arises is not whether Marxists want to sideline considerations of race, for example, but rather how it is that racialism weakens the left. This does not boil down to respect for different viewpoints. Nor does the degree of racism and sexism in capitalist societies make the case against Marxism. Another way to put this is to say that Marxism is less reductionist than anti-oppression discourses. For Marxists, class is central but not exclusive. The reason for this is because the goal of Marxism is to destroy class society. The goal of Marxism is to create a world where Marxism becomes obsolete. Efforts by people like Roediger to leverage radicals like C.L.R. James against radicals like Harvey do not help to explain the centrality of class in socialist politics. Unable to offer more convincing left analysis than one finds in Harvey's books, Roediger resorts to petty accusations of negligence and imprecision. He pretends to solve a theoretical disagreement with a selection of random instances of race and class collaboration on the left, none of which Harvey would dismiss.

Roediger has invented the epithet of "class-splainers" to tar with a single brush disparate scholars like Harvey, Reed, Michaels, Wood, Johnson and Paul Street, who are said to "resent" rather than disagree with the "useful challenges" posed by neoliberal apologists like Ta-Nehisi Coates and progressive advocates of racial justice like Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor. His assertion that the class-splainer preference for universalist strategies is good in theory but not in practice is about as convincing as South Carolina representative James Clyburn's suggestion that his role in defeating the Sanders campaign was necessary to beat Trump. What makes one most aware that Roediger protests too much is the following assertion:

> So many well-positioned writers imagine that an increased emphasis on class can only come by toning down the race and gender talk that it is hard to see how they maintain the stance that they are lonely figures sacrificing to tell the truth.[32]

Roediger attacks what is in actuality a rather small number of intellectuals. And he is right to worry about them because the army of postmodernists that

now populate the disciplines, not to mention the mainstream dispositions of most scholars, are not enough to suppress the veracity of radical universalism. Is it not Roediger who here speaks on behalf of a much larger constituency of liberal progressives? He accuses these authors of a "strategic retreat from race," reversing the title of Wood's 1986 book, *The Retreat from Class*, which is as pertinent today as it was then.[33]

Rather than play race and class ping-pong with race brokers, who have little to say about the neoliberal co-optation of identity politics, it is better to consider the insights of Wood, who could explain class matters without going the way of intersectionality. What Roediger describes as a more inclusive left-ism is what Wood once referred to as the "new 'true' socialism" of the postwar left.[34] Most advancements in so-called post-Marxist trends since the 1960s were clever repudiations of socialism. The rejection of universalism and class analysis that characterizes the emphasis on discourse and difference deprived emancipatory projects of a common foundation. The result has been the acceptance of capitalism. As Žižek put it in his exchange with Butler and Laclau:

> Against the postmodern political theory which tends to increasingly prohibit the very reference to capitalism as 'essentialist,' one should assert that the plural contingency of postmodern political struggles and the totality of Capital are not opposed … today's capitalism, rather, provides *the very background and terrain for the emergence of shifting-dispersed-contingent-ironic-and so on, political subjectivities*.[35]

For Marx and Engels, the emphasis on class analysis was not only due to its significance to capitalist economics but was part of the advent of socialist politics on the world stage. Socialism, Wood says, is less concerned with actually existing human beings – say, the way that class is lived in terms of race and gender – than with the revolutionary becoming of humanity. Communism does not simply represent the interests of the working class but of humanity in general. Reducing the complexity of dialectical materialism to magical thinking, the particularist response is that one never "concretely" encounters humanity. It is nevertheless true that unlike capitalism, communism exists more in the realm of possibility than in reality.

One of the more telling characteristics of the petty-bourgeois left is its rejection of the notion that the working class has a privileged, because structural, position in the struggle for socialism. Worse still, it blames the working class for failing to form a revolutionary movement. It then shifts its support to other groups that are presumed to be more radical – blacks, women, peasants, students, gays, intellectuals or artists. Since workers are the most exploited section of society, they are rejected as those who are least likely to engage in struggle. The consequent autonomization of ideology, politics, culture and economics from any social basis displaces class struggle in favour of crude materialism. As Ralph Miliband once stated, the New Left of the 1980s rejected the primacy

of class politics in favour of the plurality of democratic struggles, becoming in effect a Never Left. The obscurantism and nihilism of postmodern theory abets the shift to the political right, consumed since Reagan and Thatcher by anti-communist hysteria. Even as it resists, this post-left allows the terms of the class war to be set by the neoliberal managerial class. It redefines socialism as a social movement politics that does not require the political involvement of the working masses, the abolition of labour exploitation and the destruction of capitalism.

A high point of discussion inside the class-splainer camp is the exchange between Adolph Reed and Wood that was documented in a 2002 issue of the journal *Political Power and Social Theory*.[36] In "Unravelling the Relation of Race and Class in American Politics," Reed argues that there is no generic capitalism and that everything is specific to particular struggles and concrete material interests.[37] Ideal-type constructs, he argues, whether on the part of class theorists or race theorists, disregard the role of political institutions and hierarchical social dynamics. Economistic interpretations are for him no better than research on racial disparities that reifies an ahistorical category of race and ignores radical politics. According to Reed, race and class are overlapping elements within a unified system of power that is based on capitalist labour relations.[38] Reed's rejection of idealism generally dispenses with dialectics and limits his criticism to variants of structuralism and post-structuralism. His main scholarly contribution is the analysis of the political uses of anti-racism and the development by postwar liberals of concepts like "institutional racism" that have been used to justify the fortunes of the African-American bourgeoisie.

Reed's emphasis on contextual specificity and his rejection of economism is enough to disqualify Roediger's diversionary squabbling. But what about a dye-in-the-wool Marxist like Wood? In her contribution to the discussion, "Class, Race, and Capitalism," Wood agrees with Reed that a reified conception of capitalism would not clarify the relation between race and class, but she counters that a general conception of capitalism, without which there can be no Marxism, emphasizes the difference between class relations and identity categories. As a case in point, in his revisions to the notion of stages of historical development, Marx thought in the 1870s that a country like Russia could possibly bypass the process of capitalist development that took place in Western Europe. A comparative approach to historical specificity should nevertheless not, he argued, avoid the task of arriving at a "general historic-philosophical" or "super-historical" theory that would have a scientific, that is, universal validity.[39] As Lefebvre stated in the opening chapter of his 1940 introduction to dialectical materialism, formal logic is justified by the requirement of universality.[40] The identity of the concept, however, and the metaphysics of identity always retain both too much and too little of concrete material content. In the effort to reverse the schematic character of philosophy, to address actual experience, the real is then delivered to irrational speculation. It is for this reason that during the Cold War era of structuralism and cybernetics, Lefebvre considered

that social relations had not produced the highest, most universal principles of development but rather that social life stagnated and regressed in the cultural mirages of capitalized everyday exchange.[41] It is perhaps in this sense that for Wood, capitalism shapes race relations as much as it does relations of production. Race is neither an autonomous social category nor an epiphenomenon of the capitalist system. In general terms, she argues, "class is constitutive of capitalism in a way that race is not."[42] Capitalism can exist without racial inequality but not without class inequality. On this count, and since racial hierarchy is an "extra-economic" factor in capitalist social relations, the goal of racial equality can serve to stabilize relations of exploitation.

Unlike previous socio-economic systems, capitalist exploitation relies on the extraction of surplus value from a labour force whose freedom is formal rather than actual. In order to survive, one is obliged to sell one's labour at unfair rates. Economic necessity is enough to coerce people to accept relations of domination. Citizenship rights do not define race and gender relations in the same way they do labour relations. If racism and sexism are officially rejected, poverty, exploitation and billionaire wealth are accepted as the normal state of things. All who labour, regardless of their identity, are reduced by capitalist abstraction into interchangeable units. The universal equivalence of particulars may very well valorize certain traits and qualities among workers, but this remains an economic imperative. In historically and geographically specific contexts, capitalism has made use of various forms of racial, gender and colonial subordination. However, no identity group constitutes the whole of the working class. In this regard, the disproportionate number of African Americans who are working-class and the factual realities of white supremacy do more to obscure the workings of capitalist class relations than to elucidate them. To insist, then, that black lives matter is to reinforce class society by attributing inequality and injustice to abstractions like racism.

Because the categories of race, gender and sexuality can be separated from class, they help to reproduce class. This is the irony of the political correctness that replaced the notion of a presumably white working class with the concept of a multiracial working class, which, when all is said and done, is a slogan that may as well have been devised by Heritage Foundation conservatives. The more crucial insight is that the working class is international. The concern of capitalists, Wood argues, is to cheapen the cost of labour and destroy the political power of the working class. Differentiating the segments of the labour force helps to reproduce capitalist class relations. Not unlike Reed and Michaels, Wood argues that "the eradication of racial hierarchies would not fundamentally transform the nature of capitalist class relations."[43] She adds to this the fact that the elimination of racial hierarchies would also "deprive capitalism of one of its most useful mechanisms of reproduction," which is why it is not likely to come about under the current circumstances.[44] Capitalism can gerrymander identity struggles so that one group replaces another in the hierarchy. This much is what radical democracy defines as "democratic" antagonism. Wood

concludes that while anti-racism by itself will not end capitalist exploitation, class organizations should not allow anti-oppression struggles to stand on their own. The two are stronger together than apart. One question, then, in this age of privilege theory, intersectionality and decoloniality, and overall anti-Marxism, is just how is it that they can be productively combined?

In his rejoinder to Wood, and in contrast to Fraser, Reed rejects symbolic demands for recognition, which merely legitimize social hierarchy and limit the scope of radicalism. He faults Wood for emphasizing class as a universal category. If Reed was consistent in his rejection of the charge of class reductionism, however, he would view capitalism as the concrete universal and the proletariat as the species that constitutes the singular universal that can bring an end to class society. Reed rejects Wood's formulation of capitalism as an ideal type. His historicism and institutional analysis, however, would never have led to what we have learned from *Capital*, which is hardly incidental to the trade unionism he champions. Wood does not abandon Marxism and the dialectic for the politics of redistribution. She does not, I would argue, and as Reed suggests, separate race and class so that she can give priority to economism.[45] Wood separates race and class in order to demonstrate how this very operation allows capitalism to function more effectively. However, it is not Wood who performs this operation, it is capitalism. Further, it is Marx who contends that capitalist ideology defends "economic" production – labour, wages, property, surplus – from political challenge. The truth of the matter is that Reed and Michaels are somewhat more economistic than Wood, which is why they have more to say about unionization than communism. A world without racial divisions, Reed argues, is as conceivable as unicorns and dragons. Unfortunately for us, today's woke anti-racists do not believe in unicorns. Moreover, stories about dragons, as Michaels explains, are simply another way that post-history substitutes political beliefs for matters of ontology, with aliens and zombies now also representative of diversity.[46] The dedication of Reed and Michaels to the study of how race consolidates and reproduces capitalist class dynamics is in any case invaluable.

Decadent Marxism

Tensions between social democratic and communist tendencies should be tempered by attention to shared values. Questions of principle, programme, leadership and strategy cause even more difficulties between the socialist left and the anarchist tendencies of anti-state new social movements. Divisions make it all the more difficult for left politics to represent collective interests. Some have simply abandoned this goal of traditional left and even bourgeois politics. The situation we face is to some extent due to the predominance of petty-bourgeois ideology since the advent of postwar consumer culture, which, like the bourgeois *fin de siècle*, has now reached a stage of social, ideological and moral decadence. As Barbara and Karen Fields put it with regard to today's anti-racism, which they define as racecraft,

in the midst of the Cold War and the [anti-communist] purges, people understood the connection between labor and civil rights. … Those connections were so natural that even dummies and political novices understood them. They have been gone for a long time and the result is that when somebody in the press says working class or working-class voters, they invariably mean white people. … That is the big mystification achieved by racecraft. It looks like a relation between people or race relations, but it's really a submerged economic relation: that's the American ideology. We have an economic order that is untouchable because people live in identities without understanding that they are living in the world of work. In the era of a strong labor movement, they were fighting fights to get rights and now that's not even legitimate in the eyes of some.[47]

The ways in which socialism can orient anti-oppression struggles are not fixed and must take into account the failures of a now postmodernized left and neoliberalized academy. However, capitalism displaces the conflict between labour and capital onto cultural difference, even when this displacement is defined in the terms of anti-oppression. It is no wonder then that the transformation of socialism into pragmatic activism is supported by the neoliberal establishment. In 2020, the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation reported $90 million in donations, with hundreds of millions expected in the years to come. By August 2020, after the George Floyd protests, it was estimated that close to $8 billion in corporate donations had been given to support racial justice initiatives. The largest percentage of this amount consisted of pledges to BLM from the anti-socialist Ford Foundation, PNC (a bank holding company and fifth largest bank in the U.S.), Bank of America, Wells Fargo, PayPal and PepsiCo. According to Jan, McGregor and Hoyer, most of the $50 billion in pledged donations were oriented towards the upward mobility of the black middle class in ways that would benefit business interests.[48]

In "Exiting the Vampire Castle," Mark Fisher wrote a call to arms for leftists to re-learn comradeship and build conditions where disagreement is possible without fear of excommunication.[49] The vampire castle, as he called it, functions as a bulwark against efforts by leftists to not have their politics defined by identity categories. Vampiric mesmerism comes into effect as soon as someone mentions class, which is admonished as a means to eliminate difference. What Fisher found to be especially discouraging are the puritanical witch hunts and Twitterstorms that are created when someone is found to be guilty of something as ethereal as privilege. When activists begin to specialize in making people feel bad, they become rigid and moralistic, taking more pleasure in the persecution of their allies than their enemies. Based on ontologized notions of good and evil, the activism of "social justice warriors" is sometimes more concerned with matters of morality than with changing capitalist social relations. Fisher refers to this post-left as petty-bourgeois and narcissistic. One of its fundamental flaws is the parochial quest for power.

The paradox of its mission is that only the destruction of whiteness, masculinity, cisgender normalcy or settler epistemology can reveal their malignance. However, at that point, it is too late for anyone to know anything much about the enemy since realism has been eclipsed by spectacle. Why would leftists do this to one another, he asks.

Since everyone in a petty-bourgeois society wants to be perceived to be cool and rebellious, and not simply the servants of power, even people with wealth and privilege think of themselves as oppositional. The vampire left thereby avails itself of reactionary methods. Fisher adumbrates its modus operandi: (1) individualize everything while paying lip service to solidarity and collectivism; (2) pretend you're serious and deeply sceptical; (3) propagate as much guilt as you can so that people feel bad; (4) essentialize your victim's identity even if you claim to believe in fluidity; (5) stoke reactive outrage to demonstrate to others your liberal politics. Capitalism will reward your treachery, so long as you help to lead workers away from socialist politics. Heretics who resist must be made into examples, he says. Otherwise, they will revive the values of emancipatory universalism.

The vampire castle is not only a problem in activist circles and student unions. An employee of the Coca-Cola company revealed in February 2021 some of the teaching materials used in Robin DiAngelo's training webinars, which instruct white people to be "less oppressive," "less arrogant," "less certain," "less defensive," "more humble," to "listen," "believe," "break with apathy" and "break with white solidarity." The takeaway of company pressure on employees to "be less white" is simply that they should be less, demand less, expect less and break with the tradition of labour solidarity by accepting worsening living and work conditions. Similarly, the CIA now promotes the diversity and intersectionality of its staff, all the while pressuring countries like Venezuela and Nicaragua to conform to American diktat.[50] The Canadian government boasts about its intersectional and feminist foreign policy while it also provides military assistance to fascist groups in Ukraine. Legionnaires are turning in their graves.

As working-class politics have transformed into a global petty-bourgeois phenomenon, the ideology that sustained revolutionary communism for almost one century has become inoperative among those who accept capitalism as a practical reality and an inevitability. Against this, it is imperative that the left build organizational strength. What organizing methods work best today? In a talk he gave in 2020 on "the cultural politics of despair," the journalist Chris Hedges raised two codas: first, we must acknowledge the bleakness of our situation and act; second, we must defuse cynicism and despair.[51] The Democratic Party, he argues, will not save Americans from the rise of the fascist right for one simple reason: the two parties are in agreement on all of the major, substantive issues, including militarism, policing, free trade agreements, deregulation, the control of elections, ecocide and the limitless exploitation of labour. The presumably progressive party of suburban elites is less a party

than it is an arm of the corporate state that views government as an instrument of pillage. We see the same phenomenon in Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Germany, Sweden, Japan, Brazil, India, Turkey, the Philippines and elsewhere.

Jeff Bezos, formerly the richest man in the world, added $72 billion to his wealth in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, his personal worth was $200 billion, and the company he founded, Amazon, was worth $1.58 trillion in market capitalization. Amazon paid no taxes in 2019. Amazon workers, for their part, receive poverty wages for part-time jobs in factories with little to no coronavirus hygiene. There are no bonuses for working in Amazon's hazardous warehouse environments. Breaks are practically non-existent and employees are expected to work at increasingly faster rates. Workers must scan something every five minutes. Failure to do so is registered by computers that then oblige the worker to see a manager. Bezos employees are treated worse than medieval serfs.[52] Overall billionaire wealth increased by 70 per cent in the first two years of the pandemic, as millions faced unemployment and evictions, and as some 20 million souls succumbed to the virus. The wealth of Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla and Space X, increased by 751 per cent during this time period, from $24 to over $209 billion. Musk paid no taxes in recent years. When reform is no longer possible, the result is either revolution or tyranny.

In *Capital*, Marx defined capital as a form of dead labour, which, like a vampire, "lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks."[53] It will not let go, he warned, so long as there is one drop of blood remaining to be exploited. Whereas Marx had recourse to Gothic fiction as a set of narrative conventions with which to describe the horrors of capitalism, today's Marxist narratives are not simply neo-Gothic but neo-decadent. Having become the good conscience of the establishment, the postmodern left appeals to the expertise of the managerial class and disavows its responsibility for the monstrosities that are before us. According to Hedges, people are being sacrificed for the sake of keeping up the appearance that the Democratic Party can be reformed and that politicians like Biden – or Trudeau, Starmer or Macron – are not as bad as Trump, Le Pen or Bolsonaro.

Today's new era of decadence has no coherent ideology and turns morality on its head. The far right is not only tearing down the wall between church and state, it is decimating the separation of powers and remaking people into the slaves of plutocratic overlords. It can do so because neoliberalism and postmodernism have eroded the universalist premises of democratic institutions. Living labour has been transformed into the dead labour of what are now post-Fordist societies that trade on identities as commerce once did with cotton and sugar. Insofar as neoliberals continue to reject the negativity of revolutionary politics and instead prop up the fantasies of endless accumulation, the fiends of global capitalism will continue to propagate. Even if our struggle seems interminable, it is better to face the horror with a sense of purpose than to allow

the resources of the radical left to decay. One should not allow neoliberals and fascists to make our decisions for us. To paraphrase Frederick Douglass, socialist politics cannot be purchased with the ignorance of others. Social relations are not ancillary to capitalism. As the countercultural logic of the postwar left wanes or is appropriated by the right, it is no longer the decadence of the bourgeoisie that we must escape, but the decadence of a global petty-bourgeois hegemony whose rejection of class struggle is bereft of emancipatory potential. The gains in civil rights that occurred in the context of liberal democracy also belong to the universalist left. Our goal is to complete the revolution in social relations so that equality is not defined in terms of anti-classist respect for the feelings of working people but rather as the abolition of class society.

For Marxists, the production process is not simply a part of the totality but defines the totality as the concrete universal, subsuming specific forms of oppression. For all that, capitalism is never absolute. Indeed, it cannot be. While Marxist class analysis is the foundation of most socialism, not all of the contributors to this book are unambiguously Marxist. Marx himself rejected the term! Whatever their intellectual and political differences, the contributors understand the significance of identity as a feature of civil society discourse, in the ideology of the professional middle class and as a prop for dubious notions of organic community. A last word on the title of this book acknowledges the double binds and forms of extortion which demand that one choose class over identity or vice versa. This book elaborates the various ways in which, and reasons why, one should reject such a false choice. Regardless, the kinds of reified communication that a world shaped by social media demands and feeds upon privilege either-or (class or identity) as well as do-both (class and identity) types of simplification. Because identity-based politics are more conducive to capitalism than socialism, leftists are as much at a loss vis-à-vis identity as they are against the accusation that they are consumers or producers of commodities and capitalized services. The title *Identity Trumps Socialism* acts as a subversive affirmation of what the political right today indulges far more than the left: the enjoyment of one's symptom. The minimum of passivity that gives people license to assert their particularity is a given but not a programme for universal emancipation. To rule it out entirely is to deny the humanity we share. And to do that is to deny what makes politics and culture matters of struggle.

Notes

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Chapter 1

Eight Theses on the Universal

Alain Badiou

1. Thought Is the Proper Medium of the Universal

By "thought," I mean the subject insofar as it is constituted through a process that is transversal relative to the totality of available forms of knowledge. Or, as Lacan puts it, the subject insofar as it constitutes a hole in knowledge.

Remarks:

1a. That thought is the proper medium of the universal means that nothing exists as universal if it takes the form of the object or of objective legality. The universal is essentially "anobjective." It can be experienced only through the production (or reproduction) of a trajectory of thought, and this trajectory constitutes (or reconstitutes) a subjective disposition.

Here are two typical examples: The universality of a mathematical proposition can only be experienced by inventing or effectively reproducing its proof. The situated universality of a political statement can only be experienced through the militant practice that effectuates it.

1b. That thought, as subject-thought, is constituted through a process means that the universal is in no way the result of a transcendental constitution, which would presuppose a constituting subject. On the contrary, the opening up of the possibility of a universal is the precondition for there being a subject-thought at the local level. The subject is invariably summoned as thought at a specific point of that procedure through which the universal is constituted. The universal is at once what determines its own points as subject-thoughts and the virtual recollection of those points. The central dialectic at work in the universal is thus that of the local, as subject, and the global, as infinite procedure. This dialectic is constitutive of thought as such.

Consequently, the universality of the proposition "the series of prime numbers goes on forever" resides not only in the way it summons us to repeat (or rediscover) in thought a unique proof for it, but also in the global procedure that, from the Greeks to the present day, mobilizes number theory along with its underlying axiomatic. To put it another way, the universality of the practical statement "a country's illegal immigrant workers must have their rights recognized by that country" resides in all sorts of militant effectuations through

which political subjectivity is actively constituted, but also in the global process of a politics, in terms of what it prescribes concerning the State and its decisions, rules and laws.

1c. That the process of the universal or truth – they are one and the same – is transversal relative to all available instances of knowledge means that the universal is always an incalculable emergence rather than a describable structure. By the same token, I will say that a truth is intransitive to knowledge and even that it is essentially unknown. This is another way of explaining what I mean when I characterize truth as unconscious.

I will call *particular* whatever can be discerned in knowledge by means of descriptive predicates. But I will call *singular* that which, although identifiable as a procedure at work in a situation, is nevertheless subtracted from every predicative description. Thus the cultural traits of this or that population are particular. But that which, traversing these traits and deactivating every registered description, universally summons a thought-subject is singular. Whence thesis 2:

2. Every Universal Is Singular, or Is a Singularity

Remarks:

There is no possible universal sublation of particularity as such. It is commonly claimed nowadays that the only genuinely universal prescription consists in respecting particularities. In my opinion, this thesis is inconsistent. This is demonstrated by the fact that any attempt to put it into practice invariably runs up against particularities which the advocates of formal universality find intolerable. The truth is that in order to maintain the respect for particularity as a universal value, it is necessary to have first distinguished between good particularities and bad ones. In other words, it is necessary to have established a hierarchy in the list of descriptive predicates. It will be claimed, for example, that a cultural or religious particularity is bad if it does not include within itself respect for other particularities. But this is obviously to stipulate that the formal universal already be included in the particularity. Ultimately, the universality of respect for particularities is only the universality of universality. This definition is fatally tautological. It is the necessary counterpart of a protocol – usually a violent one – that wants to eradicate genuinely particular particularities (i.e. immanent particularities) because it freezes the predicates of the latter into self-sufficient identitarian combinations.

Thus, it is necessary to maintain that every universal presents itself not as a regularization of the particular or of differences, but rather, although it obviously proceeds from those predicates, as a singularity that is subtracted from identitarian predicates. The subtraction of particularities must be opposed to their supposition. However, if a singularity can lay claim to the universal by subtraction, it is because the play of identitarian predicates, or the logic of

those forms of knowledge that describe particularity, precludes any possibility of foreseeing or conceiving it.

Consequently, a universal singularity is not of the order of being but of the order of a sudden emergence. Whence thesis 3:

3. Every Universal Originates in an Event, and the Event Is Intransitive to the Particularity of the Situation

The correlation between universal and event is fundamental. Basically, it is clear that the question of political universalism depends entirely on the regime of fidelity or infidelity maintained, not to this or that doctrine, but to the French Revolution, or the Paris Commune, or October 1917, or the struggles for national liberation, or May 1968. *A contrario*, the negation of political universalism, the negation of the very theme of emancipation, requires more than mere reactionary propaganda. It requires what could be called an "evental revisionism." Thus, for example, François Furet's attempt to show that the French Revolution was entirely futile, or the innumerable attempts to reduce May 1968 to a student stampede towards sexual liberation. Evental revisionism targets the connection between universality and singularity. Nothing took place but the place; predicative descriptions are sufficient and whatever is universally valuable is strictly objective. *In fine*, this amounts to the claim that whatever is universally valuable resides in the mechanisms and power of capital, along with its statist guarantees.

In that case, the fate of the human animal is sealed by the relation between predicative particularities and legislative generalities.

For an event to initiate a singular procedure of universalization, and to constitute its subject through that procedure, is contrary to the positivist coupling of particularity and generality.

In this regard, the case of sexual difference is significant. The predicative particularities identifying the positions "man" and "woman" within a given society can be conceived in an abstract fashion. A general principle can be posited whereby the rights, status, characteristics and hierarchies associated with these positions should be subject to egalitarian regulation by the law. This is all well and good, but it does not provide a ground for any sort of universality as far as the predicative distribution of gender roles is concerned. For this to be the case, there has to be the suddenly emerging singularity of an encounter or declaration – one that crystallizes a subject whose manifestation is precisely its subtractive experience of sexual difference. Such a subject comes about through an amorous encounter in which there occurs a disjunctive synthesis of sexuated positions. The amorous scene is thus the only genuine scene in which a universal singularity pertaining to the Two of the sexes – and ultimately pertaining to difference as such – is proclaimed. This is where an undivided subjective experience of absolute difference takes place. We all know that, where

the interplay between the sexes is concerned, people are invariably fascinated by love stories. This fascination is directly proportional to the various specific obstacles through which social formations try to thwart love. In this instance, it is perfectly clear that the attraction exerted by the universal lies precisely in the fact that it subtracts itself (or tries to subtract itself) as an asocial singularity from the predicates of knowledge.

Thus it is necessary to maintain that the universal emerges as a singularity and that all we have to begin with is a precarious supplement whose sole strength resides in there being no available predicate capable of subjecting it to knowledge.

The question then is: what material instance, what unclassifiable effect of presence, provides the basis for the subjectivating procedure whose global motif is a universal?

4. A Universal Initially Presents Itself as a Decision About an Undecidable

This point requires careful elucidation.

I call "encyclopedia" the general system of predicative knowledge internal to a situation: i.e. what everyone knows about politics, sexual difference, culture, art, technology, etc. There are certain things, statements, configurations or discursive fragments whose valence is not decidable in terms of the encyclopedia. Their valence is uncertain, floating, anonymous: they exist at the margins of the encyclopedia. They comprise everything whose status remains constitutively uncertain; everything that elicits a "maybe, maybe not"; everything whose status can be endlessly debated according to the rule of non-decision, which is itself encyclopedic; everything about which knowledge enjoins us not to decide. Nowadays, for instance, knowledge enjoins us to not decide about God: it is quite acceptable to maintain that perhaps "something" exists, or perhaps it does not. We live in a society in which no valence can be ascribed to God's existence; a society that lays claim to a vague spirituality. Similarly, knowledge enjoins us to not decide about the possible existence of "another politics." It is talked about, but nothing comes of it. Another example: are those workers who do not have proper papers but who are working here, in France (or the United Kingdom, or the United States) part of this country? Do they belong here? Yes, probably, since they live and work here. No, since they do not have the necessary papers to show that they are French (or British, or American), or living here legally. The expression "illegal immigrant" designates the uncertainty of valence or the non-valence of valence. It designates people who are living here but do not really belong here, and hence people who can be thrown out of the country or who can be exposed to the non-valence of the valence of their presence here as workers.

Basically, an event is what decides about a zone of encyclopedic indiscernibility. More precisely, there is an implicative form of the type: $E \dashrightarrow d(\varepsilon)$,

which reads as: every real subjectivation brought about by an event, which disappears in its appearance, implies that ε, which is undecidable within the situation, has been decided. This was the case, for example, when illegal immigrant workers occupied the church of Saint Bernard in Paris: they publicly declared the existence and valence of what had been without valence, thereby deciding that those who are here belong here and enjoining people to drop the expression "illegal immigrant."

I will call ε the evental statement. By virtue of the logical rule of detachment, we see that the abolition of the event, whose entire being consists in disappearing, leaves behind the evental statement ε, which is implied by the event, as something that is at once: (a) a real of the situation (since it was already there) and (b) something whose valence undergoes radical change, since it was undecidable but has been decided. It is something that had no valence but now does.

Consequently, I will say that the inaugural materiality for any universal singularity is the evental statement. It fixes the present for the subject-thought out of which the universal is woven.

Such is the case in an amorous encounter, whose subjective present is fixed in one form or another by the statement "I love you," even as the circumstance of the encounter is erased. An undecidable disjunctive synthesis is thus decided and the inauguration of its subject is tied to the consequences of the evental statement.

Note that every evental statement has a declarative structure, regardless of whether the statement takes the form of a proposition, a work, a configuration or an axiom. The evental statement is implied by the event's appearing-disappearing and declares that an undecidable has been decided or that what was without valence now has a valence. The constituted subject follows in the wake of this declaration, which opens up a possible space for the universal.

Accordingly, all that is required in order for the universal to unfold is to draw all the consequences, within the situation, of the evental statement.

5. The Universal Has an Implicative Structure

One common objection to the idea of universality is that everything that exists or is represented relates back to particular conditions and interpretations governed by disparate forces or interests. Thus, for instance, some maintain that it is impossible to attain a universal grasp of difference because of the abyss between the way the latter is grasped, depending on whether one occupies the position of "man" or the position of "woman." Others insist that there is no common denominator underlying what various cultural groups choose to call "artistic activity" – or that not even a mathematical proposition is intrinsically universal, since its validity is entirely dependent upon the axioms that support it.

What this hermeneutic perspectivalism overlooks is that every universal singularity is presented as the network of consequences entailed by an evental decision. What is universal always takes the form $\varepsilon \dashrightarrow \pi$, where ε is the evental statement and π is a consequence, or a fidelity. It goes without saying that if someone refuses the decision about ε, or insists, in reactive fashion, on reducing ε to its undecidable status, or maintains that what has taken on a valence should remain without valence, then the implicative form in no way enjoins them to accept the validity of the consequence. Nevertheless, even they will have to admit the universality of the form of implication as such. In other words, even they will have to admit that if the event is subjectivated on the basis of its statement, whatever consequences come to be invented as a result will be necessary.

On this point, Plato's apologia in the *Meno* remains irrefutable. If a slave knows nothing about the evental foundation of geometry, he remains incapable of validating the construction of the square of the surface that doubles a given square. But if one provides him with the basic data and he agrees to subjectivate it he will also subjectivate the construction under consideration. The implication that inscribes this construction in the present, and that was inaugurated by the Greek emergence of geometry, is therefore universally valid.

Someone might object: "You're making things too easy for yourself by invoking the authority of mathematical inference." But they would be wrong. Every universalizing procedure is implicative. It verifies the consequences that follow from the evental statement to which the vanished event is indexed. If the protocol of subjectivation is initiated under the aegis of this statement, it becomes capable of inventing and establishing a set of universally recognizable consequences.

The reactive denial that the event took place, as expressed in the maxim "nothing took place but the place," is probably the only way of undermining a universal singularity. It refuses to recognize its consequences and cancels whatever present is proper to the evental procedure.

Yet even this refusal cannot cancel the universality of implication as such. Take the French Revolution: if, from 1792 onward, this constitutes a radical event, as indicated by the immanent declaration which states that revolution as such is now a political category, then it is true that the citizen can only be constituted in accordance with the dialectic of Virtue and Terror. This implication is both undeniable and universally transmissible, as for instance in the writings of Saint-Just. But obviously, if one thinks that there was no Revolution, then Virtue as a subjective disposition does not exist either and all that remains is the Terror as an outburst of insanity inviting moral condemnation. Yet even if politics disappears, the universality of the implication that puts it into effect remains.

There is no need to invoke a conflict of interpretations here. This is the nub of my sixth thesis:

6. The Universal Is Univocal

Insofar as subjectivation occurs through the consequences of the event, there is a univocal logic proper to the fidelity that constitutes a universal singularity.

Here we have to go back to the evental statement. Recall that the statement circulates within a situation as something undecidable. There is agreement about both its existence and its undecidability. From an ontological point of view, it is one of the multiplicities of which the situation is composed. From a logical point of view, its valence is intermediary or undecided. What occurs through the event does not have to do with the being that is at stake in the event nor with the meaning of the evental statement. It pertains exclusively to the fact that, whereas previously the evental statement had been undecidable, henceforth it will have been decided, or decided as true. Whereas previously the evental statement had been devoid of significance, it now possesses an exceptional valence. This is what happened with the illegal immigrant workers who demonstrated their existence at the Saint Bernard church.

In other words, what affects the statement, insofar as the latter is bound up in an implicative manner with the evental disappearance, is of the order of the act rather than of being or meaning. It is precisely the register of the act that is univocal. It just so happens that the statement was decided, and this decision remains subtracted from all interpretation. It relates to the yes or the no, not to the equivocal plurality of meaning.

What we are talking about here is a logical act or even, as one might say, echoing Arthur Rimbaud, a logical revolt. The event decides in favour of the truth or eminent valence of that which the previous logic had confined to the realm of the undecidable or of non-valence. But for this to be possible, the univocal act that modifies the valence of one of the components of the situation must gradually begin to transform the logic of the situation in its entirety. Although the being-multiple of the situation remains unaltered, the logic of its appearance – the system that evaluates and connects all the multiplicities belonging to the situation – can undergo a profound transformation. It is the trajectory of this mutation that composes the encyclopedia's universalizing diagonal.

The thesis of the equivocity of the universal refers the universal singularity back to those generalities whose law holds sway over particularities. It fails to grasp the logical act that universally and univocally inaugurates a transformation in the entire structure of appearance.

Every universal singularity can thus be defined as follows: it is the act to which a subject-thought becomes bound in such a way as to render that act capable of initiating a procedure which effects a radical modification of the logic of the situation, and hence of what appears insofar as it appears. Obviously, this modification can never be fully accomplished. The initial univocal act, which is always localized, inaugurates a fidelity: i.e. an invention of consequences that will prove to be as infinite as the situation itself. Whence thesis 7:

7. Every Universal Singularity Remains Incompletable or Open

All this thesis requires by way of commentary concerns the manner in which the subject, the localization of a universal singularity, is bound up with the infinite, the ontological law of being multiple. On this particular issue, it is possible to show that there is an essential complicity between the philosophies of finitude, on the one hand, and relativism, or the negation of the universal and the discrediting of the notion of truth, on the other. Let me put it in terms of a single maxim: The latent violence, the presumptuous arrogance inherent in the currently prevalent conception of human rights, derives from the fact that these are actually the rights of finitude and ultimately – as the insistent theme of democratic euthanasia indicates – the rights of death. By way of contrast, the evental conception of universal singularities, as Jean-Francois Lyotard remarked in *The Differend*, requires that human rights be thought of as the rights of the infinite.

8. Universality Is Nothing Other than the Faithful Construction of an Infinite Generic Multiple

What do I mean by generic multiplicity? Quite simply, a subset of the situation that is not determined by any of the predicates of encyclopedic knowledge; that is to say, a multiple such that to belong to it, to be one of its elements, cannot be the result of having an identity, of possessing any particular property. If the universal is for everyone, this is in the precise sense that to be inscribed within it is not a matter of possessing any particular determination. This is the case with political gatherings, whose universality follows from their indifference to social, national, sexual or generational origin; with the amorous couple, which is universal because it produces an undivided truth about the difference between sexuated positions; with scientific theory, which is universal to the extent that it removes every trace of its provenance in its elaboration; or with artistic configurations whose subjects are works, and in which, as Stéphane Mallarmé remarked, the particularity of the author has been abolished, so much so that in exemplary inaugural configurations, such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the proper name that underlies them – Homer – ultimately refers back to nothing but the void of any and every subject.

The universal therefore arises according to the chance of an aleatory supplement. It leaves behind it a simple detached statement as a trace of the disappearance of the event that founds it. It initiates its procedure in the univocal act through which the valence of what was devoid of valence comes to be decided. It binds to this act a subject-thought that will invent consequences for it. It faithfully constructs an infinite generic multiplicity, which, by its very opening, is what Thucydides declared his written history of the Peloponnesian war – unlike the latter's historical particularity – would be: "something for all time."

Chapter 2

Politics, Identification and Subjectivization

Jacques Rancière

In a sense, the whole matter of my paper is involved in a preliminary question: In what language will it be uttered? Neither my language nor your language, but rather a dialect between French and English, a special one, a dialect that carries no identification with any group. No tribal dialect, no universal language, only an *in-between* dialect, constructed for the aims of this discussion and guided by the idea that the activity of thinking is primarily an activity of translation and that anyone is capable of making a translation. Underpinning this capacity for translation is the efficacy of equality, that is to say, the efficacy of humanity.

I will move directly to the question that frames our discussion. I quote from the third point of the list of issues we were asked to address: "What is the political?"

Briefly and roughly speaking, I would answer: the political is the encounter between two heterogeneous processes. The first process is that of governing, and it entails creating community consent, which relies on the distribution of shares and the hierarchy of places and functions. I shall call this process *policy*.

The second process is that of equality. It consists of a set of practices guided by the supposition that everyone is equal and by the attempt to verify this supposition. The proper name for this set of practices remains *emancipation*. In spite of Jean-François Lyotard's statements, I do not assume a necessary link between the idea of emancipation and the narrative of a universal wrong and a universal victim. It is true that the handling of a wrong remains the universal form for the meeting between the two processes of policy and equality. But we can question that encounter. We can argue, for example, that any policy denies equality and that there is no commensurability between the two processes. In my book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, I advocated the thesis of the French theorist of emancipation, Joseph Jacotot, according to whom emancipation can only be the intellectual emancipation of individuals. This means that there is no political stage, only the law of policy and the law of equality. In order for a political stage to occur, we must change that assumption. Thus, instead of arguing that policy *denies* equality, I shall say that policy *wrongs* equality, and I shall take the

political to be the place where the verification of equality is obliged to turn into the handling of a wrong.

So we have three terms: policy, emancipation and the political. If we want to emphasize their interplay, we can give to the process of emancipation the name of *politics*. I shall thus distinguish policy, politics and the political – the political being the field for the encounter between emancipation and policy in the handling of a wrong.

A momentous consequence follows from this: politics is not the enactment of the principle, the law or the self of a community. Put in other words, politics has no arche, it is anarchical. The very name *democracy* supports this point. As Plato noted, democracy has no arche, no measure. The singularity of the act of the demos – a *cratein* instead of an *archein* – is dependent on an originary disorder or miscount: the demos, or people, is at the same time the name of a community and the name for its division, for the handling of a wrong. And beyond any particular wrong, the "politics of the people" wrongs policy, because the people is always more or less than itself. It is the power of the *one more*, the power of *anyone*, which confuses the right ordering of policy.

Now for me the current dead end of political reflection and action is due to the identification of politics with the *self* of a community. This may occur in the big community or in smaller ones; it may be the identification of the process of governing with the principle of the community under the heading of universality, the reign of the law, liberal democracy, and so on. Or it may be, on the contrary, the claim for identity on the part of so-called minorities against the hegemonic law of the ruling culture and identity. The big community and the smaller ones may charge one another with "tribalism" or "barbarianism," and both will be right in their charge and wrong in their claim. I don't assume that they are practically equivalent, that the outcomes are the same; I only assume that they stem from the same questionable identification. For the *primum movens* of policy is to purport to act as the self of the community, to turn the techniques of governing into natural laws of the social order. But if *politics* is something different from *policy,* it cannot draw on such an identification. One can object that the idea of emancipation is historically related to the idea of the self in the formula of "self-emancipation of the workers." But the first motto of any self-emancipation movement is always the struggle against "selfishness." This is not only a moral statement (i.e. the dedication of the individual to the militant community); it is also a logical one: the politics of emancipation is the politics of the self as an other, or, in Greek terms, a *heteron*. The logic of emancipation is a heterology.

Let me put this differently: the process of emancipation is the verification of the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being. It is always enacted in the name of a category denied either the principle or the consequences of that equality: workers, women, people of colour, or others. But the enactment of equality is not, for all that, the enactment of the self, of the attributes or properties of the community in question. The name of an injured

community that invokes its rights is always the name of the anonym, the name of anyone.

Are there universal values transcending particular identifications? If we are to break out of the desperate debate between universality and identity, we must answer that the only universal in politics is equality. But we must add that equality is not a value given in the essence of Humanity or Reason. Equality exists, and makes universal values exist, to the extent that it is enacted. Equality is not a value to which one appeals; it is a universal that must be supposed, verified and demonstrated in each case. Universality is not the *eidos* of the community to which particular situations are opposed; it is, first of all, a logical operator. The mode of effectivity of Truth or Universality in politics is the discursive and practical construction of a polemical verification, a case, a demonstration. The place of truth is not the place of a ground or an ideal; it is always a *topos*, the place of a subjectivization in an argumentative plot. Its language is always idiomatic, which, on the contrary, does not mean tribal. When oppressed groups set out to cope with a wrong, they may appeal to Man or Human Being. But the universality is not in those concepts; it is in the way of demonstrating the consequences that follow from this – from the worker being a citizen, the black being a human being, and so on. The logical schema of social protest, generally speaking, may be summed up as follows: Do we or do we not belong to the category of men or citizens or human beings, and what follows from this? The universality is not enclosed in *citizen* or *human being*; it is involved in the "what follows," in its discursive and practical enactment.

Such a universality may develop through the mediation of particular categories. For instance, in nineteenth-century France, workers might construct the logic of a strike in the form of a syllogism: Do French workers belong to the category of Frenchmen? If not, the Declaration of Rights has to be changed. If so, they must be treated as equals, and they act to demonstrate it. The question might become more paradoxical. For instance, does a French woman belong to the category of Frenchmen? The question may sound nonsensical or scandalous. However, such nonsensical sentences may prove more productive in the process of equality than the mere assumption that a woman is a woman or a worker a worker. For they allow these subjects not only to specify a logical gap that in turn discloses a social bias but also to articulate this gap as a relation, the nonplace as a place, the place for a polemical construction. The construction of such cases of equality is neither the act of an identity nor the demonstration of the values specific to a group. It is a process of subjectivization.

What is a process of subjectivization? It is the formation of a one that is not a self but is the relation of a self to an other. Let me demonstrate this with respect to an outmoded name, "the proletarian." One of its first uses occurs in nineteenth-century France when the revolutionary leader Auguste Blanqui was prosecuted for rebellion. The prosecutor asked him: "What is your profession?" He answered: "Proletarian." Then the prosecutor: "It is not a profession." And the response of Blanqui was: "It is the profession of the majority

of our people who are deprived of political rights." From the vantage point of policy, the prosecutor was right: it is no profession. And obviously Blanqui was not what is usually called a worker. But, from the vantage point of politics, Blanqui was right: *proletarian* was not the name of any social group that could be sociologically identified. It is the name of an outcast. An outcast is not a poor wretch of humanity; outcast is the name of those who are denied an identity in a given order of policy. In Latin, *proletarii* meant "prolific people" – people who make children, who merely live and reproduce without a name, without being counted as part of the symbolic order of the city. *Proletarian* was thus well suited for the workers as the name of anyone, the name of the outcast: those who do not belong to the order of castes; indeed, those who are pleased to undo this order (the class that dissolves classes, as Marx said). In this way, a process of subjectivization is a process of disidentification or declassification.

Let me rephrase this: a subject is an outsider or, more, an *in-between*. *Proletarian* was the name given to people who are together inasmuch as they are between: between several names, statuses and identities; between human- ity and inhumanity, citizenship and its denial; between the status of a man of tools and the status of a speaking and thinking being. Political subjectivization is the enactment of equality – or the handling of a wrong – by people who are together to the extent that they are between. It is a crossing of identities, relying on a crossing of names: names that link the name of a group or class to the name of no group or no class, a being to a nonbeing or a not-yet-being.

This network has a noticeable property: it always involves an impossible identification, an identification that cannot be embodied by he or she who utters it. "We are the wretched of the earth" is the kind of sentence that no wretched of the world would ever utter. Or, to take a personal example, for my generation, politics in France relied on an impossible identification – an identification with the bodies of the Algerians beaten to death and thrown into the Seine by the French police, in the name of the French people, in October 1961. We could not identify with those Algerians, but we *could* question our identification with the "French people" in whose name they had been mur- dered. That is to say, we could act as political subjects in the interval or the gap between two identities, neither of which we could assume. That process of subjectivization had no proper name, but it found its name, its cross name, in the 1968 assumption "We are all German Jews" – a "wrong" identification, an identification in terms of the denial of an absolutely essential wrong. If the movement began with that sentence, its decline might be emblematized by an antithetical statement, which served as the title of an essay published some years after by a former leader of the movement: "We were not all born proletarians." Certainly we were not; we are not. But what follows from this is an inability to draw consequences from a "being" that is a "nonbeing," from an identification with an anybody that has no body. In the demonstration of equality, the syl- logistic logic of the *either/or* (are we or are we not citizens or human beings?) is intertwined with the paratactic logic of a "we are and are not."

In sum, the logic of political subjectivization, of emancipation, is a heterology, a logic of the other, for three main reasons. First, it is never the simple assertion of an identity; it is always, at the same time, the denial of an identity given by an other, given by the ruling order of policy. Policy is about "right" names, names that pin people down to their place and work. Politics is about "wrong" names – misnomers that articulate a gap and connect with a wrong. Second, it is a demonstration, and a demonstration always supposes an other, even if that other refuses evidence or argument. It is the staging of a common place that is not a place for a dialogue or a search for a consensus in Habermasian fashion. There is no consensus, no undamaged communication, no settlement of a wrong. But there is a polemical commonplace for the handling of a wrong and the demonstration of equality. Third, the logic of subjectivization always entails an impossible identification.

Only by dismissing the complexity of this logic can one oppose the past grand narratives and the universal victims to present-day little narratives. The so-called grand narrative of the people and the proletariat was in fact made of a multiplicity of language games and demonstrations. And the concept of narrative itself, like the concept of culture, is highly questionable. It entails the identification of an argumentative plot with a voice, and of a voice with a body. But the life of political subjectivization is made out of the difference between the voice and the body, the interval between identities. So narrative and culture entail the reversion of subjectivization onto identification. The process of equality is a process of difference. But difference does not mean the assumption of a different identity or the plain confrontation of two identities. The place for the working out of difference is not the "self" or the culture of a group. It is the *topos* of an argument. And the place for such an argument is an interval. The place of a political subject is an interval or a gap: being *together* to the extent that we are in *between* – between names, identities, cultures, and so on.

This is, to be sure, an uncomfortable position, and the discomfort gives way to the discourse of metapolitics. Metapolitics is the interpretation of politics from the vantage point of policy. Its tendency is to interpret heterology as illusion and intervals and gaps as signs of untruth. The paradigm of the metapolitical interpretation approach is the Marxist interpretation of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* of 1789. It assumed that the very difference between man and citizen was the hallmark of delusion: lurking behind the celestial identity of the citizen was the mundane identity of a man who was in fact an owner. Today the current style of metapolitics teaches us, on the contrary, that man and citizen are the same liberal individual enjoying the universal values of human rights embodied in the constitutions of our democracies. But the style of politics as emancipation is a third one: it assumes that the universality of the declaration of 1789 is the universality of the argument to which it gave way and that is due precisely to the very interval between the two terms, which opened the possibility of appealing from one to the other, of making

them the terms of innumerable demonstrations of rights, including the rights of those who are counted neither as men nor as citizens.

My conclusion is twofold: both optimistic and pessimistic. First, we are not trapped within the opposition of universalism and identity. The distinction is rather between a logic of subjectivization and a logic of identification – between two ideas of multiplicity, not between universalism and particularism. The discourse of universalism may be as "tribal" as the discourse of identity. We could experience this during the Gulf War, when many heralds of universal culture turned out to be heralds of clean universal weapons and undetailed death. The true opposition runs between the tribal and the idiomatic. Idiomatic politics constructs locally the place of the universal, the place for the demonstration of equality. It dismisses the desperate dilemma: either the big community or the smaller ones – either community or nothing at all. It leads to a new politics of the in-between.

My second conclusion is less optimistic. In France, for instance, the new racism and xenophobia should not be viewed as consequences of social problems that we cannot confront, i.e. as the effects of objective problems raised by the immigrant population. Rather, they are the effects of a void, of a previous collapse – the collapse of emancipatory politics as a politics of the other. Twenty years ago, we were "all German Jews"; that is to say, we were in the heterological logic of "wrong" names, in the political culture of conflict. Now we have only "right" names. We are Europeans and xenophobes. It is the demotion of the political form, of the political polymorphism of the other, that creates a new kind of *other*, one that is infrapolitical. Objectively, we have no more immigrant people than we had twenty years ago. Subjectively, we have many more. The difference is this: twenty years ago the "immigrant" had an *other* name; they were workers or proletarians. In the meantime, this name has been lost as a *political* name. They retained their "own" name, and an other that has no *other* name becomes the object of fear and rejection.

The "new" racism is the hatred of the other that comes forth when the political procedures of social polemics collapse. The political culture of conflict may have had disappointing outlets. But it was also a way of coming to terms with something that lies before and beneath politics: the question of the other as a figure of identification for the object of fear. Cornel West has told us that identity is about desire and death. I would say that identity is first about fear: the fear of the other, the fear of nothing, which finds on the body of the other its object. And the polemical culture of emancipation, the heterological enactment of the other, was also a way of civilizing that fear. The new outcomes of racism and xenophobia thus reveal the very collapse of politics, the reversion of the political handling of a wrong to a primal hate. If my analysis is correct, the question is not only "How are we to face a political problem?" but "How are we to reinvent politics?"

The Eternal Return of the Same Class Struggle

Slavoj Žižek

The tension between global space and nation states lies in the defence of a specific (ethnic, religious, cultural) way of life, which is perceived as threatened by globalization, and the whole question of protecting one's way of life is problematic in all its versions, including the "progressive" ones. Recall the polemics in the United States concerning the statues of Robert E. Lee – was Lee a Southern gentleman who just fought for a certain way of life? A popular image of the Southern gentleman exists even in "progressive" literature, from Horace in Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, a benevolent patriarch with a weak heart who is horrified by his wife's plans for the brutal capitalist exploitation of their property, to Atticus Finch in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who, as is revealed in the sequel, also had a dark racist underside. So all of a sudden Confederacy was not about slavery but about protecting a local "way of life" from the brutal capitalist onslaught. These iconic left-liberal figures of conservative bucolic patriarchal anti-capitalism sincerely help Southern blacks when they are oppressed and falsely accused; however, their sympathy stops when blacks begin not only to fight but also to question the actual freedom provided by the Northern liberal establishment.

But Robert E. Lee was not even such a gentleman. There are no reports that he had any inner qualms about slavery. Furthermore, even among slave owners there was a division between those who, when they were reselling their slaves, took care that families with children remained together, and those who did not bother about this and separated them – Lee belonged to this second, much harsher group. He may well have been a gentleman with nice manners and personal honesty, but he nonetheless dealt brutally with slaves – the difficult thing to accept is that the two characteristics go together.

A true white gentleman was executed on the order of Robert E. Lee: John Brown, one of the key political figures in the history of the U.S., the fervently Christian abolitionist who came closest to introducing radical emancipatory-egalitarian logic into the U.S. political landscape. As Margaret Washington, a noted historian of the U.S., put it, he made it very clear that he saw no difference between whites and blacks, and "he didn't make this clear by saying it, he made it clear by what he did."[1] If the term "gentleman" can be given an

emancipatory dimension, this is how a true gentleman talks and acts. His consequential egalitarianism led him to get engaged in the armed struggle against slavery: in 1859, he tried to arm slaves and thus create a violent rebellion against the South; the revolt was suppressed and Brown was taken to jail by a federal force led by none other than Robert E. Lee. After being found guilty of murder, treason and inciting a slave insurrection, Brown was hanged on December 2. Even today, long after slavery was abolished, Brown is a divisive figure in the American collective memory: his only statue, which stands on an obscure location in the Quindaro neighbourhood of Kansas City (the original town of Quindaro was a major stop on the Underground Railroad), was often vandalized.

So it goes without saying that all great American founding myths should be re-analysed: there is another, dark side to the War of Independence, the Alamo, and so on. The "heroes of Alamo" were also defending slave ownership. This other side is portrayed in an interesting film of 1999, Lance Hool's *One Man's Hero*, which tells the story of Jon Riley (played by Tom Berenger) and the Saint Patrick's Battalion, a group of Irish Catholic immigrants who deserted from the mostly Protestant U.S. Army to the Catholic Mexican side during the Mexican–American War of 1846–48 and fought heroically to defend the Republic of Mexico from U.S. aggression. At the movie's end, while working in a stone quarry for military prisoners, Riley is told by his former U.S. commander that he has been freed, to which he responds, "I have always been free."

The point is not just to debunk the War of Independence as fake: there is undoubtedly an emancipatory dimension in the works of Jefferson, Paine, and so on. In spite of being a slave owner, Jefferson is an important link in the chain of modern emancipatory struggles, and one is justified in claiming that the struggle for the abolition of slavery was basically the continuation of Jefferson's work. Jefferson was a different kind of man from Robert E. Lee, and the inconsistencies in his position just demonstrate how the American Revolution is an unfinished project (as Habermas would have put it). In some sense, its true conclusion, its second act, was the Civil War; in one sense, it was over only in 1960, with the realization of the black right to vote; and in another sense, as the persistence of the Confederacy myth demonstrates, it is not yet over today. (Similarly, although Immanuel Kant's views are racist, he nonetheless contributed to the process which led to contemporary emancipatory struggles – to put it bluntly, there is no Marxism and no socialism without Kant.) This is the point missed by Donald Trump when he placed "respect" for Lee within the canon of respect for American tradition and asked where all this will stop – first Lee, then Washington, then … What lurks beneath the fight for statues of Lee is simply the refusal to bring the American Revolution to an end.

But there is another aspect to Trump's proclamations which is as a rule ignored: his reluctance to unambiguously condemn alt-right violence and his repeated claims that "Both sides are guilty" strangely mirror the leftist

multiculturalist strategy ("True, ISIS is committing horrible crimes – but do we not do similar evil things? Who are we to judge them?"). As Jamil Khader pointed out in a crucial intervention, in his reactions to the Charlottesville killing Trump displayed not only multiculturalism but also, and above all, the emancipatory legacy of universalism.[2] This point was also missing in most liberal and leftist responses to Trump's comments on slavery and white supremacy – that:

> no identity can easily fill in the empty space of universality with its proper content, and that identities should always be taken up to fulfill the promises of the immanent universal dimension that exists in the form of a gap at their core. Radical, if not revolutionary change, can happen only when liberals and leftists rethink their conception of identity in light of this repressed universal dimension at its core … The problem is that mainstream liberal and leftist discourses on identity politics and political correctness have shifted the struggle for justice, freedom, and equality from oppression and exploitation to tolerance and respect under the banner of a post-racial ideology … Trump's other controversial statements about moral equivalency between Neo-Nazi White supremacist terrorists and antifa activists did not emerge out of a vacuum. Indeed, his points about violence on "many sides" and that there were "some very fine *people* on both *sides*" are symptomatic of the same humanist strategies that liberals and leftists had used during the culture and canon wars to relativize conflicts, subjectivize the Other (giving the evil Other a voice and a human story), and remain on neutral grounds.[3]

Along the same lines, Walter Benn Michaels wrote apropos the (often ridiculous) polemics about cultural appropriation:

> even our own stories don't belong to us – no stories belong to anyone. Rather, we're all in the position of historians, trying to figure out what actually happened … Identity crimes – both the phantasmatic ones, like cultural theft, and the real ones, like racism and sexism – are perfect for this purpose, since, unlike the downward redistribution of wealth, opposing them leaves the class structure intact … The problem is not that rich people can't feel poor people's pain; you don't have to be the victim of inequality to want to eliminate inequality. And the problem is not that the story of the poor doesn't belong to the rich; the relevant question about our stories is not whether they reveal someone's privilege but whether they're true. The problem is that the whole idea of cultural identity is incoherent, and that the dramas of appropriation it makes possible provide an increasingly economically stratified society with a model of social justice that addresses everything except that economic stratification.[4]

Benn Michaels is fully justified here: of course we should fight white liberal cultural appropriations, but not simply because they practice imbalance in the cultural exchange – we should fight them because they practice the struggle for emancipation in such a way that they ignore and neutralize its key dimension. And the same holds for the feminist struggle. In the last decades, a new form of feminism rose to prominence, especially in the U.S., which one cannot but designate as "neoliberal feminism."[5] Its three main features are: (1) individualization of persistent gender inequality (today, gender inequality is not systemic but mostly a consequence of individual choices, so there is no need for structural analysis and large social changes); (2) privatization of political responses (solutions must be individual); (3) liberation through capitalism (women can achieve and ensure gender equality through the free market: "the feminist is the entrepreneur, capable of competing alongside of men, and winning or losing in the marketplace."[6] The appeal of this approach resides also in the pleasures it promises: those of avoiding conflict (organized political struggle), of indulging in consumption and financial success, and so on. Do we not have here an exemplary case of hegemonic rearticulation in which feminism is included in a different chain of equivalences? If this process of rearticulation is open and ultimately contingent, we cannot claim that neoliberal feminism is a "betrayal" of the "true" feminism which links feminine liberation to the universal emancipation of all those who are exploited. Is, then, this feminism a concrete universality which transforms itself into new figures, where we should not introduce a critical distinction between radical and bourgeois feminisms but see different feminisms as particular moments, each of which contributes new content, opens up new spaces of political practice and simultaneously implies specific limitations? If not, why, exactly, not? Because class struggle is the only universal antagonism, an antagonism that cuts across the entire social edifice, the impossible/real which casts its shadow on all other antagonisms.

The basic premise of classical Marxism (the premise that grounds its call for the "unity of theory and practice") is that, because of its objective social position (that of the "part of no-part" (Rancière) of the social edifice, the point of its "symptomal torsion" (Badiou)), the working class is pushed towards a correct insight into the state of society (its basic antagonisms) and, simultaneously, towards the action to be taken to set it straight (the revolutionary transformation). Does this still hold today? Does the rise of populist fury and rage not bear witness to an irreducible break in the "unity of theory and practice"? It is as if the "objective" social position of those exploited and marginalized no longer pushes them towards a clear "cognitive mapping" of their predicament, which would engage them in a universal emancipatory struggle, but rather, expresses itself in frustrated and occasionally violent impotence, betraying their loss of basic orientation. So, instead of a united front, local lower classes fear immigrants, who take refuge in fundamentalism, while the trade unions fight for the welfare of those whom they represent, more often against other parts of the working class than against capital – can one imagine here a

united front? The projected unity is necessarily and continuously undermined by the counter-force that is immanent to the ongoing process of class struggle: the conflict between local lower classes and immigrants (or between feminist struggle and worker struggle) is not an externally imposed abomination caused by the manipulations of enemy propaganda but the form of appearance of the same class struggle. Local workers perceive immigrants as the stooges of big capital, brought into the country to undermine their strength and to compete with them since their wages are lower; immigrants see local workers, even if they are poor, as part and parcel of the Western order that marginalizes them. No easy preaching about how they are actually on the same side can be effective in such a situation where competition is real.

Therein resides the fatal limitation of the attempts to counter the rise of rightist populism with leftist populism, a populism that would listen to the real concerns of ordinary people instead of trying to impose on them some high theoretical vision of their historical task. The fears, hopes and problems that "real people" experience in their "real lives" always appear to them as moments of a certain ideological vision, i.e. as Louis Althusser saw it well, ideology is not a conceptual frame externally imposed on the wealth of reality but is our experience of reality itself. To break out of ideology, it is not enough to get rid of the distorting ideological lenses – hard theoretical work is needed.

To get a taste of the complexity of this struggle, let's take a recent example of the conflict between different emancipatory demands. On a U.S. campus, an incident took place recently: a group of young Latino workers were restoring the façade of a house on a plateau that overlooked a nearby swimming pool where a group of young middle-class women were sunbathing in bikinis, and the workers started to direct flirtatious comments at them (what in Latin America they call *el piropo*).[7] Predictably, the women felt harassed, and they complained, and the solution imposed by the authorities was no less predictable: they separated the house from the pool area by a plastic wall, and they constructed a special plastic tunnel through which the workers had to approach their workplace, cutting off the view of the pool area – a perfect example of the politically correct way of dealing with sexism, which only reinforces the lines separating groups of people.

From the women's standpoint, what happened was a clear-cut case of male-chauvinist harassment "objectivizing" women as sexual prey, while from the workers' standpoint their exclusion was a no less clear-cut case of maintaining class distinction, of protecting the white middle class from contact with ordinary workers. Is it then a case of feminist struggle versus class struggle, with the long-term solution being to somehow unite the two and convince both sides that their respective struggles are moments of the same universal struggle for emancipation? It's not as simple as that since it is the class struggle itself that overdetermines the tension between the two struggles: the workers' *piropo* was obviously so disturbing to the women because it came from lower-class boys unworthy of their attention, and the boys were aware of this dimension

when they were reprimanded. Feminism can also play a class game, implying that the lower classes are vulgar, male chauvinist, not politically correct, so that the fear of being "harassed" reveals itself to be the fear of lower-class vulgarity. This, however, in no way means that we should say to the women, "Endure the harassment on account of the need for solidarity with the working class (and remember they are Latino foreigners who have their way of life)!" – at this level, in the direct confrontation of the two views, the conflict cannot be resolved, and *this irresolvable deadlock IS the reality of class struggle.*

Recognizing the overdetermining role of class struggle does not amount to accepting the standard "essentialist"-Marxist claim that sexuality gets violent owing to class struggle but remains in itself non-violent – class struggle co-opts the immanent violence and deadlocks that pertain to sexuality as such. In the same way, other particular struggles obey their own immanent antagonist logic: for example, different ethnic-religious "ways of life" are immanently out-of-sync due to the different mode of regulating collective *jouissance*, while human industry affects our environment in potentially dangerous ways independently of specific modes of production. Class struggle does not introduce antagonism but overdetermines the immanent antagonism. More precisely, class antagonism is doubly inscribed – it encounters itself in its oppositional determination, among the struggles whose totality it overdetermines. Back to our example, class struggle is represented by the resistance towards Mexican workers by the bathing girls (in contrast to their feminist claims) plus it overdetermines the very articulation of these particular struggles. The actuality of the class struggle is the tension between the two emancipatory struggles – but again, not in the sense that the workers stand for the proletariat and the girls for the bourgeoisie. If one had to decide to which side one should give priority in the conflict, there are strong arguments that the bathing girls effectively were harassed and should be somehow protected. The overall dynamic of class struggle is the overdetermining factor of the conflict and, consequently, that which makes the conflict irresolvable in its own terms (even if we give the priority to the harassed girls, there is a shadow of injustice in this choice). And the same goes for the opposite choice: class struggle is that which makes also the "class" choice of Mexican workers over bathing women unjust. Paradoxically, class struggle is itself the factor that limits the scope of direct reference to class struggle.

The formal feature that makes class struggle exceptional is that it cannot be reduced to a case of identity politics: while the goal of feminism is not to destroy men but to establish new, more just rules as to how the two sexes should interact, and while the most aggressive religious fundamentalism wants to assert itself by way of destroying other religions, proletarian class struggle aims at abolishing class *difference*, eliminating not only the ruling class but also itself – the aim of proletarian struggle is to create conditions in which proletarians themselves would cease to exist. (Along the same lines, John Summers has pointed out how multiculturalism emerged as the ideology of corporate elites: a politics directed at gender, race or any other identity is a game that is lost in

advance. The struggle for identity is a perfect substitute for the class struggle, since it keeps people in permanent mutual conflict, while the elite withdraws and observes the game from a safe distance.[8]) An analysis published in the *Guardian* brings out the basic inconsistency of identity politics:

> Many on the left had become acutely aware that colour blindness was being used by conservatives to oppose policies intended to redress histori- cal wrongs and persisting racial inequities. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the anti-capitalist economic preoccupations of the old Left began to take a backseat to a new way of understanding oppression: the poli- tics of redistribution was replaced by a "politics of recognition." Modern identity politics was born. As Oberlin professor Sonia Kruks writes, "What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier [movements] is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is qua women, qua blacks, qua lesbians that groups demand recognition … The demand is not for inclu- sion within the fold of 'universal humankind' … nor is it for respect 'in spite of' one's differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different." When liberal icon Bernie Sanders told supporters, "It's not good enough for somebody to say, 'Hey, I'm a Latina, vote for me'," Quentin James, a leader of Hillary Clinton's outreach efforts to people of colour, retorted that Sanders's "comments regarding identity politics suggest he may be a white supremacist, too." This brings us to the most striking feature of today's right-wing political tribalism: the white identity politics that has mobilized around the idea of whites as an endangered, discriminated-against group. People want to see their own tribe as excep- tional, as something to be deeply proud of; that's what the tribal instinct is all about. For decades now, non-whites in the United States have been encouraged to indulge their tribal instincts in just this way, but, at least publicly, American whites have not.[9]

Identity politics reaches its peak (or, rather, its lowest point) when it refers to the unique experience of a particular group identity as the ultimate fact which cannot be dissolved in any universality: "only a woman/lesbian/trans/Black/ Chinese knows what it is to be a woman/lesbian/trans/black/Chinese." While this is true in a certain trivial sense, one should thoroughly deny any politi- cal relevance to it and shamelessly stick to the old Enlightenment axiom: all cultures and identities can be understood – one just has to make an effort to get it.[10] The secret of identity politics is that, in it, the white/male/hetero posi- tion remains the universal standard; everyone understands it and knows what it means, which is why it is the blind spot of identity politics, the one identity that it is prohibited to assert. Sooner or later, however, we get the return of the repressed: the white/male/hetero identity breaks out and begins to play the same card – "Nobody really understands us, you have to be a white/hetero/

male to understand what it means to be a white/hetero/male." What these reversals prove is that one cannot get rid of universality so easily. The obvious old Marxist point about how there is no neutral universality, i.e. about how every universality that presents itself as neutral obfuscates and thereby privileges actual privileges, should not seduce us into abandoning universality as such – if we do this, we obliterate the fact that our very argumentation against false universalities speaks from the position of true universality (which enables us to perceive the position of the underprivileged as unjust). Paradoxically, the assertion of white/hetero/male identity would deprive them of their implied universality and compel them to accept their particularity.

Such an assertion may appear to play directly in the hands of white supremacists – but does it? Everyone who is troubled by the new anti-immigrant populism should make the effort to watch *Europa: The Last Battle* (Tobias Bratt, Sweden, 2017), a ten-part documentary that can easily be downloaded for free. It presents *in extenso* the neo-Nazi version of the last hundred years of European history: it was dominated by Jewish bankers who control our entire financial system; from the beginning, Judaism stood behind Communism, and the wealthy Jews directly financed the October Revolution to deal a mortal blow to Russia, a staunch defender of Christianity; Hitler was a peaceful German patriot who, after being democratically elected, changed Germany from devastated land to a welfare country with the highest living standard in the world by withdrawing from the international banking controlled by Jews; international Jewry declared war on him, although Hitler desperately strived for peace; after the failure of the European communist revolutions of the 1920s, the communist centre realized that one has first to destroy the moral foundations of the West (religion, ethnic identity, family values), so it founded the Frankfurt School, whose aim was to denounce the family and authority as pathological tools of domination and to undermine every ethnic identity as oppressive. Today, in the guise of different forms of Cultural Marxism, their efforts are finally showing results: our societies are caught in eternal guilt for their alleged sins, they are open to unbridled invasion by immigrants, lost in empty hedonist individualism and lack of patriotism. This corruption is secretly controlled by Jews like George Soros, and only a new figure like Hitler, who would re-awaken our patriotic pride, can save us. When one watches this spectacle, one cannot avoid the impression that, although the authors went much further than our average racist populists would be ready to go, we are getting in *Europa* a kind of "absent centre" of the multitude of communitarian-populist movements that currently thrive, the zero point towards which they all tend and in which they would converge.

When, in my critique of this tendency, I claimed that the greatest threat to Europe is its populist/racist defenders, I was reproached for the obvious absurdity of this claim: how can those who want to defend Europe pose a threat to it? In principle, the answer is easy to give: the Europe these defenders try to save (a neo-tribal Europe of fixed ethnic identities) is the negation of all that is great

in the European legacy. (The obvious anti-Eurocentric reproach to my claim is, of course, that Europe, the agent of global colonial domination, has no right to offer its ideological foundations as a possible weapon against racism.) There is some truth in this – no wonder that the most radical "defenders" of Europe look with distrust at Christianity and prefer pagan (Celtic, Nordic) spirituality. And one can easily see where the problem resides – even those who still pay lip service to Christian Europe advocate a weird Christianity with a distinct pagan twist. As reported, Viktor Orbán

> has declared the end of "liberal democracy" in Hungary, saying it has failed to defend freedoms and Christian culture in the wake of the migrant crisis. He vowed to build a "Christian democracy" defying EU dictates. "The era of liberal democracy has come to an end. It is unsuitable to pro- tect human dignity, inadmissible to give freedom, cannot guarantee physi- cal security, and can no longer maintain Christian culture," Orbán said.[11]

Are these statements not difficult to combine with statements like the follow- ing from *Galatians* 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." And how would Christian defenders of the family deal with the famous passage from Matthew 12:46–50:

> While he was still talking to the multitudes, behold, his mother and broth- ers stood outside, seeking to speak with him. Then one said to him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with you." But he answered and said to the one who told him, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" And he stretched out his hand toward his disciples and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

There is, however, another higher-level counter-argument often evoked against immigrants: the point is not that, in their way of life, they are differ- ent from us but that *they* have problems with difference (the coexistence of different ways of life) as such. The exemplary case is here that of the Dutch rightist populist politician Pim Fortuyn, killed in early May 2002, two weeks before elections in which he was expected to gain one-fifth of the votes: a rightist populist whose personal features and even (most of his) opinions were almost perfectly politically correct – he was gay, had good personal relations with many immigrants and had an innate sense of irony. In short, he was a good tolerant liberal with regard to everything *except his basic political stance*: he opposed fundamentalist immigrants because of their hatred towards homo- sexuality, women's rights, etc.

The reply is, of course, that this argument relies on meta-racism, i.e. on a more subtle form of racism in which we assert our superiority over the Other

precisely by claiming that our Other, not us, is racist. But there is another more basic problem we are dealing with here: asserting openness and the fluidity of identities is not enough, and it is indeterminacy that is pushing people towards proponents of populist ethnic identity. The tough question is therefore: what kind of identity is acceptable for a radical leftist? Abstract universalism does not work, as was made clear by, among others, Claude Lévi-Strauss, who, in the essays collected in the second volume of his *Structural Anthropology*, forcefully demonstrated how a strong assertion of one's ethnic identity and even of its superiority to others does not necessarily imply racism.[12] He shows that many tribes who call themselves "human" (with regard to other tribes to whom one denies this quality), i.e. in whose language the word for "human" is the same as the word for "belonging to our tribe," are not racist in the modern sense of the term. Although they may appear offensively racist, upon a closer look their stance is much more modest: it should be read as an implicit assertion of being caught in one's own way of life – "We are what we are, and for us this is what being human means; we cannot step out of our world to judge ourselves and others from nowhere, so we also let others be." In short, their assertion of self-identity is not negatively mediated by others in the form of envy.

In order to mask its own divisions, populist identity is based on the negative reference to the Other: no Nazi without a Jew, no European without the immigrant threat, etc. However, political correctness is also grounded in a negative reference, parasitizing on the sexist/racist "incorrect" Other – this is why the politically correct subjectivity is a mixture of eternal self-guilt (searching for the remainders of sexism or racism in oneself) and arrogance (constantly reprimanding and judging the guilty others). The paradox is thus that the problem of populist fundamentalism does not reside in the fact that it is too identitarian (against which we should emphasize the fluidity and contingency of every identity) but, on the contrary, in the fact that it lacks a proper identity, that its identity clings to a denial of its constitutive Other. Are the so-called fundamentalists, be they Christian or Muslim, really fundamentalists in the authentic sense of the term? Do they really believe? What they lack is a feature that is easy to discern in all authentic fundamentalists, from Tibetan Buddhists to the Amish in the U.S.: the absence of resentment and envy, the deep indifference towards the non-believers' way of life. If today's so-called fundamentalists really believe they have found their way to Truth, why should they feel threatened by non-believers, why should they envy them? When a Buddhist encounters a Western hedonist, he hardly condemns him or her – he just benevolently notes that the hedonist's search for happiness is self-defeating. In contrast to true fundamentalists, the pseudo-fundamentalists are deeply bothered, intrigued, fascinated by the sinful life of the non-believers. One can feel that, in fighting the sinful other, they are fighting their own temptation. This is why the so-called Christian or Muslim fundamentalists are a disgrace to true fundamentalism.

Does this mean that we should simply tolerate a peaceful coexistence of different ways of life? Unfortunately, this is no solution. We should persist in the properly dialectical approach: such an acceptance of identity in no way invalidates universality; it merely renders it "concrete" in the Hegelian sense. When white supremacists say, "We only want for us what the supposedly marginalized others demand for themselves – to freely assert and develop our identity, our way of life," there is nothing wrong with this statement as such. The problem is that they do not mean just that but much more, implicitly privileging their own way of life at the expense of others – in short, the problem is in their implicit universality. Each way of life implies its own universality: it is not just about itself but also about how to relate to others, and the two cannot be separated. Western liberal multiculturalism is different, say, from the coexistence of religions and ethnic groups in India; the problem (not only) with Islam is how it relates to other religions and cultures (and atheism) in its own countries – are they tolerated as equal, can they act in public space? When Western liberals prohibit certain sexual practices (not only) of Muslims, like arranged marriages against the will of the woman involved, does the state have the right to intervene, or is this an intrusion into another's way of life. The problem is that the relationship between different ways of life is always also a conflict of universalities – there is no universal neutral space exempted from it.

The only true emancipatory gesture is therefore to persist in the search for universality (as, for example, Malcolm X did). And the white person should cast a self-critical glance on their position, of course, but without getting caught in the vicious cycle of eternal guilt. The prohibition of asserting the particular identity of white men (as the model of oppression of others), although it presents itself as the admission of their guilt, confers on them a central position: this very denial of the right to assert their particular identity makes them into the universal-neutral medium, the place from which the truth about the others' oppression is accessible. And this is why white liberals so gladly indulge in self-flagellation: the true aim of their activity is not really to help others but the *Lustgewinn* brought about by their self-accusations, the feeling of their own moral superiority over others. The problem with the self-denial of white identity is not that it goes too far but that it does not go far enough: while its enunciated content seems radical, its position of enunciation remains that of a privileged universality.

When we try to clarify how to relate the universal struggle for emancipation to the plurality of ways of life, nothing should be left to chance, not even the most self-evident general notions. Left-liberals view the very notion of "way of life" with suspicion (if it does not relate to marginal minorities, of course), as if it conceals a proto-fascist poison; against this suspicion, one should accept the term in its Lacanian version, as something that points beyond all cultural features towards a core of the Real, of *jouissance* – a "way of life" is ultimately the way in which a certain community organizes its *jouissance*. This is why "integration" is such a sensitive issue: when a group is under

pressure to "integrate" into a wider community, it often resists out of fear that it will lose its mode of *jouissance*. A way of life does not merely encompass rituals of food, music and dance, social life, and so on, but also, and above all, habits, written and unwritten rules of sexual life (inclusive of rules of mating and marriage) and social hierarchy (respect for elders, and so on). In India, for example, some postcolonial theorists defend even the caste system as part of a specific way of life that should be protected from the onslaught of global individualism.

To solve this problem, the preferred vision is that of a united world with all its particular ways of life thriving, each of them asserting its difference from others, not as an antagonistic relationship, not at the expense of others, but as a positive display of creativity that contributes to the wealth of the whole of society. When an ethnic group is prevented from expressing its identity in this creative way because it is under pressure to renounce it and "integrate" itself into the predominant (usually Western) culture and way of life, it cannot but react by withdrawing into negative difference, a regressive, purist fundamentalism that fights the predominant culture, including by violent means – in short, fundamentalist violence is a reaction for which the predominant culture is responsible.

This entire vision of creative differences, of particular identities contributing to a united world, threatened by the violent pressure on minorities to "integrate" – in other words, by the false universality of the Western way of life, which imposes itself as a standard for all – is to be rejected in its entirety. The world we live in is one, but it is such because it is traversed (and, in a way, even held together) by the same antagonism that is inscribed in the very heart of global capitalism. Universality is not located over and above particular identities, it is an antagonism that cuts from within each "way of life." This antagonism determines all emancipatory struggles: explicit and unwritten rules of hierarchy, homophobia, male domination and so on are key constituents of the "way of life" in which such struggles occur. Let's take the very sensitive case of China and Tibet: the brutal Chinese colonization of Tibet is a fact, but this fact should not blind us to what kind of country Tibet was before 1949, and even before 1959 – a harsh feudal society with an extreme hierarchy regulated in detail. In the late 1950s, when the Chinese authorities still more or less tolerated the Tibetan "way of life," a villager visited his relatives in a neighbouring village without asking his feudal master for permission. When he was caught and threatened with severe punishment, he took refuge in a nearby Chinese military garrison, but when his master learned of this he complained that the Chinese were brutally meddling in the Tibetan way of life – and he was right! So what should the Chinese do? Another similar example is that of a traditional Tibetan custom: when a serf met a landowner or a priest on a narrow path, he

> would stand to the side, at a distance, putting a sleeve over his shoulder,
> bowing down and sticking out his tongue – a courtesy paid by those of

lower status to their superiors – and would only dare to resume his journey after the former serfs had passed by.[13]

In order to dispel any illusions about Tibetan society, it is not enough to note the distasteful nature of this custom. Over and above the usual stepping aside and bowing, the subordinated individual – to add insult to injury, as it were – had to fix his face in an expression of humiliating stupidity (open-mouthed, tongue stuck out, eyes turned upwards) in order to signal with this grotesque grimace his worthless stupidity. The crucial point here is to recognize the violence of this practice, a violence that no consideration of cultural differences and no respect for otherness should wash over. Again, in cases like these, where does the respect for the other's way of life reach its limit? True, we should not intervene from outside, imposing our standards, but is it not the duty of every fighter for emancipation to unconditionally support those in other cultures who, from within, resist such oppressive customs?[14]

Anti-colonialists as a rule emphasize how the colonizers try to impose their own culture as universal and thereby undermine the indigenous way of life; but what about the opposite strategy, which resides in strengthening local traditions in order to make colonial domination more efficient? No wonder the British colonial administration of India elevated *The Laws of Manu* – an ancient detailed justification for and manual of the caste system – into the seminal text to be used as a reference for establishing the legal code that would render possible the most efficient domination of India; up to a point, one can even say that *The Laws of Manu* only became *the* book of the Hindu tradition retroactively. And, in a more subtle way, the Israeli authorities are doing the same on the West Bank: they silently tolerate (or at least do not seriously investigate) "honour killings," well aware that the true threat to them comes not from devout Muslim traditionalists but from modern Palestinians.

This is the lesson that not only refugees but all members of traditional communities should learn: the way to strike back at cultural neo-colonialism is not to resist it on behalf of traditional culture but to reinvent a more radical modernity – something that Malcolm X, again, was well aware of. It is this unreadiness to accept the primary role of universality that saps the majority of post-colonial studies. Ramesh Srinivasan's work is representative of the effort to "decolonize" digital technology, which is not just a neutral-universal technological framework for the exchange between cultures: it privileges a certain (Western modern) culture, so that even benevolent efforts to extend computer literacy and include everyone in the digital "global village" secretly prolong colonization, insisting on the integration of the subaltern into Western modernity and thus oppressing their cultural specificity.[15] Srinivasan mentions briefly that communities themselves are "multifaceted and diverse," but instead of developing this point into the notion of antagonisms that traverse every community, he waters it down into global relativization and the partiality of every view. The basic units of his vision of reality are communities which,

through their life practices, form their own vision of reality; they are the start-ing point, and "conversations that surpass the bounds of community" come second, so that when we practise them we should always be careful that we respect the authentic voice of the particular community. Therein lies the trap of the popular notion of the "global village": it imposes on particular non-Western communities assumptions which are not theirs, that is, it practices cultural colonialism:

> While it is important to learn about other people, cultures, and com-munities on their terms, we must respect the power and importance of local, cultural, indigenous, and community-based creative uses of technol-ogy. Conversations that surpass the bounds of community can and should emerge but only when the voices of their participants are truly respected. From this perspective, the "global village" is the problem rather than the solution. We must reject assumptions about technology and culture that are dictated by Western concepts of cosmopolitanism.[16]

This is why Srinivasan criticizes Ethan Zuckerman, who

> is correct to say that many of today's challenges, such as climate change, require global conversation and cross-cultural awareness. But not all chal-lenges are global and indeed thinking globally about people's traditions, knowledges, struggles and identities may unintentionally exclude them from positions of control and power.[17]

So, again, the global view is strictly secondary; what comes first is the mul-tiplicity of local communities with their particular "ontologies." And even modern science in its global reach is historically relativized as one among many fields of knowledge with no right to be privileged – Srinivasan approvingly quotes Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who claims:

> The epistemological privilege granted to modern science from the sev-enteenth century onwards, which made possible the technological rev-olutions that consolidated Western supremacy, was also instrumental in suppressing other non-scientific forms and knowledges … [It is now time] to build a more democratic and just society and … decoloniz[e] knowl-edge and power.[18]

It would be easy to show that such a "fluid ontology" of the multiplicity of cultures is grounded in a typically Western postmodern view based on the historicization of all knowledge, a view that has nothing to do with actual pre-modern societies. But much more important is the link between Srinivasan's disavowal of universality (his insistence on the primacy of particular cul-tures/communities) and his ignoring of the inner antagonisms constitutive of

particular communities: they are the two sides of the same misrecognition, since universality is not a neutral entity elevated above particular cultures; it is inscribed into them, at work in them, in the guise of their inner antagonisms, inconsistencies and disruptive negativities. Every particular way of life is a politico-ideological formation whose task is to obfuscate an underlying antagonism, a particular way to cope with this antagonism, and this antagonism traverses the entire social space. Apart from some tribes in the Amazon jungle who have not yet established contact with modern society, all communities today are part of a global civilization in the sense that their autonomy itself has to be accounted for in terms of global capitalism. Let's take the case of the native American tribes' attempts to resuscitate their ancient way of life. This way of life was derailed and thwarted by their contact with Western civilization, which had the devastating effect of leaving the tribes totally disoriented, deprived of a stable communal framework; and their attempts to regain some stability by restoring the core of their traditional way of life as a rule depend on their success in finding their niche in the global market economy. Many tribes wisely spend the income earned from casinos and mining rights on this restoration. As Richard Wagner put it, *die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur der sie Schlug* (only the spear that struck you heals the wound).

In George Orwell's *1984*, there is a famous exchange between Winston and O'Brien, his interrogator. Winston asks him:

> "Does Big Brother exist?"
> "Of course he exists. The Party exists. Big Brother is the embodiment of the Party."
> "Does he exist in the same way as I exist?"
> "You do not exist," said O'Brien.[19]

Should we not say something similar about the existence of universality? To the nominalist claim that there is no pure neutral universality, we can say, "No, today it's the particular ways of life that do not exist as autonomous modes of historical existence, the only actual reality is that of the universal capitalist system." So, in contrast to identity politics, which focuses on how each group should be able to fully assert its particular identity, the radical task is to enable each group to have full access to universality – which does not mean recognizing that one is also part of the universal human genus or asserting some ideological values that are considered universal. It means recognizing how one's own universality is at work in the fractures of one's particular identity, as the "work of the negative" that undermines every particular identity – or, as Susan Buck-Morss put it, "universal humanity is visible at the edges":

> rather than giving multiple, distinct cultures equal due, whereby people are recognized as part of humanity indirectly through the mediation of collective cultural identities, human universality emerges in the

historical event at the point of rupture. It is in the discontinuities of history that people whose culture has been strained to the breaking point give expression to a humanity that goes beyond cultural limits. And it is our emphatic identification with this raw, free, and vulnerable state, that we have a chance of understanding what they say. Common humanity exists in spite of culture and its differences. A person's nonidentity with the collective allows for subterranean solidarities that have a chance of appealing to universal, moral sentiment, the source today of enthusiasm and hope.[20]

Here Buck-Morss provides a precise argument against the postmodern poetry of diversity: it masks the underlying *sameness* of the brutal violence enacted by culturally diverse cultures and regimes: "Can we rest satisfied with the call for acknowledging 'multiple modernities,' with a politics of 'diversity,' or 'multiversality,' when in fact the inhumanities of these multiplicities are often strikingly the same?"[21]

Furthermore, when leftist liberals endlessly vary the motif of how the rise of terrorism is the result of Western colonial and military interventions in the Middle East, meaning that we are ultimately responsible for it, their analysis, although affecting respect towards others, stands out as a blatant case of patronizing racism that reduces the Other to a passive victim and deprives it of any agenda. What such a view fails to see is how Arabs are in no way just passive victims of European and American neo-colonial machinations. Their different courses of action are not just reactive, they are different forms of active engagement in their predicament: the expansive and aggressive push towards Islamization (financing mosques in foreign countries, for example) and open warfare against the West are ways of actively engaging in a situation with a well-defined goal.

For the same reason, one should also doubt the emancipatory value of referring to the people who were colonized as "natives" or "first people." When, in the U.S., a hypothesis was ventured that today's native Americans ("Indians") were not the first human inhabitants there, that they displaced another earlier race, the predominant left-liberal reaction was that this is a dark move to obfuscate the horrors of colonization ("what we, white people, did to the Indians, they did to others"). Similarly, anti-racists view with suspicion the historians trying to demonstrate that the first (Boer) white settlers in South Africa were there simultaneously (or even a couple of decades earlier) than today's black majority, which invaded the country from the North, displacing the original (Bushman and Hottentot) inhabitants. While these suspicions are justified, i.e. while the white racist stakes of such research are obvious, one should nonetheless absolutely reject the idea that proving that today's "native Americans" or the black majority in South Africa were not the true "first people" in any way diminishes or even undermines the black or "native American" anti-racist struggle for full emancipation. Today's racism has nothing to do with the

historical question of "who got there first?"; it is a matter of today's relations of domination and exploitation.

The Western legacy is effectively not just that of colonial and post-colonial imperialist domination but also that of the self-critical examination of the violence and exploitation that the West brought to the Third World. The French colonized Haiti, but the French Revolution also provided the ideological foundation for the rebellion which liberated the slaves and established independent Haiti; the process of decolonization was set in motion when the colonized nations demanded for themselves the same rights that the West took for itself. In short, one should never forget that the West provided the very standards by which it (as well as its critics) measures its criminal past.

Notes

1 See PBS, "Interview Transcripts: Margaret Washington, Historian, on John Brown's Egalitarianism," *American Experience* (February 2000), http://www.shoppbs.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/filmmore/reference/interview/washington05.htm

2 See Jamil Khader, "Against Trump's White Supremacy: Embracing the Enlightenment, Renouncing Anti-Eurocentrism," (quoted from the manuscript). For a scathing critical analysis of liberal PC speech, see Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White Men About Race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

3 Khader, "Against Trump's White Supremacy."

4 Walter Benn Michaels, "The Myth of 'Cultural Appropriation'," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 2, 2017), https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Myth-of-Cultural/240464. Quoted from https://cominsitu.wordpress.com/2017/07/05/the-myth-of-cultural-appropriation/.

5 See Michaele L. Ferguson, "Neoliberal Feminism as Political Ideology: Revitalizing the Study of Feminist Political Ideologies," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 22:3 (2017), 221–35.

6 Ferguson, "Neoliberal Feminism as Political Ideology," 230.

7 I owe this story and its interpretation to Alenka Zupančič.

8 See Robert Birnbaum, "Interview: John H. Summers on *The Baffler*," *Identity Theory* (March 16, 2012), http://www.identitytheory.com/interview-john-summers-baffler/.

9 Amy Chua, "How America's Identity Politics Went from Inclusion of Women to Division," *The Guardian* (March 1, 2018), https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/mar/01/how-americas-identity-politics-went-from-inclusion-to-division. The article is an excerpt from Amy Chua, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* (London: Penguin, 2018).

10 This idea was suggested to me by Mladen Dolar.

11 Quoted from Russia Today staff writer, "Orban Declares End of 'Liberal Democracy' in Hungary, Vows to Fight for Christian Values," *RT* (May 10, 2018), https://www.rt.com/news/426412-orban-christian-values-eu-hungary/.

12 See Claude-Levi Strauss, *Structural Anthropology, Volume 2*, trans. Monique Layton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

13 Wang Lixiong and Tsering Shakya, *The Struggle for Tibet* (London: Verso Books, 2009), 77.

14 For a perspicuous description of the tension between environmentalists who want to preserve local habitats and the actual people who live in these habitats in Scotland, see James Hunter, *On the Other Side of Sorrow: Nature and People in the Scottish Highlands* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2014).

15 See Ramesh Srinivasan, *Whose Global Village? Rethinking How Technology Shapes Our World* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

16 Srinivasan, *Whose Global Village?* 209.

17 Srinivasan, *Whose Global Village?* 213.

18 Cited in Srinivasan, *Whose Global Village?* 224.

19 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1949] 1982), 208.

20 Susan Buck–Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 151, 133.

21 Buck–Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, 138–39.

Chapter 4

Universality and Its Discontents

Bruno Bosteels

I

For a while now universalism has been back on the agenda. Though such a move might be tempting, there is no need to begin waxing poetic by invoking the predictable notion of the spectre from the opening lines of *The Communist Manifesto*, since the return of a certain kind of universalism – different from the formal, humanist-metaphysical or *a priori* type of universalism of the Kantian Enlightenment – points to a well-articulated philosophical tradition with a respectable pedigree in contemporary thought. Already starting in the mid-1990s, with pivotal texts such as Alain Badiou's "Eight Theses on the Universal" and Jacques Rancière's "Politics, Identification and Subjectivization," which are included in the present collection, the trend to propose an unabashed defence of a new form of universalism reached exhilarating heights in the early 2000s, most notably with the lively debates between Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*.[1] In fact, compared to the richness of the dialogues between these last three figureheads of contemporary theory and philosophy, we can only lament that no such wealth of polemical exchanges has accompanied the more recent worldwide shift that once again has laid bare the intimate connections that tie capitalism to multiple forms of right-wing populism, neo-fascism and white supremacy – from Trump's America to Bolsonaro's Brazil. In the face of the latter, and given the quasi-unanimous appeal of the universal among the thinkers mentioned above, readers might be forgiven for expecting a more forcefully shared political agenda on the left as well. However, very little of the kind has emerged over the last three decades since the universal came back into fashion. On the contrary, the political paths of many of these thinkers have stopped crossing over into one another. But, then again, perhaps the relative absence of a common political project as well as the painful falling out between several of the thinkers in question points to a deficiency inherent in the call for a renewed universalism itself? Could this call be a substitute formation hiding the more urgent need for a radical militant project? And if this is indeed the case, should we perhaps push through the veil of quasi-unanimity surrounding

the notion of political universalism on the so-called left to draw sharper lines of demarcation, where it is not just democracy, whether radical or always still to-come, but rather socialism and communism that are at stake?

2

Let us take Laclau's seemingly straightforward claim in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* as our basic point of departure:

> This, in my view, is the main political question confronting us at this end of the century: what is the destiny of the universal in our societies? Is a proliferation of particularisms – or their correlative side: authoritarian unification – the only alternative in a world in which dreams of a global human emancipation are rapidly fading away? Or can we think of the possibility of relaunching new emancipatory projects which are compatible with the complex multiplicity of differences shaping the fabric of present-day societies?[2]

From this formulation we can easily glean the context for the assertion of the renewed emancipatory potential of universalism. Previously, in the tradition of Karl Marx's reading in "On the Jewish Question," all universalisms of the kind involved in the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, for example, were unmasked to reveal the selfish interests of the private property owners hidden behind them. By contrast, the argument today holds that the proliferation of closed identarian or communitarian particularisms can be overcome only through a reaffirmation and reconceptualization of the universal.

Similarly, when Badiou in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (published in French in 1997) explains the Apostle's contemporary relevance, he too refers antagonistically to the global conjuncture of particularisms based on this or that subset of the human species defined in terms of race, religion, sexuality, language or culture. Insofar as the proliferation of such identitarian or communitarian subsets, often in the guise of a vivid portrayal of their undeniable historical victimization, is not just permitted but actively promoted by the concomitant logic of post-industrial capitalism, only an alternative form of emancipatory universalism will be able to overcome the false universal that serves as the general equivalent in the world of the so-called free market:

> What is the real unifying factor behind this attempt to promote the cultural virtue of oppressed subsets, this invocation of language in order to extol communitarian particularisms (which, besides language, always ultimately refer back to race, religion, or gender)? It is, evidently, monetary abstraction, whose false universality has absolutely no difficulty accommodating the kaleidoscope of communitarianisms.[3]

In this sense, the Pauline figure – combining a declarative and faithful relation to the event with an organized implementation of its universal truth – can be formalized outside and beyond the Christian content of its message about the resurrection of Christ, which Badiou never stops considering a fable, to provide us with a possible model for political militancy after the Leninist and Bolshevik figure incarnated in the party and ultimately in the corrupt party-state under Stalin.

3

However, the broader context surrounding these pleas for a new and revised universalism complicates the political significance of their proposals. Univeralism, then, appears to be a temporary placeholder or stand-in for socialist and communist emancipatory projects whose name can no longer be invoked in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union, at least not with the same candour and enthusiasm. For Badiou, this is still the clearest proof of the fact that the empty universality of the capitalist logic will not be threatened by anything other than the antagonistic principle of another universality:

> The lengthy years of communist dictatorship will have had the merit of showing that financial globalization, the absolute sovereignty of capital's empty universality, had as its only genuine enemy another universal project, albeit a corrupt and bloodstained one: that only Lenin and Mao truly *frightened* those who proposed to boast unreservedly about the merits of liberalism and the general equivalent, or the democratic virtues of commercial communication.[4]

Only some ten years later, around the time of the worldwide crisis of 2008, would Badiou return explicitly and unapologetically to the name and idea of communism to describe the politics presupposed by his philosophical project. In the article "The Communist Hypothesis," first published in English in *New Left Review* and subsequently turned into a book of the same title, this involves drawing up a minimal history of three moments or sequences of the communist Idea: first, in the long nineteenth century, the Marxian and Engelsian sequence of the affirmation of its original possibility; then, after 1917, the Leninist, Stalinist, Maoist and Castroist realization of the idea at the level of socialist states; and, finally, after the interval of another period of crisis and latency, a return to its reaffirmed possibility by way of a post-Leninist and post-Maoist communist politics at a distance from both party and state. "In many respects we are closer today to the questions of the 19th century than to the revolutionary history of the 20th," Badiou concludes in the article version of his hypothesis. "Which is no doubt why, as in the 19th century, it is not the victory of the hypothesis which is at stake today, but the conditions of its existence."[5]

In Laclau's case, on the other hand, the rhetoric of universalism – in texts from the turn of the century such as *Emancipation(s)* or his contributions to the debates with Butler and Žižek in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* – seems to have completely taken over from what once constituted a plea for socialism, albeit an openly post-Marxist one, as in his bestselling book from the mid-1980s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, co-authored with the Belgian political philosopher Chantal Mouffe.[6] And in the new century, instead of following Badiou or Žižek in their embrace of a new sequence for communism, supported with several international conferences on *The Idea of Communism* in London, New York City and Seoul, the Argentine thinker would go on to sum up his entire political philosophy in the name of populism, as in his final major work *On Populist Reason*, in which socialist and communist references are historically illustrative but by no means programmatic.[7]

As Linda Zerilli has shown, Laclau's appeal to the idea of a hegemonic construction of universality – or what he later would call the construction of a people based on a series of equivalent chains between different demands – aims to overcome the false opposition between particularism and universalism. "Demonstrating the imbrication of the universal and the particular, Laclau shows why it is a matter not of choosing one over the other but of articulating, in a scrupulously political sense, the relation between the two," Zerilli summarizes in an eloquent review-essay on *Emancipation(s)*. "What this means is that there can be no universal that would be free of all particularity and no particularity without some universal reference – short of a totally reconciled society without politics."[8] Such indeed is the necessary contamination between the particular and the universal, which according to this line of argumentation would be the positive condition of possibility for the politics of hegemony. In Laclau's own words, "there is hegemony only if the dichotomy universality/particularity is superseded; universality exists only incarnated in – and subverts – some particularity but, conversely, no particularity can become political without also becoming the locus of universalizing effects."[9] And, in her first contribution to *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, this is something that Butler would likewise reiterate and expand, especially through a reading of the multiple accruals and reversals of meaning in the notion of the universal in Hegel. Between the abstract and the concrete, the formal and the socio-historical, or the transcultural and the culturally specific, this involves a set of necessary oscillations which require that both as readers and as political agents we engage in the constant work of translating one level or language into the other. "If we are to begin to rethink universality in terms of this constitutive act of cultural translation," Butler remarks, "then neither a presumption of linguistic or cognitive commonness nor a teleological postulate of an ultimate fusion of all cultural horizons will be a possible route for the universal claim."[10]

4

In the absence of a socialist or communist polity, what these arguments for the renewal of universalism aim to produce is a radicalization of democracy in an ongoing and ever-expanding process to include those subsets of humanity that are excluded from liberal and parliamentary democracies as they currently exist under global capitalism. Butler describes this process most eloquently:

> The universal announces, as it were, its "non-place", its fundamentally temporal modality, precisely when challenges to its *existing* formulation emerge from those who are not covered by it, who have no entitlement to occupy the place of the "who", but nevertheless demand that the universal as such ought to be inclusive of them.[11]

Or, in Žižek's Hegelian reformulation of the same argument:

> Universality becomes "actual" precisely and only by rendering thematic the exclusions on which it is grounded, by continuously questioning, renegotiating, displacing them, that is, by assuming the gap between its own form and content, by conceiving itself as unaccomplished in its very notion.[12]

In terms of historical diagnostics, however, this way of arguing means ignoring the extent to which the new social movements that first supported the idea of radical democracy defined in texts such as Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* may themselves have become transmogrified into precisely the kinds of identity claims that more than a decade later will constitute the principal object of critique targeted by Butler, Laclau and Žižek in the dialogues of *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. Conversely, to insist on the need for a renewed universalism in response to such identity claims means to risk forgetting the extent to which the real stakes continue to depend on the possible future of socialist and communist politics.

Thus, in a crucial text from the late 1990s, contemporary with both Badiou's *Saint Paul* and Laclau's *Emancipation(s)*, the American political theorist Wendy Brown accounts for the proliferation of "identity politics" – or what she prefers to describe in terms of "politicized identities" – during the neoliberal era in the United States, on the grounds not only of the waning of a socialist alternative but also of the logic inherent in such protest politics themselves. In her book *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, cleverly invoked by Žižek as well in his first response to Butler and Laclau, Brown questions the emancipatory character of the politics of injured identities. More so than a true subversion in the name of difference, she sees in this a traumatized repetition of and against the exclusions that one part of the population suffers at the hands of another in terms of race, class, ethnicity, gender or sexuality. Giving renewed

actuality to the terms in scare quotes taken from Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Brown concludes:

> In its emergence as a protest against marginalization or subordination, politicized identity thus becomes attached to its own exclusion both because it is premised on this exclusion for its very existence as identity and because the formation of identity at the site of exclusion, as exclusion, augments or "alters the direction of the suffering" entailed in subordination or marginalization by finding a site of blame for it. But in so doing, it installs its pain over its unredeemed history in the very foundation of its political claim, in its demand for recognition as identity. In locating a site of blame for its powerlessness over its past – a past of injury, a past as a hurt will – and locating a "reason" for the "unendurable pain" of social powerlessness in the present, it converts this reasoning into an ethicizing politics, a politics of recrimination that seeks to avenge the hurt even while it reaffirms it, discursively codifies it. Politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics; it can hold out no future – for itself or others – that triumphs over this pain. The loss of historical direction, and with it the loss of futurity characteristic of the late modern age, is thus homologically refigured in the figure of desire of the dominant political expression of the age: identity politics.[13]

Rooting politics in the expression of injured and victimized identities, in other words, implies a peculiar logic of resentful self-identification, based on the exclusion suffered by oneself or one's people and externalized in the form of recriminations against the violence and injustice perpetrated by others. But, in its injured attachment to the past, no matter how great or mythical, such a politics cannot restore a sense of futurity, which has been lost together with the promise of a socialist alternative.

As a result of an insufficiently elaborated account of the relation between socialism, radical democracy and identity politics, we end up with a strange intersection between Laclau, who seems unable or unwilling to address the possible roots of identitarian and communitarian particularisms in the new social movements he embraced in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and Brown, whose brilliance in explaining the resentful logic of politicized identities as the dominant political expression of our age seems inversely proportionate to the absence of a renewed socialist strategy in *States of Injury*. Put differently, the 1990s in the U.S. (insofar as this is Brown's exclusive focus) have shown how misplaced were the hopes from the 1980s in Europe and Latin America (insofar as Laclau's frame of reference remained tied to the example of Peronist politics) for the possible alliance between a variety of new social movements and a socialist agenda.

5

One way out of this conundrum seems to entail an argument over what we might describe as the success of failure. Throughout the nine contributions that comprise *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, the reader will have noticed how Butler, Laclau and Žižek indeed all share a peculiar confidence in the failure of any given identity to achieve absolute fullness as a total, universal and transparent One. Thus, in the "Introduction," we can read the following:

> One argument in the book took the following form: new social movements often rely on identity-claims, but "identity" itself is never fully constituted; in fact, since identification is not reducible to identity, it is important to consider the incommensurability or gap between them. It does not follow that the failure of identity to achieve complete determination undermines the social movements at issue; on the contrary, that incompleteness is essential to the project of hegemony itself.[14]

And right afterwards:

> There are significant differences among us on the question of the "subject", and this comes through as we each attempt to take account of what constitutes or conditions the failure of any claim to identity to achieve final or full determination. What remains true, however, is that we each value this "failure" as a condition of democratic contestation itself.[15]

Likewise, throughout the book, the very impossibility of fullness (of identity, of society, or of universality itself) paradoxically serves at the same time as the condition of possibility for a radical democratic politics. In the words of Žižek, who in this way tries to summarize a fundamental presupposition behind both Butler's theory of performativity and Laclau's theory of hegemony:

> What this means is that – to put it in the well-known Derridan terms – the condition of impossibility of the exercise of power becomes its condition of possibility: just as the ultimate failure of communication is what compels us to talk all the time (if we could say what we want to say directly, we would very soon stop talking and shut up for ever), so the ultimate uncertainty and precariousness of the exercise of power is the only guarantee that we are dealing with a legitimate democratic power.[16]

Or, in Laclau's own words, also quoted by Žižek:

> If hegemony means the representation, by a particular social sector, of an impossible totality with which it is incommensurable, then it is enough that we make the space of tropological substitutions fully visible, to enable the hegemonic logic to operate freely. If the fullness of society is

unachievable, the attempts at reaching it will necessarily fail, although they will be able, in the search for that impossible object, to solve a variety of partial problems.[17]

All too often, such arguments appear to me to be displaced diagnostics of the worldwide defeat of the communist and socialist left in the 1960s and 70s. To be exact, in the proposal for a contingent and hegemonic construction of universality, this historical experience of defeat is first translated in terms of an underlying failure and then in a second move this failure is made into a necessary feature of the social or the political as such, which in principle would be unable to fulfil itself in the plenitude of a transparent society. Conversely, and according to Laclau, the realization of a fully reconciled society, as in the young Marx's notion of "human" as opposed to merely "political" emancipation, would not signal the accomplishment so much as the negation of democratic politics, understood as the hegemonic articulation of a multiplicity of differences: "The idea of a totally emancipated and transparent society, from which all tropological movement between its constitutive parts would have been eliminated, involves the end of all hegemonic relation (and also, as we will see later, of all democratic politics)."[18]

When such arguments are legitimized with textual references to Hegel, Gramsci or Lacan, the reader may in good faith accept the authority of the sources in question, even as we are forced to remain within the traditional confines of a purely philosophical dispute. By contrast, when the necessary failure of any given identity or society to achieve full reconciliation with its own essence is presented as a promising feature inherent in the socio-political space as such, the same reader is left to wonder on what grounds such apodictic affirmations can be made, especially with the degree of confidence exuded in this regard by all three contributors to *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. The success of failure thereby functions as the guarantee of a principle beyond dispute – the facticity of a necessary limit, gap or deadlock to be celebrated or at least accepted, not as a threat or a shortcoming but rather as the promise of an opening towards the radicalization of democracy.

Hidden in this transfiguration of failure into guaranteed success is a historico-political rather than a theoretico-philosophical question, namely, whether and to what extent actually existing forms of communism and socialism failed or were defeated – or, in a combination of the two, whether they were defeated in part because of their failure to accept the limit inherent in all emancipatory projects. Too much confidence in the potential of necessary failure as a jumping-off point for the expansion of radical democracy protects us from having to delve into the minutiae of these historical experiences, with the latter surreptitiously being replaced with authoritative references to the philosophers' favourite authors and concepts – from Hegel's Absolute reinterpreted as pure self-relating negativity, via Jacques Derrida's irreducible play of difference, all the way to Jacques Lacan's Real as that limit-point which resists symbolization.

6

Now, if for a moment we manage to extricate ourselves from the commodified appeal of proper names, the new theory of political universalism can be said to be based on two fundamental postulates (for the time being let us call them thus without worrying about the exact status of the ideas in question as either structure or event-based principles, as quasi-transcendental laws or as historico-political precipitates): (1) *The postulate of the failed absolute*: the realm of being, substance or objectivity cannot (or can no longer) be said to achieve the full closure of the circle of circles of absolute reason; (2) *The postulate of the divided subject*: the realm of consciousness, thought or subjectivity cannot (or can no longer) be said to achieve the free will of the autonomous ego. Between these two postulates there exists an intimate dialectical link – not in the sense of a harmonious fusion or synthesis of the identical subject–object of history, but rather by way of a split correlation that ties the two poles together precisely through the point of lack, failure or impasse inherent in each, which keeps them from becoming united into a One–Whole.

Here, for example, is how Laclau sums up the basic framework that I think he shares with his two interlocutors:

> 1. There is no longer any question of an objectivity which necessarily imposes its own diktats, for the contingent interventions of the social actors partially determine such a structural objectivity. The most we can have is the transient objectivity of a "historical bloc" which partially stabilizes the social flux, but there is no "necessity" whose consciousness exhausts our subjectivity – political or otherwise;

> 2. In the same way, on the side of the "active subject of history" we find only ultimate contingency. But the problem then arises: *where* and how is that subject constituted? What are the places and logics of its constitution which make the actions that subject is supposed to perform compatible with the contingent character of this intervention?[19]

Stepping back into the small world of philosophical names and references, I would argue that what we are encountering here is the minimal common core behind an expansive tradition of post-Hegelian thought. In this tradition of dialectical thinking, to paraphrase and adapt a well-known saying from the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as (barred) *Substance*, but equally as (divided) *Subject*."[20]

On one hand, according to Laclau, the recognition of the constitutive role of antagonism keeps the substance of society from ever forming an objective whole: "As we have repeatedly argued, antagonisms are not objective relations but the point where the limit of all objectivity is shown. Something at least comparable is involved in Lacan's assertion that there is no such thing as

a sexual relationship."[21] On the other hand, the notion of the subject is strictly correlated to this lack or failure that keeps the social from cohering into the recognized necessity of a transparent society that would be fully reconciled with itself, insofar as

> it is the very lack within the structure that is at the origin of the subject. This means that we do not simply have subject positions within the structure, but also the subject as an attempt to fill these structural gaps. That is why we do not have just *identities* but, rather, *identification*.[22]

There is identification, and not just politicized identities, because the subject or agent is always "split" or "divided" between its objective place in society or in the symbolic order, a place which remains "barred" or "crossed" by an essential failure or incompleteness, and its contingent role as a political actor that must be hegemonically produced. As Žižek puts it: "We can also see here how this notion of the subject is strictly correlative to the notion of the 'barred' symbolic structure, of the structure traversed by the antagonistic split of an impossibility that can never be fully symbolized."[23]

7

We can illustrate the expansive nature of this post-Hegelian consensus by referring to three gnomic assertions that in terms of sheer conceptual concision rival Hegel's dictum from his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, all the while showcasing some of the crucial displacements that have taken place in the meantime.

The first statement can be found in Badiou's *Being and Event* and serves to sum up the conceptual trajectory of the entire book: "The impasse of being, which causes the quantitative excess of the state to err without measure, is in truth the pass of the Subject."[24] Here the order of being can be shown mathematically or set-theoretically to harbour an impasse, an incalculable excess of the state of a given situation (the cardinality of the power set) over this situation itself (the cardinality of the original set): there are always more subsets than elements in the original set; and in the case of an infinite set this quantitative excess wanders or errs without measure, similar to the undecidable excrescence of the state in a historico-political situation. However, while the first half of the sentence thus may appear to confirm a gesture more typical of Derridean deconstruction, laying bare the necessary aporias inherent in the representation of the One, the second half makes the apparition of the aporia or impasse itself depend on the pass or passing of the Subject, in the sense borrowed from Lacanian psychoanalysis. Badiou's entire philosophical system can thus be said to combine an ontology of pure multiplicity, based on the impasse of being, with a theory of the divided subject, without whose pass the impasse would not even be apparent in the first place.

The second formulation comes to us from Laclau's preface to Žižek's classic, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: "There is subject because the substance – objectivity – does not manage to constitute itself fully: the location of the subject is that of a fissure at the very centre of the structure."[25] Here, admittedly at the risk of an overly structural description, subject and substance are articulated based on the fissure than runs through each of the two poles otherwise perceived to be autonomous, as in the traditional debates concerning freedom and necessity. Again, deconstruction turns out to be helpful in this case as well, except that Laclau – like Badiou, Žižek and other such major voices in the Lacano-Althusserian school – adds the need for a subjective intervention to decide the undecidable: "Indeed, deconstruction reveals that it is the 'undecidables' which form the ground on which any structure is based. I have elsewhere sustained that in this sense, the subject is merely the distance between the undecidable structure and the decision."[26]

Finally, a third version of this peculiar articulation between substance and subject, this time in terms of the relation between power and agency, can be found in Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power*. "Agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled," Butler writes as though this postulate were always and everywhere an irrevocable law of subjectivity as such.

> As a subject *of* power (where "of" connotes both "belonging to" and "wielding"), the subject eclipses the conditions of its own emergence; it eclipses power with power. The conditions not only make possible the subject but enter into the subject's formation. They are made present in the acts of that formation and in the acts of the subject that follow.[27]

Or, to use an even more succinct formulation from Butler's contemporary book on *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*: "Whereas some critics mistake the critique of sovereignty for the demolition of agency, I propose that agency begins where sovereignty wanes."[28]

Whichever version one prefers – whether in terms of the impasse of being and the subjective pass, the undecidable aporia and the decision or the enabling and eclipsing of agency by power – based on this thoroughly revised dialectic between a failed or barred substance and a divided or split subject, the new politics of universality proceeds not despite but thanks to the gap that separates an agent's place in social being and their role or consciousness as a political actor. The universal, then, does not correspond to an already given identity but must be actively produced in a series of decisions and interventions, of identifications that are also always in part disidentifications and that inscribe themselves in the objective situation of the moment through this situation's very own symptomatic blind spots and aporias.

8

At this point, we can return to our question about the exact status of the twin postulates supporting this post-Hegelian consensus regarding the politics of universalism. Indeed, even in their revised versions these postulates may appear to be coming out of nowhere, like the truths proffered by old Hegel himself according to a letter from Marx to his fellow Young Hegelian, Arnold Ruge: "Up to now the philosophers had the solution of all riddles lying in their lectern, and the stupid uninitiated world had only to open its jaws to let the roast partridges of absolute science fly into its mouth."[29]

   In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels would go on to give multiple accounts of the fate of post-Hegelian thought by referring to the comings and goings between "substance" and "self-consciousness" – with a first (Spinozist-Feuerbachian) lineage or tendency on the side of substance favouring the sensuous-material presuppositions that are always already given and the other (Fichtean-Hessean) lineage on the side of self-consciousness or subjectivity favouring the transcendental–ideal act or deed of positing. Common to both sides, though, is an inability to leave the mystifying realm of philosophical theses and counter-theses:

> German criticism has, right up to its latest efforts, never left the realm of philosophy. It by no means examines its general philosophic premises, but in fact all its problems originate in a definite philosophical system, that of Hegel. Not only in its answers, even in its questions there was a mystification. This dependence on Hegel is the reason why not one of these modern critics has even attempted a comprehensive criticism of the Hegelian system, however much each professes to have advanced beyond Hegel. Their polemics against Hegel and against one another are confined to this – each takes one aspect of the Hegelian system and turns this against the whole system as well as against the aspects chosen by the others. To begin with they took pure, unfalsified Hegelian categories such as "substance" and "self-consciousness," later they secularized these categories by giving them more profane names such as "species," "the unique," "man," etc.[30]

Here Marx and Engels are hinting at the common starting point as well as the subsequent splits and attempts at a synthesis among the different Young Hegelians. Contrary to Hegel's own notion of philosophy as "presupposition-less," *voraussetzungslos*, or at least devoid of any presuppositions other than those posited by the absolute spirit itself, all Young Hegelians start out from the premise that thought is preceded by "real" or "effective presuppositions," *wirkliche Voraussetzungen*. In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Laclau briefly reminds his reader of this context with a reference to the influential example of Schelling:

This was the main line of Schelling's criticism of Hegel: he attempted to show that, apart from many inconsistent deductions in his *Logic*, the whole project of a presuppositionless philosophy was flawed, for it could not even start without accepting the laws of logic and a rationalist approach to concepts (as innate ideas), a dogmatic metaphysical realism which starts from "Being" as a lifeless objectivity, and language as a pre-constituted medium. Against this vision, Schelling asserts that Philosophy cannot be presuppositionless, and that human existence is a starting point more primary than the concept. Feuerbach, Kierkegaard and Engels – all of whom attended Schelling's courses – accepted his basic criticism, and developed their own particular approaches, giving priority to "existence" over "reason."[31]

However, while Laclau's constructivist viewpoint refuses to accept such a strict divide between "existence" and "reason," insofar as the former is always partially and retroactively stitched together by the action of the latter, for Marx and Engels the fundamental principle behind a truly materialist method requires us to look at philosophy itself as a form of the real – one form among others, together with other ideological forms such as art or literature, and perhaps not even the most significant one. Hence, in Marx, the truth of a concept such as the universal must be interrogated in practice from the point of view of those real or historical presuppositions whose internal logic this concept helps us understand:

> The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Humanity must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of its thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.[32]

At issue here are some of the meta-methodological issues that Butler also raises in her opening questionnaire for *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*: "What is the status of 'logic' in describing social and political process and in the description of subject-formation?"; "Are such logics incarnated in social practice?"; and "What is the relation between logic and social practice?"[33] Butler's polemic with Laclau and Žižek in this regard can be summed up by saying that social practice thoroughly informs the logic we use to describe social and political processes, whereas a structural or formalist understanding of social logics risks reducing such processes to nothing more than separable and often interchangeable examples or illustrations of an ahistorical or quasi-transcendental concept already fully defined beforehand at the level of theory or philosophy.

9

Žižek, initially at least, points to the need for a material historicization of the politics of the universal. The task that theory must perform is not to discover

what is excluded from the game but to account for how it is that universality emerges. In addition to this, one must be attentive to the changes in the way that universality works in the socio-symbolic space. And so, for example, modern, premodern and postmodern notions of universality are not simply different in terms of particular contents, but universality functions differently in each instance:

> "Universality" *as such* does not mean the same thing since the establishment of bourgeois market society in which individuals participate in the social order not on behalf of their particular place within the global social edifice but *immediately*, as "abstract" human beings.[34]

This leads Žižek, at least for a moment, to consider what we might call "real universalization" on the model of what Alfred Sohn-Rethel calls "real abstraction," two phenomena which moreover, qua historico-theoretical processes, are nearly identical. In this instance, Žižek focuses on how abstraction is part of social life in the specific conditions of a global market economy and the way that concrete individuals relate to the world around them. Marx describes how in a world of commodity fetishism individuals relate to themselves and to the things they encounter as though these were contingent instances of abstract-universal notions. On this basis, Žižek says, what someone is, in their concrete existence, is experienced as contingent. What defines the individual in a market society is the abstract capacity to think or to work. Any object that is consumed is abstracted from the formal capacity to desire. Likewise, in the modern world, someone understands their work activity, or profession, as the result of a purely contingent free choice. The medieval serf, in comparison, did not think of peasant life as a profession but as something they are simply born into.[35]

Similarly, when in a footnote to his first contribution to *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Laclau appears ready to begin answering Butler's opening methodological questions, he too has recourse to the Marxian logic of commodity fetishism to describe his analytical concepts at the same time as real abstractions:

> Formal analysis and abstraction are essential for the study of concrete historical processes – not only because the theoretical construction of the object is the requirement of any intellectual practice worthy of the name, but also because social reality itself generates abstractions which organize its own principles of functioning. Thus Marx, for instance, showed how the *formal* and *abstract* laws of commodity production are at the core of the actual concrete workings of capitalist societies. In the same way, when we try to explain the structuration of political fields through categories such as "logic of equivalence", "logic of difference" and "production of empty signifiers", we are attempting to construct a theoretical horizon whose

abstractions are not merely analytical but *real* abstractions on which the constitution of identities and political articulations depends.[36]

However, if we ignore the way that Žižek criticizes Laclau by lumping him together with Butler for failing to clarify the historicity of their respective theoretical models, both Žižek and Laclau share a refusal to go all the way in the effort at historicization. For the Slovenian, with the explicit approval of the Argentinian, this entails distinguishing between two levels of analysis – the first aiming at the internal logics of the space for the hegemonic or performative construction of universality and the second attentive to the more fundamental exclusion/foreclosure that opens this space of the universal itself. Žižek applies this equally to Butler and Laclau: "the need to distinguish more explicitly between contingency/substitutability *within* a certain historical horizon and the more fundamental exclusion/foreclosure that *grounds this very horizon.*"[37] He adds that when Laclau argues that any attempt to reach the fullness of society inevitably fails, he is conflating a contingent hegemonic struggle and a more fundamental exclusion that sustains that struggle. Likewise, when Butler claims that the subject is incomplete because it is constituted by specific, politically salient exclusions, she potentially conflates the endless political struggle of/for inclusion/exclusion and a fundamental exclusion that sustains that field.

To his original question ("how, in what specific historical conditions, does abstract universality itself become a 'fact of (social) life'?"), which pointed in the direction of a Marxian understanding of real universalization as synonymous with real abstraction, Žižek answers in a resolutely ahistorical manner. The form of universality, he argues, emerges through some kind of split – a dislocation, an impossibility or a repression. He does not give attention to the specific, contingent content that hegemonizes the empty universal but to the specific content that has to be excluded so that the universal itself emerges as the space of hegemonic struggle.[38]

These two levels of analysis, which for Žižek define the difference between historicism and historicity – whereas for Laclau they can be translated in terms of the Heideggerian distinction between the ontic and the ontological – put an absolute limit on what the logic of periodization can produce. According to this argument, historicism cannot become radical or absolute, as in the case of Antonio Gramsci, for the possibility of history itself supposedly cannot be thought without an ahistorical kernel. Whereas historicism deals with the endless contingent play of substitutions within a field of (im)possibility, historicity addresses the structural principles of this (im)possibility. For Žižek, then, historical contingency must include the tension between historical change and this ahistorical condition of (im)possibility: "the historicist theme of the endless open play of substitutions is the very form of ahistorical ideological closure."[39] In other words, historicism obfuscates historicity. This, finally, is what Butler would have misunderstood by denouncing the Lacanian "bar" on the subject as a static, formalist-transcendental limit-point that functions as a stubborn

obstacle to its own performative transformation. Lacan's theory of sexuation, the notion that there is no sexual relationship, or that sexual difference is the real–impossible, implies that sexual difference cannot be reduced to a fixed set of symbolic oppositions or inclusions/exclusions but that this bar of difference, trauma or deadlock resists every attempt at symbolization. The failure to translate sexual difference into symbolic coordinates is what "opens up the terrain of hegemonic struggle for what 'sexual difference' will mean."[40] What is contingently barred, then, according to Žižek, is not what is excluded. Supposedly, what is *barred* defines the ahistorical (ontological or quasi-transcendental) kernel of historicity itself, whereas what is *excluded* defines the historicist (ontic or cultural-hegemonic) play of inclusions and exclusions within the space of the universal.

10

Today, the arguments have become legion for such a split-level division between historicism and historicity, between the ontic and the ontological, or between the tactics and strategies of politics and the opening of the space of the political as such. In their most radical version, these distinctions are then said to be incompatible with the still all-too-optimistic belief in their emancipatory potential as seen in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. Instead, a profound awareness of the kind of "originary repression" needed for the space of the political in the West to become possible in the first place, as in the exclusion of the Black/Slave from the history of Man, produces an absolute incommensurability between the time of historical progress and the time of the paradigm of historicity itself. Thus, Frank B. Wilderson III writes for example in his recent *Afropessimism*, quoting from his own earlier book, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, with added explanations in square brackets:

> For the Slave, historical time is no more viable a temporality of emancipation than biographical time – the time of empathy. Thus, neither the analytic aesthetic [the demystifying cure of ethical assessment] nor the empathetic aesthetic [the mystifying "cure" of moral judgment] can accompany a theory of change that restores Black people to relationality. The social and political time of emancipation proclamations should not be confused with the [time of the paradigm itself, a temporality] in which Blackness and Slaveness are imbricated ab initio, which is to say, from the beginning.[41]

And, in a concise formulation with strikingly Heideggerian and Žižekian resonances, the author adds: "Blacks are constituted by a violence that separates the time of the paradigm (ontological time) from time *within* the paradigm (historical time)."[42] Thus, even as they refer to utterly disparate phenomena

that it might seem offensive to compare, namely, the "primordial repression" of the maternal Thing for Žižek, as opposed to the "abjection" of the Black/Slave as nonhuman or subhuman to the Western idea of Man or the Human for Wilderson, at the far end of this radicalization in the logic of universality and its discontents it seems that the very possibility of emancipation appears to be blocked for good.

Going back one last time to the question about the status of the postulates commonly assumed in contemporary theory and philosophy, I would argue that even the gesture of radical ontologization can and perhaps should be interpreted as itself a historico-political precipitate. In fact, from Heidegger's retrieval of the ancient Greek notion of *ousía*, which, instead of "being" or "presencing," refers in everyday language to the common possessions, or the small capital, that can be inherited, all the way to Wilderson's use of "absolute dereliction," to translate and/or paraphrase Frantz Fanon's notion of the *désordre absolu* that defines the lived experience of the Black person, it is possible for many concepts of philosophy to be traced back to their actual or effective presuppositions. Take Badiou's "singular universality," for instance, which is central to his *Saint Paul*. An apparent synonym for Hegel's "concrete universality," likewise embraced by Butler and Žižek in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, the notion of the singular nonetheless has a unique material history. Often in the writings of philosophers, more inclined to look inward than to see themselves as part of ongoing social practices, such a history comes through only in the use of certain symptomatic expressions or metaphors. Thus, at first sight, the invention of the singular can be attributed to the brilliance of one thinker such as the late medieval Wilhelm of Ockham, in what would appear to be a decisive if not definitive victory of the nominalists over Platonic realists in the scholastic quarrel about the status of universals. Pierre Alferi, in this sense, is fully justified in giving his superb study the title and subtitle of *Guillaume d'Occam: Le Singulier*. If we look closer at the philosopher's use of language, however, we see that to describe what is nothing short of an ontological revolution produced by Ockham, Alferi in French repeatedly has recourse to the metaphor of the *cadastre*, that is, a whole new register or map of landed properties for tax purposes. For example, Alferi at one point writes:

> Thus is established a new *cadastre* of the genres of discourse in which ontology acquires a new place and new limits. Everything that concerns universality, commonality, species, and genres is converted merely into semiology. To a legitimate ontology belongs only pure singularity, such as it is, as the fundamental marker of entities. Given that the old universalist ontology has been destroyed, and its greatest problem – that of "individuation" – has been dissipated, the only question that motivates the ontological discourse from now on is the following: what is a singular thing?[43]

In fact, what we witness here is an implicit description of the process of real universalization, which elevates the singular to the only thing that exists while destroying the old ontology of pre-given universals, genres and common notions – reducing them to mere sign-symbols that are the subject of semiology. We might even say that the victory of the singular over the universal, or of nominalism over realism, a victory so widespread that it goes without saying, defines one of the philosophical forms of the real that is the movement of the enclosures, part of what Marx describes as the primitive or originary so-called accumulation without which capitalism would not have been possible.[44]

Žižek himself, in his inchoate attempts at periodization and before abandoning history in search of its ahistorical kernel, seems to forget that what "frees" the modern individual in his or her professional choices or artistic tastes, unlike the servant who is born into the organic whole of feudal society, is the violent ripping apart of all common bonds both to the land and to the community, not just through the movement of enclosures but also through the conquest and colonization of the New World, the antagonistic mirror in which Old Europe for the first time is able to see itself in the image of a reflexive Self, both different from and dominant over the premodern Other. The emergence of modern market society, for Žižek, implies the "irreducible contingency, the gap between the abstract human subject and its particular way of life," a reflexive society in which we no longer identify certain social rules and social roles as natural but as a multitude of historically conditioned choices.[45]

In Etienne Balibar's words, this is the process that can be described as real universalization, or universality as reality, as opposed to universality as hegemonic fiction and universality as ideal symbol:

> Real universality is a stage in history where, for the first time, "Humankind" as a single web of interrelations is no longer an ideal or utopian notion but an actual condition for every individual; nevertheless, far from representing a situation of mutual recognition, it actually coincides with a generalized pattern of conflicts, hierarchies, and exclusions. It is not even a situation in which individuals virtually communicate with each other, but much more one where global communication networks provide every individual with a distorted image or a stereotype of all the others, either as "kin" or as "aliens," thus raising gigantic obstacles before any dialogue. "Identities" are less isolated *and* more incompatible, less univocal *and* more antagonistic.[46]

Universalism, as Marx might have said, has thus become practically true: "What is now called 'globalization' is only the reversal of a multisecular process, constantly fostered by the capitalist expansion, which had started with the constitution of rival national units, at least in the core of the world-economy."[47] By contrast, if we want to reopen a future horizon for socialist or communist politics, perhaps the invocation of a new emancipatory kind of universalism is

not sufficient. As Marx understood perfectly well when he devoted the final years of his militant research to the investigation of communal forms of land-ownership and kinship, whether in Tsarist Russia or pre-Hispanic Mexico, perhaps we also must think back on the production and reproduction of those commons and communes so violently freed up and ripped apart – even in the name of the singular – as part of the process of real universalization.[48]

Notes

1 See Alain Badiou, "Eight Theses on the Universal," in *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004), 143–52; Jacques Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," *October* #61 (Summer 1992), 58–64; and Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000). See also Etienne Balibar, "Ambiguous Universality," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 7:1 (Spring 1995), 49–74.

2 Ernesto Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 86.

3 Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 6–7.

4 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 7.

5 Alain Badiou, "The Communist Hypothesis," *New Left Review* #49 (January-February 2008), 41–42; compare with "The Communist Idea," in Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2010), 229–60.

6 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

7 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); and compare with Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, eds. *The Idea of Communism* (London: Verso, 2010); Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, eds. *The Idea of Communism Volume 2: The New York Conference* (London: Verso, 2013); and Alex Taek-Gwang Lee and Slavoj Žižek, eds. *The Idea of Communism Volume 3: The Seoul Conference* (London: Verso, 2016).

8 Linda Zerilli, "This Universalism Which Is Not One," *Diacritics* 28:2 (Summer 1998), 4, 8.

9 Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony," 56.

10 Butler, "Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 20–21.

11 Butler, "Restaging the Universal," 39.

12 Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 102.

13 Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 73–74. See also Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," 95–98.

14 Butler, Laclau and Žižek, "Introduction," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 1–2.

15 Butler, Laclau and Žižek, "Introduction," 2.

16 Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," 94.

17 Laclau, quoted in Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," 93.

18 Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony," 57.

19 Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony," 49.

20 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 10. Parentheses added.

21 Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony," 72.

22 Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony," 58.
23 Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," 119.
24 Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 429. For an analysis of this formula, see especially Chapter 4, "The Ontological Impasse," in Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 157–73.
25 Ernesto Laclau, "Preface," in Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), xv.
26 Laclau, "Preface," xv.
27 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 14–15.
28 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 15–16.
29 Karl Marx, "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 13.
30 Karl Marx (with Friedrich Engels), *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 34–35. For a fuller discussion of the consequences of this logic of the presupposition, see Bruno Bosteels, "Marx's Theory of the Subject," in Karen Benezra, ed. *Accumulation and Subjectivity in Latin America* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2022), 255–74.
31 Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony," 62.
32 Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 144. Translation modified.
33 Butler, "Questions," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 6.
34 Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 104.
35 Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," 105.
36 Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony," 86–87.
37 Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," 108.
38 Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," 110.
39 Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," 111–12.
40 Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," 110–11.
41 Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 218.
42 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 218.
43 Pierre Alferi, *Guillaume d'Occam: Le Singulier* (Paris: Minuit, 1989), 63.
44 In his "History and Eternity," Borges writes: "Now, like the spontaneous and bewildered prose-speaker of comedy, we all practice nominalism *sans le savoir*, as if it were a general premise of our thought, an acquired axiom. Useless, therefore, to comment on it." Jorge Luis Borges, "A History of Eternity," *Selected Non-fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin, 1999), 135. Translation modified.
45 Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," 128.
46 Balibar, "Ambiguous Universality," 56.
47 Balibar, "Ambiguous Universality," 69–70.
48 See, for example, Bruno Bosteels, *La comuna mexicana* (Mexico City: Akal, 2021).

Chapter 5

Capitalism, Class and Universalism

Escaping the Cul-de-sac of Postcolonial Theory

Vivek Chibber

After a long, seemingly interminable hiatus, we appear to be witnessing the re-emergence of a global resistance to capitalism, at least in its neoliberal guise. It has been more than four decades since anti-capitalist movements exploded with such force on a global scale. To be sure, there were tremors every now and then, brief episodes that temporarily derailed the neoliberal project as it swept the globe. But not like that which we have witnessed in Europe, the Middle East and the Americas since the Arab Spring. It is still impossible to predict how far they will develop and how deep will be their impact. But they have already changed the complexion of left discourse. Suddenly, the issue of capital and class is back on the agenda, not as an abstract or theoretical discussion but as an urgent political question.

But the re-emergence of movements has revealed that the retreat of the past three decades has exacted a toll. The political resources available to working people are the weakest they have been in decades. The organizations of the left – unions and political parties – have been hollowed out, or worse yet, have become complicit in the management of austerity. But the left's weakness is not just political or organizational – it also extends to theory. The political defeats of the past decades have been accompanied by a dramatic churning on the intellectual front. It is not that there has been a flight away from radical theory or commitments to a radical intellectual agenda. Arguably, self-styled progressive or radical intellectuals are still very impressive in number at a good many universities, at least in North America. It is, rather, that the very meaning of radicalism has changed. Under the influence of post-structuralist thinking, the basic concepts of the socialist tradition are either considered suspect or rejected outright. To take but one example, the idea that capitalism has a *real* structure which imposes real compulsions on actors, that class is rooted in real relations of exploitation, or that labour has a real interest in collective organization – all these ideas, which were the common sense of the left for almost two centuries, are taken to be hopelessly outdated.

Whereas these criticisms of materialism and political economy came out of the post-structuralist milieu generally, they have found a particularly sharp expression in the most recent product of that current, which has come to be

known as postcolonial theory. Over the past couple of decades, it is not the Francophone philosophical tradition that has been the flag-bearer of the attack on materialism or political economy. It is, interestingly enough, a clutch of theorists from South Asia and other parts of the Global South that have led the charge. Perhaps the most conspicuous and influential of these are Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Ranajit Guha and the *Subaltern Studies* group, but it also includes the Colombian Anthropologist Arturo Escobar, the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano and the Argentine literary theorist Walter Mignolo, among others. The most common target of their criticism is Marxist theory, of course, but their ire extends to the Enlightenment tradition itself. Of all the weaknesses of Enlightenment radicalism, what most agitates postcolonial theorists is its universalizing tendencies, i.e. its claims for the validity of certain categories, regardless of culture and of place. Marxism figures in their analysis as the theory that most pointedly expresses this aspect of the Enlightenment's deadly intellectual inheritance.

Marxists insist that certain categories like class, capitalism, exploitation and the like have cross-cultural validity. These categories describe economic practices not just in Christian Europe but also in Hindu India and Muslim Egypt. For postcolonial theorists, this kind of universalizing zeal is deeply problematic – as theory, and just as important, as a guide for political practice. It is rejected not just because it is wrong but also because it supposedly deprives actors of the intellectual resources vital for effective political practice. It does so in two ways: because in being misleading, it is a questionable guide to action – any theory that is wrong will perform poorly in directing political practice. But also, because it refuses to recognize the autonomy and the creativity of actors in their particular location. Instead, these universalizing theories shoehorn the local and the particular into the rigid categories that are derived from European experience. They deny local agents recognition of their practice, and in so doing, marginalize their real agency. This worry about the use of universalizing categories is so strong that it often does not appear as a criticism of illicit or unwise generalizations but as a general injunction against universalisms.

Postcolonial theory presents itself as not just a criticism of the radical Enlightenment tradition, but as its replacement. In this essay, I will critically examine the basis of postcolonial theory's claim to be a guiding framework for radical politics. I will show that, ironically, it is the very elements of its framework that postcolonial theorists present as genuine advances that count it out as a serious political theory.

I am going to argue, in particular, that the strictures against universalizing categories ought to be rejected. I will show that they are both incorrect and contradictory. My argument is not, of course, that all universalizing claims are defensible. They may or not be, and some of them will be quite problematic. My argument, rather, is that there are some universal categories that are defensible. More importantly, I will suggest that certain key concepts that postcolonial theorists question or reject are not only legitimate but are essential for

any progressive politics. These are concepts that have been at the very heart of radical politics since the birth of the modern left – and they are the ones that have, after a long hiatus, re-emerged in the global organizing against austerity in the past few years.

The Turn Against Universalism

In one of the most widely used texts on postcolonial studies, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, the editors explain the motivation behind the turn against universalizing categories.[1] It turns out that European domination of the colonial world was based in part on just these sorts of concepts. "The assumption of universalism," we are told, "is a fundamental feature of the construction of colonial power because the 'universal' features of humanity are the characteristics of those who occupy positions of political dominance." The mechanism through which universalism abets colonial domination is the elevation of some very specific facts about European culture to the status of general descriptions of humanity, valid at a global scale. Cultures that do not match these very specific descriptions are then consigned to the status of being backward, needing tutoring in civilization, incapable of governing themselves. As the editors describe it, "the myth of universality is thus a primary strategy of imperial control ... on the basis of an assumption that 'European' equals 'universal'."[2]

We see in this argument two of the most commonly held views by postcolonial theorists. One is a formal, meta-theoretical idea – that claims to universality are intrinsically suspect because they ignore social heterogeneity. This is why, in postcolonial texts, we often find critiques of universalism cashed out in terms of its homogenizing, levelling effects. The worry is that it ignores diversity, and in so doing, marginalizes any practice or social convention that does not conform to what is being elevated to the universal. And the act of marginalization is an act of suppression, of the exertion of power. The second view is a substantive one – that universalization is complicit with European domination in particular. This is so because in the intellectual world, Western theories are utterly dominant. Insofar as they are the frameworks that guide intellectual inquiry, or the theories that inform political practice, they imbue it with an enduring Eurocentrism. The frameworks and theories inherited from the Enlightenment bear the mark of their geographical origin. But the mark is not easily discerned. It operates insidiously, as the hidden premise of these doctrines. The task of postcolonial criticism is to expunge it, by exposing its presence and highlighting its effects.

Owing to its assigned complicity with colonial domination, anti-universalism has become a watchword among postcolonial theorists. And because of the enormous influence of postcolonial theory in academic culture, it has become the common sense of many on the left. So too the hostility to the "grand narratives" associated with Marxism and progressive liberalism. The action these

days is in "the fragment," the marginal, the practices and cultural conventions that are unique to a particular setting and cannot be subsumed into a generalized analysis – as Dipesh Chakrabarty describes them, the "heterogeneities and incommensurabilities" of the local.[3] This is where we are directed to search for political agency.

The hostility to universalizing theories carries some interesting implications. The radical tradition since Marx and Engels' time has relied on two foundational premises for all of its political analysis. The first is that as capitalism expands across the globe, it imposes certain economic constraints – one might even call them compulsions – on the actors that come under its sway. Hence, as it takes root in Asia, Latin America, Africa and elsewhere, economic production in all these regions is forced to abide by a *common* set of rules. How the regions develop, what the tempo of growth is, will not be identical – it will proceed unevenly, at different rates, with considerable institutional variation. They will not look the same. But their differences will be worked out in response to a common set of compulsions, coming from the underlying capitalist structure. On the other side of the analysis, it is taken for granted that as capitalism imposes its logic on actors, as it exercises its economic and political domination, it will elicit a response from labouring groups. They will resist its depredations in order to defend their well-being. This will be true regardless of the cultural or religious identity of these groups. The reason for their resistance is that, whatever the facts about their local culture, whatever its "incommensurabilities" with respect to other ways of being, capitalism generates an assault on some basic needs that all people have in common. So just as capitalism imposes a common logic of reproduction across regions, it also elicits a common resistance from labour. Again, the resistance will not take the same form, it will not be ubiquitous, but the potential for its exercise will be a universal one, because the wellspring that generates it – workers' drive to defend their well-being – is common across cultures.

These two beliefs have been foundational to much radical analysis and practice for more than a century. But if we accept postcolonial theory's injunctions against universalism, they must both be rejected, for they are both unabashedly universalistic. The implications are profound. What is left of radical analysis if we expunge capitalism from its theoretical tool kit? How do we analyse the global depression since 2007, how do we make sense of the drive for austerity that has swept the Atlantic world, if not by tracing the logic of profit-driven economies and the relentless struggle to maximize profits? And what do we make of the global resistance to these impositions, how do we understand the fact that the same slogans can be found in Cairo, Buenos Aires, Madison and London, if not through some universal interests that are being expressed in them? Indeed, how do we generate *any* analysis of capitalism without recourse to at least some universalizing categories?

The Universal Compulsions of Capital

The stakes being rather high, one would think that postcolonial theorists might grant amnesty to concepts like capitalism or class interests. Perhaps these are examples of universalizing categories that have some justification and might therefore escape the charge of Eurocentrism. But as it happens, not only are these concepts included in the list of offenders, they are singled out as *exemplars* of all that is suspect in Marxist theory. Gyan Prakash expresses the sentiment well in one of his broadsides against Enlightenment (e.g. Marxist) thought. To analyse social formations through the prism of capitalism, or capitalist development, he suggests, inevitably leads to some kind of reductionism. It makes all social phenomena seem as if they are nothing but reflexes of economic relations. Hence, he argues, "making capitalism the foundational theme [of historical analyses] amounts to homogenizing the histories that remain heterogenous within it."[4] This tendency blinds Marxists to the specificity of local social relations. They either fail to notice practices and conventions that are independent of capitalist dynamics or simply assume that whatever independence they have will soon dissolve. Even more, the very idea that social formations can be analysed through the lens of their economic dynamics – their mode of production – is not only mistaken but also Eurocentric and complicit with imperial domination. "Like many other nineteenth-century European ideas," Prakash notes, "the staging of the Eurocentric mode-of-production narrative as history should be seen as an analogue of nineteenth-century territorial imperialism."[5]

Dipesh Chakrabarty has given this argument some structure in his influential book, *Provincializing Europe* (2007). The idea of a universalizing capitalism, he argues, is guilty of two sins. The *first* is that it denies non-Western societies their history. This it does by squeezing them into a rigid schema imported from the European experience. Instead of respecting the autonomy and specificity of regional experiences, Marxists turn regional histories into so many *variations on a theme*. Every country is categorized on the extent to which it conforms with or departs from an idealized concept of capitalism. In so doing, regional histories are never able to escape from being footnotes to the European experience. The telos of all national histories remains the same, with Europe as their endpoint. The *second* error associated with the idea of capitalism is that it evacuates all contingency from historical development. The faith that Marxists repose in the universalizing dynamic of capitalism blinds them to the possibility of "discontinuities, ruptures, and shifts in the historical process," as Chakrabarty puts it.[6] Freed from interruption by human agency, the future becomes a knowable entity, drawing towards a determinable end.

Chakrabarty is crystallizing a view held by many postcolonial theorists, that if they allow categories like capitalism a central place in their tool kit, they also commit to a historical teleology. Taken together, the two criticisms I have outlined suggest that the universalizing assumptions of concepts like capitalism are not just mistaken but politically dangerous. They deny non-Western societies

the possibility of their own history, but they also disparage the possibility of their crafting their own futures. In so doing, they impugn the value of political agency and struggle.

The fact that postcolonial theorists include the concept of capitalism in their list of offending ideas bequeathed by the Enlightenment would seem to generate a conundrum. Surely there is no denying the fact that, over the course of the past century, capitalism really has spread across the globe, imbricating itself in most of the postcolonial world. And if it has taken root in some areas, whether in Asia or Latin America, it must also have affected the actual institutional make-up of those regions. Their economies have been transformed by the pressures of capital accumulation, and many of their non-economic institutions have been changed to accommodate its logic. There is, therefore, a common thread that runs through these regions, even though they remain highly diverse, and this thread does bind them together in some way. Because it speaks directly to this, the category of capitalism surely has some purchase in the analysis of their economic and political evolution. For any such analysis to be taken seriously at all, it has to recognize this simple and basic fact – because it *is* a fact. But the rhetoric of postcolonial theory seems perilously close to denying this very fact when it castigates Marxists for abiding by "universalizing" concepts like capitalism. The conundrum, then, is this: postcolonial theory seems to be denying the reality of capitalism having spread across the world; and if it is not denying it, then what are the grounds on which it can criticize Marxists for insisting that the concept has cross-cultural validity?

In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty affirms that capitalism has in fact globalized over the past century or so. But while he acknowledges the fact of its *globalization*, he denies that this is tantamount to its *universalization*.[7] This allows him, and theorists who follow this line of thinking, to affirm the obvious fact that market dependence has spread to the far corners of the world, while still denying that the category of capitalism can be used for its analysis.[8] For Chakrabarty, a properly universalizing capitalism is one that subordinates all social practices to its own logic. A capitalism that spreads to any particular corner of the world can be said to have globalized. But it cannot have universalized unless it transforms all social relations to reflect its own priorities and values. Insofar as there are practices or social relations that remain independent, that interrupt its totalizing thrust, its mission remains incomplete. Indeed, it can be judged to have failed. "No historic form of capital, however global in its reach," Chakrabarty argues, "can ever be a universal. No global, or even local for that matter, capital can ever represent the universal logic of capital, for any historically available form of capital is a provisional compromise" between its totalizing drive, on the one hand, and the obduracy of local customs and conventions, on the other.[9] The basic idea here is that the abstract logic of capital is always modified in some way by local social relations; insofar as it is forced to adjust to them in some way, the description of capitalism that is contained in abstract, general theories will not map onto the way in which people

are actually living their lives on the ground. There will be a gap between the description of capitalism in the abstract and the really existing capitalism in a given region. This is how it can globalize, but without ever universalizing itself – it could be said to have universalized only if it properly universalized certain *properties*.

In purely formal terms, Chakrabarty's arguments are sound. It is an entirely justified argument to insist that an object should be classified as belonging to a certain kind of thing, or a category, only if it exhibits the properties associated with that kind of thing. If what we call capitalism in its Peruvian instance does not have the same properties as in its classic examples, then we might justifiably say that to classify what we find in Peru as "capitalist" is misleading and that the category itself is potentially misleading. The question, of course, is whether or not the properties we are identifying with the universal can be justified. It could be that Chakrabarty is formally correct but substantively mistaken. He is right to insist that capitalism must properly transmit certain properties to new regions if it can be said to have universalized – but he might be mistaken in the properties on which he bases his judgements. And this is in fact what I will show in what follows.

Chakrabarty's entire case rests on one question: is it in fact justified to require that all social relations become subordinated to capitalism, for us to be able to use the category of capital? Chakrabarty's argument is not all that idiosyncratic. He is drawing on a tradition within Marxian theorizing itself, which has consistently described capitalism as a totalizing system, driven to expand, to subordinate all social relations to its own logic. But it is one thing to point to capitalism's corrosive effect on social conventions. It is quite another to build the strongest version of that observation into one's definition of capitalism itself. Postcolonial theorists make a subtle but crucial error. They accept the description of capitalism by Marx, in which he characterizes it as having an internal drive for self-expansion. Thus, Ranajit Guha summarizes Marx as arguing the following:

> This [universalizing] tendency derives from the self-expansion of capital. Its function is to create a world market, subjugate all antecedent modes of production, and replace all jural and institutional concomitants of such modes and generally the entire edifice of precapitalist cultures by laws, institutions, values, and other elements of a culture appropriate to bourgeois rule.[10]

Marx is making two claims here: first, that capitalism is driven to expand, and it is this relentless pressure towards ever new regions that is behind its universalization; second, that the universalizing drive also impels it to dismantle any legal or cultural conventions that are inimical to its dominance. Postcolonial theorists tend to focus on the second clause in this passage – the idea that capitalism, as it universalizes, will replace "the entire edifice" of pre-capitalist values and

laws with new ones. This is what is behind Chakrabarty's denial that capital has universalized, since it is clear to him that there are many institutions in capitalism, especially in non-Western societies, that cannot be derived from the logic of capital, and indeed, which have a reproductive integrity of their own. That being the case, is it not legitimate to conclude that universalization has failed?

Now it could be that there is an overly narrow fixation here on Marx's characterization. One way to proceed, if we wanted to reject Chakrabarty's argument, is to simply set aside Marx's passage and argue for a new criterion for successful universalization. But a case can be made that even this passage does not lend itself to postcolonial theorists' reading of it. Marx is not arguing that capital requires a root-and-branch transformation of all institutions but that the institutions in place will be those that are "appropriate to bourgeois rule." It is true that this might call for a dismantling of very many parts of the pre-capitalist legal and normative conventions – but whether or not it does, and how far the call for dismantling goes, will be decided by what is needed for capitalism to reproduce itself – for its self-expansion to proceed. It is entirely possible that this expansion of accumulation could proceed while leaving intact a great many aspects of the *ancien régime*. At least, this is one reading of the passage.

It is also a more plausible way to understand what is involved in capitalism's expansion. Nobody, including Chakrabarty, Guha and other postcolonial theorists, disputes that capitalism is, in the first instance, a way of organizing economic activities – the production and distribution of goods. In an economy organized along capitalist lines, economic units are compelled to focus single-mindedly on expanding their operations, in an endless cycle of accumulation. Capitalists pursue profits because if their firms fail to do so, they are overtaken by their rivals in the market. Wherever capitalism goes, so too does this imperative. This is what Marx was referring to in the first part of the passage quoted above and neither Guha nor Chakrabarty questions it. All that is required for capitalism to reproduce itself is for this imperative to be followed by economic actors – the imperative for firms to seek out greater markets, more profit, by outcompeting their rivals.

Now, if capitalists are single-mindedly driven to accumulate, then their attitude towards cultural and legal institutions will be instrumental towards the achievement of this goal. If the institutions in place inhibit the accumulation of capital, if they do not respect private property or if they insulate labour from having to seek out waged work, then those institutions will most likely come under attack, as Marx suggests. Capital will carry out a campaign to overturn them. But what if existing institutions do not come into conflict with accumulation? What if they are neutral with respect to capitalist interests? This is the crucial question, which Chakrabarty simply ignores. In his argument, a universalizing capitalism must internalize all social relations to its own logic. It must be a totalizing system, which refuses to allow any autonomy to other social relations. Chakrabarty does produce a reason for this. So long as social practices refuse to conform to the direct needs of capital,

so long as they refuse to reflect capital's own values and priorities, they carry the threat of disrupting its reproduction. They embody "other ways of being in the world" than as a bearer of labour power, or a consumer of commodities.[11] Capital cannot tolerate the possibility of "ways of being in the world" that are not aligned with its own logic. It therefore seeks what he calls their "subjugation/destruction."[12]

This whole argument rests on the assumption that if a practice does not *directly* advance capitalism's reproduction, by being part of what Chakrabarty calls its "life-process," it must elicit a hostile response from capital. But we might ask, why on earth would this be so? Returning to the question I posed in the preceding paragraph, if a practice is simply neutral with respect to accumulation, wouldn't the natural response from capital be one of indifference? Chakrabarty makes it seem as though capitalist managers walk around with their own political Geiger counters, measuring the compatibility of every social practice with their own priorities. But surely the more reasonable picture is this: capitalists seek to expand their operations, make the best possible returns on their investments, and as long as their operations are running smoothly, they simply do not care about the conventions and mores of the surrounding environment. The signal, to them, that something needs to be changed is when aspects of the environment disrupt their operations – by stimulating labour conflict or restricting markets and such. When that happens, they swing into action and target the culprit practices for change. But as for other practices – which may very well embody other "ways of being in the world" – capitalists simply would be indifferent.

As long as local customs do not inhibit or undermine capital accumulation, capitalists will not see any reason to overturn them – this is the conclusion we have reached. This has two immediate implications. The first has to do with Chakrabarty's grounds for denying the universalization of capital. On his argument, the reason we cannot accept that it has universalized is that the pure logic of capital is modified by the local customs of the regions into which it spreads. But we have just seen that a mere modification of a practice does not constitute grounds for rejecting its viability. As long as its basic rules and compulsions remain intact, we are justified in regarding it as a species of its earlier, unmodified, ancestor. It therefore follows – and this is my second point – that if what has been globalized really is capitalist economic relations, then it makes little sense to deny that those relations have also been universalized. We can reject Chakrabarty's claim that globalization does not imply universalization. How could it not? If the practices that have spread globally can be identified as capitalist, then they have also been universalized. It is the fact that we can recognize them as distinctively capitalist that allows us to pronounce capital's globalization. If we can affirm that they are in fact capitalist, and that they therefore have the properties associated with capitalism, how can we then deny their universalization? The very idea seems bizarre.

The Universal Grounds for Resistance

Capitalism spreads to all corners of the world, driven by its insatiable thirst for profits, and in so doing, in bringing an ever-increasing proportion of the global population under its sway, it creates a truly universal history, a history of capital. Postcolonial theorists will often give at least some lip service to this aspect of global capitalism, even if they deny its substance. What makes them even more uncomfortable is the second component of a materialist analysis, which has to do with the sources of resistance. There is no dispute around the idea that as capitalism spreads it meets with resistance – from workers, from peasants fighting for their land, from Indigenous populations, etc. Indeed, the celebration of these struggles is something of a calling card for postcolonial theorists. In this, they would seem to be of a piece with the more conventional Marxist understanding of capitalist politics. But the similarity in approaches is only at the surface. Whereas Marxists have understood resistance from below as an expression of the real interests of labouring groups, postcolonial theory typically shies away from any talk of objective, universal interests. The sources of struggle are taken to be local, specific to the culture of the labouring groups, a product of their very particular location and history – and not the expression of interests linked to certain universal basic needs.

The hostility to analyses that see resistance as an expression of common universal drives is that they impute to agents a consciousness that is peculiar to the developed West. To see struggles as emanating from material interests is "to invest [workers] with a *bourgeois rationality,* since it is only in such a system of rationality that the 'economic utility' of an action (or an object, relationship, institution, etc.) defines its reasonableness."[13] All of this is part of the escape from essentializing categories handed down by Enlightenment thought, initiated by post-structuralist philosophy. As Arturo Escobar explains, "with poststructuralism's theory of the subject we are ... compelled to give up the liberal idea of the subject as a self-bounded, autonomous, rational individual. The subject is produced by/in historical discourses and practices in a multiplicity of domains."[14]

So, whereas traditional Marxist and materialist theories hew to some conception of human needs, which constitute the basis on which resistance is built, current avatars of post-structuralism – postcolonial theory being the most illustrious – reject this idea in favour of one in which individuals are entirely constituted by discourse, culture, customs, etc. Insofar as there is resistance to capitalism, it must be understood as an expression of local and very particular conceptions of needs – not only constructed by geographically restricted histories, but working through a cosmology that resists translation. In Chakrabarty's expression, what drives the struggle against capital is the "infinite incommensurabilities" of local cultures – something that he posits outside of the universalizing narratives of Enlightenment thought.[15]

The question, then, is whether it is unwarranted to assign some universal needs and interests to agents, which span across cultures and across time. There is no doubt that, for the most part, the things that agents value and pursue are culturally constructed. In this, postcolonial theorists and more traditional progressives are of one mind. But is Escobar right in arguing that agents are not just influenced but entirely *produced* by discourse and custom? Surely we can recognize the cultural construction of many, even most, of our values and beliefs, while also recognizing that there is a small core of the latter that humans hold in common across cultures. To give one central example, there is no culture in the world, nor has there ever been one, in which agents did not give regard to their physical well-being. A concern for certain basic needs – for food, shelter, safety, etc. – is part of the normative repertoire of agents across localities and time. There has never been a culture that has endured over time which erased or ignored the valuation of basic needs, since the fulfilment of these needs is a precondition for the culture's reproduction. Hence, we can affirm that there are some aspects of human agency that are not entirely the construction of local culture, if by that we mean that they are specific to that culture. These aspects are rooted in aspects of human psychology that extend across time and space – they are components of our human nature.

Now to say that social agents are oriented to give due regard to their physical well-being is not to insist that culture has no influence in this domain. What they consume, the kinds of dwellings they prefer, their sartorial inclinations – all these can be shaped by local custom and the contingencies of history. It is common to find cultural theorists pointing to the variability in forms of consumption as evidence that needs are cultural constructions. But this is a bogus argument. The fact that the *form* of consumption is shaped by history – which it might be to some extent – is no evidence against the view that there is a need for basic sustenance. They are, after all, presented as forms *of* something. The language is a signal to the common factor – to label them forms of consumption is to say that they are species of a common genus. The question is whether the higher-order need for sustenance is itself a cultural construction. Or, correspondingly, whether culture can erase the recognition of basic needs. To even pose the question shows how absurd it is.[16]

It is the agential concern for well-being that anchors capitalism in any culture where it implants itself. As Marx observed, once capitalist relations are in place, once agents are subsumed under its imperatives, the "dull compulsion of economic relations" is all it takes to induce workers to offer themselves up for exploitation. This is true regardless of culture and ideology – if they are in the position of being a worker, they will make themselves available for work. This claim presumes the facts about human nature I have just defended, namely, that agents in any culture are motivated to defend their physical well-being. The reason they make their labour power available to employers is that this is the only option that they have open to them if they are to maintain their well-being. They are free to refuse, of course, if their culture tells

them that such practices are unacceptable – but as Engels pointed out in his earliest writings, this only means that they are free to starve.[17] I belabour this point only for the following reason: postcolonial theorists cannot affirm the globalization of capital, the spread of wage labour across the world, while also denying the reality of basic needs and people's regard for their physical well-being. If they continue to insist on a thoroughly constructionist view, they must explain why the "dull compulsion of economic relations" can be effective wherever capitalist class relations are secured, regardless of culture or ideology or religion.

Now, while this one aspect of human nature is the foundation on which exploitation rests, it is also a central fount for resistance. The same concern for well-being that drives workers into the arms of capitalists also motivates them to resist the *terms* of their exploitation. Employers' remorseless drive for profits has, as its most direct expression, a constant search for minimizing the costs of production. The most obvious such cost, of course, is wages. But the reduction of wages, while a condition for increased profit margins, necessarily means a squeeze on workers' standards of living – and hence an assault, in varying degrees of intensity, on their well-being. For some workers in high-end or unionized sectors, the squeeze can be contained within tolerable limits, so that it amounts to struggle around their standard of living but not necessarily around their basic needs. But for much of the Global South and an increasing range of sectors in the developed world, the stakes are much higher. Now add to this drive the need for employers to manage other costs associated with production – trying to squeeze out extra time from outdated machinery, hence increasing the risk of injury to workers, the drive to speed-up the pace and intensity of work, the lengthening of the working day, the raids on pensions and retirement benefits, etc. – and we can see that accumulation comes up systematically against workers' interest in their well-being. Workers' movements are often going to be geared simply towards securing the basic conditions for their reproduction, not just higher standards of living.

The concern for their well-being, then, is the reason why proletarians offer themselves up for exploitation, and why, having done so, they proceed to struggle around its terms. This particular aspect of their human nature locks them in a condition of *antagonistic interdependence* with capital. It is in their interest to seek out employment, in order to reproduce themselves; but the condition for securing employment is that they must submit to the authority of their employer, who is driven to undermine their well-being, even while he uses their labouring activity. The first dimension of this process – their submission to the labour contract – explains why capitalism can take root and secure itself in any and all corners of the globe. The second dimension – of fighting around the terms of their exploitation – explains why class reproduction begets class *struggle* in every region where capitalism establishes itself.[18] The universalization of capital has as its corollary the universal struggle for workers to defend their well-being.

We have derived both of these universalisms from just one component of human nature. This does not in any way suggest that that is all there is to it. Most progressive thinkers have believed that there are other components to human nature, other needs that span across regional cultures. Thus, for example, there is the need for autonomy or freedom from coercion, for creative expression, for respect – just to name a few. My point is not that human nature can be reduced to one basic, biological need. It is, rather, that this need does exist, even if it is less exalted than some others; and, more importantly, that it can account for a startling range of practices and institutions that radicals are concerned with. It is a sign of how far left thinking has fallen, how degenerate the intellectual culture has become, that it would even be necessary to defend its reality.[19]

Conclusion

Whatever their many disagreements may have been over the past century or so, radicals and progressives have almost always agreed on two basic postulates – that as capitalism spreads, it subordinates all parts of the world to a common set of compulsions; and, wherever it spreads, those whom it subjugates and exploits will have a common interest in struggling against it, regardless of culture or creed. Has there ever been a time when both of these claims are more obviously true? For more than five years now, a tremendous economic crisis has roiled global markets and convulsed national economies from the United States to East Asia, from Northern Europe to Southern Africa. If there was ever a doubt that capital has universalized, surely we can put it to rest now. Correspondingly, movements against neoliberalism have broken out across the globe, organized around a set of demands that converge around a strikingly small set of concerns – for economic security, for greater rights, for protecting basic services and for respite from the unrelenting demands of the market. This is perhaps the first time since 1968 that there is a real glimmer of a global movement emerging again. It is only a hint, of course, of what many of us hope it can become. But it is more than we have had in quite some time.

It seems quite bizarre, at a time like this, to find ourselves saddled with a theory that has made its name by dismantling some of the very conceptual pillars that can help us understand the political conjuncture and to devise effective strategy. Postcolonial theory has made some real gains in certain domains, especially in its mainstreaming of literature coming out of the Global South. Over the 1980s and 1990s, it played an important role in keeping alive the idea of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism; and of course it has made the problem of Eurocentrism a watchword among progressive intellectuals. But these achievements have come with a steep price tag. Giving up on the concept of universalism, as many of the leading lights of this theoretical movement have, is hardly a step towards a more adequate theorization of the times in which we live.

I have shown that the arguments against universalism – at least the ones that have greatest currency – are without merit. The two most salient universalisms of our time – the spread of capitalist social relations and the interest that working people have in resisting this spread – stand affirmed. Postcolonial theorists have spilled a great deal of ink tilting against windmills of their own creation. In so doing, they have also given license to a massive resurgence of nativism and Orientalism. It is not just that they emphasize the local over the universal. Their valorization of the local, their obsession with cultural particularities, and most of all, their insistence on culture as the wellspring of agency have given license to the very exoticism that the left once abhorred in colonial depictions of the non-West.

Throughout the twentieth century, the anchor for anti-colonial movements was, at least for the left, a belief that oppression was wrong wherever it was practiced, because it was an affront to some basic human needs – for dignity, for liberty, for basic well-being. But now, in the name of anti-Eurocentrism, postcolonial theory has resurrected the very cultural essentialism that progressives viewed – rightly – as the ideological justification for imperial domination. What better excuse to deny peoples their rights than to impugn the very idea of rights, and universal interests, as culturally biased? But if this kind of ideological manoeuvre is to be rejected, it is hard to see how it could be, except through an embrace of the very universalism that postcolonial theorists ask us to eschew. No revival of an international and democratic left is possible unless we clear away these cobwebs, thereby affirming the two universalisms – our common humanity and the threat to it posed by a viciously universalizing capitalism.

Notes

1 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Triffin, eds. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995).
2 Ashcroft et al., eds. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, 55.
3 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [2000] 2007), 95.
4 Gyan Prakash, "Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography," *Social Text* #31/32 (1992), 13.
5 Prakash, "Postcolonial Criticism," 14.
6 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 23.
7 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 71.
8 Chakrabarty's is not the only argument for the failure of capital's universalization or for the suspect nature of Marxism's universalizing framework. But it is one of the most influential. For a more detailed analysis of Chakrabarty's work and of other theorists associated with the *Subaltern Studies* project, see Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013).
9 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 70. This argument is embedded in a complicated discussion of two different kinds of histories: History1, which embodies the universalizing drive of capital, and History2, which embodies those practices that manage to retain their own integrity. I have refrained from using this jargon because it would

needlessly complicate the exposition, without adding any content. For a discussion and extended critique of the conclusions that Chakrabarty draws from the History1/History2 duality, see my *Postcolonial Theory*, especially Chapter 9.

10 Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 13–14.

11 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 66.

12 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 67.

13 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 212. Emphasis added.

14 Arturo Escobar, "After Nature: Steps to an Anti-essentialist Political Ecology," *Current Anthropology* 40:1 (February 1999), 3.

15 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 254.

16 Another argument against basic needs is that we typically consume a great deal that has no connection with our needs. This is of course true but even sillier than the objection I have described in the main text. The fact that much of what we consume is unnecessary, or is culturally shaped, hardly overturns the fact that we still need to have some basic needs met in order to survive.

17 Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (New York: Penguin Books, [1844] 1987).

18 To be precise, what it begets is the *motivation* to struggle. Whether or not the motivation generates actual resistance, in the form of collective action, depends on a host of additional and contingent factors.

19 What is most shocking of all is to find self-styled Marxists denying the universality of basic needs as a component of human nature. This was a subject of some controversy in the 1980s, and one might be forgiven for thinking that the matter had been settled. But, perhaps owing to the continuing (and rather baffling) influence of Louis Althusser, especially among younger intellectuals, the denials persist. For the definitive textual evidence on Marx, see Normal Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (London: Verso, 1983). More recently, see on the young Marx the superb study by David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). More globally, see John McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx's World-View* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). The only serious attempt I know of to raise doubts about Marx's commitment to a human nature is Sean Sayers, *Marxism and Human Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1998), but Sayers qualifies his argument by categorically denying the case for an anti-humanist Marx (the Marx of Althusser) and affirming that "Marxism … does not reject the notion of a universal human nature" (159).

Chapter 6

Intersectionality
A Marxist Critique

Barbara Foley

Intersectionality addresses questions of vital importance to anyone – scholar or layperson – who is concerned with matters of social justice and committed to understanding the kinds of causality that give rise to the egregious inequalities pervading present-day society. My students at Rutgers University (Newark) – especially the sophisticated ones who are attempting to theorize ways to understand, resist and combat these inequalities – refer constantly, if somewhat vaguely, to things (whether movements or identities or just plain ideas) that "intersect." In order to assess the usefulness of intersectionality as an analytical model and practical programme, however – and, indeed, to decide whether or not it can actually be said to be a "theory," as a number of its proponents insist – we need to ask not only what kinds of questions it encourages and remedies, but also what kinds of questions it discourages and what kinds of remedies it forecloses.

I

It is standard procedure in discussions about intersectionality to cite important forebears – from Sojourner Truth to Anna Julia Cooper, from Alexandra Kollontai to Claudia Jones to the Combahee River Collective – but then to zero in on the work of the legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, who first coined and explicated the term in the late 1980s. Concerned with overcoming the discriminatory situation faced by black women workers at General Motors, Crenshaw demonstrated the inadequacy of existing categories denoting gender and race as grounds for legal action, since these could not be mobilized simultaneously in the case of a given individual: you had to be either a woman or non-white, but not both at the same time. Crenshaw famously developed the metaphor of a crossroads of two avenues, one denoting race, the other gender, to make the point that accidents occurring at the intersection could not be attributed to solely one cause; it took motion along two axes to make an accident happen.[1]

While Crenshaw's model ably describes the workings of what Patricia Hill Collins has termed a "matrix of oppressions," its two-dimensionality displays its

limitation in explaining why this matrix exists in the first place.[2] Who created these avenues? Why would certain people be traveling down them? On what terrain were they constructed, and when? The flattened and flattening spatial metaphor precludes such questions, let alone answers them; the fact that the black women are workers selling their labour power in the capitalist market-place, where it yields up surplus value – that is, the ground on which the roads have been built – is a given. While Crenshaw succeeded in demonstrating that the GM workers had been subjected to double discrimination – no doubt an outcome of considerable value to the women she represented – her model for analysis and redress was confined to the plane of bourgeois jurisprudence. In fact, as Delia Aguilar has ironically noted, class was not even an "actionable" category for the workers in question.[3]

The explanatory limitations of Crenshaw's model – limitations, by the way, of which she has subsequently proclaimed herself to be fully aware – have not prevented other anti-racist and feminist social theorists from adding social class to the mix and proposing intersectionality as an encompassing explana-tory paradigm, capable of not just describing the workings of various modes of oppression but also locating their root causes. Here is where, in my view, its usefulness ends, and it becomes in fact a barrier when one begins to ask other kinds of questions about the reasons for inequality – that is, when one moves past the discourse of "rights" and institutional policy, which presuppose the existence of capitalist social relations.[4]

2

Gender, race and class – the "contemporary holy trinity," as Terry Eagleton once called them, or the "trilogy," in Martha Gimenez's phrase – how do these categories correlate, and what kind of causal paradigm is proposed when one stipulates their interaction?[5] I am willing to grant the objection raised by some proponents of intersectionality that these categories should not be reduced to "identities"; that they are, as Ange-Marie Hancock asserts, "analytical catego-ries."[6] But if gender, race and class are analytical categories, of what kind? Are they commensurable or distinct? Can their causal roles be situated in some kind of hierarchy, or are they, by virtue of their "interlocked" and simultaneous operations, of necessity ontologically equivalent? Can they ever be abstracted from one another for purposes of investigation? Or, as Hester Eisenstein asks, does one have to speak of them all at once in order to speak of them at all?[7]

When I ask these questions, I am not asserting that a black female auto worker is black on Monday and Wednesday, female on Tuesday and Thursday, a proletarian on Friday and – for good measure – a Muslim on Saturday. (We'll leave Sunday for another selfhood of her choosing.)[8] But I am proposing that some kinds of causes take priority over others – and, moreover, that, while gender, race and class can be viewed as comparable subject positions, they in fact require very different analytical approaches, as Lise Vogel points out.[9]

Here is where the Marxist claim for the explanatory superiority of class analysis comes into the mix, and the distinction between oppression and exploitation becomes crucially important. Oppression, as Gregory Meyerson puts it, is indeed multiple and intersecting, producing experiences of various kinds; but its causes are not multiple but singular.[10] That is, "race" does not cause racism; gender does not cause sexism. But the ways in which "race" and gender have historically been shaped by the division of labour can and should be understood within the explanatory framework supplied by class analysis. Otherwise, as Eve Mitchell points out, categories for defining types of selfhood that are themselves the product of alienated labour end up being reified and, in the process, legitimated.[11] Moreover, even if intersectionality insists that various analytical categories coexist in a given person, or a given demographic, the fact that these categories are originally stipulated on the basis of difference means that, as Himani Bannerji has observed, they continue to bang up against one another when one seeks causality in interactive "dissociation."[12] And one therefore wonders whether they have in fact managed to transcend the limitations of identity politics.

3

An effective critique of the limitations of intersectionality hinges upon the formulation of a more robust and materialist understanding of social class than is usually allowed: not *class* as a subject position or identity, but *class analysis* as a mode of structural comprehension. In the writings of Karl Marx, "class" figures in several ways. At times, as in the chapter on "The Working Day" in Volume I of *Capital*, it is an empirical category, one inhabited by children who inhale factory dust, men who lose fingers in power-looms, women who drag barges and slaves who pick cotton in the blazing sun.[13] All these people are oppressed as well as exploited. But most of the time, for Marx, class is a relationship, a social relation of production; that is why he can talk about the commodity, with its odd identity as a conjunction of use value and exchange value, as an embodiment of irreconcilable class antagonisms. To assert the priority of a class analysis is not to claim that a worker is more important than a homemaker, or even that the worker primarily thinks of herself as a worker; indeed, based on her personal experience with spousal abuse or police brutality, she may well think of herself more as a woman, or a black person. It is to propose, however, that the way in which productive human activity is organized – and, in a class-based society, compels the mass of the population to be divided up into various categories in order to ensure that the many will labour for the benefit of the few – *this* class-based organization constitutes the principal issue requiring investigation if we wish to understand the roots of social inequality. To say this is not to "reduce" gender or "race" to class as modes of oppression, or to treat "race" or gender as epiphenomenal. It is, rather, to insist that the distinction between exploitation and oppression makes possible

an understanding of the material roots of oppressions of various kinds. It is also to posit that "classism" is a deeply flawed concept, since, in an odd spin on "class reductionism," this term reduces class to a set of prejudiced attitudes based upon false binary oppositions, equivalent to ideologies of racism and sexism. As a Marxist, I say that we need *more* class-based antipathy, not less, since the binary oppositions constituting class antagonism are rooted not in ideology but in reality.

In closing, I'll second Victor Wallis' suggestion that intersectionality, rather than supplying an analytical framework for understanding current social reality, can more usefully be seen as symptomatic of the times in which it has moved into prominence.[14] Extending back several decades now, these times have been marked by several interrelated developments. One is the world-historical (if in the long run temporary) defeat of movements to set up and consolidate worker-run egalitarian societies, primarily in China and the USSR. Another – hardly independent of the first – is the neoliberal assault upon the standard of living of the world's workers, as well as upon those unions that have historically supplied a ground for a class-based and class-conscious resistance to capital. The growing regime of "flexible accumulation," which fragments the workforce into gig economies of various kinds, has accompanied and consolidated this neoliberal assault.[15] For some decades now, a political manifestation of these altered economic circumstances has been the emergence of "New Social Movements" positing the need for pluralist coalitions around a range of non-class-based reform movements rather than resistance to capitalism. Central to all these developments has been the "retreat from class," a phrase originated by Ellen Meiksins Wood.[16] In academic circles, this has been displayed in attacks on Marxism as a class-reductionist master narrative in need of supplementation by a range of alternative methodologies.

These and related phenomena have for some time now constituted the ideological air that we breathe. Intersectionality is in many ways a conceptual mediation of this economic and political matrix. Those who look to intersectionality for a comprehension of the causes of the social inequalities that grow more intense every day, here and around the world, would do much better to seek analysis and remedy in an anti-racist, anti-sexist and internationalist revolutionary Marxism that envisions the communist transformation of society in the not-too-distant future.

Notes

1   Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989:1 (1989), 139–67.
2   Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
3   Delia D. Aguilar, "Intersectionality," in Shahrzad Mojab, ed. *Marxism and Feminism* (London: ZED Books, 2015), 209.

4 In what follows, I am omitting discussion of the other vectors of oppression that are often invoked in discussions of intersectionality – sexuality, age, disability, and so on – not because I do not see them as integral to the "matrix of oppressions," but because it is the very relationship between such a matrix of oppressions and class-based exploitation that I wish to examine critically.

5 Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Selected Essays 1975-1985* (London: Verso, 1986), 82; Martha Gimenez, "Marxism, and Class, Gender, and Race: Rethinking the Trilogy," *Race, Gender & Class* 8:2 (2001), 22–33.

6 Ange-Marie Hancock, *Solidarity Politics for Millennials: A Guide to Ending the Oppression Olympics* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2011), 51. Since, as a Marxist, I am hypersensitive to the false claim that Marxism is economic determinism, I am inclined to grant the proponents of intersectionality the courtesy of not immediately accusing them all of culturalist reductionism and instead will take seriously some of their critiques of multiculturalism and identity politics as static and hegemonic.

7 Hester Eisenstein, "Querying Intersectionality," *Science & Society* 82:2 (April 2018), 248–91.

8 For a version of this rather clever formulation, I am indebted to Kathryn Russell. See Russell, "Feminist Dialectics and Marxist Theory," *Radical Philosophy Review* 10:1 (2007), 33–54.

9 Lise Vogel, "Beyond Intersectionality," *Science & Society* 82:2 (April 2018), 275–87.

10 Gregory Meyerson, "Rethinking Black Marxism: Reflections on Cedric Robinson and Others," *Cultural Logic* 3:2 (Spring 2000), https://www.academia.edu/8104602/Rethinking_Black_Marxism_Reflections_on_Cedric_Robinson_and_others.

11 Eve Mitchell, "I Am a Woman and a Human: A Marxist Feminist Critique of Intersectionality Theory" (2013), available at https://libcom.org/files/intersectionality-pamphlet.pdf.

12 Himani Bannerji, "Ideology," in Mojab, ed. *Marxism and Feminism*, 116.

13 Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 340–416.

14 Victor Wallis, "Intersectionality's Binding Agent: The Political Primacy of Class," *New Political Science* 37:4 (2015), 604–19.

15 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), 141–72.

16 Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New 'True' Socialism* (London: Verso, 1986).

From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump – and Beyond

Nancy Fraser

Whoever speaks of "crisis" today risks being dismissed as a bloviator, given the term's banalization through endless loose talk. But there is a precise sense in which we *do* face a crisis today. If we characterize it precisely and identify its distinctive dynamics, we can better determine what is needed to resolve it. On that basis, too, we might glimpse a path that leads beyond the current impasse – through political realignment to societal transformation.

At first sight, today's crisis appears to be political. Its most spectacular expression is right here, in the United States: Donald Trump – his election, his presidency, and the contention surrounding it. But there is no shortage of analogues elsewhere: the United Kingdom's Brexit debacle; the waning legitimacy of the European Union and the disintegration of the social–democratic and centre–right parties that championed it; the waxing fortunes of racist, anti-immigrant parties throughout Northern and East-central Europe; and the upsurge of authoritarian forces, some qualifying as proto-fascist, in Latin America, Asia and the Pacific. Our political crisis, if that is what it is, is not just American, but global.

What makes that claim plausible is that, notwithstanding their differences, all these phenomena share a common feature. All involve a dramatic weakening, if not a simple breakdown, of the authority of the established political classes and political parties. It is as if masses of people throughout the world had stopped believing in the reigning common sense that underpinned political domination for the last several decades. It is as if they had lost confidence in the bona fides of the elites and were searching for new ideologies, organizations and leadership. Given the scale of the breakdown, it is unlikely that this is a coincidence. Let us assume, accordingly, that we face a *global* political crisis.

As big as that sounds, it is only part of the story. The phenomena just evoked constitute the specifically *political* strand of a broader, multifaceted crisis, which also has other strands – economic, ecological and social – all of which, taken together, add up to a *general crisis*. Far from being merely sectoral, the political crisis cannot be understood apart from the blockages to which it is responding in other, ostensibly non-political, institutions. In the U.S., those blockages include the metastasization of finance; the proliferation of precarious service-sector

McJobs; ballooning consumer debt to enable the purchase of cheap stuff produced elsewhere; conjoint increases in carbon emissions, extreme weather and climate denialism; racialized mass incarceration and systemic police violence; and mounting stresses on family and community life thanks in part to lengthened working hours and diminished social supports. Together, these forces have been grinding away at our social order for quite some time without producing a political earthquake. Now, however, all bets are off. In today's widespread rejection of politics as usual, an objective system-wide crisis has found its subjective political voice. The political strand of our general crisis is a *crisis of hegemony*.

Donald Trump is the poster child for this hegemonic crisis. But we cannot understand his ascent unless we clarify the conditions that enabled it. And that means identifying the worldview that Trumpism displaced and charting the process through which it unravelled. The indispensable ideas for this purpose come from Antonio Gramsci. "Hegemony" is his term for the process by which a ruling class naturalizes its domination by installing the presuppositions of its own worldview as the common sense of society as a whole. Its organizational counterpart is the "hegemonic bloc": a coalition of disparate social forces that the ruling class assembles and through which it asserts its leadership. If they hope to challenge these arrangements, the dominated classes must construct a new, more persuasive common sense or "counterhegemony" and a new, more powerful political alliance or "counterhegemonic bloc."

To these ideas of Gramsci, we must add one more. Every hegemonic bloc embodies a set of assumptions about what is just and right and what is not. Since at least the mid-twentieth century in the U.S. and Europe, capitalist hegemony has been forged by combining two different aspects of right and justice – one focused on *distribution*, the other on *recognition*. The distributive aspect conveys a view about how society should allocate divisible goods, especially income. This aspect speaks to the economic structure of society and, however obliquely, to its *class divisions*. The recognition aspect expresses a sense of how society should apportion respect and esteem, the moral marks of membership and belonging. Focused on the status order of society, this aspect refers to its *status hierarchies*.

Together, distribution and recognition constitute the essential normative components out of which hegemonies are constructed. Putting this idea together with Gramsci's, we can say that what made Trump and Trumpism possible was the breakup of a previous hegemonic bloc – and the discrediting of its distinctive normative nexus of distribution and recognition. By parsing the construction and breakup of that nexus, we can clarify not only Trumpism, but also the prospects, post Trump, for a counterhegemonic bloc that could resolve the crisis. Let me explain.

The Hegemony of Progressive Neoliberalism

Prior to Trump, the hegemonic bloc that dominated American politics was *progressive neoliberalism*. That may sound like an oxymoron, but it was a real and

powerful alliance of two unlikely bedfellows: on the one hand, mainstream liberal currents of the new social movements (feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, environmentalism and LGBTQ rights); on the other hand, the most dynamic, high-end "symbolic" and financial sectors of the U.S. economy (Wall Street, Silicon Valley and Hollywood). What held this odd couple together was a distinctive combination of views about distribution and recognition.

The progressive-neoliberal bloc combined an expropriative, plutocratic economic programme with a liberal-meritocratic politics of recognition. The distributive component of this amalgam was neoliberal. Determined to unshackle market forces from the heavy hand of the state and from the millstone of "tax and spend," the classes that led this bloc aimed to liberalize and globalize the capitalist economy. What that meant, in reality, was financialization: the dismantling of barriers to, and protections from, the free movement of capital; the deregulation of banking and the ballooning of predatory debt; deindustrialization, the weakening of unions and the spread of precarious, badly paid work. Popularly associated with Ronald Reagan, but substantially implemented and consolidated by Bill Clinton, these policies hollowed out working-class and middle-class living standards, while transferring wealth and value upward – chiefly to the one per cent, of course, but also to the upper reaches of the professional-managerial classes.

Progressive neoliberals did not dream up this political economy. That honour belongs to the right: to its intellectual luminaries, Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and James Buchanan; to its visionary politicians, Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan; and to their deep-pocketed enablers, Charles and David Koch, among others. But the right-wing "fundamentalist" version of neoliberalism could not become hegemonic in a country whose common sense was still shaped by New Deal thinking, the "rights revolution," and a slew of social movements descended from the New Left. For the neoliberal project to triumph, it had to be repackaged, given a broader appeal, linked to other, non-economic aspirations for emancipation. Only when decked out as *progressive* could a deeply *regressive* political economy become the dynamic centre of a new hegemonic bloc.

It fell, accordingly, to the "New Democrats" to contribute the essential ingredient: a progressive politics of recognition. Drawing on progressive forces from civil society, they diffused a recognition ethos that was superficially egalitarian and emancipatory. At the core of this ethos were ideals of "diversity," women's "empowerment" and LGBTQ rights, post-racialism, multiculturalism and environmentalism. These ideals were interpreted in a specific, limited way that was fully compatible with the Goldman Sachs-ification of the U.S. economy. Protecting the environment meant carbon trading. Promoting home ownership meant subprime loans bundled together and resold as mortgage-backed securities. Equality meant meritocracy.

The reduction of equality to meritocracy was especially fateful. The progressive neoliberal programme for a just status order did not aim to abolish social

hierarchy but to "diversify" it, "empowering" "talented" women, people of colour and sexual minorities to rise to the top. And that ideal was inherently *class specific*: geared to ensuring that "deserving" individuals from "underrepresented groups" could attain positions and pay on a par with the straight white men *of their own class*. The feminist variant is telling but, sadly, not unique. Focused on "leaning in" and "cracking the glass ceiling," its principal beneficiaries could only be those already in possession of the requisite social, cultural and economic capital. Everyone else would be stuck in the basement.

Skewed as it was, this politics of recognition worked to seduce major currents of progressive social movements into the new hegemonic bloc. Certainly, not all feminists, anti-racists, multiculturalists and so forth were won over to the progressive neoliberal cause. But those who were, whether knowingly or otherwise, constituted the largest, most visible segment of their respective movements, while those who resisted it were confined to the margins. The progressives in the progressive neoliberal bloc were, to be sure, its junior partners, far less powerful than their allies in Wall Street, Hollywood and Silicon Valley. Yet they contributed something essential to this dangerous liaison: charisma, a "new spirit of capitalism." Exuding an aura of emancipation, this new "spirit" charged neoliberal economic activity with a frisson of excitement. Now associated with the forward-thinking and the liberatory, the cosmopolitan and the morally advanced, the dismal suddenly became thrilling. Thanks in large part to this ethos, policies that fostered a vast upward redistribution of wealth and income acquired the patina of legitimacy.

To achieve hegemony, however, the emerging progressive neoliberal bloc had to defeat two different rivals. First, it had to vanquish the not insubstantial remnants of the New Deal coalition. Anticipating Tony Blair's "New Labour," the Clintonite wing of the Democratic Party quietly disarticulated that older alliance. In place of a historic bloc that had successfully united organized labour, immigrants, African Americans, the urban middle classes, and some factions of big industrial capital for several decades, they forged a new alliance of entrepreneurs, bankers, suburbanites, "symbolic workers," new social movements, Latinos and youth while retaining the support of African Americans, who felt they had nowhere else to go. Campaigning for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1991–92, Bill Clinton won the day by talking the talk of diversity, multiculturalism and women's rights even while preparing to walk the walk of Goldman Sachs.

The Defeat of Reactionary Neoliberalism

Progressive neoliberalism also had to defeat a second competitor, with which it shared more than it let on. The antagonist in this case was *reactionary neoliberalism*. Housed mainly in the Republican Party and less coherent than its dominant rival, this second bloc offered a different nexus of distribution and recognition. It combined a similar, neoliberal politics of distribution with a

different, reactionary politics of recognition. While claiming to foster small business and manufacturing, reactionary neoliberalism's true economic project centred on bolstering finance, military production and extractive energy, all to the principal benefit of the global one per cent. What was supposed to render that palatable for the base it sought to assemble was an exclusionary vision of a just status order: ethno-national, anti-immigrant and pro-Christian, if not overtly racist, patriarchal and homophobic.

This was the formula that allowed Christian evangelicals, Southern whites, rural and small-town Americans and disaffected white working-class strata to coexist for a couple decades, however uneasily, with libertarians, Tea Partiers, the Chamber of Commerce and the Koch brothers, plus a smattering of bankers, real-estate tycoons, energy moguls, venture capitalists and hedge-fund speculators. Sectoral emphases aside, on the big questions of political economy, reactionary neoliberalism did not substantially differ from its progressive-neoliberal rival. Granted, the two parties argued some about "taxes on the rich," with the Democrats usually caving. But both blocs supported "free trade," low corporate taxes, curtailed labour rights, the primacy of shareholder interest, winner-takes-all compensation and financial deregulation. Both blocs elected leaders who sought "grand bargains" aimed at cutting entitlements. The key differences between them turned on recognition, not distribution.

Progressive neoliberalism mostly won that battle as well but at a cost. Decaying manufacturing centres, especially the so-called Rust Belt, were sacrificed. That region, along with newer industrial centres in the South, took a major hit thanks to a triad of Bill Clinton's policies: NAFTA, the accession of China to the WTO (justified, in part, as the promotion of democracy) and the repeal of Glass-Steagall. Together, those policies and their successors ravaged communities that had relied on manufacturing. In the course of two decades of progressive neoliberal hegemony, neither of the two major blocs made any serious effort to support those communities. To the neoliberals, their economies were uncompetitive and should be subject to "market correction." To the progressives, their cultures were stuck in the past, tied to obsolete, parochial values that would soon disappear in a new cosmopolitan dispensation. On neither ground – distribution or recognition – could progressive neoliberals find any reason to defend Rust Belt and Southern manufacturing communities.

The Hegemonic Gap – and the Struggle to Fill It

The political universe that Trump upended was highly restrictive. It was built around the opposition between two versions of neoliberalism, distinguished chiefly on the axis of recognition. Granted, one could choose between multiculturalism and ethno-nationalism. But one was stuck, either way, with financialization and deindustrialization. With the menu limited to *progressive* and *reactionary neoliberalism*, there was no force to oppose the decimation of

working-class and middle-class standards of living. Anti-neoliberal projects were severely marginalized, if not simply excluded, from the public sphere.

That left a sizeable segment of the U.S. electorate, victims of financialization and corporate globalization, without a natural political home. Given that neither of the two major blocs spoke for them, there was a *gap* in the American political universe: an empty, unoccupied zone, where anti-neoliberal, pro-working-family politics might have taken root. Given the accelerating pace of deindustrialization, the proliferation of precarious, low-wage McJobs, the rise of predatory debt, and the consequent decline in living standards for the bottom two-thirds of Americans, it was only a matter of time before someone would proceed to occupy that empty space and fill the gap.

Some assumed that that moment had arrived in 2007–8. A world still reeling from one of the worst foreign policy disasters in U.S. history was then forced to confront the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression – and a near meltdown of the global economy. Politics as usual fell by the wayside. An African American who spoke of "hope" and "change" ascended to the presidency, vowing to transform not just policy but the entire "mindset" of American politics. Barack Obama might have seized the opportunity to mobilize mass support for a major shift away from neoliberalism, even in the face of congressional opposition. Instead, he entrusted the economy to the very Wall Street forces that had nearly wrecked it. Defining the goal as "recovery," as opposed to structural reform, Obama lavished enormous cash bailouts on banks that were "too big to fail," but he failed to do anything remotely comparable for their victims: the ten million Americans who lost their homes to foreclosure during the crisis. The one exception was the expansion of Medicaid through the Affordable Care Act, which provided a real material benefit to a portion of the U.S. working class. But that was the exception that proved the rule. Unlike the single-payer and public option proposals that Obama renounced even before health-care negotiations began, his approach reinforced the very divisions within the working class that would eventually prove so politically fateful. All told, the overwhelming thrust of his presidency was to maintain the progressive neoliberal status quo despite its growing unpopularity.

Another chance to fill the hegemonic gap arrived in 2011 with the eruption of Occupy Wall Street. Tired of waiting for redress from the political system and resolving to take matters into its own hands, a segment of civil society seized public squares throughout the country in the name of "the 99 percent." Denouncing a system that pillaged the vast majority in order to enrich the top one per cent, relatively small groups of youthful protesters soon attracted broad support – up to 60 per cent of the American people, according to some polls – especially from besieged unions, indebted students, struggling middle-class families and the growing "precariat."

Occupy's political effects were contained, however, serving chiefly to re-elect Obama. It was by adopting the movement's rhetoric that he garnered support from many, who would go on to vote for Trump in 2016, and thereby

defeated Mitt Romney in 2012. Having won himself four more years, however, the president's newfound class consciousness swiftly evaporated. Confining the pursuit of "change" to the issuing of executive orders, he neither prosecuted the malefactors of wealth nor used the bully pulpit to rally the American people against Wall Street. Assuming the storm had passed, the U.S. political classes barely missed a beat. Continuing to uphold the neoliberal consensus, they failed to see in Occupy the first rumblings of an earthquake to come.

That earthquake finally struck in 2015–16, as long-simmering discontent suddenly shape-shifted into a full-blown crisis of political authority. In that election season, both major political blocs appeared to collapse. On the Republican side, Trump, campaigning on populist themes, handily defeated his sixteen hapless primary rivals, including several handpicked by party bosses and major donors. On the Democratic side, Bernie Sanders, a self-proclaimed democratic socialist, mounted a surprisingly serious challenge to Obama's anointed successor, who had to deploy every trick and lever of party power to stave him off. On both sides, the usual scripts were upended as a pair of outsiders occupied the hegemonic gap and proceeded to fill it with new political memes.

Both Sanders and Trump excoriated the neoliberal politics of distribution. But their politics of recognition differed sharply. Whereas Sanders denounced the "rigged economy" in universalist and egalitarian accents, Trump borrowed the very same phrase but coloured it nationalist and protectionist. Doubling down on long-standing exclusionary tropes, he transformed what had been "mere" dog whistles into full-throated blasts of racism, misogyny, Islamophobia, homo- and transphobia and anti-immigrant sentiment. The "working-class" base his rhetoric conjured was white, straight, male and Christian, based in mining, drilling, construction and heavy industry. By contrast, the working class Sanders wooed was broad and expansive, encompassing not only Rust Belt factory workers but also public-sector and service workers, including women, immigrants and people of colour.

Certainly, the contrast between these two portraits of "the working class" was largely rhetorical. Neither portrait strictly matched its champion's voter base. Although Trump's margin of victory came from eviscerated manufacturing centres that had gone for Obama in 2012 and for Sanders in the Democratic primaries of 2016, his voters also included the usual Republican suspects – including libertarians, business owners and others with little use for economic populism. Likewise, the most reliable Sanders voters were young, college-educated Americans. But that is not the point. As a rhetorical projection of a possible counterhegemony, it was Sanders' expansive view of the U.S. working class that most sharply distinguished his brand of populism from that of Trump.

Both outsiders sketched the outlines of a new common sense, but each did so in his own way. At its best, Trump's campaign rhetoric suggested a new proto-hegemonic bloc, which we can call *reactionary populism*. It appeared to combine a hyper-reactionary politics of recognition with a populist politics of

distribution: in effect, the wall on the Mexican border plus large-scale infra-structure spending. The bloc Sanders envisioned, by contrast, was *progressive populism*. He sought to join an inclusive politics of recognition with a pro-working-family politics of distribution: criminal justice reform plus Medicare for all; reproductive justice plus free college tuition; LGBTQ rights plus break-ing up the big banks.

Bait and Switch

Neither of these scenarios has actually materialized, however. Sanders' loss to Hillary Clinton removed the progressive-populist option from the ballot, to no one's surprise. But the result of Trump's subsequent victory over her was more unexpected, at least to some. Far from governing as a reactionary populist, the new president activated the old bait and switch, abandoning the populist distributive policies his campaign had promised. Granted, he cancelled the Trans-Pacific Partnership. But he temporized on NAFTA and failed to lift a finger to rein in Wall Street. Nor did Trump take a single seri-ous step to implement large-scale, job-creating public infrastructure projects. His efforts to encourage manufacturing were confined instead to symbolic displays of jawboning and regulatory relief for coal, whose gains have proved largely fictitious. And far from proposing a tax code reform whose principal beneficiaries would be working-class and middle-class families, he signed on to the boilerplate Republican version, designed to funnel more wealth to the one per cent (including the Trump family). As this last point attests, the former president's actions on the distributive front included a heavy dose of crony capitalism and self-dealing. But if Trump himself fell short of Hayekian ideals of economic reason, his appointment of yet another Goldman Sachs alumnus to the Treasury ensured that neoliberalism would continue where it counts.

Having abandoned the populist politics of distribution, Trump proceeded to double down on the reactionary politics of recognition, hugely intensified and ever more vicious. The list of his provocations and actions in support of invidious hierarchies of status is long and chilling: the travel ban in its various versions, all targeting Muslim-majority countries, ill-disguised by the cynical late addition of Venezuela; the gutting of civil rights at the Department of Justice (which abandoned the use of consent decrees) and at the Department of Labour (which stopped policing discrimination by federal contractors); the refusal to defend court cases on LGBTQ rights; the rollback of mandated insurance coverage of contraception; the retrenchment of Title IX protections for women and girls through cuts in enforcement staff; public pronouncements in support of rougher police handling of suspects, of "Sheriff Joe's" contempt for the rule of law and of the "very fine people" among the white suprema-cists who ran amok at Charlottesville. The result was no mere garden-variety Republican conservatism, but a hyper-reactionary politics of recognition.

Altogether, the policies of *President* Trump diverged from the campaign promises of *candidate* Trump. Not only did his economic populism vanish, but his scapegoating grew ever more vicious. What his supporters voted for, in short, is not what they got. The upshot is not reactionary populism but *hyper-reactionary neoliberalism*.

Trump's hyper-reactionary neoliberalism did not constitute a new hegemonic bloc, however. It was, on the contrary, chaotic, unstable and fragile. That is partly due to the peculiar personal psychology of its standard-bearer and partly due to his dysfunctional co-dependency with the Republican Party establishment, which tried but failed to reassert its control. We cannot know exactly how this will play out after Trump, but it would be foolish to rule out the possibility that the Republican Party will split. Either way, hyper-reactionary neoliberalism offers no prospect of secure hegemony.

But there is also a deeper problem. By shutting down the economic-populist face of his campaign, Trump's hyper-reactionary neoliberalism effectively sought to reinstate the hegemonic gap he helped to explode in 2016. It cannot suture that gap. Now that the populist cat is out of the bag, it is doubtful that the working-class portion of Trump's base will be satisfied to dine for long on (mis)recognition alone.

On the other side, meanwhile, "the resistance" organizes. But the opposition is fractured, comprising diehard Clintonites, committed Sanderistas and lots of people who could go either way. Complicating the landscape is a raft of upstart groups whose militant postures have attracted big donors despite (or because of) the vagueness of their programmatic conceptions.

Especially troubling is the resurgence of an old tendency on the left to pit race against class. Some resisters are proposing to reorient Democratic Party politics around opposition to white supremacy, focusing efforts on winning support from blacks and Latinos. Others defend a class-centred strategy, aimed at winning back white working-class communities that defected to Trump. Both views are problematic to the extent that they treat attention to class and race as an inherently antithetical zero-sum game. In reality, both of those axes of injustice can be attacked in tandem, as indeed they must be. Neither can be overcome while the other flourishes.

In today's context, however, proposals to back-burner class concerns pose a special risk: they are likely to dovetail with the Clinton wing's efforts to restore the status quo ante in some new guise. In that case, the result would be a new version of progressive neoliberalism – one that combines neoliberalism on the distributive front with a militant anti-racist politics of recognition. That prospect should give anti-Trump forces pause. On the one hand, it will send many potential allies running in the opposite direction, validating the Trump narrative and reinforcing support for reactionary neoliberalism. On the other hand, it will effectively join forces with him in suppressing alternatives to neoliberalism – and thus in reinstating the hegemonic gap. But what I just said about Trump applies equally here: the populist cat is out of the bag and will

not quietly slink away. To reinstate progressive neoliberalism, on *any* basis, is to recreate – indeed, to exacerbate – the very conditions that created Trump. And that means preparing the ground for future Trumps – ever more vicious and dangerous.

Morbid Symptoms and Counterhegemonic Prospects

For all these reasons, neither a revived progressive neoliberalism nor a trumped-up hyper-reactionary neoliberalism is a good candidate for political hegemony in the near future. The bonds that united each of those blocs have badly frayed. In addition, neither is currently in a position to shape a new common sense. Neither is able to offer an authoritative picture of social reality, a narrative in which a broad spectrum of social actors can find themselves. Equally important, neither variant of neoliberalism can successfully resolve the objective system blockages that underlie our hegemonic crisis. Since both are in bed with global finance, neither can challenge financialization, deindustrialization or corporate globalization. Neither can redress declining living standards or ballooning debt, climate change or "care deficits," or intolerable stresses on community life. To (re)install either of those blocs in power is to ensure not just a continuation but an *intensification* of the current crisis.

What, then, can we expect in the near term? Absent a secure hegemony, we face an unstable interregnum and the continuation of the political crisis. In this situation, the words of Antonio Gramsci ring true: "the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."[1]

Unless, of course, there exists a viable candidate for a counterhegemony. The most likely such candidate is one form or another of populism. Could populism still be a possible option – if not immediately, then in the longer term? What speaks in favour of this possibility is the fact that between the supporters of Sanders and those of Trump, something approaching a critical mass of U.S. voters rejected the neoliberal politics of distribution in 2015–16. The burning question is whether that mass could eventually be melded together in a new counterhegemonic bloc. For that to happen, working-class supporters of Trump and of Sanders would have to come to understand themselves as allies – differently situated victims of a single "rigged economy," which they could jointly seek to transform.

Reactionary populism, even without Trump, is not a likely basis for such an alliance. Its hierarchical, exclusionary politics of recognition is a sure-fire deal-killer for major sectors of the U.S. working and middle classes, especially families dependent on wages from service work, agriculture, domestic labour, and the public sector, whose ranks include large numbers of women, immigrants and people of colour. Only an inclusive politics of recognition has a fighting chance of bringing those indispensable social forces into alliance with other

sectors of the working and middle classes, including communities historically associated with manufacturing, mining and construction.

That leaves progressive populism as the likeliest candidate for a new counterhegemonic bloc. Combining egalitarian redistribution with non-hierarchical recognition, this option has at least a fighting chance of uniting the whole working class. More than that, it could position that class, understood expansively, as the leading force in an alliance that also includes substantial segments of youth, the middle class and the professional-managerial stratum.

At the same time, there is much in the current situation that speaks against the possibility, any time soon, of an alliance between progressive populists and working-class strata who voted for Trump in the last election. Foremost among the obstacles are the deepening divisions, even hatreds, long simmering but raised to a fever pitch by Trump, who, as David Brooks perceptively put it, has a "nose for every wound in the body politic" and no qualms about "stick[ing] a red-hot poker in [them] and rip[ping them] open."[2] The result is a toxic environment that appears to validate the view, held by some progressives, that all Trump voters are "deplorables" – irredeemable racists, misogynists and homophobes. Also reinforced is the converse view, held by many reactionary populists, that all progressives are incorrigible moralizers and smug elitists who look down on them while sipping lattes and raking in the bucks.

A Strategy of Separation

The prospects for progressive populism in the U.S. today depend on successfully combating both of those views. What is needed is a strategy of separation, aimed at precipitating two major splits. First, less-privileged women, immigrants and people of colour have to be wooed away from the lean-in feminists, the meritocratic anti-racists and anti-homophobes, and the corporate diversity and green-capitalism shills who hijacked their concerns and inflected them in terms consistent with neoliberalism. This is the aim of a recent feminist initiative, which seeks to replace "lean in" with a "feminism for the 99 percent."[3] Other emancipatory movements should copy that strategy.

Second, Rust Belt, Southern and rural working-class communities have to be persuaded to desert their current crypto-neoliberal allies. The trick is to convince them that the forces promoting militarism, xenophobia and ethnonationalism cannot and will not provide them with the essential material prerequisites for good lives, whereas a progressive-populist bloc just might. In that way, one might separate those Trump voters who could and should be responsive to such an appeal from the card-carrying racists and alt-right ethnonationalists who are not. To say that the former outnumber the latter by a wide margin is not to deny that reactionary populist movements draw heavily on loaded rhetoric and have emboldened formerly fringe groups of real white supremacists. But it does refute the hasty conclusion that the overwhelming majority of reactionary-populist voters are forever closed to appeals on

behalf of an expanded working class of the sort evoked by Bernie Sanders. That view is not only empirically wrong but counterproductive, likely to be self-fulfilling.

Let me clear. I am *not* suggesting that a progressive-populist bloc should mute pressing concerns about racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia and transphobia. On the contrary, the fight against all of these harms must be central to a progressive-populist bloc. But it is counterproductive to address them through moralizing condescension, in the mode of progressive neoliberalism. That approach assumes a shallow and inadequate view of these injustices, grossly exaggerating the extent to which the trouble is inside people's heads and missing the depth of the structural-institutional forces that undergird them.

The point is especially clear and important in the case of race. Racial injustice in the U.S. today is not at bottom a matter of demeaning attitudes or bad behaviour, although these surely exist. The crux is rather the racially specific impacts of deindustrialization and financialization in the period of progressive-neoliberal hegemony, as refracted through long histories of systemic oppression. In this period, black and brown Americans who had long been denied credit, confined to inferior segregated housing, and paid too little to accumulate savings, were systematically targeted by purveyors of subprime loans and consequently experienced the highest rates of home foreclosures in the country. In this period, too, minority towns and neighbourhoods that had long been systematically starved of public resources were clobbered by plant closings in declining manufacturing centres; their losses were reckoned not only in jobs but also in tax revenues, which deprived them of funds for schools, hospitals and basic infrastructure maintenance, leading eventually to debacles like Flint – and, in a different context, the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. Finally, black men long subject to differential sentencing and harsh imprisonment, coerced labour and socially tolerated violence, including at the hands of police, were in this period massively conscripted into a "prison-industrial complex," kept full to capacity by a "war on drugs" that targeted possession of crack cocaine and by disproportionately high rates of minority unemployment, all courtesy of bipartisan legislative "achievements," orchestrated largely by Bill Clinton. Need one add that, inspiring though it was, the presence of an African American in the White House failed to make a dent in these developments?

And how could it have? The phenomena just invoked show the depth at which racism is anchored in contemporary capitalist society – and the incapacity of progressive-neoliberal moralizing to address it. They also reveal that the structural bases of racism have as much to do with class and political economy as with status and (mis)recognition. Equally important, they make it clear that the forces that are destroying the life chances of people of colour are part and parcel of the same dynamic complex as those that are destroying the life chances of whites – even if some of the specifics differ. The effect is finally to disclose the inextricable intertwinement of race and class in contemporary financialized capitalism.

A progressive-populist bloc must make such insights its guiding stars. Renouncing the progressive neoliberal stress on personal attitudes, it must focus its efforts on the structural-institutional bases of contemporary society. Especially important, it must highlight the *shared roots of class and status injustices in financialized capitalism*. Conceiving of that system as a single, integrated social totality, it must link the harms suffered by women, immigrants, people of colour and LGBTQ persons to those experienced by working-class strata now drawn to right-wing populism. In that way, it can lay the foundation for a powerful new coalition among *all* whom Trump and his counterparts elsewhere have betrayed – not just the immigrants, feminists and people of colour who opposed his hyper-reactionary neoliberalism, but also the white working-class strata who supported it. Rallying major segments of the entire working class, this strategy could conceivably win. Unlike every other option considered here, progressive populism has the potential, at least in principle, to become a relatively stable counterhegemonic bloc in the future.

But what commends progressive populism is not only its potential *subjective* viability. In contrast to its likely rivals, it has the further advantage of being capable, at least in principle, of addressing the real, *objective* side of our crisis. Let me explain.

As I noted at the outset, the hegemonic crisis dissected here is one strand of a larger crisis complex, which encompasses several other strands – ecological, economic and social. It is also the subjective counterpart of an objective system crisis to which it constitutes the response and from which it cannot be severed. Ultimately, these two sides of the crisis – one subjective, the other objective – stand or fall together. No subjective response, however apparently compelling, can secure a durable counterhegemony unless it offers the prospect of a real solution to the underlying objective problems.

The objective side of the crisis is no mere multiplicity of separate dysfunctions. Far from forming a dispersed plurality, its various strands are interconnected, and they share a common source. The underlying *object* of our general crisis, the thing that harbours its multiple instabilities, is the present form of capitalism – globalizing, neoliberal, financialized. Like every form of capitalism, this one is no mere economic system, but something larger, an institutionalized social order. As such, it encompasses a set of non-economic background conditions that are indispensable to a capitalist economy: for example, unwaged activities of social reproduction, which assure the supply of wage labour for economic production; an organized apparatus of public power (law, police, regulatory agencies and steering capacities) that supplies the order, predictability and infrastructure that are necessary for sustained accumulation; and finally, a relatively sustainable organization of our metabolic interaction with the rest of nature – one that ensures essential supplies of energy and raw materials for commodity production – not to mention a habitable planet that can support life.

Financialized capitalism represents one historically specific way of organizing the relation of a capitalist economy to these indispensable background conditions. It is a deeply predatory and unstable form of social organization, which liberates capital accumulation from the very constraints (political, ecological, social, moral) needed to sustain it over time. Freed from such constraints, capitalism's economy consumes its own background conditions of possibility. It is like a tiger that eats its own tail. As social life as such is increasingly economized, the unfettered pursuit of profit destabilizes the very forms of social reproduction, ecological sustainability and public power on which it depends. Seen this way, financialized capitalism is an inherently crisis-prone social formation. The crisis complex we encounter today is the increasingly acute expression of its built-in tendency towards self-destabilization.

That is the objective face of crisis: the structural counterpart to the hegemonic unravelling dissected here. Today, accordingly, both poles of crisis – one objective, the other subjective – are in full flower. And, as already noted, they stand or fall together. Resolving the objective crisis requires a major structural transformation of financialized capitalism: a new way of relating economy to polity, production to reproduction, human society to non-human nature. Neoliberalism in any guise is not the solution but the problem.

The sort of change we require can only come from elsewhere, from a project that is at the very least *anti*-neoliberal, if not anti-capitalist. Such a project can become a historical force only when embodied in a counterhegemonic bloc. Distant though the prospect may seem right now, our best chance for a subjective-objective resolution is progressive populism. But even that might not be a stable endpoint. Progressive populism could end up being transitional – a way station en route to some new, post-capitalist form of society.

Whatever our uncertainty regarding the endpoint, one thing is clear. If we fail to pursue this option now, we will prolong the present interregnum. And that means condemning working people of every persuasion and every colour to mounting stress and declining health, to ballooning debt and overwork, to class apartheid and social insecurity. It means immersing them, too, in an ever more vast expanse of morbid symptoms – in hatreds born of resentment and expressed in scapegoating, in outbreaks of violence followed by bouts of repression, in a vicious dog-eat-dog world where solidarities contract to the vanishing point. To avoid that fate, we must break definitively with both neoliberal economics and with the various politics of recognition that have lately supported it – casting off not just exclusionary ethno-nationalism but also liberal meritocratic individualism. Only by joining a robustly egalitarian politics of distribution to a substantively inclusive, class-sensitive politics of recognition can we build a counterhegemonic bloc that could lead us beyond the current crisis to a better world.

Notes

1 Antonio Gramsci, "State and Civil Society," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, [1971] 1995), 276.
2 David Brooks, "The Abbie Hoffman of the Right: Donald Trump," *The New York Times* (September 26, 2017), https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/opinion/abbie-hoffman-donald-trump.html.
3 See Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2019).

Chapter 8

What Materialist Black Political History Actually Looks Like

Adolph Reed, Jr

This rumination is sparked most immediately by reflection on the roiling debate within the academic left and the academic left dressed up as a political left that has taken shape since the 2016 election. The debate initially centred on how to interpret "white working class" support for Donald Trump, specifically, whether we should understand white people's votes for Trump generically as indicative of their essential commitments to racism, patriarchy, homophobia, nativism, transphobia, etc. or whether some of that vote should be understood as a consequence of Democratic liberals' failure to address working people's concerns about economic insecurity, because of the Democrats' commitments to the dynamics of neoliberalization that have intensified economic inequality across the board nationally and have undermined access to public goods and social supports for poor and working people generally. The practical stakes of that argument have to do with what strategic lessons "progressives" should draw from Trump's victory, with eyes on future elections.

In early iterations of the debate, various anti-racist commentators and official Democratic operatives and their propaganda apparatus at MSNBC, theroot.com, and elsewhere on the Internet-chattering and posing left, have insisted that Trump's victory exposed the extent to which a deep vein of white Americans of all classes (except maybe the "woke" elements of the urbane professional–managerial strata) are committed to "white supremacy" before and beyond all else. The strategic takeaway from that view is that those Trump voters – even the estimated just under seven million to just over nine million who had previously voted for Sanders and at least once for Obama – are hopeless reactionaries and cannot be relied upon as potential allies because their deepest commitments are anti-egalitarian.[1] Their support for Trump is said to reflect anxiety over a perceived loss of status in relation to non-whites, women, immigrants or others.[2] This conviction has underwritten a contention that the lesson from Trump's victory is that it is not practical, or moral (the two are difficult to distinguish in this argument), to focus on increasing economic inequality and the intensifying upward redistribution of wealth as the basis for left political appeals and instead that the necessary strategy should centre on an intensified mobilization of nominally oppressed groups, mainly non-white, and women

as a generic category on the basis of opposition to the disparate distribution of goods and bads in the society among groups so identified and in support of the principles of diversity as generally understood in left-of-centre political discourse.

As the argument has progressed, a de facto alliance between ostensibly progressive identitarians and Wall Street Democrats has come together around the assertion, by Paul Krugman and others, that "horizontal inequality" – i.e. inequality between statistically defined racial/ethnic groups – is a more important problem than "vertical inequality," characterized as inequality between individuals and households.[3] That distinction instructively makes class and class inequality disappear, which is consistent with the trajectory of American liberalism across more than seven decades since the end of World War II. Moreover, in a sort of mission creep, opponents of what they decry as a "class-first" position have increasingly come to denounce any expressions of concern for economic inequality as in effect catering to white supremacy. This tendency, which Touré Reed has argued rests on a race reductionism, has surfaced and spread within the newly revitalized Democratic Socialists of America, as even many among those who consider themselves socialists object to the organization's selection of Medicare for All as its key political campaign on the ground that pursuit of decommodified health care for all is objectionable because doing so does not sufficiently centre anti-racist and anti-disparitarian agendas.[4] I submit that there is clearly a problem when anti-socialism is defined as socialism.

The race reductionism argument is propelled by a combination of intense moral fervour and crude self-interest. I have argued in 2018 articles in *Nonsite*, *The Baffler* and *Dialectical Anthropology* that, as it has evolved, the post-2016 debate has thrown into bold relief the class character of anti-racist and other expressions of identity politics.[5] That could be a salutary product of the controversy. It is good in this sort of debate for the mist of ideology to burn off and the material stakes involved to be clear and in the open. However, many people who have followed or even participated in the debates have not connected the dots to see that obvious point or to acknowledge its implications. One reason for the failure to do so is summed up pithily in Upton Sinclair's quip, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it."[6]

Not only would pursuit of an agenda focused on addressing "horizontal inequality," if successful, disproportionately benefit upper-status, already well-off people, but as Walter Benn Michaels and I have noted tirelessly over the past decade at least, the reality of a standard of justice that is based on eliminating group disparities is that a society could be just if one per cent of the population controlled 90 per cent of the resources so long as the one per cent featured blacks, Hispanics, women, lesbians and gays, etc. in rough proportion to their representation in the general population; also, advocacy of defining the only meaningful inequality as disparities between groups is itself a career trajectory in the academy, as well as in the corporate, non-profit and freelance

commentary worlds. There is no point trying to communicate with those whose resistance stems from such material investment; no matter what their specific content, their responses to class critique always amount to the orderly Turkle's lament to McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, along the lines: This is my fucking *job*![7]

Purblindness to identitarianism's ever more clearly exposed class character also rests on naively habituated ideological thinking. Most of us operate with more or less vague or inchoate recognition that the past included bad old-timey times marked by openly racist practices like slavery and compulsory racial segregation, genocide against Native Americans, Chinese Exclusion, imposed gender hierarchies, etc. In lieu of examining the discrete sources of inequality in the present, anti-racist ideology in particular depends on asserting superficial analogies to those earlier historical periods when racial exclusion and discrimination were more direct impediments to black Americans' and other non-whites' social position and well-being. Expressions of outrage at miscarriages of justice in the present commonly allude to practices associated with slavery or the segregation era. Thus, for example, Michelle Alexander proposes that contemporary mass incarceration be understood as a "new Jim Crow" – though even she allows that the analogy does not work.[8]

As I have argued, such assertions are not to be taken literally as empirical claims; they are rhetorical. No sane or at all knowledgeable person can believe that black Americans live under similarly constrained and perilous conditions as they did a century ago or longer. Those analogies and allusions carry a silent preface: "(This incident/phenomenon/pattern makes it seem as though) Nothing has changed." Yet the claim itself presumes that things have changed because the charge is essentially a denunciation of objectionable conditions or incidents in the present as atavistic and a call for others to regard them as such. Attempting to mobilize outrage about some action or expression by associating it with discredited or vilified views or practices is a common gambit in hortatory political rhetoric, more or less effective for a rally or leaflet. But this anti-racist politics is ineffective and even destructive when it takes the place of scholarly interpretation or strategic political analysis.[9]

Political controversies in contemporary New Orleans provide an apt frame of reference for demonstrating anti-racism's limitations, and class character, as a politics. Anti-racist political critique failed abysmally after Katrina to mobilize significant opposition to the elimination of low-income public housing or to the ongoing destruction of public schools. In a context in which black people participate as administrators, functionaries, contractors and investors in the commercial opportunities provided by privatization and destruction of those institutions – all in the blessed name of racial representation – that politics, which posits an abstract "black community" against an equally abstract "racism," could not provide persuasive responses to the blend of underclass ideology that stigmatizes public housing as an incubator of a degraded population or that proffers culturalist explanations for failing schools.[10]

Debate over displacement for upscale redevelopment, including the proliferation of the Airbnb industry, is another powerful case in point in that city as elsewhere. In opting for a language of "gentrification," opponents of displacement, often without necessarily intending to do so, cloud a simple, straightforward dynamic – public support of private developers' pursuit of rent-intensifying redevelopment – with cultural implications that shift critique away from the issue of using public authority to engineer upward redistribution and instead impose hardship on relatively vulnerable residents. Instead, discussion of gentrification slides into objections about the display of privilege and the lack of recognition or respect that, notwithstanding the moral outrage that accompanies them, accept the logic of rent-intensifying redevelopment as given and demand that newcomers acknowledge and honour aboriginal habitus and practices and that the "community" be involved in the processes of upgrading.

The same racial or cultural discourse has unhelpfully shaped opposition to the charterization of public education by focusing on the racial dimension of the process. The fundamental problem with Teach For America and the corporate privatizers for whom TFA are shock troops, after all, is not that the missionaries are mainly white and unfamiliar with native culture or even that many of them are tourists building extracurriculars for their graduate and professional school dossiers. Those are only idiosyncratically distasteful features of a particular line of attack on one front in a broader war on public goods and the idea of social solidarity, in line with the marketization of all human needs.

And that sort of culturalist discourse also opens opportunities for petty, and not so petty, entrepreneurship in the name of respect or recognition of the community, within the logic of neoliberalization. Race reductionism enables a sleight-of-hand in which benefits to individuals can appear to be victories for the generic racial population or community. The more deeply embedded a groupist notion of fairness or justice becomes as common sense, the more easily that sleight-of-hand works under labels like "community empowerment," "voice," "opportunity" or "representation," to propel and legitimize accumulation by dispossession.[11]

This takes us back to Sinclair's dictum, which underlies the material truth of anti-racist politics and other expressions of identitarianism that are hostile to politics based on class solidarities. Yet even the crudest self-interest depends on ideological mystification for legitimacy. And race/racism – the former term is inconceivable without the latter – has always worked in exactly that way, only now, in the aftermath of the victories of the 1960s, it can work to the benefit as well as the detriment of non-whites. The cornerstone of race ideology, which is not now and never has been incompatible with capitalism, is the presumption of ontological-level differences among human populations apportioned into racial groups. Just as nineteenth and early twentieth-century white supremacists insisted that fundamental differences preempt political alliances based on common material conditions, anti-racists posit whites' transhistorical

– and thus primordial – commitment to racial supremacy towards the same end.

That is the more insidious basis of the impulse to argue for the primacy of race in contemporary politics via allusion to the past. Like all forms of race reductionism it masks a class-skewed agenda. That underlying reality helps make sense of both why anti-racists seem unconcerned that their elevation of challenging disparities to the paramount, if not exclusive, goal of egalitarian politics is entirely consistent with neoliberalism's regime of intensifying economic inequality and why their de facto alliance with corporate and Wall Street Democrats against the conventional left has been automatic and untroubling.

I conclude with several postulates about black American political history to counter the idealist mystifications that posit a primordial white racism or a transhistorical, reified White Supremacy capable of acting in the world on the conviction that, as Nikhil Pal Singh and Joshua Clover most recently characterized it in a Verso blogpost, "black lives matter less."[12]

1. Slavery was fundamentally a labour relation, not an extreme system of race relations. To paraphrase Barbara and Karen Fields, its objective was to produce cotton, sugar, tobacco and rice, not white supremacy. Its appeal to the planter class was that it secured a labour force that had no rights or recourse, not that it was a permanent sadistic camp. Historian Kenneth Stampp quotes a slaveowner's succinct explanation: "For what purpose does the master hold the servant? Is it not that by his labour, he, the master, may accumulate wealth?"[13] An irony of the view that defines slavery as institutionalized brutality is its implication that slavery without extremes of brutalization might not be objectionable.

2. The segregationist regime was a historically specific social order based on disfranchisement of the vast majority of blacks and a substantial percentage of whites, imposed by Southern elites after the defeat of the interracial Populist political insurgency of the late nineteenth century. It was defined by an extensive, legally codified system of racial subordination. That order was not fully consolidated before World War I, and its institutional foundations were crushed by the late 1960s. That is, it was a regime that prevailed for roughly sixty years, depending on location.

3. There is no singular, transhistorical "Black Liberation Struggle" or "Black Freedom Movement," and there never has been. Black Americans have engaged in many different forms of political expression in many different domains, around many different issues, both those considered racial and not. They have engaged in race-solidaristic formations and in close concert with others, in class-based and multiclass alliances. As Cedric Johnson has argued forcefully, contemporary scholarly discussion reads "black politics" – the ethnic pluralist group politics articulated mainly since the 1960s – anachronistically back onto the varying and pragmatically grounded political expressions in which black Americans have engaged since Emancipation, which he describes as "black American political life." Political differentiation has been as common

among black Americans as among all others. Moreover, issues bearing specifically on race or racial disparities have never exhausted, or exclusively defined, black Americans' expressed political concerns.

4. As a corollary of 3, the issues driving the postwar Southern mass mobilization against segregation and the emergent black interest-group urban politics in the North and West, and the big city South, were distinct. Lumping them together under a blanket construct like the "long civil rights movement" does not help us comprehend the discrete features of either or, more important, the distinct trajectories each set in motion.

5. Black Power was not a mass, radical insurgent movement. It was a militant expression of ethnic pluralism. Radicals of various sorts – including ideological race nationalists – occupied its fringes, but the driving and commanding forces of Black Power politics were always the assertive elements within the new black political and professional-managerial class that emerged from opportunity structures that were opened by the victories of the Civil Rights movement, the dynamics of urban demographic transition and incorporation into governing regimes, as well as War on Poverty, Model Cities and foundation-funded programmes. Nominally radical groups, such as the Black Panther Party, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and others with less cachet among the left, were not serious alternatives, certainly not the romantic "roads tragically not taken" of post–New Left fantasies. General Gordon Baker, longtime United Auto Workers activist and co-founder of both the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, was emphatically clear that those tendencies were entirely specific to Detroit and the centrality of the union in local Democratic politics. The Black Panther Party was founded in 1966. By the end of the decade, it was already in disarray, especially outside Oakland, as a result of police repression, to be sure, but also due to its political incoherence.

6. Neither Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James nor Stuart Hall can tell us anything strategically useful about the black American political situation. Appeals to their putative wisdom stem from academic leftists' romantic attachments and commitments to race-reductionist politics. Malcolm was dead before nearly all the big events understood to define "The Sixties" had occurred. Fanon died several years before Malcolm, and in any case his focus was always elsewhere; he gave only the most general, perfunctory attention to the United States. James's time in the U.S. was on the political equivalent of a tourist visa. He was not enmeshed in black American politics and understood its internal and external dynamics in only an abstract, formalist way. The same pertains to Stuart Hall. Attachments to the likes of Malcolm, Fanon, James and Hall are more totemic than intellectually or politically productive. There is a more pernicious aspect to the embrace of those figures' supposed cultural authority. Each is read as propounding trans-contextual insights about "race." Such insights are necessarily race reductionist.

Notes

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2 See for example Diana Mutz, "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote," *pnas.org* (April 23, 2018), http://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/early/2018/04/18/1718155115.full.pdf; Stephen L. Morgan, "Fake News: Status Threat Does Not Explain the 2016 Presidential Vote," *SocArxiv* (May 11, 2018), https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/7r9fj/; and Andrew Gelman, "Does Status Threat Explain the 2016 Presidential Vote?," *andrewgelman.com* (May 14, 2018), https://andrewgelman.com/2018/05/14/status-threat-explain-2016-presidential-vote/.

3 Paul Krugman, "Hillary and the Horizontals," *New York Times* (June 10, 2016), https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/10/opinion/hillary-and-the-horizontals.html; Frances Stewart, "Horizontal Inequalities as a Cause of Conflict," *Bradford Development Lecture* (November 2009), https://www.academia.edu/28567760/Horizontal_inequalities_as_a_cause_of_conflict.

4 Touré F. Reed, "Between Obama and Coates," *Catalyst* #1 (Winter 2018), 9–54.

5 Adolph Reed, Jr., "Black Politics After 2016," *Nonsite* (February 11, 2018), https://nonsite.org/article/black-politics-after-2016, "Antiracism: A Neoliberal Alternative to a Left," *Dialectical Anthropology* 42 (2018), 105–15, and "The Trouble with Uplift," *The Baffler* #41 (September 2018), https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-trouble-with-uplift-reed.

6 Upton Sinclair, *I, Candidate for Governor, And How I Got Licked* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1935] 1994), 109.

7 See Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Penguin, 1962).

8 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012).

9 Reed, Jr., "Antiracism: A Neoliberal Alternative to a Left," 105.

10 Adolph Reed, Jr.: "The Black-Labor-Left Alliance in the Neoliberal Age," *New Labor Forum* 25:2 (Spring 2016), 28–34, and "The Post-1965 Trajectory of Race, Class, and Urban Politics in the U.S. Reconsidered," *Labor Studies Journal* 41:3 (September 2016), 260–91.

11 Reed, Jr., "Black Politics After 2016."

12 Nikhil Pal Singh and Joshua Clover, "The Blindspot Revisited," *Verso Blog* (October 12, 2018), https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4079-the-blindspot-revisited. See also Adolph Reed Jr., "Response to Backer and Singh," *Verso Blog* (October 10, 2018), https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4073-response-to-backer-and-singh.

13 Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Random House, 1956), 5.

Chapter 9

Who's Afraid of Left Populism?

Anti-Policing Struggles and the Frontiers of the American Left

Cedric G. Johnson

My 2017 *Catalyst* article, "The Panthers Can't Save Us Now," addressed a specific conundrum within contemporary left politics and anti-policing struggles in particular: that is, the strategic problem of building a counterpower capable of winning in the context of renascent black–nationalist thinking, sheepishness on the left about class analysis, and a pervasive reluctance to think about black political life with much sophistication.[1] In a sense, the article was less about the historical Black Panther Party for Self-Defense than the dangers of sixties nostalgia that afflict contemporary struggles, namely the revival of the racial essentialism, the colonial analogy and black vanguardist posturing. Such notions were limited as means to advance black political life during the sixties, and, inasmuch as they preserve the fiction that society-wide, revolutionary changes can be won either by the actions of numerical minorities or sectarian tendencies, they are ill-suited to the challenges we face today.

My argument then and now is that Black Lives Matter, and cognate notions such as the New Jim Crow, have been useful in galvanizing popular outrage over policing and mass incarceration, but these same banners have simultaneously enshrouded the very social relations they claim to describe and led away from the kind of politics, one predicated on building broad, popular power, that is necessary to roll back the carceral state. That 2017 article was conceived as an historical materialist antidote to racially reductionist thinking and attempted to excavate the origins of black ethnic politics as we know it. A key conceptual distinction here is between *black ethnic politics*, that mode of ethnic representational and electoral practices that was expanded and institutionalized nationally through the confluence of civil rights reform and Black Power mobilizations, and *black political life*, the heterogeneous, complex totality of shifting positions, competing interests, contradictory actions and behaviours that constitute black political engagement historically. That 2017 article was written as a plea for a more mature view of black political life, and for a left politics that proceeds from careful analysis of society, *as it exists*, towards building popular constituencies around a more just vision of what society might be.

In what follows, I expand the arguments of my *Catalyst* article in three ways. First, this essay addresses the prevailing hesitation to engage in class

analysis of black life. Many left activists and academics continue to abide the notion of black exceptionalism – the notion that there is something unique and incommensurable about the experiences of blacks that prohibits any substantive discussion of class position and interests whenever the black population is concerned. This posture is wrong and dangerous. It is not grounded in any close empirical sense of actually existing black life but retreats towards the most unidimensional sense of the black population as noble, long-suffering victims of oppression and the moral conscience of a white-dominated nation, rather than a people possessing all the social contradictions, ideological diversity, foibles, heroism and frailties found throughout the American populace. This failure to understand the complexities of black political life leaves intellectuals and activists unable to see the ways that particular segments of the black population, both elites and popular constituencies, have historically supported carceral expansion and continue to play a crucial role in the reproduction of the highly unequal, unjust neoliberal urban order. Genuflecting before identitarian politics, whether under the guise of Black Power nostalgia or Black Lives Matter sloganeering, does little to help us understand and contest these power alignments. The second part of this essay offers a brief overview of these concomitant processes of black governance, central-city revanchism and mass incarceration.

This essay concludes by addressing the Trump phenomenon and the clear problems his ascendancy poses for anti-policing struggles going forward. Trump is a dangerous figure, and his presidency has put his oafishness, sexism, racism and incivility on full display. But as some have noted, Trump's tweets and antics are a distraction. He has no doubt been a powerful booster for authoritarian policing and securitization, but the carceral state, which has been built up through local and state-level legislation over the course of decades, is anchored much deeper within American life and institutions. Moreover, the myth that Trump rode into office on a wave of resurgent white supremacy has only entrenched liberal anti-racist posturing, overgeneralizations about and demonization of white workers, and a prevailing sense that popular left politics are not only out of reach but not even worth pursuing.

Class and Actually Existing Black Life

The last few years have seen the resurgence of racially reductionist thinking about black political life and a corresponding political defeatism regarding class solidarity. Such thinking is sedimented and reproduced through social media discussions, which are at best proto-political but often anti-political, precluding public-spirited conversation and the possibility of communion and action in face-to-face contexts. The explosive popularity of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, as well as the expansion of blogging and podcast platforms, has not only displaced the centrality of corporate news sources in the lives of many Americans, but these media have also produced an artificial

levelling in terms of public debate. In this new landscape, access is more universal but expertise and rigorous investigation are devalued in spaces where sensationalism, conspiracy and dilettantism breed and flourish underneath ebullient travel photos, cat memes, fish-kiss selfies and cute toddler videos.[2]

The revival of race-centric approaches to thinking about inequality did not begin with Black Lives Matter. For decades, liberal think tanks, civil rights organizations and academics working in area studies have promoted various strands of liberal anti-racism. But we might trace the more recent origins of the Black Lives Matter/New Jim Crow frame to the optics of the 2005 Katrina disaster and the subsequent ways that both academics and activists came to understand the 2008 foreclosure crisis.[3] Rapper Kanye West may have offered the most memorable statement of this sensibility when he went off-script during a live telethon for Katrina survivors. "America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off, as slow as possible," West said, before punctuating his impromptu speech with the charge that "George Bush doesn't care about black people." His conviction that racism was the primary motive for the death and misery in New Orleans has been rearticulated and expanded in a small library of books and essays over the past decade. The *Nation* columnist Mychal Denzel Smith claims that for his cohort of black millennials, West's words were "our first relatable expression of black rage on a national stage" and that expression has since inspired resurgent waves of black political activity, from the election of Barack Obama to the anti-police brutality protests in Ferguson and Baltimore.[4] Given the media optics of the Katrina crisis, where thousands of black residents crowded the Superdome in search of relief, it is not surprising that so many concluded the disaster was caused by structural racism.

The focus on racial disparity gets much of the Katrina story wrong, however, because it substitutes meta-narratives of racial oppression for a more critical and rigorous analysis of the city as a totality, the place-specific institutional and social roots of the disaster, the balance of class forces on the ground, and the power of actual constituencies in shaping disaster preparation and recovery policies in New Orleans, none of which is simply reducible to the legacies of Jim Crow segregation or the hubris of the Bush administration alone. A more critical post-Katrina literature and cinema has situated the governmental failures regarding disaster evacuation and relief, as well as the highly uneven politics of reconstruction, within the volatile and crisis-laden processes of urban neoliberalization.[5] The racial justice frame does not discern class contradictions within the black population and the variegated experiences of recovery. This framing fails to capture how the contraflow evacuation process worked effectively for middle-class blacks with access to cars, as it had for whites of similar means. The property owner-centred reconstruction programmes supported by city, state and federal governments also helped middle-class homeowners, black and white, to restore their property and lives, while the same governing coalition pushed a wave of evictions and public housing demolitions that

created hardship for black working-class residents and made it more difficult for them to return.

In the wake of the "race–class" debates that accompanied the 2016 Democratic presidential primary challenge of democratic socialist and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, many within academia and activist circles have sought to defend the virtues of identity-based appeals and organizing strategies. These defences often begin from an interpretation of American history that sees popular, cosmopolitan forms of left alliance as anomalous and too often doomed by the reactionary behaviours and interests of whites, sometimes with the most venom reserved for the "white working class," often portrayed as though it constitutes a self-conscious and unified social category in utero.[6] Such anti-left populist arguments are often guided by an odd view of history, devoid of any useful sense of conjuncture, and positing wrongly that what did not work in the past clearly will not work now, so why bother. This posture not only sweeps aside meaningful and plentiful examples of cross-racial class solidarity in the United States past, but it also amounts to a loser's view of political life, lacking imagination and courage. The Trump phenomenon, and the prevailing myth that his presidency was the result of resurgent white supremacy, and not the reverse, has only further intensified hyperbolic racialist arguments and antipathy towards class analysis and working-class solidarity in some corners.

Asad Haider's *Mistaken Identity* is addressed to this new context of Trumpism and attempts to recuperate what he sees as the more radical, progressive origins of identity politics in the nexus of the black political struggles and second-wave feminism of the 1970s.[7] Haider reminds us that the phrase "identity politics" was coined by black lesbian feminist activists who formed the Combahee River Collective (CRC), but their initial formulation, which sought to bring anti-racist and anti-sexist sensibilities in as correctives to the limitations of revolutionary socialism as they saw it, was ultimately appropriated and corrupted by liberal elites. Although he makes numerous references to the CRC's participation in strike actions, as well as reproductive rights and domestic violence activism, Haider does not pause to evaluate the relative political impact and utility of the CRC vis-à-vis other organizations that actually made life demonstrably better for the greatest number of African Americans. That is to say, we know that the group is significant in the genealogy of black feminism and women's studies as that scholarly discipline evolved out of the 1960s and 70s migration of activists into academia, but what political victories can we point to that make the CRC an indispensable vein for the contemporary left to mine, especially for strategic lessons concerning the building of a powerful left opposition? Why should we focus on the CRC and not the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the Montgomery Improvement Association, the various grassroots organizations and networks that elected Harold Washington to the Chicago mayoralty in 1983, or for that matter, The Links, Incorporated? Let us be clear. The CRC emerged during a period of pervasive demobilization, amid the jetsam of Black Power, women's liberation and the New Left,

literally on the eve of the Reagan revolution, and despite whatever interpretative value we might wring from their critique of U.S. society, there is no practical reason to afford the CRC a privileged place in contemporary left strategic and tactical thinking. Haider is not alone here, but rather he indulges in a common practice among academics: confusing the scholarly subject that piques one's curiosity – which may be interesting within the novelty-driven dynamics of academic credentialing, conferencing and publishing – with those historical phenomena that are politically impactful and resonant.

Setting aside this problem of the CRC's historical amplitude and relevance to contemporary efforts to revitalize the left, a bigger problem with Haider's analysis is his neglect of how the empowerment discourse of new social movements emerges from a peculiar deployment of standpoint epistemology, the view descended from Hegel and Marx that those who endure similar social conditions possess common ways of knowing the world. For Marx, the common predicament of the proletariat alone did not generate solidarity; rather, such was clearly the outcome of political organizing and social struggle. Sixties appropriations of standpoint epistemology, however, often falsely equated common predicament, the experience of the black ghetto or of patriarchal order, with shared political sympathy and interests. Haider is well aware of the ways that identity politics and intersectionality have become corrupted and misused in the time of Black Lives Matter, too often deployed as a means of making territorial-knowledge claims, staking out authority based on relative disadvantage (epistemic deference), and undermining the prospects of open democratic engagement and the possibility of solidarity. We agree on these latter-day problems. Haider sees some value, however, in the prelapsarian version of identity politics that was first articulated by the CRC, but his historical account forgets how 60s and 70s black radical and feminist politics also abided problematic notions of standpoint epistemology that conflated identity with political constituency.

Standpoint epistemology forms the foundation of identity politics, whether articulated in Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton's 1967 manifesto, *Black Power*, which was heavily informed by the ethnic pluralist claims of Cold War American political science; in the Black Panthers' desire to liberate the "black colony" within American inner cities, which was in practice ethnic pluralism with anti-colonial patina; in Amiri Baraka's work to forge an institutional mechanism for national black political unity; or even in the CRC's efforts to infuse socialism with analyses of interlocking oppressions. In the classic CRC statement that Haider celebrates, the territoriality he rightly condemns in latter-day movement circles was already gestating: "This focusing on our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe the most profound and potentially most radical politics came directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression."[8] The tendency to equate racial and ethnic identity with political constituency did not first emerge within African-American political life during the 60s but

was already hegemonic, a consequence of the exclusion of the black masses from civic life in the first half of the twentieth century, the prevalence of Jim Crow racism beyond the Mason-Dixon line and the ethnic patron–clientelist practices that dominated most urban governing regimes during the Fordist era. The view of a sacrosanct racial constituency, however, is tough to abide when we take a closer look at black political life during the 60s, which was rife with public debate and political rivalry, teeming with different agendas, priorities and class interests despite the prevailing popular expressions of black unity and soul power.

Haider's critical claim that liberal identity politics is the "neutralization of movements against racial oppression" is an earnest restatement of the familiar co-optation thesis that falls flat when the internal contradictions and limitations of those movements are subjected to rigorous analysis and scrutiny. These black movements were not simply neutralized by the machinations of elites. Rather, as many historians and social scientists have illustrated, 60s black political tendencies abided the same flawed logic of racial constituency that Haider sees as emerging at a later point in history.[9] Black Power was not some grassroots phenomenon that sprung up organically only to be quelled by agents of the state. Black Power took shape within a context of omnibus civil rights reforms; the ongoing evolution and internal debates of interracial organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality, who helped secure such reforms; the work of sympathetic national politicians and liberal benefactors who sincerely wanted to improve the lives of black Americans, albeit under the terms of the postwar consumer society; the Johnson administration's War on Poverty, which provided federal block grants to develop anti-poverty programmes at the local level; and the growing sense in black neighbourhoods and communities nationwide that shifting demographic and political conditions made increased black control of governing institutions a real possibility. What the calls for black power and self-determination came to mean in operational terms cannot be separated from the broader urban and national political processes that shaped black life during the last days of Jim Crow segregation. There is more to African-American political development than the heroic political tendencies that leftists fetishize.

Against left critics of identity politics, Haider claims that there is a "materiality of race" as a social relation. This is the formulation *du jour* for some on the left, but when applied to black social life beyond the context of antebellum slavery, it is a conceptual evasion that evokes material conditions only to make a racially reductionist point about some common predicament of blacks (or whites) regardless of class position. If the notion were to have any integrity as an analytic frame, then Haider and others would need to actually explore in greater depth the historically specific material conditions and situated class experiences of blacks under capitalism. Such analyses would include not only the sharecroppers union, the Scottsboro boys' legal defence campaign, or the League of Revolutionary Black Workers – favourite topics of the academic

left that Haider evokes in defence of his book.[10] Any helpful discussion of the "materiality of race" would also need to take seriously those manifestations of bourgeois class position, aspiration and ideology that contend for influence within black political life at every historical juncture and often secure legitimacy and devotion among layers of the black working class – for instance the reign of Tuskegee Machine; the role of the Afro-American Realty Company in the making of Harlem; the Geddes Willis Funeral Home and scores of others in every major city and small town with a sizeable black population; the business ventures of black entrepreneurs such as Jesse Binga, Madame C.J. Walker, A.G. Gaston, and legions of other race women and men; the black professional organizations that were also born out of Black Power; the anti-public housing stances of black New Democrats; the expansion of black tourist-entertainment niches such as the annual Essence Fest; and on and on. "A materialist mode of investigation," Haider contends, "has to go from the abstract to the concrete – it has to bring this abstraction back to earth by moving through all the historical specificities and material relations that have put it in our heads."[11] This particular outing for Haider, however, falls short of making good on that methodological commitment.

Throughout the text, Haider offers pithy statements about the centrality of race and anti-racism to revitalizing the left. "As long as racial solidarity among whites is more powerful than class solidarity across races," he writes, "both capitalism and whiteness will continue to exist." "In the context of American history," Haider continues, "the rhetoric of the 'white working class' and positivist arguments that class matters more than race reinforce one of the main obstacles to building socialism."[12] Of course, it is quite possible for capitalism to exist without white racial domination in the U.S., as it does in other parts of the world – think Lagos. Also, we have already witnessed in many American cities how heritage tourism – ethnic cultural markers such as Mexican murals, blues music trails, immigrant commercial thoroughfares, and so on – and multiracial coalitions have been central to place-branding, real estate valuation and neighbourhood revitalization. This has happened in ways that facilitate capital accumulation and the empowerment of some people of colour alongside the massive displacement of others. As well, despite Haider's historicist point about the "main obstacles to building socialism," there are powerful examples of biracial and interracial unionism, where anti-black racism among workers was clearly an impediment to organizing but ultimately did not prevent striking dockworkers and teamsters in postbellum New Orleans, or miners in the West Virginia Coal Wars, from achieving meaningful solidarity and collective advance. Such ambitious statements may score points in the seminar room or basement study group, but this rhetoric, however well-intentioned, has little to do with the internal workings of political life or how people perceive their immediate interests and priorities in real time and space. Union drives, city council campaigns, class-action lawsuits against polluters, parent-teacher meetings about pending state tests and the like are contexts where race and class are

not always the chief preoccupation or animating logics among citizens that left activists and academics suppose them to be. The underlying claim in *Mistaken Identity* that foregrounding anti-racism might secure more extensive commitments of people of colour to the nominal left is shopworn, unproven and descended from the recruitment strategies of the Socialist Workers Party during the 60s. It remains prevalent among elements of the International Socialist Organization and the revived Democratic Socialists of America. This strategic posture, which reduces the expressed needs and diverse interests of blacks, Latinx and other people of colour to the "struggle against racial oppression," is at best misguided, at worst patronizing, and will continue to lead us towards a dead end.

To his credit, Haider does allude to the sharpening of class conflict within post-segregation black political life, especially in a chapter dedicated to the life and serial ideological conversions of the late poet and activist Amiri Baraka.[13] This discussion of class and black politics, however, is rather perfunctory, derivative, and at a level of theoretical abstraction that dances above the moil of black political life as it is experienced in everyday social relations, grounded organizational contexts, and historical class interests in motion. It would seem that a focus on these quotidian matters would be central in a book that hopes to rescue some radical kernel of 60s and 70s identity politics from latter-day appropriations and use whatever lessons that are gained to build left opposition in the present. I am not suggesting that Haider needed to address the full spectrum of black political tendencies and personalities in that particular book, which is clearly intended as a provocation and work of theory rather than an accurate interpretation grounded in a deep reading of historiography and primary sources. It would seem, however, that the most useful normative political theory, especially one that evokes Lenin's "concrete analysis of concrete conditions," would be informed by a more critical-empirical understanding of black life as it exists, especially when twentieth-century black political developments and the "black radical tradition," which is essentially an exercise in canon formation, are used to underwrite his claims. Put another way, if black political life has become more complicated over the last half century by the extensive integration of the black population into the consumer society, the expansion of the black middle class, the process of black political incorporation, and the worsening conditions of the most submerged segments of the black working class, why should we recuperate racial identity politics, however refined, as a framework for understanding our times and as a basis for political organizing?

In line with Haider, political scientist Joe Lowndes casts doubt on left analyses that criticize the limits of racial identity politics in favour of class solidarity. In a 2018 *Baffler* essay assessing the perils of left- and right-wing populism, Lowndes laments that "populism is as populism does," concluding that "just as right-wing populism draws on democratic and egalitarian desires, left-wing variants can have a cramped notion of the people that alienates the politically vulnerable and marginal."[14] To illustrate the historical problems of populism,

Lowndes rehearses an all-too-familiar "constraint of race" narrative, an inter-pretation of American political development where socialist and progressive left politics are undermined as white workers are time and again seduced by the siren song of reactionary politics, siding with the power of capital and against people of colour, from Jacksonianism through the rise of the New Right. It is difficult to dispute the broad outlines of this account. The U.S. is a nation founded on African chattel slavery, indentured servitude, the conquest and removal of Indigenous peoples, the disenfranchisement of the unpropertied, and the domestication and exclusion of women from full civic life, a condition that would last for over half of the nation's history. The devil does not live in the granular details of history but rather sets up his workshop in the generali-ties and occlusions of such "constraint of race" narratives. As with Haider's *Mistaken Identity*, the level of abstraction in Lowndes' account actually leads away from the kind of critical historical analysis that might reveal the rich and contradictory archive of working-class struggles, the specific conjunctural chal-lenges we face now and those quotidian concerns that may form the basis for building viable left opposition.

As is common nowadays, Lowndes offers the obligatory criticism of the New Deal. Franklin D. Roosevelt's "vision shored up producerist ideology," Lowndes writes, "a strictly gendered division of labor, and, through the distinc-tion between 'entitlements' and 'relief,' a sharp divide between the deserving and undeserving poor."[15] This is certainly true, but there is more to the story. The New Deal coalition under Roosevelt's leadership shored up a consumerist ideology as well. Indeed, he saw raising the vast consumer capacity of Americans as a remedy for the problems of overproduction that in part precipitated the Great Depression. Likewise, as a consequence of labour shortages and mass activist pressure during World War II, Roosevelt's administration was com-pelled to momentarily break down racial and gendered divisions of labour through integration of the defence industries.[16] This historical development is significant and prefigures the postwar Civil Rights movement and the birth of second-wave feminism, but such facts get in the way of the kind of criticism of left populism Lowndes wants to craft. We should be fully aware of the patent limitations of mid-century American liberalism and the inequalities produced by the New Deal coalition, especially the real estate-driven growth trajectory established after World War II. However, Lowndes' accounting, like that of many others, leaves out the ways that the expansion of the social wage and labour protections, as well as the institution of national public works initia-tives like the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps, benefited African Americans in unprecedented ways.[17] Lowndes' sum-mary thesis, which repeats claims that have become conventional wisdom in some corners of the left, does damage to the complex legacy of the New Deal and underwrites a left cynicism we cannot afford.

Oddly enough, Lowndes' account of the misadventures of populism does not mention the pervasive power of Cold War red-baiting and witch hunts

against communists and leftist trade unionists. This domestic trench warfare against the left played out in the televised hearings of the House Un–American Activities Committee, FBI interrogation rooms, police raids, death threats, imprisonment, the financial ruin of accused reds, disappearances and assassinations. It would have a lasting impact on the American left, dividing the labouring classes against themselves and defeating more progressive-to-radical left political possibilities. It would seem that this grim episode would be central to any intellectual appreciation of the difficulty of building a viable left populism.

Lowndes insists, "We need a left-wing populism that puts anti-racism, immigrant rights and refugee solidarity at the center of its politics."[18] If Lowndes' point here is simply that progressive left and socialist organizations must confront reactionary thinking and behaviours – anti-black racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia, and so on – whenever they arise in the actual context of organizing and building solidarity, there is little here that anyone with progressive left or socialist commitments should find disagreeable. In the particular context of policing and prison reform, activists must, for instance, contest and overturn hegemonic underclass narratives that treat poverty as a consequence of the alleged cultural failings and behaviours of the poor and that justify mass incarceration and punitive social policy. The problem with such declarations that we centralize anti-racism, however, is that in many local political battles and campaigns, race and racism are not always a central concern.

Moreover, the liberal anti-racist frame reduces what are in fact common class conditions – felt more widely across racial and ethnic populations – to matters of racism and racial disparity. To emphasize the need to centralize anti-racism, Lowndes closes by praising the militant protests that erupted in the Bay Area following the killing of Oscar Grant by transit police, the battles against ICE deportations and other struggles that he sees as "opening out onto broader vistas with populist dimensions."[19] Those vistas could be broader still, especially when we take seriously the actual patterns of police abuse, which defy liberal anti-racist canards. Of the ten cities with the highest per capita fatal police shootings of civilians, only one approaches a majority-black population: Baton Rouge (50.4 per cent black), followed closely by St. Louis (49.2 per cent) with Las Vegas trailing well behind (11.1 per cent). Of the remaining cities, the black population constituted less than 3 per cent: Kingman, Arizona (0.04 per cent black); Las Cruces, New Mexico (2.4 per cent); Billings, Montana (0.08 per cent); Pueblo, Colorado (2.4 per cent); Rapid City, South Dakota (1.1 per cent); Westminster, Colorado (1.23 per cent); and Casper, Wyoming (1 per cent).[20] Black Lives Matter protests have galvanized opposition to police abuse, but clearly, there are neighbourhoods and communities in the U.S. hinterlands that some on the left have written off, which endure over-policing, violence and precarity but fall out of the race-centric, metropolitan framing of these problems that are favoured by activists and academics.

Evocations of the "materiality of race," or "confronting the meanings of race," especially as prerequisites for building a majoritarian left politics, are a ruse. These are the more sophisticated statements of Black Lives Matter sloganeering; they are valuable as a means of signalling one's ethico-political commitments in academia and within majority-white left sectarian circles and social media networks. Race is not always the central axis of conflict, nor the primary organizing impediment in local contexts – not in the dominant sense that Haider or Lowndes might have us believe and not even among black people. We should certainly condemn and fight racism in all its manifestations. However, in political life, we should also proceed from a careful investigation of the felt needs, shifting political positions and expressed interests of blacks and all other Americans, rather than assuming black exceptionalism – that African Americans constitute a discrete political constituency that can never find common cause with non-blacks. This is simply not true. The irrationality and falsehood of such thinking becomes especially clear when we rehearse the historical evolution of the carceral state, which was made possible through a circuitous and tragic combination of social forces that were not limited to the Reagan–Bush rendition of the War on Drugs, white suburban voter anxieties and myths of black criminality alone. The path towards building the popular opposition that is needed to produce substantial criminal justice reforms does not begin by "confronting the meanings of race" as a therapeutic or proselytory stance, but rather with a clear sense of the peculiar political alliances that have produced our current order and the difficult work of changing public perceptions and securing support for more just forms of public safety.

Policing the Revanchist City

The expansion of the carceral state and the increasingly aggressive policing of urban minority communities coincided with the rollback of the welfare state at the national level as well as the almost universal pursuit of urban downtown redevelopment as an antidote to the loss of manufacturing jobs in many U.S. cities. As others have noted, the carceral build-up of the late War on Drugs era was not merely the handiwork of conservative Republicans. Rather, mass incarceration was the creation of various constituencies – black and white; urban, suburban and rural; liberal and conservative; New Democrats, black nationalists, families of victims, drug rehabilitation clinicians, social workers and community activists – who supported expanded police protection, more punitive sentencing laws, increased funding for prisons, and the like. Some supported these policies for staunchly ideological reasons, while others did so out of desperation, seeing punishment as the only plausible cure for worsening crime and social disorder, especially as the tangible benefits of social democracy were no longer part of the lived experiences and popular memory of millions of Americans. The roots of this dilemma lie in the Cold War liberal turn away from public works and redistributive public policy and towards civil society

and cultural solutions to urban poverty. Moreover, the ramping up of the War on Drugs during the Reagan-Bush years coincided with an intensifying class war and the aggressive removal of the poor from the urban centre where the policing strategy of pacification was central to the post-industrial growth model driven by the financial, insurance and real estate industry, and by the tourism–entertainment sector. The late geographer Neil Smith characterized this process in terms of the "revanchist city."[21]

While the postwar transformation of the urban landscape created physical distance between the new suburban middle class and those who were left ghettoized in the inner-city core, the taking back of the city through gentrification and real estate valorization in the 1980s brought these disparate classes into direct confrontation with middle-class urban pioneers, the investor class and tourists on one side, and minority communities, the unemployed, the itinerant poor and countercultural enclaves on the other. "This revanchist antiurbanism," Smith holds,

> represents a reaction against the supposed "theft" of the city, a desperate defense of a challenged phalanx of privileges, cloaked in the populist language of civic morality, family values and neighborhood security… More than anything the revanchist city expresses a race/class/gender terror felt by middle- and ruling-class whites who are suddenly stuck in place by a ravaged property market, the threat and reality of unemployment, the decimation of social services, and the emergence of minority and immigrant groups, as well as women, as powerful urban actors.[22]

Smith continues, "It portends a vicious reaction against minorities, the working class, homeless people, the unemployed, women, gays and lesbians, immigrants."[23] These processes of revanchism have occurred in fits and starts, more successful in some cities than others, but securitization has been at the heart of this phenomenon, making the city safe for upwardly mobile residents and visitors. Pacification and removal of the poor, architectural innovation and new forms of enclosure have produced a new central-city landscape, one where class contradictions are managed through the manifold technologies of policing, surveillance and certification that permit ease of movement across urban space for those of economic means while regulating and constricting the poor. This is a new metropolitan landscape defined by Airbnb, Uber, helipads for the nouveau rich, artisanal grocers, novelty fitness clubs, private roads and relentless condo tower construction. It is equally defined by bum-proof benches, ankle monitors, pretext police stops, the demolition of public housing, ubiquitous closed-circuit cameras, a criminalized and informal economy, predatory lenders and check-cashing centres.

One immediate casualty of this new urban warfare, as Mike Davis reported some time ago, was the elimination of the very notion of the public. "The universal consequence of the crusade to secure the city is the destruction of any

truly democratic urban space," Davis wrote. "The American city is being systematically turned inward. The 'public' spaces of the new megastructures and supermalls have supplanted traditional streets and disciplined spontaneity."[24] This war on the public has created new opportunities for profit-making and philanthropy for the investor class. It has made already vulnerable segments of the working class even more desperate, ensuring a ready and cheap reservoir of servant labour.[25] These processes of urban fortressing were further entrenched in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which, under the pretext of national security, precipitated a wave of federal and state spending on policing and surveillance programmes. At the centre of these processes of urban neoliberalization and revanchism was the liberal black political elite who governed many American cities through a period of manufacturing decline and post-industrial renaissance. Their complex role is neglected in most accounts of the carceral build-up, yet the fact of multiracial support for policing and incarceration remains a formidable barrier to the kinds of reforms promoted through Black Lives Matter protests.

In the decades after demands for black power, black political incorporation became a reality, with most major American cities electing black mayors and often majority-black city councils. These black-led cities, however, would inherit a number of well-known constraints on their capacity to govern, such as declining tax bases, population loss, capital flight, the drought in federal investment, the expanded power of bond-rating agencies and international financiers, antiquated infrastructure and deteriorating social conditions.[26] Likewise, the class-diverse black ghettos of the mid-twentieth century, which provided the spatial-demographic basis for black power demands for indigenous control, would undergo dramatic transformation, producing the hyper-segregation of the black poor. Within this dire context, citizens and civic leaders made even more difficult policy choices, with some blacks supporting anti-crime measures because of idiosyncratic political beliefs and others because of their specific constituent interests as homeowners, shopkeepers or families of victims.

Some common manoeuvres whenever the subject of black class politics is broached are to emphasize the relative precariousness of the black professional-managerial class, when compared to whites, or to downplay the relative power of black political elites in public affairs. The first move is usually intended to shore up the view that race remains the primary social determinant in American life, which is not a difficult argument to make given the documented disparities in wealth and income even between blacks and whites of similar levels of educational attainment. The second move is pitched for much the same reasons, to emphasize that even blacks who occupy positions of institutional authority will likely be constrained by the power of reactionary, superordinate whites – a claim that seems infallible during the reign of the New Right and the New Democrats. Class is not fundamentally a matter of gradations of income but rather a matter of relative power within the social relations of production. The black middling and elite classes have certainly been historically

smaller and generally more vulnerable than similarly situated whites. Despite its relative size and precarity, however, the black professional-managerial class often plays a role in society, especially during the post-segregation era, that many whites cannot fulfil: the role of legitimating and advancing Democratic Party politics and neoliberal privatization agendas at the local level. This is a social role that whites cannot play effectively given prevailing notions of black racial constituency. The black elite cements black public consent and mediates the demands of popular and working-class constituencies, whose interests are often at odds with the dictates of city hall and the Washington Beltway. That said, conservative, pro-policing attitudes and interests are not limited to African-American elites. At various moments, specific local black constituencies have embraced tough-on-crime measures, especially during the epoch of neoliberalization when the expansion of progressive social spending became increasingly difficult to pursue.

Yale law professor James Forman Jr offers a highly textured account of how and why some residents, politicians and activists in Washington, D.C. supported a politics of incarceration during an era of black political control.[27] In his study, we find historically discrete motives for black support of various anti-crime and pro-policing policies. Black civil rights activists in Atlanta during the 1940s and in the District of Columbia in the 1960s demanded the hiring of more black officers as a remedy to police brutality. During the 1970s, black nationalists opposed marijuana legalization in the District because they viewed it as a "gateway" drug to more debilitating addictions. Some black judges insisted on harsh punishment for black violent offenders out of a moral obligation to black victims, who for too long were denied adequate police protection or court justice under Jim Crow. These decisions were made with an eye towards what might be done to reduce addiction, theft and violence in black communities within a context of limited choices. The stories Forman presents contradict contemporary anti-racist sloganeering and analyses that portray the problems of policing and mass incarceration in stark black-and-white terms. Instead, he gives a more nuanced historical account of why certain urban black constituencies supported policies that would eventually have disastrous effects on black incarceration rates. He also illustrates, through a close analysis of attitudes towards policing in black professional and working-class neighbourhoods, that there are distinct class experiences of policing, with working-class blacks more likely to be subjected to intensive and routine police surveillance and arrests.[28]

Forman's work presents us with a political paradox that remains instructive in this era of resurgent liberal identity politics, that is, the fact that black political control did not protect black District residents from the escalating problems of crime and policing. Rather, within the all-black context of the District, different constituencies combined to produce measures, like mandatory minimum sentencing laws, that had unintended consequences, contributing to the problem of mass incarceration. Racial affinity and ascriptive status should not

be mistaken for political constituency. Going forward, an understanding of the discrete interests constituting black life will be crucial to any success that police-reform forces hope to achieve. Former New Democratic black mayors like Adrian Fenty in Washington, D.C., Clarence Ray Nagin in New Orleans and Stephanie Rawlings-Blake in Baltimore presided over a period of urban revanchism where the interests of capital were prioritized over the education, security and livelihoods of black working-class neighbourhoods. Alongside black contractors and school privatization advocates, such black leadership has played a crucial role in legitimating neoliberalization by providing it with a multiracial countenance.

In cities like Baltimore and Chicago, which possess integrated police forces and city administrations, massive anti-policing protests have been defused and placated through legal prosecution of police, suspensions and token firings. Street demonstrations against police abuse have also been met with the mobilization of more centrist black political elements, who have called for modest technical reforms to correct police abuse, such as standard-issue body cameras, and who have advanced private-charitable projects and volunteer mentoring as solutions to poverty.[29] Moreover, electoral pressures and activist demands have produced a generation of public relations-savvy black police chiefs, such as Charles Ramsey, former commissioner of the Philadelphia Police Department and before that, head of the District of Columbia's metropolitan police department, and Chicago superintendent Eddie Johnson, who have perfected skilled messaging and crisis management. This is not to say that black top-cops do not endorse the same pretext stops, profiling and aggressive tactics as their white counterparts. Ramsey presided over the mass arrest of protestors and pre-emptive raids of activist staging areas during the 2000 demonstrations against the World Bank in Washington, D.C. Unlike whites, however, they are able to emote effectively with some black audiences, marshal authenticity claims to gain trust from some of the most heavily policed neighbourhoods, and deflect charges of racism. In large and complex urban areas, where black power has long been institutionalized and entrenched, analyses that ignore the actually existing class relations and interests shaping incarceration and the political arena will do little to advance the kind of substantive reforms touted by the most progressive elements of anti-policing protests. The combination of these local challenges produced by multiracial, neoliberal governing coalitions, and the ascension of Donald J. Trump, should encourage activists now more than ever to work towards building broad popular consent for concrete alternatives to the current accumulation regime and its attendant modes of policing.

The Blue Lives Matter Presidency

Securitization and policing, racist exclusion and repression were central features of Trump's ascension to the presidency. During the summer of 2016, when his election still seemed like a long shot to many, Trump was emphatic

in his support for police. He seized upon two separate incidents where police were assaulted by black gunmen, saying, "We must stand in solidarity with law enforcement, which we must remember is the force between civilization and total chaos." Echoing the core logic of the "thin blue line" that has animated U.S. law enforcement since the Cold War, Trump led a chorus of conservative voices who claimed that the Obama administration and Black Lives Matter protests had created dangerous conditions for police officers. Former New York City mayor and Trump attorney Rudolph Giuliani was quick to attack activists, claiming that Black Lives Matter is "inherently racist because, number one, it divides us."[30]

Contrary to the overheated rhetoric of Trump, Giuliani and others, policing is not the most hazardous occupation in the U.S. In fact, it is not even in the top ten, with on-the-job police fatalities ranking well behind those of construction workers, groundskeepers, fishermen and women, garbage collectors and loggers, among others. And contrary to the claim that the Obama administration enabled anti-police sentiment, violence against police officers actually decreased during Barack Obama's tenure, especially when compared to the George W. Bush years. Moreover, conservative attacks on Black Lives Matter are simply unfounded. White men were responsible for 70 per cent of the violence against law enforcement that occurred during the 2016 election year.[31] The mass shootings of police during the 2016 July Fourth week were tragic, but equally so is the fact of police suicide, which in recent years dwarfs the numbers of police officer fatalities by shootings and traffic accidents combined.[32] Yet improving working conditions and mental health care for officers is not at the forefront of the "Blue Lives Matter" chest thumping of Trump, Giuliani and their ilk.

After taking office, Trump continued to deride any dissent against police violence and abuse. He infamously demanded that the National Football League's team owners fire any player who joined San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick's national anthem protests. Trump also openly joked about police violence during a 2017 address to law enforcement at Suffolk County Community College in Long Island. He went so far as to encourage rough treatment of suspects during arrests and minimized their right to due process.[33]

Following the weathered playbook of Republican Party strategists, Trump's approach to campaigning and governing pits the deserving American middle class against the *relative surplus population* of welfare dependents, the unemployed and unemployable, undocumented migrant workers and low-wage workers in China and other countries. Surplus population, or the industrial reserve army, is understood here as those persons not currently employed who might be pressed into service to the advantage of capital.[34] Relative surplus population in any given historical context exerts downward pressure on wages. As a reservoir of low-wage, fragmented and disempowered labour, they are employed as competitors to the relatively more secure segments of the

workforce and as such can be used to foment division within the working class. Since the dismantling of the social wage and the rise of the New Right, the surplus population in the U.S. has been routinely evoked in campaign rhetoric that places the blame for the general social morass and public finance woes on the continued costs of welfare assistance programmes, public support for non-citizens, Medicaid, anti-discrimination regulation in college admissions and private sector hiring, funding for public education and the pensions of public sector employees. These underserving segments, we are told in every election cycle, do not pay their fair share of taxes and do not contribute much to the economic and social health of the nation.

Blaming the most vulnerable among the working class, however, merely absolves corporate elites of their culpability in producing wage stagnancy and worsening living conditions through their decisions, such as union-busting, offshoring, the replacement of living labour with automation, and massive reductions in the taxation of the investor class. Blame-labelling the black urban poor and immigrants further distracts an already anxious middle class and secures their interests as consumer-citizens to the reproduction of the capitalist order. Trumpism appeals to the real economic anxieties of those Americans who can recall the last days of a vibrant manufacturing-based economy. His protectionist ideas as well as his xenophobia beckon many Americans, not just whites, back to a nostalgic ideal of unending compound growth and middle-class consumption. This is where the legitimacy of the current carceral order resides, and it is unlikely that progressive left forces can create a more just alternative without engaging broad swaths of the population, wrestling with real and imagined anxieties, fears and felt needs. Indeed, that is the only way to turn the tide against authoritarian populism and produce a more just, egalitarian society.

Notes

1 Cedric G. Johnson, "The Panthers Can't Save Us Now: Anti-Policing Struggles and the Limits of Black Power," *Catalyst* 1:1 (Spring 2017), 57–85.

2 Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

3 Both Mychal Denzel Smith and Ta-Nehisi Coates provide autoethnographic accounts of the origins of renewed liberal anti-racism politics during the Obama years. Coates's book, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, is a compendium of his writings during the tenure of Barack Obama. When he says "we" in the book's title, on one level he's referring to those liberal commentators who were given an enlarged platform by major news magazines, cable television networks and other media because of the election of the nation's first black president. Coates is honest and self-effacing about how he and many others were made by that historical moment. They gained a wider audience than they might have previously imagined. Melissa Harris-Perry was catapulted into national celebrity as the host of her own MSNBC programme, which drew extensively on progressive left academics, often people of colour, for weekly commentary. There are other liberal black journalists who gained more notoriety during this period as well, such as Joy Reid of MSNBC, Charles Blow of *The New York Times*, writers like Vann Newkirk

of *The Atlantic*, and so forth. Various bloggers, independent filmmakers, musicians and creative writers also found greater opportunity and financial support during the Obama years. This is nothing new. The personnel and content of news agencies often shifts with the new mood created by presidential administrations. The election of Obama, as well as the re-emergence of anti-racist struggles, helped to lay the foundation for the ascendancy of a black liberal commentariat. See Mychal Denzel Smith, "The Rebirth of Black Rage: From Kanye to Obama and Back Again," *The Nation* (August 13, 2015), https://www.thenation.com/article/the-rebirth-of-black-rage/; Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (New York: One World, 2017).

4 Smith, "The Rebirth of Black Rage." For a sampling of writings that rely on the racial frame to understand the Katrina crisis, see Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005); South End Press Collective, ed., *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007); Hillary Potter, ed., *Racing the Storm: Racial Implications and Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina* (Lanham: Lexington, 2007); Kristen M. Lavelle and Joe Feagin, "Hurricane Katrina: The Race and Class Debate," *Monthly Review* 58:3 (July-August, 2006), 52–66, https://monthlyreview.org/2006/07/01/hurricane-katrina-the-race-and-class-debate/.

5 The following are some of the critical works that discuss the Katrina crisis and its aftermath in terms of neoliberalization: Adolph Reed, Jr., "Undone by Neoliberalism," *The Nation* (September 18, 2006), https://www.thenation.com/article/undone-neoliberalism/; Adolph Reed, Jr., "Three Tremés," *Nonsite* (July 4, 2011), nonsite.org/editorial/three-tremes; Cedric Johnson, ed., *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); John Arena, *Driven from New Orleans: How Nonprofits Betray Public Housing and Promote Privatization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Vincanne Adams, *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith: New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Kevin Fox Gotham and Miriam Greenberg, *Crisis Cities: Disaster and Redevelopment in New York and New Orleans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Megan French-Marcelin, "Gentrification's Ground Zero," *Jacobin* (August 28, 2015), https://www.jacobin-mag.com/2015/08/katrina-new-orleans-arne-duncan-charters/; Thomas Jessen Adams, "How the Ruling Class Remade New Orleans," *Jacobin* (August 29, 2015), https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/hurricane-katrina-ten-year-anniversary-charter-schools/; Anna Hartnell, *After Katrina: Race, Neoliberalism, and the End of the American Century* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017); Aaron Schneider, *Renew Orleans? Globalized Development and Worker Resistance After Katrina* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Thomas Jessen Adams and Matt Sakakeeny, eds. *Remaking New Orleans: Beyond Exceptionalism and Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

6 The economic appeal of the Trump campaign, and his success in parts of the midwestern industrial heartland, provoked a rash of pop cultural explanations and social media invective centred on the "white working class." For example, J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* shot up on the *New York Times* bestsellers list. As Chris Maisano writes in an excellent review of the new literature on the white working class, the book helped Vance "become the punditocracy's go-to native informant on all things white trash." This contemporary focus on the white working class is a variation of the "white backlash" argument, a now commonsensical explanation of the social origins of the New Right, which depicts anti-civil rights sentiment as central to the Republican Party's courtship of a new Southern white base and to shaping its market-libertarian and states-rights policy stances. In its scholarly and pedestrian forms, however,

that argument centres race and, in particular, white working-class racism, rather than the interests of powerful blocs of capital as the primary drivers of the New Right ascendancy.

The view that Trump was elected because of angry white working-class voters applies to some who supported him. However, as an explanation of why he won, white racial anxiety has been greatly exaggerated and misdiagnosed. The median income of Trump's white supporters was higher than the median for whites overall. As Michael A. McCarthy details, there is reason to believe that Trump's protectionist, anti-tax and xenophobic platform resonated most loudly with small business own-ers, who are more "Joe the Plumber" than the blue-collar Archie Bunker archetype. "Trumpism is no oddity," McCarthy writes. "Instead it's the expression of the anxie-ties of the petit bourgeoisie and a result of a break between two wings of the capitalist class in the Republican Party that began with the emergence of the Tea Party." But the "angry white worker" line misses too much. Trump did not grow the Republican Party base substantially, though he outperformed McCain in 2008 and Romney in 2012 by over two million votes. More importantly, Trump did not secure a larger share of the white vote than Romney did. Trump performed well among blue-collar voters, former Obama voters, wealthy whites, non-unionized workers in coal country, the steel-producing belt and Right-to-Work states, building trades and contractors, proto-entrepreneurs *and* minorities. One-third of Latino voters supported Trump, as did 13 per cent of African-American men.

Trump's campaign mobilized racist, xenophobic sentiment and created a platform for fringe right-wing elements within the White House and throughout the country. His response to the Charlottesville march, which was led by white supremacists and neo-Nazis, and which ended in the death of Heather Heyer and the injury of dozens of other counter-protestors, was craven and reprehensible. His election, however, is not evidence that right-wing ideas have triumphed but is instead proof that contemporary Democratic Party liberalism has lost nearly all popular legitimacy, alienating many of its former beneficiaries and supporters.

If Trump's election was evidence of resurgent white supremacy, then we should have expected to see some electoral coattail effects to that end. Perhaps the most graphic evidence against this line of reasoning can be found in David Duke's failed 2016 bid to become senator from Louisiana, where he polled less than 3 per cent. Keep in mind that Duke was a serious contender in the 1990 race for the same congressional seat, garnering over 600,000 votes, some 43.5 per cent of the state-wide total votes cast. And again, in 1991, he came close to seizing Louisiana's governorship, winning over 670,000 votes and 38.8 per cent of the total. In both of those earlier contests, he was defeated by a coalition of liberal and Democratic whites and high black voter turnout. If white supremacy is on the rise, why was Duke's performance so abysmal in the very state where he had so much support in the past? The answer to why Trump was elected lies in the ideological crisis of the Democratic party, and more specifically in the implosion of Hillary Clinton's campaign, both problems having their root in the New Democrats' neoliberal political agenda and pro-corporate strategic and governing priorities.

See J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper, 2016); Chris Maisano, "The New 'Culture of Poverty'," *Catalyst* 1:2 (Summer 2017), https://catalyst-journal.com/vol1/no2/new-culture-of-poverty-mai-sano; Michael A. McCarthy, "The Revenge of Joe the Plumber," *Jacobin* (October 26, 2016), https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/10/trump-small-business-whites-xeno-phobia-immigration/; Connor Kilpatrick, "Burying White Workers," *Jacobin* (May 13, 2016), https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/05/white-workers-bernie-sanders -clinton-primary-racism/.

7 Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso, 2018), 7–9.

8 Haider, *Mistaken Identity*, 8. See Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 17.

9 See Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (New York: Anchor, 1969); Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Black Urban Regime: Structural Origins and Constraints," in *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 97; Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); William P. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).

10 Asad Haider, "Zombie Manifesto," *Verso Blog* (September 1, 2018), https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4002-zombie-manifesto. See also Melissa Naschek, "The Identity Mistake," *Jacobin* (August 28, 2018), https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/08/mistaken-identity-asaid-haider-review-identity-politics.

11 Haider, *Mistaken Identity*, 11.

12 Haider, *Mistaken Identity*, 51.

13 Haider, *Mistaken Identity*, 67–82.

14 Joe Lowndes, "Populist Persuasions: The Promise and Perils of Left Populism," *The Baffler* (October 31, 2018), https://thebaffler.com/latest/populist-persuasions-lowndes.

15 Lowndes, "Populist Persuasions."

16 See Rhonda F. Levine, *Class Struggle and the New Deal: Industrial Labor, Industrial Capital, and the State* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1988); Meg Jacobs, "'Democracy's Third Estate': New Deal Politics and the Construction of a 'Consuming Public'," *International Labor and Working-Class History* #55 (Spring 1999), 27–51.

17 Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold Story of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005); Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore, "The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* #74 (Fall 2008), 3–32.

18 Lowndes, "Populist Persuasions."

19 Lowndes, "Populist Persuasions."

20 Matt Hudson, "Billings has One of the Highest Rates in the Nation for Fatal Officer-involved Shootings," *Billings Gazette* (April 13, 2018), https://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/crime-and-courts/billings-has-one-of-the-highest-rates-in-the-nation/article_3ef90049-b836-5364-9e04-b4c38975e3ce.html.

21 Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996).

22 Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 211.

23 Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 211. See also Neil Smith, "Revanchist Planet: Regeneration and the Axis of Co-Evilism," *Urban Reinventors* #3 (November 2009), 1–18, http://www.urbanreinventors.net/3/smith1/smith1-urbanreinventors.pdf.

24 Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 226.

25 Cedric Johnson, "Working the Reserve Army: Proletarianization in Revanchist New Orleans," *Nonsite* (September 4, 2015), https://nonsite.org/article/working-the-reserve-army.

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Chapter 10

Class Not Race

Walter Benn Michaels

When I started writing this essay, in January 2020, unemployment in the United States was the lowest it had been since 1968 and income inequality was the highest it has been since then.[1] As I revise it, several months into the COVID-19 epidemic that broke out in the U.S. in March 2020, the situation has changed radically with respect to unemployment but not at all with respect to income inequality. And all along, the redistribution of income upward has been accompanied by an upward redistribution of wealth. In the early 1960s, the bottom 90 per cent of the population held about one-third of American wealth; by 2016 that had decreased to about one-fifth.[2] Today's best guesses are that the pandemic will make these inequalities worse, not better.[3] Furthermore, the decrease has not only been proportional. It is not just that most people are getting the relatively smaller but absolutely larger piece of the growing pie that the defenders of inequality have always promised. Rather, between 1989 and 2018, the top one per cent increased its total net worth by $21 trillion while, as Matt Breunig reports, "[t]he bottom 50 per cent actually saw its net worth decrease by $900 billion."[4] And it is not as if the bottom half had much to begin with. The net worth of the bottom decile of the population is negative, the next decile is at $4,798 and the one after that at $18,753.[5]

The last half century, then, has been a catastrophic one for economic equality and, more specifically, for the working class, which has received both a smaller portion and a smaller proportion of wealth and income. But, of course, *economic* equality is not the only kind and, indeed, if we stick with 1968 as a kind of baseline, we will note that part of what Didier Eribon has called the "heritage of 68" has been a focus on those "forms of domination" that, as Chantal Mouffe puts it in *For a Left Populism*, can "not be formulated in class terms": second-wave feminism, the gay rights movement, anti-racist struggles and all the other *nouveaux mouvements sociaux*.[6] And it is undeniable both that these social movements have achieved some real success, albeit in different degrees and in different places, and that they have hardly lost their relevance, though they are now confronted by the kind of right populism that has fuelled the demand for Mouffe's left populism.

In this context, the question of how to understand the relation between race and class, or more generally, between identity and class, takes on a certain theoretical and political urgency. The good news has been the energy and relative success of the fight for equality by groups that are not defined in "class" terms.[7] The bad news has been what Adolph Reed Jr describes as the success of a "capitalism effectively freed from working-class opposition" – hence the increased economic inequality.[8] We can put the question abstractly and in anodyne form: what is the relation between those struggles against oppression that are formulated in class terms and those struggles against oppression that move beyond class? Or we can put it more concretely and a little more polemically: what does it mean that defenders of capital can – sincerely and without contradiction – be committed feminists, opponents of white supremacy and supporters of same-sex marriage?

Since no analysis at all is required to recognize the frequency of hypocrisy and inconsistency in human affairs, it is the "sincerely and without contradiction" that gives the question its point. When, for example, a company like Goldman Sachs declares that its "commitment to creating and sustaining a diverse and inclusive work environment is absolute," up to and including providing directions on how to share your pronouns and how to respond when others share theirs, because everybody profits when you bring "your authentic self" to the workplace, no doubt the enthusiasm of some partners is less absolute than others.[9] But it need not be. Goldman's business is providing "advice and capital" to its clients, and neither the advice nor the capital is compromised if it is provided by a workforce like the one Goldman says it is aiming for: 50 per cent women, 11 per cent black and 14 per cent Hispanic/Latino.[10] By contrast, were Goldman as committed to socialism as it is to diversity, the contradiction between its business (providing capital) and its ideal (ending capitalism) really would be "absolute."

The historical moment in which it makes sense to think about race and class is a moment in which we have capitalists who, when it comes to anti-racism, are as progressive as anyone on the left. While, perhaps not surprisingly, we have some workers who are considerably less progressive than the capitalists, the rise of a right populism is precisely the situation that has made books like *For a Left Populism* seem necessary. The way Mouffe puts the problem is that if the need in 1968 was to "recognize the demands of the new movements" and "to articulate them alongside more traditional workers' demands," today "the situation" is "the opposite" and it is "working-class demands [and the social question] that are now neglected."[11] It is a more personal version of that neglect that also produced *Retour à Reims*, in which Eribon invokes the "heritage of 68" and in which he asks and seeks to answer the question why he, who has written so much on what he calls "the mechanisms" of domination, especially in *Réflexions sur la question gai*, has not written about "social domination" – a question given particular point by the fact that, just as Eribon is gay, he was born into a working-class family

and is thereby as well situated to talk about the construction of working-class identity as about gay identity.

What has made Eribon's work important, then, has been its ambition to take "social" domination as seriously as he himself has taken sexual domination and as seriously as the left takes racial domination, sexism and transphobia. In other words, if in the intersectional trilogy of race, class and gender, class has been relatively neglected, Eribon looks to remedy that neglect by thinking about what it means to do what intersectionality asks of us, raising the question of being oppressed as a gay man together with the question of being oppressed as a member of the working class. And in doing so he makes vivid the limits of that effort. He shows why it is crucial to distinguish between race and sex on the one hand and class on the other, and why it is just as crucial to understand the priority of class over identity. Why, to stick with his original example, is homophobia oppressive, or why are working-class families made to feel "shame" when their families do not live up to a certain "ideal" of family structure? It is the effort of the "social order" to "impose" a "definition of a couple or a family," to make heterosexuality "normative" and thereby to assert the "inferiority" of homosexuality.[12] And that is wrong because homosexuality is *not* in any way inferior to heterosexuality. Indeed, this was and is the completely compelling point at the heart of all the new social movements. Women are not inferior to men; blacks are not inferior to whites. The power of the turn to identity is in its pluralism, and the power of identity politics is in its assertion of that pluralism: identities are different but equal, and so the technologies of domination that render one inferior to another are on their face illegitimate.

To put the point in this way is already to begin to suggest the discrepancy between sexual or racial domination and class domination, a discrepancy suggested also in Eribon's remark that it was "easier" for him "to write about sexual shame than about class shame."[13] What Eribon means is that he was even more ashamed of his social identity than his sexual one. But the problem runs deeper than that. For one thing, the story of his sexual identity is the story of his coming to embrace who he is, whereas the story of his social identity involves his ceasing to be who he was. The successful intellectual who no longer thinks of poverty as shameful is also a person who has stopped being poor. And for another, the fact that his poverty no longer seems to him shameful does not make it seem desirable. Getting over your shame at being gay means being perfectly happy to be gay; getting over your shame at being poor does not mean being perfectly happy to be poor.

The reason for this, of course, is that the supposed inferiority of people of colour, women and of gays is only supposed – a function of the shame-inducing disciplinary technologies to which they are subjected. Remove those technologies or even just recognize them as the illegitimate constructs of a false normativity and you begin to remove the inferiority; remove the things that cause shame and you remove the shame. But remove the shame experienced

by Eribon's mother, who was forced to work two backbreaking jobs and left even then with almost nothing, and you have not in the slightest relieved the oppression that is built into her class position. That oppression is independent of her feelings about it. Eribon asks why "certain categories of the population – gay men, lesbians, transsexuals, Jews, blacks, and so on – have to bear the burden" of "social" and "cultural" domination.[14] But no one needs to ask why capital needs to dominate labour; it is because capital needs to exploit labour. And that function, that structural subordination, would be in place even if poor people loved it. But there has never been much evidence that they do. This is why Erik Olin Wright writes that the conflict between classes is generated by "inherent properties … rather than simply contingent factors" and Nicos Poulantzas insists that even if more nuanced accounts of class difference – "bourgeois, proletarian, petty bourgeois, poor peasant, etc." – are sometimes useful, the crucial thing is that all "*classes have existence only in the class struggle.*"[15] Conversely, this is why the shaming of the working class (which is entirely "contingent") plays such a crucial role in liberal thinking about inequality. It marks liberalism's transformation of a class position, a relation to the means of production, into an identity and thus eliminates the inherent conflict between labour and capital.

Since the publication of Michel Foucault's seminars on neoliberalism as a form of biopolitics, we have understood very well how conservatives seek to eliminate class conflict. Redescribing workers as entrepreneurs of the self makes every worker into "his own capital," his "own producer," and the "source" of his own "earnings."[16] In this vision, where the wage capital pays you is understood as the "return" on your own "capital," we are "at the opposite extreme of a conception of labour power sold at the market price to a capital invested in an enterprise."[17] In other words, we are at the extreme opposite of the vision of a society divided by class. The drivers who might otherwise be understood as Uber's employees are instead understood as "independent contractors," making deals with Uber the way one capitalist does with another. Thus what Foucault naively thought of as neoliberalism, but what we might think of as right-wing or conservative neoliberalism, deploys human capital to make the very idea of class disappear.

Eribon, however, is not a conservative, and so identity does for him what human capital does for conservatives. That is, for left neoliberals, or just plain liberals, it recasts the problem of the necessary (in capitalism) exploitation of one class by another as the unnecessary and (in neoliberal capitalism) undesirable discrimination by one group against another. This is the neoliberal theory of social justice. In the service of equality of opportunity and meritocracy, it seeks to minimize what economists call "bad" inequalities, and it defines bad inequalities precisely as those that are rooted in, to quote the usefully representative California Fair Employment and Housing Act, "race, religious creed, color, national origin, ancestry, physical disability, mental disability, medical condition, marital status, sex, age, or sexual orientation."[18] With respect to

housing, it is illegal to refuse to sell to someone because of her race but not, obviously, because she cannot afford the price. And the same principle is at work with respect to employment. The law seeks to guarantee access to the housing market and the job market while leaving it up to the market to determine the price of the house and of the labour. In a market where the differences in income between good jobs and bad jobs have become more extreme, both economic efficiency and morality demand that the people who get the bad jobs be the victims of "good" inequalities, like their own incompetence, and not of bad ones, like discrimination.

Right now about 43 per cent of American workers between the ages of 18 and 64 are low-wage workers with a median hourly salary of $10.22. These workers are disproportionately black and Hispanic.[19] That disproportion is the problem that anti-discrimination law was invented to help solve. The fact that it has not done a very good job suggests that the problem is more complicated and also that the legacy of past racism and the persistence of current racism continue to be obstacles. But my point here is not the perfectly valid one that we need to work harder to end discrimination. The problem with a job that pays $10.22 an hour is that it pays $10.22 an hour, and that problem does not go away if we succeed in fixing things so that more white people or fewer black people have it. What would make it start to go away is a salary closer to $30 an hour, which would help both black and white people feel a lot better about those jobs. But what we get instead is the demand for proportional representation, which has absolutely nothing to do with solving the problem of economic inequality. To put it charitably, it is a symptom of the problem and, less charitably, an effort to deny that it is a problem.

If you are confronted not only with the current inequalities but with the fact that the jobs with the greatest projected growth are mainly low-wage jobs, and what Brookings discreetly calls the "erosion of the American middle class" over the last half century is likely to continue, you will plausibly feel a little nervous about the future of a social system that makes the rich richer and the poor poorer. Hence, among elites, that is, those who have benefitted from the unequal distributions of the past half century and who hope their children will continue to benefit, the increasing intensity of focus on anti-discrimination is intended less to reduce inequality than to make it fairer. The more remote equality of outcome seems, the more urgent equality of opportunity becomes. It is for this reason that education plays such a central role in American ideological life – not because it is so necessary for so many jobs but because it is not. The job in the U.S. with the greatest projected growth over the next ten years is "personal care aide," which pays $24,020 a year and for which you do not need an hour's worth of college. The college education is to help you avoid becoming a personal care aide.[20] More positively, college is to help you compete for the high-paying jobs. Although people sometimes wonder why Americans pay so much attention to the never-ending controversies, like affirmative action, over admissions to institutions that are relevant to a very

small amount of the population, it is precisely because the number is so small that the stakes are so high.[21] Thus, the point of affirmative action is to legitimate the elite first by characterizing the main impediment to joining it as racism and then by seeking to eliminate the racism. Of course, racism is not in fact the main impediment. The fact that the students at places like Harvard, Yale and Michigan have become richer as they have become more racially diverse is here, as in the housing market, either anomalous or irrelevant. It is poverty and not racism that is the main impediment. Buying your kid's way into college by bribing the water polo coach counts as a scandal; buying his way into college by sending him to excellent preparatory schools does not.

For our purposes, however, the problem is not just that the racialization of fairness makes other kinds of unfairness irrelevant. It is not even that, when it comes to reducing inequality, making the bad jobs better matters more than making the process of deciding who gets them fairer. For the purpose of understanding the relations between class and race, it is that the model of proportional representation offered by programmes like affirmative action makes the idea of class conflict disappear. And insofar as class only exists in terms of class conflict, class itself disappears. We get a vivid instance of how this works in Kimberlé Crenshaw's account of the contribution the Critical Race Movement has made to one of the Harvard Law School controversies about hiring minorities. The Critical Race scholars, she says, "articulated a redistributional conception of law teaching jobs. They viewed these positions as resources that should be shared with communities of color."[22] The brilliance here is in the appeal to "communities of colour," as if a few black people getting really cushy jobs is a good thing not just for them but for the overwhelming majority of black people – essentially all of them – who will never be professors at Harvard Law School. If you were to characterize the relation between poor black people and black law professors in terms of class rather than community, it would be adversarial: the difference between people who get paid a great deal of money to make capitalism work and people who get paid very little money also to make capitalism work. The difference, in other words, is between beneficiaries and victims. Once you replace class with community and make colour the criterion of membership, the rewards of your job at Harvard can be understood as shared with the working class rather than extracted from them. Race turns rich black people into the representatives rather than the adversaries of poor black people.

Why anyone should think that poor black people accept this is a bit of a mystery. Has anyone ever thought that having a few white people teach at Harvard was good news for all of the white people who do not? Or, more generally, that having some rich white people is good for all poor white people? It is true, however, that even if no poor white people believe it, this is the story told by all the statistics that demonstrate the economic advantages whites have over blacks. It is not that the disparities between whites and blacks are not real. There is absolutely no doubt that most American wealth is held by white

people. The mean wealth of whites is about $900,000, and for blacks it is about $140,000. There can also be no doubt that past and current racism plays a central role in producing this gap. Whites are richer than blacks and racism is the main reason why. If, however, you look at disparities of wealth within races instead of between them, the meaning of the racial wealth gap, and of racializing the wealth gap, begins to look a little different. The top 10 per cent of white people have about three-quarters of all white wealth. The bottom 50 per cent of white people have less than two and a half per cent of that wealth, and the bottom 30 per cent of white people have essentially none of it. The bottom 50 per cent of white people are benefitting from white wealth about as much as the vast majority of black people are benefitting from the appointment of black professors at Harvard. That is to say, not at all. And if the top 20 per cent of white people own more than 85 per cent of white wealth and the bottom half of white people have basically no wealth at all, why would anyone in that bottom half think that closing the *racial* wealth gap is the great social justice problem of our time?

It is easy to see the ideological utility of believing that what is required to lift poor black people out of poverty is anti-racism. It makes equality of opportunity the only equality that matters, and it makes diversifying capitalism rather than ending it the goal of egalitarianism. Furthermore, as Ken Warren has brilliantly observed, it makes every rich black person a role model for overcoming racism rather than just a different colour exploiter of the working class.[23] And, of course, it also produces an adjacent glow for every rich white person who opposes racism. It is no wonder that college campuses are filled with people whose rejection of discrimination is accompanied by their eagerness to get good jobs. The gap between the earnings of college graduates and everyone else is higher than it has ever been, and the sincere desire to make sure that badly paid health care aides are not all minority women is not compromised by the equally sincere desire to avoid becoming a badly paid health care aide.

What is more striking is the degree to which the identification of economic inequality with the effects of discrimination has taken hold among white people. Indeed, even what Eribon describes as the "profound racism" that emerged among white workers in the 1980s in response to the new immigration understands itself as a form of anti-racism. White workers, convinced that immigrants are siphoning off all the social welfare allocations, feel that they are being left behind because of their race. "*Y en a que pour eux, ils vivent avec les allocations familiales et il n'y a plus rien pour nous*" is the French version.[24] The American version is that if you're black, and you want help from the government, you get it; "if you're white you don't."[25] And then there is the Trump supporter version: 45 per cent of the people who voted for Trump in 2016 apparently thought that white people were more likely to face discrimination in the U.S. than any other group.[26] Even in 2011, when the idea of President Trump was just a gleam in Satan's eye, many white people had come to believe that "anti-white bias" had become more prevalent than "anti-black

bias."[27] In reality, both those French and American white people who believe they are the victims of racism are mistaken. But when the explanatory model of the exploitation of labour by capital has been taken off the table, not only by the right – who never believed in it – but also by the left – whose concept of domination is now discrimination – the idea that if you are a victim what you must be a victim of is discrimination becomes all powerful.[28]

The problem is not with anti-discrimination as such. As Reed has written, "no serious tendency on the left contends that racial or gender injustices or those affecting LGBTQ people, immigrants, or other groups as such do not exist, are inconsequential or … should be ignored."[29] The point of making fun of Goldman Sachs's sensitivity about pronouns is not to disparage sensitivity about pronouns; it is to disparage the idea that they contribute to a radical politics. In other words, the problem is with the separation of anti-discrimination from a commitment to socialism. If you think the basic problem is white supremacy, you are committed to a model of equality that is merely contingent because it ignores the inequality necessarily produced by the conflict between classes. You are thus committed to a vision of equality that, leaving capitalism intact, also leaves the unequal distribution of wealth intact. Right now, almost all American wealth is owned by white people, which does no good for the masses of white people who do not own any of it. Black people owning their fair share would do just as little for the masses of black people who also would not own any of it. Actual equality requires destroying the classes, not establishing parity between different "communities." Indeed, nothing is more conservative than the idea of communities of colour, whatever the colour is.

It could be argued that on a more radical view, the goal of anti-racism should not be equality between the races but the elimination of racial difference altogether. And since there really is no such thing as race, that would actually be a good thing! But liberal identitarianism is more interested in multiplying identities than in eliminating them. Thus, for example, Peter Frase argues for the continuity between class and gender, suggesting that we should see the gender binary as more like the capital/labour binary and replace the liberal goal of equality between genders with the more radical one of eliminating gender. By eliminating gender differences, what he means is purging them of "their function as categories of hierarchy and oppression," and thus, turning the "performance of gender" into something "more fluid, playful, and theatrical."[30] That is not an alternative to liberal anti-discrimination, it *is* liberal anti-discrimination. Not that, when it comes to identity, there is not anything wrong with that. But when it comes to class, the values of playfulness and fluidity are completely irrelevant, unless by class fluidity you mean the entirely liberal fantasy of class mobility. Why? Because class is a relation to the means of production, not a performance. In fact, the minute you start trying to imagine what the performance of class would look like, you recognize that the invocation of the "models set down by queer and transgender cultures" does the exact opposite of what Frase wants it to do. Instead of blurring the difference

between class position and identity, his model sharpens it. In gender, what you are is what you act like; in class what you are is what you own.[31]

Frase's commitment to identity is so complete that he thinks even the "partisans" of "the crude 'class first' politics" he opposes share it. Their (my!) problem is that "they claim class as an identity superior to all others" when really it is "subject to the same limitations and contradictions that beset race, gender, and all other oppressed identities in capitalism."[32] But the argument for a class first politics depends entirely on the idea that class *is not* an identity. Turning it into one is, as we have already seen, the neoliberal gesture par excellence. Having performed that gesture, Frase immediately moves to the intersectional high ground where he can denounce not only racism and sexism but also the kind of "classism" that crops up every time, for example, "a *soi-disant* leftist ridicules the tastes and mores of a rabble it perceives to be made up of fat, lazy, stupid rubes."[33] Ridiculing rubes is definitely bad and if you were organizing or being organized by them, it would also be stupid. But as long as you are fighting on the side of the rubes, the fact that you think they are fat and lazy does not make your leftism the slightest bit *soi-disant*. The unjustified assertion of one's own superiority is doubtless a moral failing, but there is a difference between moral failings and material antagonisms, even if the whole point of concepts like classism is to replace the latter by the former. You do not need an implicit bias test to tell you what class you belong to or whether you support decommodified housing, schooling and medicine. But you do need one to tell you whether you are harbouring unconscious prejudices against people of colour or are unknowingly stereotyping the poor.[34] As some diehard Foucauldian must surely have pointed out by now, examining oneself for hidden bias is a technology of the self that is supposed to do for progressives what self-examination for sin followed by confession is supposed to do for Catholics.[35] The idea that racism is America's original sin brings the two nicely together, encapsulating the transformation of material opposition into the moral disapproval that makes the substitution of race for class, and hence of a left neoliberal politics for a left politics, so attractive.

The further attraction is that discrimination is not only immoral, it is compensable. Women can sue if they are not being paid the same as men; no one can sue just because they are not being paid a living wage. And this entirely procedural and fundamentally conservative model has extended to putatively more radical efforts towards equality. The demand for reparations seeks to make compensation for discrimination compensable not only if you yourself have been discriminated against but also if the inequality you are suffering from – the disparity between black and white wealth – is a function of previous discrimination. Thus, for example, Ta-Nehisi Coates convincingly invokes the history of discrimination in both the market and in the government's "racist housing policy" as an explanation for the disparities between black and white homeownership, which is around 74 per cent for whites and 43 per cent for blacks, and hence, since home ownership is such a large component of most

Americans' wealth, between black and white wealth.[36] But no one is arguing for reparations to people who cannot afford a house because their grandparents could not make the mortgage payments on the one they were living in when their union got busted. With reparations, as with neoliberal discrimination law, you can be compensated for inequalities produced *within* the class structure not for the inequalities produced *by* the class structure.

If for Coates, reparations is crucially about the effort to close the black and white "wealth gap" that he describes as "the enduring legacy of our country's shameful history of treating black people as sub-citizens, sub-Americans, and sub-humans," it is also about the necessity to "face up to the particular history of white-imposed black disadvantage."[37] It is this sense of social justice, defined as the necessity to face up to history, that marks the most fundamental difference between left neoliberalism and socialism. Just as personal history matters in any anti-discrimination action, history matters to the advocates of reparations because the injury relies on history – it is the causal account of how you were injured. If you are denied a mortgage because you or your ancestors were discriminated against, you have a claim. If you cannot qualify for a mortgage because you lost your down payment at the track, you do not. The structure remains the same even if we expand the range of acceptable causal accounts to include the would-be homeowner whose union was busted. Facing up to history is built into it because the question of who does and who does not deserve some form of compensation is nothing but a question about who has and who has not endured the right kind of unfairness. But if you think that housing is a public good and should be decommodified, then it no longer matters whether or not, much less why, your grandparents could not get a mortgage. You are entitled to housing no matter what happened to them and no matter what they did. That is the difference between trying to make the housing market fairer and trying to eliminate it. Socialism renders the causal account of how you came to be in need – and therefore the individualizing determination of whether your causal account is the right one – irrelevant. More generally, the universalizing ambition to make everyone equal makes the history of how we became unequal, makes history itself, irrelevant.

From this perspective, there is no political point in facing up to our history. Or rather, there is a political point but it is the wrong one since the effort to use the history of inequality as a technology for rectifying the inequality is completely wedded to the logic of compensation and the question of who deserves it. In this respect, the current enthusiasm for putting racism at the centre of both the history of the U.S. and the history of capitalism is an expression of enthusiasm for a liberal rather than socialist idea of equality. Thus, for example, what is wrong with the *New York Times* 1619 Project or even, more seriously, with the newly intensified interest in Cedric Robinson's redescription of capitalism as racial capitalism has less to do with the question of whether their emphasis on the centrality of race is mistaken and more to do with the

idea that history matters and that justice consists in undoing the damages caused in the past.[38] The story of how you got to where you are is not the blueprint for getting you out of where you are. When Marx said that philosophers have only interpreted the world and that the point was to change it, he should have added that historians have only understood (or misunderstood) the past; the point is to forget it.

With racial capitalism, however, the situation is more complicated since whether or not it has always been true, as Robinson wrote in *Black Marxism*, that race has been the "ordering principle" and "organizing structure" of capital, it is certainly true today.[39] It is only when you take a society that is organized around the relations between classes, or between labour and capital, and redescribe it as one organized around the relations between races, or communities of colour, that you can make programmes like affirmative action and the whole apparatus of racially proportionate redistribution look like a left politics. That is to say, anti-racism can be just as useful to capitalism as racism has been. Where racism plays a role in producing the actual distribution of white and black people across classes, anti-racism provides a model for the ideal distribution across classes. They both enable rather than oppose the class system.

The overwhelming corporate support for the mass protests that broke out in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police exemplifies this achievement. It is not that the outrage expressed by everyone from Adidas to J.P. Morgan and Uber is hypocritical – though these companies no doubt have a way to go to live up to their own ideals. Rather, with the people in the corporate offices as with the people in the streets, the protests are an expression of an entirely justified moral anger redeployed as an entirely conservative liberal politics. When the goals of the protesters in the street are indistinguishable from the goals of the vice president for Human Resources in the corner office, and when Crenshaw can wax enthusiastic about living in "a moment where every corporation worth its salt is saying something about structural racism and anti-blackness" that is "outdistancing" what Bernie Sanders said, you know that anti-racism has become nothing but a form of neoliberal apologetics.[40]

For an anti-capitalist politics, it is class and not race, or sex or gender, that makes sense now. It is only in a situation where anti-discrimination can be and is being used against the working class that it becomes important to insist on the conceptual point that class is not an identity and to link that insistence to the political point that anti-discrimination and the primacy of identity are deployed today to justify and preserve inequality. If economic inequality had been continually decreasing since 1968 and we lived in a world where, somehow, almost no harm followed from anyone's class position, the conceptual point would still be true but the reason for making it would be merely academic. But we live in something like the opposite of that world, and so both the conceptual point and the political point matter.

Notes

1 Then, as measured by the Gini coefficient, income inequality was 0.388, the lowest in the last half century. But that number started to rise in the 1970s and has been rising ever since; in 2018, it reached a new high of 0.485.

2 See the fact sheet on "Wealth Inequality in the United States" at https://inequality.org/facts/wealth-inequality/.

3 Davide Furceri, Prakash Loungani, Jonathan D. Ostry and Pietro Pizzuto, "Covid-19 Will Raise Inequality if Past Pandemics Are a Guide," *Vox EU* (May 8, 2020), https://voxeu.org/article/covid-19-will-raise-inequality-if-past-pandemics-are-guide.

4 Matt Breunig, "Top 1% Up $21 Trillion. Bottom 5-% Down 900 Billion," *People's Policy Project* (June 14, 2019), https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/2019/06/14/top-1-up-21-trillion-bottom-50-down-900-billion/.

5 PK, "United States Net Worth Brackets, Percentiles, and Top One Percent," *DQYDJ* (2016), https://dqydj.com/net-worth-brackets-wealth-brackets-one-percent/. If you are right in the middle – at the 50th percentile – your net worth is $97,225. And that is inflated by savings (mainly home equity) that older people have managed to accrue. For households headed by someone between the ages of 35 and 44, the median is $59,800.

6 Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso 2018), 2.

7 Thus, for example, at Ivy League colleges, where admissions matter because they represent an entry into the elite, men and women are equally represented or women are over-represented among the student body. And, although white people are a majority of the country, at no Ivy League school do they represent a majority of the students.

8 Adolph Reed, Jr., "Adolph Reed, Jr. Responds," *New Labor Forum* 23:1 (2014), 65.

9 Goldman Sachs Blog, "Bringing Your Authentic Self to Work," *GoldmanSachs.com* (November 22, 2019), https://www.goldmansachs.com/careers/blog/posts/bring-your-authentic-self-to-work-pronouns.html.

10 Jena McGregor, "Goldman Sachs Says it Wants Half of Its Entry-level Recruits to Be Women," *The Washington Post* (March 18, 2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/03/18/goldman-sachs-says-it-wants-half-its-entry-level-recruits-be-women/. In fact, the standard argument is that a diverse workforce is better for profits.

11 Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 59.

12 Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, trans. Michael Lucey (New York: Semiotext(e), 2013), 72.

13 Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, 25. The English translation turns "honte sexuelle" and "honte sociale" into "shame linked to…"

14 Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, 217.

15 Erik Olin Wright, "Foundations of a Neo-Marxist Class Analysis," in Wright, ed. *Approaches to Class Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 28; Nicos Poulantzas, "On Social Classes," *New Left Review* #78 (March-April, 1973), 49.

16 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* trans. by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 226.

17 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 225.

18 California Legislative Information fact sheet, https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?sectionNum=12921.&lawCode=GOV.

19 Marcela Escobari, "Realism About Reskilling: Upgrading the Career Prospects of America's Low-Wage Workers," *Brookings Workforce of the Future Initiatives* (December 2019), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Realism-About-Reskilling-Final-Report.pdf.

20 Of the top five growing jobs only one (registered nurse) requires a college degree. People often say that the intricacies of the modern world are what make education so

important today. What actually makes it important is the need for a mechanism that will at least seem to reconcile the ideal of equality with the reality of inequality.

21 Only about four per cent of American students attend colleges competitive enough to make affirmative action an issue. See Ben Casselman, "Shut Up About Harvard," *FiveThirtyEight* (March 30, 2016), https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/shut-up-about-harvard/.

22 Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mark Lilla's Comfort Zone," *The Baffler* (September 14, 2017), https://thebaffler.com/latest/mark-lillas-comfort-zone.

23 See Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

24 Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, 146.

25 Don Gonyea, "Majority Of White Americans Say They Believe Whites Face Discrimination," *NPR* (October 24, 2017), https://www.npr.org/2017/10/24/559604836/majority-of-white-americans-think-theyre-discriminated-against.

26 Ariel Edwards-Levy, "Nearly Half of Trump Voters Think Whites Face a Lot of Discrimination," *The Huffington Post* (November 21, 2016), https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/discrimination-race-religion_n_5833761ee4b099512f845bba?ri18n=true.

27 Michael I. Norton and Samuel R. Sommer, "Whites See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game That They Are Now Losing," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6:3 (2011), 215–18, https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Publication%20Files/norton%20sommers%20whites%20see%20racism_ca92b4be-cab9-491d-8a87-cf1c6ff244ad.pdf.

28 This is one of the central points of Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2014).

29 Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Myth of Class Reductionism," *The New Republic* (September 25, 2019), https://newrepublic.com/article/154996/myth-class-reductionism.

30 Peter Frase, "Stay Classy," *Jacobin* (June 26, 2014), https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/06/stay-classy/.

31 Identitarianism has always gone hand in hand with performance and with a theoretical commitment to the performative. See Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

32 Frase, "Stay Classy."

33 Frase, "Stay Classy."

34 Anna Lindqvist, Fredrik Björklund and Martin Bäckström, "The Perception of the Poor: Capturing Stereotype Content with Different Measures," *Nordic Psychology* 69:4 (2017), 231–47.

35 Some recent studies suggest the tests are not so good at actually discovering bias, but this seems to me somewhat beside the point; as with confession, the value of the practice need have nothing to do with science.

36 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic* (June 2014), https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/. You get a better sense of the meaning of the black/white wealth gap if you put it in the context of the white/white wealth gap: the top 10 per cent of all white people have about 75 per cent of white wealth; the bottom 30 per cent have none; the bottom 70 per cent have about 8 per cent. For most white people, white supremacy just has not been what it was cracked up to be. See Matt Bruenig, "Wealth Is Extremely Unevenly Distributed In Every Racial Group," *People's Policy Project* (September 28, 2017), https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/2017/09/28/wealth-is-extremely-unevenly-distributed-in-every-racial-group/.

37 Coates, "The Case for Reparations."

38 According to Jake Silverstein, "The goal of The 1619 Project is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation's birth year. Doing so requires us to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of

black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country." Silverstein, "Why We Published the 1619 Project," *The New York Times* (December 20, 2019), https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/20/magazine /1619-intro.html.

39 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xxxi.

40 Kimberlé Crenshaw cited in Sydney Ember, "Bernie Sanders Predicted Revolution, Just Not This One," *The New York Times* (June 19, 2020), https://www.nytimes.com /2020/06/19/us/politics/bernie-sanders-protests.html.

Capitalism Is the Problem
Articulating Race and Gender with Class

David Harvey

Marxism emphasizes the fact that capitalism is *the* problem to our social ills and not a solution. Some are beginning to recognize that fact. For instance, the American economist Paul Krugman on occasion provides a critical perspective on the nature of the economic system, although usually from a purely economic standpoint. He considers that things go wrong when politicians interfere with economics. Given the mass demonstrations that erupted after the police killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, Krugman asked: How did we get here? He writes: "The core story of U.S. politics over the past four decades is that wealthy elites weaponized white racism to gain political power, which they used to pursue policies that enriched the already wealthy at workers' expense."[1] Now that is the sort of thing that I might have happily written myself! It is a very challenging perspective. He adds:

> Until Trump's rise it was possible – barely – for people to deny this reality with a straight face. At this point, however, it requires willful blindness not to see what's going on … Republicans have … spent decades exploiting racial hostility to win elections despite a policy agenda that hurts workers. But Trump is now pushing that cynical strategy toward a kind of apotheosis. On one side, he's effectively inciting violence by his supporters. On the other, he's very close to calling for a military response to social protest. And at this point, nobody expects any significant pushback from other Republicans. Now, I don't think Trump will actually succeed in provoking a race war in the near future, even though he's clearly itching for an excuse to use force. But the months ahead are still likely to be very, very ugly. After all, if Mr. Trump is encouraging violence and talking about military solutions to overwhelmingly peaceful protests, what will he and his supporters do if he looks likely to lose November's elections?[2]

The issue in this argument goes back to Krugman's opening sentence and the claim that the core story has been that "wealthy elites weaponized white racism to gain political power." There is no question that the Republicans have played an important role in governance and have weaponized racial fears.

Trump was very explicit about this. The idea that with this political power they pursue policies that enrich the already wealthy at the expense of workers is not difficult to prove. Trump's Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 was a giveaway to corporations, investors, bondholders, and everyone else, but with nothing whatsoever in it for the mass of the population. There will be people who say that because people can afford an extra two coffees each week, that is a huge improvement to their condition. How we integrate class and race is therefore critical.

In the United Sates, African Americans typically have a mixed reaction to class analysis. In the mid-1970s, the reaction was rather hostile. The idea was that if you combined race and class, there will be a revolution, which is something that the ruling class fears. That is why the authorities went after Martin Luther King and the Black Panthers. The Black Panthers were not only black nationalists but had an economic project. One of the most successful programmes that the Panthers organized was the Baltimore Free Breakfast Programme for kids. They also, together with the American Friends Service Committee – an almost entirely white progressive organization – set up a free medical clinic. The FBI went after them, silenced Fred Hampton in Chicago and did everything to completely dismantle the Black Panther organization. The implication is that if you start a movement that combines race and class issues you are looking for trouble. Malcolm X also talked about class and race and so the idea is that when the two are put together the results are explosive. One can only admire Angela Davis, a former Panther, who later put race together with class and gender in a remarkable way.

The issue is: how are race, class and gender put together? For example, who would benefit from a universal healthcare system? It would benefit everybody, but it would particularly benefit the African-American population. This is the group that by and large cannot afford health care because they have the "underlying conditions" that make insurance costs prohibitive. If you want to cure the underlying conditions, then you need an adequate healthcare system in low-income African-American communities. That is not going to happen through a private for-profit system and through individual initiative. This is clear in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even New York governor Andrew Cuomo's comments acknowledged that in order to deal with this kind of crisis you need a unified healthcare system. Only approximately 15 to 20 per cent of hospitals in New York state are public institutions. The rest are private institutions that operate independently. In order to manage the coronavirus crisis, the system had to be unified. Cuomo was therefore, indirectly, saying that we need a public health system. This would be easier to set up and coordinate if it was a universal single-payer system. You would have, in effect, the abolition of the for-profit model of private health care. Privatization is crucial, however, to investment and Wall Street profiteering. If you interfere with business interests, you are interfering with the sanctity of capitalism. Nevertheless, a universal healthcare system is to some degree

essential if your goal is to take care of the underlying conditions that lead to lower life expectancy rates in those zip codes that are predominantly populated by African Americans and that are more vulnerable, for example, to problems like the coronavirus.

Why does this not occur? Lobbyists and insurance companies are against it. We expect that from them, however. And this is where Krugman's analysis comes in. Republicans do not want it and so find ways to resist it. The ways they resist it have nothing to do with the provision of affordable quality health care. What did the Republicans object to about Obamacare, which is not a universal healthcare plan? Their objection was to the individual mandate, which they argued is un-American insofar as government is directing consumer choice. If such a mandate is allowed to stand, they argue, it could lead, as Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia said, to the government forcing people to do such things as eat spinach. Individual liberty is the way that conservatives deny the provision of a collective good that would allow you to remedy the social inequalities that exist in health standards between affluent communities and impoverished communities. In a city like New York, impoverished communities are for the most part comprised of people of colour, Hispanic migrants and other minority groups.

As difficult as it is to address problems of inequality, other problems arise. For example, the situation around the pandemic is aggravated when people begin to question their obligation to wear a mask. People turn up at supermarkets without a mask and claim their rights as individuals to expose others and be exposed to a deadly disease. The only solution to this is to emphasize universal rights against the individual rights of those who refuse to wear a mask. No one has the right to infect someone else. Neoliberal ethics has been focused, from the start, on the rhetoric of individual responsibility and individual rights. We have all become neoliberal insofar as we are caught up in this way of thinking. I am not arguing against targeted funding, but when funding runs out and the programmes are withdrawn, people suddenly find themselves bereft. Temporary infusions of cash do not, on the whole, contribute to the well-being of the mass of the population. The same thing applies to public housing when Congress fails to secure funding and instead attacks recipients of state subsidies. We need to think of social policies that address the question of racial disparities but do it through the kind of universal legislation that makes benefits available to everyone. To take the question of reparations, there is a very good case to be made for reparations to be paid to an African-American community that not only suffered slavery but suffered after slavery from systematic discrimination. However, if you use those means independently of universal programmes, they will fold back into the dominant praxis.

Much of what has happened after the struggles for reform in the late 1960s and early 70s was an erosion of the progress that was achieved previously. Neoliberalism marked a shift away from welfare state universalism to such things as targeted programmes, means testing and privatization. One of the

most important things that we can do, politically speaking, is set up a situation where that cannot happen. We can notice that with those programmes that persist. For instance, it would be very difficult to get rid of Social Security. Republicans constantly claim that we must get rid of Social Security and that people would be better off investing in the stock market. Rather than a mandatory system, they think that investment should be an individual responsibility. But it turns out that it is very difficult to get rid of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. If you begin to universalize social programmes, it will be very difficult to get rid of them. What the Republicans and the wealthy elite want to do is gradually erode these programmes, defund them bit by bit, gnaw away at the edges and get them to the point where they become unsustainable. There is no problem with Social Security. It could last forever so long as it is managed correctly and you do not allow the government to raid it for other purposes. Likewise, Medicare and Medicaid are very efficient systems for delivering health services. They are potentially universal and do the job of setting up the basics of a good healthcare system. It is therefore easy to imagine setting up a public choice initiative that would gradually extend them, or, more radically, setting up a universal healthcare system.

We need to understand how white racism is being cultivated and how it is used. One of the questions we should all ask ourselves is: How racist am I? In what sense am I racist? Any person, but particularly a white person, who says that they are not racist is lying. We live in a racially charged society where all kinds of racial codes exist. It is very difficult, even with the best intentions, not to be influenced by all of these codes. If you do not acknowledge this, it becomes easier for hidden forms of racism to surface. This is what occurred in the "Black Birder" incident that occurred in Central Park, as it happens, on the same day that George Floyd was killed. A white woman named Amy Cooper took her dog off its leash in an area where bird watchers like to congregate. A bird watcher who happened to be black, named Christian Cooper (no relation), asked her to put her dog on a leash. After they got into an altercation, this white, neoliberal–type woman accused him of harassing her and threatened to call the police. He told her to go ahead and she did, telling the authorities that her life was being threatened by an African–American man. She later claimed that she did not know why she said that, but she nevertheless lost her job because of it.

This incident demonstrates that we must be aware of the fact that we all are capable of racist thoughts and behaviours. Beyond the hurt feelings of one individual, we must be aware of this possibility because that is the sort of thing that leads people to make decisions based on racial animus. This then allows politicians to come along and exploit racist fears and xenophobia. Suddenly, in the voting booth, people vote for a candidate like Trump instead of another. One reason why this happens is because people with more privilege are more likely to blame the victim. For instance, if life expectancy in underprivileged communities is around 60 years of age, then people might assume that those

people are not taking care of themselves as much as they could. That is where the racial coding of something like "underlying conditions" comes into play. In the initial discussion surrounding the killing of George Floyd, the question was raised as to whether or not he had underlying conditions – as if that somehow justified his death. This is a subtle way of blaming him for his own death. According to this line of reasoning, if he died it was due to the fact that he had underlying conditions and not because the police officers used a chokehold against him. Such an argument has all the markings of racist coding.

This brings us to the question of Black Lives Matter protests. These protests are very encouraging in a number of ways. To begin with, the protesters are braving the coronavirus. In addition, many of them are white. That was not the case in the uprisings of the late 1960s. These are therefore multiracial protests that are characteristic of today's younger generation. Despite this, we are going to have to rescue the entire population from all of the moralizing talk of unity and insist on the need to account for the processes that generate the underlying conditions. People therefore need to understand that capital is the problem and not the solution. Until we reign in the power of capital and deal with what Krugman talks about – this core story of U.S. politics – then wealthy elites will be able to weaponize white racism in order to gain political power. That is without question what Trump has done in order to pursue policies that enrich the already wealthy at the expense of workers. The working class has not benefitted in the least from Trump.

We need to further politicize Krugman's argument in order to appreciate who it is that has benefitted from Trump's so-called tax reforms. The argument that Krugman puts forward has been used by some but has not been taken up by progressive liberals. We must push the liberal left in such a way that all of the people who have protested understand that capital is the problem. Capital cannot be the solution. When we say capital, we are talking about wealthy elites and their manipulation of white racism. This is not to say that white racism is simply the invention of these elites. However, the potential for manipulation exists and we must pay close attention to it. These are difficult times and it would be unfortunate if we came out of this moment, when real change is possible, and make all of the mistakes that were made in the 1960s through to the 80s. If working people are betrayed in this way once again it will be a disaster. We must prevent that history from repeating itself. We therefore must be critical of those people in the capitalist class who sound progressive but are not – people like Ray Dalio, Bill Gates, Eric Schmidt and Michael Bloomberg. Andrew Cuomo sounded very progressive, but his mentor and the person that he looked up to is Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Moynihan's view of the black family was that it is intractable and so what was recommended was the neoliberal solution of black capitalism, where a few privileged blacks are admitted into the ranks of the power elite. If that happens again, then the U.S. will not be a place worth living in. Race issues are therefore critical to all of us and the future of the country. That is why it is important to keep in mind that

no group can go it alone in a system that is essentially unequal and exclusive. Some may rise in the social hierarchy, but the majority will not because it is structurally impossible.

What then is the anti-capitalist content of identity politics? There are many sites of struggle that have a different dynamic from the classic struggles of industrial labour. In many parts of the world factories have disappeared. Much factory production has been offshored to China, Bangladesh, Mexico and other places. The narrow view is that the only struggles that can be anti-capitalist are workplace struggles. Such struggles are crucial in highly proletarianized places like China, but this narrow view leaves questions unanswered about, for instance, the protection of Indigenous cultures from destruction by capitalist development. Do we argue that these are not class struggles and that therefore we do not need to pay attention to them? Do we say that they are not anti-capitalist, when in fact, very often, they are exactly that? Environmental struggles and struggles over the extortionist practices of pharmaceutical companies that profit from the marketing of essential drugs are also problems about the realization of value. Who is affected? It is not only workers but everyone who has a medical problem.

In New York City, for example, if you were to organize a struggle against landlords, to prevent them from raising rents, you would have here also a struggle over value realization. Family restaurants in New York City are being driven out of business because, when their leases run out, landlords double the price. They cannot survive. Small businesses are fighting against rental extraction and so working people have to be in alliance with them. These alliances are not simply about workers, but about everyone who is affected by rising rents and rates of exploitation in land and property markets. Because these do not have the form of classic anti-capitalist struggles, you need to do the work to see how they are interrelated. Different struggles across the accumulation process have their specific aspects. We have to put them together rather than making our particular struggle exclusive or more relevant than the others. You can say that your struggle is specific and different from the others, but you must also recognize that all of the struggles have something in common because they are part of a totality, which is the system of capitalist accumulation. We have to change that totality in order to resolve any particular problem. This is something that identity politics sometimes ignores or rejects.

Over the last several decades, identity politics have had some very positive aspects. There is a problem, however, to the degree that identity politics are seen in isolation from the totality of the social process. The recent interest in intersectionality does not necessarily have an anti-capitalist content. For example, the gay rights movement in the U.S. has not been particularly anti-capitalist. On the contrary, it has often been pro-capitalist. Black Lives Matter, in comparison, has emerged from a long history of labour struggles, civil rights struggles and black radicalism. The questions of race cannot readily be separated from class issues. The black struggle is a form of identity politics that

focuses on the status of African Americans in the history of American society. Given the history of slavery, segregation and incarceration, there is good reason for black politics to be critical of capitalism. And so BLM does conceive itself in relation to the radical politics of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Coming out of that tradition makes BLM a form of identity politics that is connected to economic and labour struggles. This makes it different from some of the other identity movements.

The case of the women's movement is slightly different. Cinzia Arruzza, for example, has discussed the "unhappy marriage" between Marxism and feminism. Neoliberalism created opportunities that some feminists found to be advantageous. There was a phase during which feminists took advantage of the kinds of freedoms that neoliberalism was proclaiming. There has therefore emerged a form of feminism that is consistent with neoliberal ideology. However, as people like Nancy Fraser have argued, many feminists have come to understand that what seemed like an opening is actually a sham and that feminism has to be integrated with a class perspective. For example, the MeToo movement now comes across as a somewhat neoliberal slogan and so feminists associated with MeToo have moved towards a better understanding of how class affects the social conditions that oppress women worldwide. Struggle has to go beyond high-profile actresses who have been mistreated by men and has to include the working conditions for the majority of working women. For example, the role of women has been given unprecedented prominence in the Kurdish movement in Rojava, which combines class politics with ethnic politics. In Iceland, the role of feminism in politics is also pronounced and rooted in class issues.

One of the points of overlap between Marxism and feminism, as articulated in socialist feminism, is the question of social reproduction. How do practices of social reproduction relate to capital accumulation and circulation? The household economy is often treated as though it is separate from the broader capitalist economy. It is assumed that the hours that are spent raising children are not monetized. That is maybe true and that is perhaps for the better. However, the household economy can be monetized through various means, like take-out food for example. The household economy works according to different principles. We labour in the household but we do not do an accounting system of that labour. The gender partitioning of household labour raises the question of the social relations of production within the domestic realm. It is not such a good idea to integrate the domestic realm directly into processes of capital accumulation, as some have suggested. Domestic work should rather be thought of as a free gift, even if it is ultimately factored into the overall costs of social reproduction. The potential to organize reproductive labour could be socialized through collective and mutually supporting community structures. Solidarities could therefore be built along social and economic lines.

It is not unusual for neighbours to help one another. The household economy has the potential to build outwards and encompass increasingly more

activities, like for example community gardens. Non-market forms of food production, for example, are possible. This happened in Great Britain during the Second World War, when the "Dig for Victory" campaign obliged people to grow their own gardens. During the war, about 15 per cent of the food supply came from people's backyards. People would trade one type of food for another. As goods and services become monetized, those kinds of social relations disappear. Restaurants and laundromats are examples of the monetization of household activities. These processes are not in themselves so terrible, but they do diminish the possibilities for social solidarity. Instead of cultivating spheres of mutual support, neoliberalism has isolated people into individualistic schemes. The domestic sphere is therefore a potential site for the creation of alternative economies. In some places there is a good deal of voluntary labour. These are not organized through non-governmental organizations but are everyday activities that people do in their neighbourhoods for its own sake. There should be ways of encouraging that kind of work.

The reform of market housing is something that could also be looked into more strenuously. We have the legal structures that would allow us to do that in the U.S., like for example community land trusts. The question is why do we not use them? And the answer is because the financiers do not want us to do so and the state prevents us from doing so. If the state could be made to support community land trusts, a good deal of housing could be taken out of the market. The state does not do it because it is tied to the interests of big money. Organizations of the homeless in New York City are seeking to establish community land trusts. They are also attacking the warehousing of sites that are unused only for the sake of speculation on land prices. That land could be released and taxes imposed on luxury condominiums that are kept empty for the purpose of speculation.

While these are not classic instances of worker struggles, they bring the various aspects of social life into a more comprehensive and cohesive vision of society than has otherwise been allowed by neoliberalization, which has made individuals and groups less oriented towards solidarity and more susceptible to the predatory politics of the wealthy elite. Class is not an exclusive category of analysis, but it is central to any politics that seeks to challenge the crises caused by capitalism.

Notes

1 Paul Krugman, "Trump Takes Us to the Brink: Will Weaponized Racism Destroy America?" *The New York Times* (June 1, 2020), https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/01/opinion/trump-george-floyd-police-brutality.html.
2 Krugman, "Trump Takes Us to the Brink."

Chapter 12

A Comrade for the Anthropocene

Beyond Survivors and Allies

Jodi Dean

Survivors and Systems

Two opposed tendencies dominate theory and activism on the contemporary left: survivors and systems. The first inhabits social media, academic environments and some activist networks. It is voiced through intense attachment to identity and appeals to intersectionality. The second predominates in more aesthetic and conceptual venues as a post-humanist concern with geology, extinction, algorithms, hyperobjects, bio-systems and planetary exhaustion.[1] On the one side, we have survivors, those with nothing left to cling to but their identities, often identities forged through struggles to survive and attached to the pain and trauma of these struggles.[2] On the other, we have systems, processes operating at a scale so vast, so complex, that we can scarcely conceive them, let alone affect them.[3]

These two tendencies correspond to neoliberal capitalism's dismantling of social institutions and to the intensification of capitalism via networked, personalized digital media and informatization, or what I refer to as "communicative capitalism."[4] More and more people experience more and more economic uncertainty, insecurity and instability. Decently paid jobs are harder to find and easier to lose. Most people cannot count on long-term employment or expect that benefits like health insurance and retirement packages will be part of their compensation. Many people's work is now more precarious – flex work, temp work, contract work – and ideologically garnished as "entrepreneurial." Unions are smaller and weaker. Schools and universities face cuts to budgets and faculty, additions of administrators and students, more debt and less respect. Pummelled by competition, debt and the general dismantling of the remnants of public and infrastructural supports, families crumble. Neoliberal ideology glosses the situation as one where individuals have more choice and more opportunity to exercise personal responsibility. The reality is akin to a new kind of feudalism where ever more of us feel trapped in relations in which we cannot but produce for the benefit of tech lords and billionaires who extract fees from our every interaction.

Carl Schmitt famously characterized liberalism as the replacement of politics with ethics and economics.[5] Correlatively, we should note the displacement of politics specific to the neofeudalizing tendencies of late neoliberalism. The public sphere has fragmented into multiple private domains, from the phones and platforms through which we interact to the widespread non-disclosure, non-compete and arbitration contracts of privatized law that are unravelling even the fiction of bourgeois justice. For most of us in the society of servants, there is individualized self-cultivation, self-management, self-reliance, self-absorption, self-care and, at the same time, impersonal determining processes, circuits and systems. We have responsible individuals – individuals who are responsibilized and treated as loci of autonomous choices and decisions – and we have individuals who are encountering forces that are utterly determining and beyond their control. Instead of ethics and economics, neoliberalism's displacement of politics manifests a neofeudal opposition between survivors and systems. Survivors struggle to persist in conditions of unliveability rather than to seize and transform these conditions. Systems and hyperobjects – aesthetic objects or objects of a future aesthetic, which are made to view, diagram, predict and perhaps even mourn, but not to affect – determine us.[6]

Survivors experience their vulnerability. Some even cherish it, deriving their sense of themselves from their survival against all that is stacked against them. Sociologist Jennifer Silva interviewed working-class adults in Massachusetts and Virginia.[7] Many emphasized their self-reliance, feeling that other people were likely to continue to fail or betray them; to survive, they could count only on themselves. Some of the young adults described struggles with illness and battles with addiction, the challenge of overcoming dysfunctional families and abusive relationships. For them, the fight to survive is the key feature of an identity that is imagined as dignified and heroic because it produces itself by itself.

Accounts of systems are typically devoid of survivors. Human lives do not matter. The presumption that they matter is taken to be the epistemological failure or ontological crime in need of remedy. Bacteria and rocks, planetary or even galactic processes are what need to be considered, brought in to redirect thought away from anthropocentric hubris. When people appear, they are the problem, a planetary excess that needs to be curtailed, a destructive species run amok.

The opposition between survivors and systems gives us a left devoid of politics. Both tendencies render political struggle, the divisive struggle over common conditions on behalf of a common project and future, unintelligible. In the place of politics, we have the fragmenting assertion of particularity, of unique survival and the obsession with the encroaching, unavoidable impossibility of survival due to climate change. Politics is effaced in the impasse of individualized survivability under conditions of generalized non-survival, of extinction.

In Place of Politics

Emphases on identity occupy the place of the left's missing politics. The feminist slogan that "the personal is political" has morphed into the view that only the personal is political. The personal – what the individual experiences, feels, risks – has become the privileged site of the moralizing engagements that give expression to grievance. This is not surprising given neoliberalism's subjection of political practices and public institutions to the imperatives of private capital accumulation. The problem is that the left has claimed as a victory the symptom of its defeat: the evisceration of working-class political power and the accompanying betrayal by its political parties.

When identity is all that is left, hanging on to it makes a kind of sense. As Silva discovered in her interviews, the struggle to survive can become the basis of an identity that is imagined as dignified. Attachment to identity as a ground for politics is nonetheless pathological. It is an attachment to a certainty, to the delusion of a pure site that guarantees that we are right, that we are on the side of the angels. But no one ever fully knows themselves and even if they did, how could that inform a collective politics? Identities are themselves split, contested, sites of class struggle. That someone identifies as a woman, as black or as trans tells us nothing about their politics.

Identity preoccupies the right as well as the left. In some ways, the right has been more successful in its deployment of identity, mobilizing national and racial identifications in successful campaigns for state power. The widespread attachment to the sense of certainty that the emphasis on identity provides – *I know who I am and I speak for myself* – intensifies the eclipse of politics, its devolution into competing moralisms that foreclose the cut of the universal.

In an opinion piece for the *New York Times*, columnist Pamela Paul argued the obvious point that lived experience is not the only perspective from which to think and write.[8] She pitched her argument as a culture war salvo against artists, academia and Hollywood. This high pitch tried to amplify something uncontroversial by shoving it into the liberal-conservative culture war binary. The effect was a collapse of the space that Paul was ostensibly writing to open. Rather than the collapse resulting from the identity of the writer or artist forced to speak only from their lived experience, the collapse in the space for thinking resulted from the imposition of the liberal-conservative culture war binary, forcing readers to take a side between something that seems reasonable and something that seems ridiculous, even as we know how the choice is lining up. Paul's op-ed presents a reflexivization of identity politics, an identity politics turned back in on itself. Its postulate is that identity does not determine politics, politics determines identity. Your politics expresses who you are. Similar examples of politics determining identity appear in the adoption of political signifiers as fashion statements, in intense party affiliation with little to no regard for ideological content, and in the reduction of the content of arguments to the standpoint from which they are expressed.

Both identity politics and its reflexivization – politics determines identity – collapse the signifier into the subject. Jacques Lacan famously said that the signifier represents the subject for another signifier.[9] With the collapse of politics into identity, instead of the signifier taking the place of the subject, instead of the utterance running on its own momentum along a path determined by a chain of significations, there is just the person making the utterance. What they say matters less than who they are. So instead of the question "why are you telling me this?" there is only space for the question "who are you?"

Fastening on identity and its reflexivize determination – politics determines identity – functions as an attempt to combat what Slavoj Žižek refers to as the decline of symbolic efficiency.[10] Symbols, points of reference, that signify one way in one field mean something altogether different in another one. There is no way to stabilize meaning or provide a decisive determination (the big Other does not exist; division goes all the way down). In digital communication networks, we regularly confront myriad others whose views of reality differ from our own. Our disagreements are not just matters of taste and opinion. They are not even about morality and the good life. Disagreements are about reality itself. These strong disagreements have always been there but networked digital communication networks force them into our everyday lives, presenting endless challenges to the navigation of competing realities: anti-vaxxers, denialists of all stripes, anti-communists, influencers whose every upload tries to sell us something, trolls and cynics. All news is fake to somebody. Trump did not invent all this – the decline of symbolic efficiency is an attribute of communicative capitalism, one of the ways that a previous symbolic order has fragmented into antagonistic parts. No big Other tells us whether the virus is real, if masks work, if vaccines are safe or who won the 2020 election. These political disagreements arise from the material change in communication. The absence of a big Other is not liberating; it is frustrating, suffocating, a kind of closure where significant action is impossible.

In the affective infrastructures of communicative capitalism there is no commonly shared meaning. Can anyone really trust Facebook and Twitter to settle claims of facticity? Without generally accepted procedures of veridification, lies circulate just as or more easily than truth. Outrage trumps reason and nuance. Deluged with constant communication but maddening incommunicability, we not only lose the sense that no one hears us but that even if they do there is no way they can understand us. Meaning is individuated: what matters to me, what I have experienced, what I feel. Words might be defined differently, but we can hold on to our own experiences, speak for ourselves, assert the commitments that define us and so on, "as a communist," "as a woman." We cannot rely on common meanings or references, and so we ground our claims in our identity, whether this identity is given by politics or the experiences from which our politics emerge. Anyone who disagrees, or raises a question, strikes at our very being.

The intensities around mental health, language and even jokes attest to the extreme vulnerability of the subject unable to find a place and protection in a chain of signifiers. Anything I say is WHO I AM. My core. And if you say something that is anything less than affirming, you have harmed me, dealt a blow. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will destroy my soul, rather like the side effects of Dylar in Don DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*. In the novel, Dylar is an experimental drug for eliminating the fear of death. One of its side effects is the collapse of the difference between signifier and signified. One person says "hail of bullets" and the other drops to the ground, terrified. I am suggesting that the collapse between signifier and subject is even worse. The words of another harm me not because I cannot tell the difference between words and objects but because I cannot tell the difference between words and the person who utters them.

In Seminar III Lacan distinguishes between the normal and the psychotic subject.[11] The normal subject does not insist on certainty; they have doubts but carry on in an uncertain world, not really worrying about it. There are better things to do than take seriously every little aspect of their interior lives. The psychotic rejects the ambiguity of the everyday, replacing it with certainty. This certainty does not correspond with reality; reality is not the issue. What matters is the hole in the symbolic, foreclosure of the Master Signifier, absence or loss of commonly accepted discourse. To cover up this hole, the psychotic fixates on something, which Lacan refers to as a "captivating image."[12] Imaginary forms cover over the holes in meaning, the absence of a signifying structure in which sense can be made. The psychotic fastens on these, using them to get their bearings within a dialectic of imaginary identification. Do these images mirror the ego back to itself or do they reflect a rivalrous other? Does one see oneself or an aggressor? The captivating image does not offer a position from which to see. Remaining at the level of the imaginary, it is an object within a relation characterized by fear, rivalry or aggression.

Identity and Allyship

That identities are sites of struggle rather than grounds of struggle appears clearly when we consider the concept of "allyship." For roughly a decade, an intense discussion over who can be an ally and what it means to be an ally has occupied activist circles, social media, non-profits and university campuses. Generally, "allies" are privileged people who want to do something about oppression. But, as is frequently emphasized, claiming to be an ally does not make one an ally. Allyship is a process or journey. It takes time and effort. People have to work at it. Much of the writing and video work on allyship is didactic, taking the form of the "how to" guide or list of pointers – how to be an ally, the dos and don'ts of allyship, etc. As with advice books on how to "eliminate the clutter," or tips for clean eating, the instructions for being a good ally are mini lifestyle manuals, techniques for navigating institutional

settings characterized by privilege and oppression. Individuals can learn what not to say and what not to do. They can feel engaged, changing their feelings, if not the world, without taking power, without any organized political struggle at all. The "politics" in allyship how-tos focuses on interpersonal interactions, individuated feelings and mediated affect.

The pieces on how to be a good ally that circulate online, as blog posts, videos, editorials, as well as course and campus handouts, address the viewer or reader as a privileged individual who wants to operate in solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed. The potential ally is positioned as wanting to know what they can do right now, on their own and in their everyday lives, to combat racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression. The ally's field of operation is often imagined as social media (how to respond to racist or homophobic remarks on Twitter), professional interactions (hiring the marginalized, promoting the oppressed), conversations at school or university and, sometimes, street-level protests (don't dominate someone else's event).

Even more often, the ally's own individual disposition, attitude and behaviour constitute the presumed operational field. The how-to guide instructs the ally on how to feel, think and act if they want to consider themselves as someone who is on the side of the oppressed. Their awareness is what needs to change. For example, the *Guide to Allyship* says that

> To be an ally is to: Take on the struggle as your own. Stand up, even when you feel scared. Transfer the benefits of your privilege to those who lack it. Acknowledge that while you, too, feel pain, the conversation is not about you.[13]

Here allyship is a matter of the self, of what the self acknowledges, of the individual who stands alone, and of this single individual taking on a struggle that properly belongs to someone else. It is as if struggles were possessions, artefacts that individuals take on, over, and into themselves, all while being urged to see these acquisitions as something to which they – the ally – have no right. At the same time, exactly what the struggle is, what the politics is, remains opaque, unstated, a matter of the correct feeling or attitude or whatever the individual feels comfortable doing.

Another example appeared on *Buzzfeed* as "How To Be A Better Ally: An Open Letter To White Folks." The text is from a letter that a producer of the *Buzzfeed* video series, "Another Round," sent in reply to a question from a white person about being an ally. She writes:

> Have you ever had a conversation with a feminist man come grinding to a halt because he starts to complain about how feminists use language that excludes men, even the feminist men? ("Not all men…") I have! Being a good ally often means not being included in the conversation, because the

conversation isn't about you. It's good to listen. If you feel uncomfortable and excluded because you're white, you should own those feelings.[14]

Again, allyship is a disposition, a confrontation not with state or capitalist power but with one's own discomfort. To be an ally is to work to cultivate in oneself habits of proper listening, to decentre oneself, step aside and become aware of the lives and experiences of others.

An essay on "The Fundamentals of Effective Allyship" configures allyship in terms of the intensity of the ally's feelings and whether the ally is willing and able to undertake the necessary self-work:

> It's our responsibility to recognize, identify and act on the privilege we have. One of the ways of doing so is committing to an ongoing act of introspection, reflection and learning. You will find yourself challenged, uncomfortable, even defensive, but the more intense these feelings are, the more likely it is you're on the right track.[15]

Acting on privilege appears here as an interior act, an act of the self on the self. One's politics may be entirely in one's head. In this respect, allyship reflects the shrinking or decline of the political. The space for politics has decreased yet the ally feels the need to act, desperately, intensely, and now. They act in and on what is available: social media and themselves.

The process of becoming aware reiterates a key injunction of communicative capitalism: educate yourself. Google it. Do not ask or burden the oppressed. An article posted on the online magazine and educational platform *Everyday Feminism* provides a list of "10 Things All 'Allies' Need to Know." Number five on the list states: "Allies Educate Themselves Constantly." It explains:

> One of the most important types of education is listening (See #1 [Being an Ally Is about Listening]), but there are endless resources (books, blogs, media outlets, speakers, YouTube videos, etc.) to help you learn. What you should not do, though, is expect those with whom you want to ally yourself to teach you. That is not their responsibility. Sure, listen to them when they decide to drop some knowledge or perspective, but do not go to them and expect them to explain their oppression for you.[16]

The process of educating oneself is isolating, individuating. Learning is modelled as consuming information, not as discussion, coming to a common understanding, or studying the texts and documents of a political tradition. "Educating oneself" is disconnected from a collective critical practice, detached from political positions or goals. Criteria according to which one might evaluate books, blogs, speakers and videos are absent. It is up to the individual ally to figure it out. In effect, there is punishment without discipline. The would-be

ally can be scolded, shamed, even as the scolder is relieved of any responsibility to provide concrete guidance and training. Telling someone to "Google it" is an empty gesture. "Ally" appears more to designate a limit – you will never be one of us – than it does to mark or build solidarity. The relation between allies is between those with separate interests, experiences and practices.

The eighth item on the list of things allies need to know is: "Allies Focus on Those Who Share Their Identity." "Beyond listening, arguably the most important thing that I can do to act in solidarity is to engage those who share my identity."[17] Identities appear fixed and certain, unchanging and unambiguous. Individuals are like sovereign states, defending their territory and only joining together under the most cautious and self-interested terms. Those who share an identity are presumed to share a politics, as if this politics did not need to be built. Those who want to work for a politics other than one anchored in their own identity, who support a politics linked to another identity or even beyond identity, are treated with suspicion, mistrusted for their presumed privilege and criticized in advance for the array of wrongs that preserve it. Item eight tells us why "allyship" has such a hold in progressive circles: it maintains and polices identity, our own special and vulnerable thing, shoring up its weak and porous boundaries. "Ally" keeps attention away from the fearsome challenge of choosing a side, accepting the discipline that comes from collective work and organizing for the abolition of capitalism and its state.

Rather than bridging political identities or articulating a politics that moves beyond identity, allyship is a symptom of the displacement of politics into the individualist self-help techniques and social media moralism of communicative capitalism. The underlying vision is of self-oriented individuals, politics as possession, transformation reduced to attitudinal change and a fixed, naturalized sphere of privilege and oppression. Anchored in a view of identity as the primary vector of politics, the emphasis on allies displaces attention away from strategic organizational and tactical questions and onto prior attitudinal litmus tests, precluding from the start the universality necessary for revolutionary left politics.

The Generic Comrade

The comrade figures a political relation that shifts us away from preoccupations with survivors and systems, away from suppositions of unique identity and the replacement of politics by morality, and towards the sameness of those fighting on the same side.[18] Where the ally is hierarchical, specific and acquiescent, the comrade is egalitarian, generic and utopian. The egalitarian and generic dimension of comrade makes it utopian, giving the term the capacity to cut through the determinations of the everyday – that is to say, capitalist social relations. As a form of political belonging, comrade rejects the ally's naïve imaginary identity in favour of the universality of partisan subjectivation. Comrades put individual identity aside as they work together for justice. Collective desire replaces

the fiction that desire can be individual. Of course, this does not mean that comrades do not recognize how ascriptive identities are vehicles for oppression and discrimination. Rather, comradeship is a political relation that is not determined by or beholden to identity, a relation that generates the new values, intensities and possibilities necessary for changing the world.

For communists, and many socialists and anarchists, comrade expresses the relation between those on the same side of a political struggle, those who tie themselves together instrumentally, for a common purpose: *if we want to win – and we have to win – we must act together.* Our actions are voluntary but not of our own choosing. Comrades must be able to count on each other, even when we do not like each other and even when we disagree. Put in psychoanalytic terms, the comrade is the ego ideal: the point from which party members assess themselves as doing work that is meaningful. It is not the party as big Other with its obscene underside that provides this ego ideal. Comrades know full well that the party is not always right, that there are different groups and positions in the party, that having a programme and implementing a programme are two radically different things. The perspective that members have towards themselves when they see themselves acting politically is that of the comrade. In *The Romance of American Communism*, Vivian Gornick reports the words of a former member of the Communist Party (CPUSA) who hated the daily grind of selling papers and canvassing: "But I did it, I did it. I did it because if I didn't do it, I couldn't face my comrades the next day. And we all did it for the same reason: we were accountable to each other."[19] Comradeship is thus a radical response to the decline of symbolic efficiency. Rather than remaining content with the rivalries of imaginary relations, it builds a sense of universality from the committed struggles of those who are on the same side.

The comrade relation remakes the place from which one sees, what it is possible to see and what possibilities can appear. It enables the revaluation of work and time, what one does and for whom one does it. Is one's work done for the people or for the bosses? Is it voluntary or done because one has to work? Does one work for personal provisions or for a collective good? Recall Marx's lyrical description of communism in which work becomes "life's prime want." We get a glimpse of that in comradeship. One wants to do political work. You do not want to let down your comrades. You see the value of your work through their eyes, your new collective eyes. Work, determined not by markets but by shared commitments, becomes fulfilling. The French communist philosopher and militant Bernard Aspe discusses the problem of contemporary capitalism as a loss of "common time," that is, the loss of an experience of time generated and enjoyed through our collective being-together. From holidays to meals, to breaks, whatever common time we have is synchronized and enclosed in forms for capitalist appropriation. Apps and trackers amplify this process such that the time of consumption can be measured in much the same way that Taylorism measured the time of production. How long did a viewer spend on a particular web page? Did a person watch a whole advertisement or click it off after five

seconds? In contrast, the common action that is the actuality of the communist movement induces a collective change in capacities. Breaking from capitalism's 24/7 injunctions to produce and consume for the bosses and owners, the discipline of common struggle expands possibilities for action and intensifies the sense of its necessity. The comrade is a figure for the relation through which this transformation of work and time occurs.

The Bolshevik Revolution brought out the utopian and liberating dimensions of comrade. Alexandra Kollontai pointed out that capitalism tears people apart, making them competitive, self-interested and afraid. Communism abolishes these conditions and creates new ones where all workers are comrades above all else. For Kollontai, comradeship is a mode of belonging characterized by equality, solidarity and respect. Collectivity replaces isolation, egoism and self-assertion. It makes people capable of freedom.

Frantz Fanon, the revolutionary and philosopher from Martinique who participated in the Algerian liberation struggle, also brings out the egalitarian and utopian dimensions of comrade. In his conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon appeals repeatedly to his readers as comrades: "Come, comrades, the European game is finally over, we must look for something else."[20] Likewise in the last line of the book: "For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man."[21] Comrade is the mode of address appropriate to this task. It is egalitarian, generic, and in the context of hierarchy, fragmentation and oppression, utopian. It is an invitation to a common project.

Bertholt Brecht's 1930 agitprop cantata, *The Measures Taken*, explores the antithetical relation between individual identity and the comrade. Four agitators are on trial before a party central committee, the Control Chorus, for the murder of their young comrade. The agitators describe how they went undercover to reach Chinese workers they are trying to organize. Each agitator had to efface their identity, to be "nameless and without a past, empty pages on which the revolution may write its instructions."[22] Each agitator, including the young comrade, agreed to fight for communism and be themselves no longer. They all put on Chinese masks, appearing to be Chinese rather than German and Russian. Instead of following instructions and carrying out the plan, however, the young comrade repeatedly substituted his judgement for that of the party, encouraging action before the time was right. He could see with his own two eyes that "misery cannot wait," so he tore up the party writings. He tore off and up his mask. He sought to hasten the revolution and his impetuosity set the movement back. Forced to flee from the Chinese authorities, the agitators and the young comrade raced to escape the city. The agitators realized that since the young comrade had become identifiable, they had to kill him. The young comrade agreed. The four agitators shot him, threw him into a lime pit that would burn away all trace of him and returned to their work.

Comrades are multiple and fungible. They are elements in collectives, even collections. For anti-communists, the instrumentalism of comrade relations

appears horrifying. Combined with the machinic impersonality and fungibility of comrades, the fact that relations between comrades are produced for an exterior purpose, that they are means rather than ends in themselves, seems morally objectionable. This objection fails to acknowledge the specificity of comradeship as a political relation, as being on the same side of struggle. It omits the way political work focuses on ends beyond the individual and so necessarily requires collective coordination. It presumes a totalizing politics that subsumes all relations rather than recognizing a universal politics liberated from specific social relations. And it contracts the space of meaning into individual identities, as if abstracted generic relations among those faithful to a political truth could only be the result of manipulation.

To be sure, in a psychotic setting where reflexive responses to fragmentation and rivalry have displaced efforts to build political unity, where the moralization of "cancel culture" and language policing deform collectivities to prevent or distort their self-organization, the generic sameness of the comrade may be frightening. It may exacerbate fears of losing, or of being robbed of what is most precious, personal and unique – one's own individual specificity. Comrade insists on the equalizing sameness that comes from fighting on the same side of a political struggle. It ruptures the everyday world with the challenge of egalitarian modes of acting and belonging. It liberates comrades from the constraining expectations of the identities imposed on and demanded of us by communicative capitalism. You will encounter hatred and bigotry in everyday life, but with your comrades you should be able to expect something more, something better. Kathi Weeks observes that Fredric Jameson captures the "fear of becoming different" associated with the fear of utopia.[23] Jameson defines this as "a thoroughgoing anxiety in the face of everything we stand to lose in the course of so momentous a transformation that – even in the imagination – it can be thought to leave little intact of current passions, habits, practices, and values."[24] Today, on a rapidly heating planet, where capitalist neoliberalism is turning itself into neofeudalism, and where the rivalries of competing survivalisms attach us to images and certainties that reinforce suspicion, fragmentation and weakness, we must "become different." And we become different by becoming generic.

Notes

1 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
2 See Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," *Political Theory* 21:3 (August 1993), 390–410. See also Robin D. G. Kelley's critique of black student activists' embrace of the language of personal trauma in Kelley, "Black Study, Black Struggle," *Boston Review* (March 1, 2016), http://bostonreview.net/forum/robin-d-g-kelley-black -study-black-struggle.
3 Jodi Dean, "The Anamorphic Politics of Climate Change," *e-flux* Journal #69 (January 2016), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/69/60586/the-anamorphic-politics-of-cli mate-change/.

4   Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," *Cultural Politics* 1:1 (March 2005), 51–74.

5   Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, expanded edition, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1932] 2007).

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7   Jennifer M. Silva, *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

8   Pamela Paul, "The Limits of 'Lived Experience'," *The New York Times* (April 24, 2022), https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/24/opinion/lived-experience-empathy-culture.html.

9   Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIV: The Logic of Phantasy, 1966-1967*, trans. Cormac Gallagher, available at http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-XIV.pdf, 9.

10 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 322–34.

11 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

12 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956*, 9.

13 See Amélie Lamont, *Guide to Allyship* (2016/2021), https://guidetoallyship.com.

14 Meg Cramer, "How To Be A Better Ally: An Open Letter To White Folks," *Buzzfeed* (December 30, 2015), https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/anotherround/how-to-be-a-better-ally-an-open-letter-to-white-folks#.xse0E2MwA.

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20 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, [1961] 2004), 236.

21 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 239.

22 Bertholt Brecht, *The Measures Taken and Other Lehrstücke*, eds. John Willett and Ralph Manheim, trans. Carl R. Mueller et al. (New York: Arcade, [1977] 2001), 12.

23 Jameson cited in Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 203.

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Chapter 13

The Use and Abuse of Class Reductionism for the Left

Marc James Léger

The class struggle is not what it used to be. The call by some on the newly revived left to engage in class war rather than culture wars reflects the challenges that have been raised in recent years by identitarian thought and activism.[1] Since the countercultural sixties, the organized left and organized labour have often been depicted as "class essentialist" and, as such, ill-equipped to grapple with the different forms of oppression based on race, gender, sexuality, and other lines of social difference.[2] In the years following Occupy Wall Street, the success of Black Lives Matter, the MeToo movement and similar hashtags around Indigenous struggles, gun violence and ecology, suggests not only that it is no longer possible to provide a Marxist analysis of contemporary social conditions without at the same time addressing issues of structural and systemic oppression, but that the inoperativity of the former leaves socialists without a coherent agenda.[3] In the realms of intersectionality, decoloniality, Critical Race Theory and Afro-pessimism, for example, if not in post-human new materialisms, Marxist class analysis is characterized as a limited and problematic politics. Rather than the correct perspective through which to understand the history of capitalist social relations, the broad thrust of Marxism is downsized to a critique of "classism" and due respect shown for the feelings of the working poor.

Whereas the culture wars of the 1980s were by and large fought by progressive liberals and the remnants of the New Left against the neoconservative New Right, the "woke" wars of the period 2012 to 2022 came on the heels of the relative success of alter-global new social movements, which after decades of neoliberal austerity led to the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. Despite a renewed interest in socialism and communism among the new generation of activists who rallied around the electoral campaigns of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, the micropolitical tendencies that had been incubated through postmodern theory, discourse theory and post-structuralist social constructionism allowed various forms of identity and difference politics to also make a quick comeback, leading in some cases to attacks on Marxism as an outmoded form of Eurocentric universalism.[4] To take only one example, Marcie Bianco, a feminist with degrees from Harvard, Oxford and Rutgers, who has published

in *Rolling Stone* and *Vanity Fair*, worked as editor of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, and was the winner of the 2016 National Lesbian & Gay Journalists' Association Excellence in Online Journalism Award, made the bald assertion: "If you say 'working class' your white supremacy is showing. THE END."[5]

Marxism, socialism and the workers' movement have addressed issues of class and nationality, class and gender, class and race, and class and sexuality since its earliest moments in the nineteenth century. Contrary to current opinion, it is not with the appearance of the Combahee River Collective in the late 1970s that the "intersection" of issues of class, race and gender was first considered. The main difference between Marxism and these newer forms of thinking is that Marxism provides a class analysis of the rise of identity politics in the postwar era, a period in which civil rights struggles were separated from the labour movement through which they had emerged. Conceived through the lens of social justice activism, the various forms of oppression have commonly been treated in transhistorical terms and separated from questions of political economy, a process that retroactively interprets the universalism of radical and progressive movements as exclusionary and oblivious to questions of difference. This new diversity and demographics-oriented cultural politics, which I refer to here as "wokeism," has coincided with postwar shifts from Fordism to post-Fordist globalization, from rights-oriented liberal pluralism to difference politics, and from a petty-bourgeois countercultural anti-statism to a discourse theory-based logic of empowerment. Rather than defend the centrality of class in Marxist analysis, many on the postmodernized New Left have sought instead to make materialism and political economy more intersectional.[6] Those who resist this trend are dismissed as class reductionists.[7]

Like the term political correctness, the concept of class reductionism first emerged on the Marxist left as a term that is used to describe a theoretical problem. And like the term political correctness, it has been appropriated and misused as a term with which to dismiss Marxism and move critical theory further in a non-Marxist, anti-Marxist, pseudo-Marxist or post-Marxist direction. That the term class reductionism is now used as a blunt instrument against Marxists and Marxism requires that we have a better grasp of its meaning. In the most rudimentary sense, class reductionism is rejected by Marxists as a vulgar form of "economism," which means the reduction of complex social and historical processes to economic factors. Since at least the postwar era, and through the study of phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, discourse analysis and deconstruction, the "linguistic" and "cultural turn" in critical social theory has been championed because it is presumably better able to take social theory beyond the most reductionist, deterministic and teleological aspects of Marxist class analysis. However, rather than simply avoiding the pitfalls of economism, postwar theory has for the most part replaced historical and dialectical materialism with an eclectic materialism that today avoids the critique of political economy altogether and instead reinforces identitarian metaphysics within the progressive movements that are active in the neoliberalized academy, cultural

institutions and the non–governmental third sector. The general political ori-entation of these departments and organizations, and the funding that they receive, is designed to neutralize anti–capitalist struggles. In the following, I address the ways in which contemporary wokeism attacks Marxism by recourse to the concept of class reductionism. I refer to this trend as "woke baseball." To oppose it, I examine the term reductionism and address the reasons why its use on the left, as well as its misuse by critics of the left, deviate from Marxist analysis.

Marxism Against Reductionism

The term class reductionism cannot be separated from the method of Marxist class analysis and the politics of class struggle. Without the struggle against capi-talism, the notion of class reductionism is meaningless. One therefore needs to begin with Marx and Marxism to consider how the problem of class reduc-tionism is related to the politics of emancipation from capitalism. Erik Olin Wright argued that class analysis makes distinctions between class structure and class formation.[8] Different modes of production in different historical and geographical contexts give rise to different kinds of class formation. There is no automatic and determinate link between class structure, class consciousness and class formation. Since class structure exists independently of class struggle, class interests can be as variable as class organizations. The terms that we use to understand material reality are themselves the products of class struggle. The validity of Marxist concepts is therefore not only based on their ability to describe objective reality, but more so, to offer a valid explanation of social phenomena and give an orientation to politics. In any class formation, social differences and social psychology may be more significant than the mechanisms of class structure. Regardless, for Marxist analysis, it is class structure, which is defined by the capitalist mode and relations of production, which shapes the organizational dynamics of class consciousness and class struggle, which alone are able to transform class structure. Wright argued that all Marxists are class reductionist, in one way or another, to the extent that they model social typologies on the social organization of production as well as the class struc-tures and mechanisms of surplus appropriation that derive from it.[9] However, class structure and class formation are not reducible to the economic. That is why, for Marxist politics, there is nothing inevitable or pre-determined when it comes to the overcoming of capitalist class relations. In order to elucidate these theoretical problems, let us take an example from the field of biology.

Along with Stephen Jay Gould, the geneticist Richard Lewontin was con-sidered one of the most prominent scientists to reject the kind of race-based science that is associated with the work of researchers like E.O. Wilson and Charles Murray. According to Lewontin, minor genetic differences among human populations are not significant enough to validate the scientific concept of race. Human culture, he argued, cannot be explained by genetics. While

genetic diversity within a species provides the raw material upon which it may draw, different forms of adaptation are possible based on different environmental pressures. Lewontin argued that Homo sapiens have lower rates of genetic diversity than other species, with seven per cent variation between major population groups. Since all human groups can interbreed successfully, we all belong to the same so-called race. The use of racial differences to distinguish human groups is therefore entirely superficial and has no scientific value.[10] What is significant here is that Lewontin made a theoretical distinction between the terms *reduction* and *reductionism*. Based on a dialectical critique of scientific reductionism, Lewontin argued that scientists do not know why some traits are exhibited in some groups of humans and not in others. What characterizes the genus Homo is the reliance on culture and technology as modes of adaptation. Organisms do not simply react to environmental factors, surviving if they are fit enough, as the social Darwinist Herbert Spencer would have thought. Interaction with environmental factors is therefore dynamic and dialectical.

According to Lewontin and his collaborator Richard Levins, reduction is a method and reductionism is a worldview.[11] While reductionism is widely used in science, the ascription of effects to designated causes easily leads to what these scientists refer to as statistical tautology and the reification of natural or social processes.[12] What requires scientific explanation is instead taken for granted. The more mechanistic the approach, the less holistic it will be, even if it can yield satisfactory results in disciplines like chemistry or physics. In class struggle, the working class and the wider society are simultaneously object and subject of a historical dialectic that has evolutionary dimensions that are non-teleological with respect to the emancipation from capitalism. There is nothing inevitable about communism. However, just as there was nothing inevitable about the emergence of Homo sapiens, the species Homo sapiens does exist.

The term *reductionism* explains the relations between the elements within a complex system and refers to their root causes. Such reductionism defines the relation between the parts and the whole in a mechanistic way that has very little to do with dialectical materialism. A reductionist version of class analysis, for example, is commonly rejected or at least criticized as vulgar Marxism. The notion of *reduction*, in contrast to that of reductionism, allows for flexibility, for example, between elements of the economic base and the ideological superstructure. Reduction does not presume a direct and mechanical continuity between elements. Although the notion of reduction is concerned with causes, the advanced and unpredictable characteristics of a system, or a society, are not reducible to earlier or more "essential" forms.[13]

Since Marxist politics are anti-capitalist and communist, the association of social phenomena with class structure is accepted so long as it is non-reductionist, meaning, not determined in a mechanistic way. Non-reductionism is not to be confused or conflated with relativism, eclecticism, randomness or chaos. As Lewontin would argue, it is certain that we have genes, but it is not

certain how our genes affect our behaviour. The same logic applies to class. In the theory of revolutionary politics, Karl Marx did not describe what a communist society would consist of exactly, but he did believe that capitalism made class struggle inevitable and that class struggle is oriented towards the disappearance of class hierarchies. In his letter to Joseph Weydemeyer from March 5, 1852, Marx writes:

> And now as to myself, no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this class struggle and bourgeois economists, the economic anatomy of classes. What I did that was new was to prove: (1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with the *particular, historical phases in the development of production*; (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*; (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*.[14]

Consider also this quote from Friedrich Engels' 1877 *Anti-Dühring*, where Engels discusses the notion of the withering of the state in the transition from socialism to communism:

> *The proletariat seizes state power and turns the means of production into state property to begin with*. But thereby it abolishes itself as the proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions and class antagonisms, and abolishes also the state as state. Society thus far, operating amid class antagonisms, needed the state, that is, an organization of the particular exploiting class, for the maintenance of its external conditions of production, and, therefore, especially, for the purpose of forcibly keeping the exploited class in the conditions of oppression determined by the given mode of production (slavery, serfdom or bondage, wage-labor).[15]

There are countless differences among leftists and no two radical philosophers think alike. However, because all self-described Marxists are "orthodox" with regard to some basic aspects of materialist theory, they cannot simply go along to get along with everything that has been advanced under the rubrics of identity politics, radical democracy, intersectionality, decoloniality or privilege theory, among other approaches that focus on identity vectors. In a critique of Critical Race Theory, Tom Carter asserts: "For Marxists, yes, we plead guilty to being 'class reductionists.' Class for us is not just another form of subjective prejudice."[16] By rejecting the centrality of class or by remaking class domination into classism, he argues, Critical Race Theory attempts to avoid the charge of ideological collusion with the bourgeois class. Carter explains his statement by saying that Marx was not satisfied to note the unequal distribution of wealth, which had been the case for thousands of years since human

societies have produced enough surplus for there to develop social inequality between the poor and the wealthy, who guard their bounty with the use of military force, this being the basis of the Marxist critique of feudal and bourgeois regimes.

Marx's focus on the commodity and on wage labour as a contradictory social relation begins with the actuality of capitalist society in the mid-nineteenth century. Noting that capitalism's laws of development had become a global phenomenon, Marx devised a strategy of revolutionary transformation. Marxists need not plead guilty on the count of class reductionism, however. For the bourgeois class, workers are a particular class that will always exist because capitalist social relations must always exist. For the bourgeoisie, this working-class sector of the social space does nothing, and should not be allowed to do anything, to transform the totality of global capitalism. For Marxists, the working class, conceived as the proletariat, is the universal class. Only the working class has an interest in ridding the world of capitalist social relations. The plight of the working class therefore stands in for universal claims of equality, freedom and solidarity. To make good on these claims is the challenge of socialism.

Although the Marxists of the nineteenth century believed that the withering of the state and social classes was a necessity, they did not presume that this was inevitable. In other words, their theory of revolution was not mechanistically deterministic. That is why Lenin argued that the building of party organizations to seize power from the capitalist class was a task to be accomplished. One could not simply wait for this change to occur by itself. Lenin's writings on the communist supersession of class in *State and Revolution* are dedicated to the clarification of Marxist ideas and the distinction of these from the non-Marxist ideas of the leaders of the social democratic movement in Germany, Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky. His difference from them eventually caused the split between the Second and Third International. Based on his reading of Marx and Engels, Lenin demonstrated that Kautsky's position, as described in his 1909 book, *The Road to Power*, is the bourgeois position and not the proletarian position. As a particular class, the working class can remain the exploited class indefinitely. Accepting capitalism is a means through which social reforms can be advanced without the aspiration to build a communist society that would overthrow the bourgeois class of profiteers and abolish the capitalist state. Lenin writes:

> It is often said and written that the main point in Marx's theory is the class struggle. But this is wrong. And this wrong notion very often results in an opportunist distortion of Marxism and its falsification in a spirit acceptable to the bourgeoisie. For the theory of the class struggle was created *not* by Marx, *but* by the bourgeoisie *before* Marx, and, generally speaking, it is *acceptable* to the bourgeoisie. Those who recognize *only* the class struggle are not yet Marxists; they may be found to be still within the bounds of bourgeois thinking and bourgeois politics. To confine Marxism to the theory of the class

struggle means curtailing Marxism, distorting it, reducing it to something acceptable to the bourgeoisie. A Marxist is one who *extends* the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*. That is what constitutes the most profound distinction between the Marxist and the ordinary small (as well as big) bourgeois. This is the touchstone on which the *real* understanding and recognition of Marxism should be tested. And it is not surprising that when the history of Europe brought the working class face to face with this question as a *practical* issue, not only all the opportunists and reformists but all the Kautskyites (people who vacillate between reform-ism and Marxism) proved to be miserable philistines and petit-bourgeois democrats *repudiating* the dictatorship of the proletariat.[17]

Lenin rejects anything short of the Marxist theory of revolution as opportun-istic. Needless to say, revolutionary Marxism-Leninism is not the regular diet of new social movement activists or the left hangers-on of bourgeois parties.

Slavoj Žižek has argued that there is no need to repeat the specific strategies adopted by the Bolsheviks in 1917, to build a centralized industrial system, in order for us today to repeat Lenin's determination to act radically in a situation that seems hopeless.[18] Similarly, but with less vanguardist enthusiasm, Todd Chretien concludes his 2014 "Beginner's Guide to *State and Revolution*" with the recollection of Popular Front strategies, the degeneration of the Soviet empire, decolonial struggles, the social rebellions of the 1960s and the political pluralism of the 1970s, such that Lenin's ideas about organized action, however indispensable, must reflect new conditions and concerns.[19] Taking Marxism in a more intersectional direction, Jules Townshend revises Kautsky's Marxism for "open minded" radicals, concluding a text on Kautsky in the twenty-first century with the following:

> And if we want to go beyond Marxism, doesn't the fecundity of Gramsci's thought offer deep reflections on both the failure of Marxism to become working-class "common sense" in the West while offering hope through a refashioning of Marxism's theoretical tools, especially in the notion of "hegemony"? From this it might be possible to see that the distinction between "class" and "identity" politics is potentially a false one, that Marx through his class-in-itself / class-for-itself distinction was constructing a hegemonic revolutionary *identity* for the working class. In other words, can we not see the question of identity as at the heart of [a] fundamental political mobilization? Of course the task of creating a mobilizing inter-sectional narrative which should be at the heart of a democratic socialism is not easy. Kautsky's thought, however, is a valuable reminder that such a narrative needs Marx's values and insights.[20]

Not only does Townshend blame Lenin for attempting a premature takeover of power, but he defines Marxism as a form of identity politics. This can only

happen when a post-left mistakenly imposes the reductionist aspects of identity politics back into Marxist analysis. If a Marxist wished to remain "allied" to the overwhelming mass of petty-bourgeois progressives who like Townshend have abandoned revolutionary theory, they would have to nevertheless critique the kinds of eclectic materialism that consider issues of identity or ecology to be as central to our analysis as the critique of political economy. The problem with this prospect is that class would have no distinct significance with regard to the mode and relations of production. It would be defined in advance, and to no end, as differentially mediated. The result of such politics, from a Marxist perspective, is not only class relativism, where for example a homeless man is perceived to be more privileged than a female CEO, but also a repressive desublimation of politics, where radical class struggle is proscribed as not only violent and authoritarian but as racist, sexist and Eurocentric.

Woke Baseball and the Class War

If Marxist materialism is non-reductionist, who makes use of the term class reductionism and to what ends? The accusation of class reductionism is a popular red herring in today's conversation on race, class, gender and sexuality. Not exactly a Marxist dictionary, the Urban Dictionary nevertheless has one handy definition of class reductionism that reflects a common perception: "The idea that class-based oppression should be the foremost concern among revolutionaries, with things like gender, race, sexual orientation, etc, taking a back seat until 'after the revolution'."[21] The use here of the term oppression, instead of exploitation, reflexively inscribes the problem it addresses. Given that Marx and Engels would never have suggested that English workers should wait until after the revolution to make common cause with Irish workers, and vice versa, we are here in the realm of stereotype rather than anything remotely approaching Marxism. As the prerogative of an educated and professional elite, much of today's wokeism is not concerned with the destruction of capitalist class relations. For this reason, the Urban Dictionary qualifies its definition more or less correctly: "For the most part the term is used as a pejorative by liberals against socialists and materialists, rather than being advocated by anyone."

Whether one receives the accusation of class reductionism as a compliment, a joke, an insult or a challenge is not simply a matter of psychology. The epithet "class reductionist" is not something that a radical leftist can simply wear as a badge of honour because this slur, when used by postmodernists, not only presumes of a lack of understanding but implies political antagonism. To take one example, Yanis Iqbal twists various strands of critical social theory – an abstractly universalist and de-historicized Hegelian notion of the master-slave dialectic, an anti-colonial but de-universalized Frantz Fanon, Cedric Robinson's anti-European concept of "racial capitalism," as well as the de-Marxified Cultural Studies version of Gramscian hegemony – to suggest that in the days of BLM, the "obdurate" Bernie Sanders left was unable, due to its

"class reductionism" and obsession with the "merely economic," to understand the "complex reality of oppression."[22] As Adolph Reed has argued, this charge of class reductionism against the Sanders left tells us less about the people who are accused of it than it does about the class allegiances of the accusers.[23] It is highly ironic, for Reed, that those African Americans who have the most to gain from universalist policies designed to address problems of economic inequality should be interpellated by their middle-class peers on the basis of a uniquely black notion of racial solidarity that just happens to complement the aims of neoliberal elites in and around the Democratic Party.

In this type of discussion, the shibboleth of class reductionism is usually tempered by intellectuals and activists who advocate a more "balanced" view of materialism and material interests. While such social critics can typically offer a genealogy that takes different strands of analysis into account, they also tend to disarticulate race from class and class from political economy.[24] That these critics typically accept the postmodern rejection of Enlightenment universality along with concepts like progress, humanity, objectivity, truth and human rights allows them to seem as though they are carrying forward the Marxist critique of bourgeois idealism. For example, Asad Haider calls for a strategy that does not depend entirely on class struggle to do all of the work, since, he argues, anti-racist struggles against police violence can also benefit labour struggles.[25] Falsely presuming a symmetry between, on the one hand, Hillary Clinton's charge against Sanders in 2016 that breaking up the banks will not end racism, and on the other, Reed's counter-strategy of "reframing" racial disparities in class terms, Haider believes that the labour movement should support but not criticize movements like BLM that are against police violence. The reason Haider fails to see the asymmetry in his example is due to his overestimation of racism rather than capitalism as the cause of disparities between American blacks and whites. Unless we wish to make racism into America's original and eternal sin, the radical democratic logic of equivalence that one finds in both-and logics of anti-racism plus class struggle need to be challenged as not only divergence from Marxism but as activist wishful thinking. While nothing about socialist politics guarantees that struggles will lead to equality, as Haider charges, a struggle that is not premised on class solidarity cannot be considered radical. For this reason, as Reed and Walter Benn Michaels correctly argue, the solution to problems of racism, as in the case of police violence, should not be presumed to be anti-racist.[26]

The dramatic increase in global economic inequality over the last several decades is not due to racism. Not only will specifically anti-racist solutions not reduce economic inequality, they will do nothing to reduce the recourse of the state apparatus to police violence. Unlike class exploitation, there is nothing about racial oppression that gives it more structural importance than any other form of oppression. Whereas Marxism seeks the elimination of class society and the destruction of bourgeois rule, anti-racism cannot be defined as the elimination of racial difference and the destruction of people of European

descent. Capitalism can also make use of anti–racism rather than racism.[27] This can be noticed in the corporate and establishment support for BLM, much of it designed to reinforce its own domination. While the relations between national, religious, ethnic and gender groups are only arbitrarily conflictual, and need not be, class relations of exploitation are inherently conflictual. This makes the demand that working class movements be articulated in relation to the particular interests of demographic groups and along intersectional lines more problematic than social movement activists either let on or care to know. The point is not that the socialist movement must not advance the concerns and rights of all members of society, which it must do, but rather that attention to identity groups obscures the workings of capitalism at the same time that it obscures the differences between conservative, liberal and left politics.[28]

While there is no question that the capitalist ruling class has used class, gender, racial and national differences to divide organized socialist movements, the question that concerns us here is the use of anti–racism and anti–sexism to weaken rather than strengthen the organized left. The broad outlines of this dilemma were evident in the 2020 exchange between Ben Burgis and Noah Berlatsky that qualified the concepts of class and identity against the notion of reductionism.[29] While Burgis used the term (race) essentialism rather than (race) reductionism, the concept of (class) reductionism was used in Berlatsky's retort as he attempted to expose Burgis as insufficiently solidaristic. In more extreme cases, Marxists are simply sidelined as incorrigible and outdated. Because there is nothing new about anti–Marxism, this practice has been updated through the stratagems of a social media–influenced cancel culture. Marxists are not universalist because they are reductionist, the story goes, they are reductionist because they are racist, sexist, homophobic or xenophobic, because they refuse to abandon their settler privileges, or some other failing that is identified in order to advance the agenda of the virtue signalling professional-managerial class.[30]

In the era of wokeism, the discourse of anti-oppression has become one of the means through which postmodern academics and activists unwittingly collude with the neoliberal status quo. As a neoliberal politics, the relationship of wokeism to Marxism can be conceived as a game of woke baseball. The game begins as soon as a Marxist or radical leftist makes their first pitch. To get on base, the woke player then accuses them of one form of discrimination or other. Accuse them of being racist, sexist and homophobic and you have all the bases covered. Further afield are questions having to do with ageism, sizeism, ableism, xenophobia, and so on. The woke player can aim for a home run by comprehensively accusing the Marxist of class reductionism. When the Marxist is on plate, various pitches are available, depending on what league you play in: the privilege softball, the Eurocentrism hardball, the universalism curveball, the masculinism fastball and the phallogocentrism spitball. To end this game of political relativism and will to power, woksters accuse leftist universalists of being no different than the political right. Woke baseball is unlike

most sports, however, to the extent that woke players are player, umpire and fan all at once. They can cheat and provoke someone to the point where the left player cannot but be guilty of something. Or they can simply be proactive and presume in advance that the Marxists are the losers. In some quarters, for example, one can be considered white supremacist for any of the following traits: perfectionism, defensiveness, paternalism, either/or thinking, avoidance of conflict, individualism, objectivity or seeking emotional and psychological comfort.[31] Infinitely demanding criteria like these imply that woke baseball is not a game that Marxists can play to win.

Woke baseball has nothing to do with a given Marxist's actual social commitments. As with the Holy Inquisition and other forms institutionalized corruption, the burden of proof is imposed on designated parties whose guilt and redemption are irrelevant since the game obeys its own rules. For example, when Nikole Hannah-Jones was corrected by the nation's leading historians about the fact that the American Revolution was not fought to salvage slavery, as claimed by the *New York Times* 1619 Project, she retorted on Twitter: "Trump supporters have never harassed me and insulted my intelligence as much as white men claiming to be socialists. You all have truly revealed yourself for the anti-black folks you really are."[32] For her neoliberal hack work Hannah-Jones received a Pulitzer Prize and a well-endowed Chair alongside Ta-Nehisi Coates at Howard University. Similarly, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez defended Critical Race Theory at the same time that she denounced those people who critique it from the left as being "privileged" and acting in "bad faith."[33] This was before she voted to spend billions of dollars in support of the NATO-backed Zelensky regime in Ukraine.

It is a sorry state of affairs when progressives are playing woke baseball against one another rather than organizing against capitalism and a resurgent far right. The reasons for this are not simply ideological but relate to relations of competition within contemporary knowledge and creative industries, where trading on markers of difference symbolizes progress under conditions of economic stagnation and socio-political decline. The post-Fordist context in which questions of identity, difference and lifestyle function as integral aspects of the commodification of all forms of social life makes it such that the politics of anti-oppression are part of a post-politics that abandons revolutionary change in favour of surface changes within global capitalism. As Žižek argues, "the plural contingency of postmodern political struggles" is not opposed to the totality of capital.[34] Rather, capitalism functions as the background, or condition of possibility, for the emergence of new subjectivities. As he puts it elsewhere:

> Today's celebration of "minorities" and "marginals" *is* the predominant majority position; even alt-rightists who complain about the terror of liberal political correctness present themselves as protectors of an endangered minority. Or take the critics of patriarchy – those left-wing cultural

theorists who focus their critique on patriarchal ideologies and practices: they attack them as if patriarchy were still a hegemonic position, ignoring what Marx and Engels wrote 170 years ago, in the first chapter of *The Communist Manifesto*: "The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations." Is it not the time to start wondering why patriarchal phallogocentrism was elevated into a main target of criticism at the exact historical moment – ours – when patriarchy definitely lost its hegemonic role, when it began to be progressively swept away by the market individualism of "rights"? … This means that *the critical statement that patriarchal ideology continues to be today's hegemonic ideology* is *today's hegemonic ideology*: its function is to enable us to evade the deadlock of hedonistic permissiveness, which is effectively hegemonic.[35]

Communities and social groups worldwide do not have distinct properties, even if they are unevenly served by the dominant relations in place. They emerge *abstractly*, that is to say, as a function of alienation from the social totality. While rejecting imperialism, Marxism does not begin with organic community but with the contingent and changing social totality, examining the relations between and within groups at all levels of material reality.

The fortunes of class struggle depend on the balance of class power and class consciousness at any given moment. Those progressives who think that a pluralist "all of the above" social justice activism does not raise issues and problems for the left typically take pro-allyship stands against the presumed "class-only" politics of the radical left.[36] In this, as Jodi Dean has argued, the term comrade, and the communism it implies, is exchanged for the kinds of post-politics in which identity and class are simply interchangeable moments of a capacious progressivism.[37] Consider in this regard Christian Fuchs's cautious mediation of the divergences between David Harvey and Michael Hardt with Antonio Negri on the issue of identity and class in the special 2018 Marx @ 200 issue of the journal *tripleC*.[38] Whereas Hardt and Negri were once more Deleuzian in their critique of post-Fordism's real subsumption of all facets of social life, including the way that capitalism captures subjectivity through identity constructs, they are now following the diversity zeitgeist that developed among activists after Occupy Wall Street came under attack as a brocialist movement. This attack, however, like the Bernie Bro meme, emerged as a corporate media smear.[39] Its achievement has been the reinforcement of postmodern theory among new social movement activists, in some ways taking the left back to where it was in the 1980s and 90s. Identity and class are not equivalent. As Alain Badiou argues, the infinite multiplicity of ontology is irrelevant to the generic truths of politics.[40] Activism should look to renew its strength through socialism rather than through those movements that reorient politics around counterproductive forms of moral blackmail.

Revolution Is Non-Reductionist

Since communism is at present inoperative in most countries, one might at the very least avoid being draw into the game of woke baseball and question the term class reductionism. This means rejecting the particularity of the working class and insisting on its universality as the gravedigger of capitalism. The particularity of class has always been acceptable to the bourgeoisie, regardless of how charitable, reformist and progressive capitalists may have been in different historical instances. The bourgeois view of the working class is today redoubled in neoliberal capitalism's promotion of identity politics. The class reductionism that forecasts the eternal subordination of workers is echoed in the race and gender reductionism that takes personal experience to be more relevant than theoretical generalization and that is used to attack the politics of emancipatory universality. Paradoxically, the position of "universal norm" that is the bugbear of postmodern feminists, anti-racists, intersectionalists and decolonialists is reinforced when those who are associated with this norm – cisgender and hetero-normative white male settlers – self-position and impart to others the requisite tolerance of difference.[41] The only alternative to this is to reach for the universal, as Fanon once recommended, and that means avoiding the reduction of culture and politics to matters of personal or group identity. Those pseudo-Gramscian postmodernists who oppose Enlightenment universality so as to critique the normativity that is associated with social inequality simply affirm capitalism.

Is there a limit to what today's woke postmodernists will say against the Marxist left? I would suggest that there are social limits to anti-Marxism and that these are informed by contemporary social conditions and ideology. Since many postmodern discourse theorists, social constructionists and left populists make claims to be the actually existing left, they must characterize the Marxists who disagree with them as furtively bourgeois or right-wing. Although many postmodernists claim that they do not believe in modernist macro-politics, they resort to its terms when the need arises. This opportunism ironizes the abuse of the concept class reductionism when it is wielded by woke identitarians. Nevertheless, what characterizes such accusations is the way that they have been conditioned by variants of wokeism. Just as whiteness studies considers whites to be guilty and inherently flawed, the postmodern left goes on the attack against the Marxist left as though it constitutes an identity category of the wrong sort. According to postmodern hermeneutics, there must be differences and incommensurabilities that macro-politics cannot countenance.

The avenues that constitute the intersections of intersectionality tend to be one-way streets. Within the terms of identity politics, whites, men and straights are not allowed to enjoy with the same license as blacks, women and queers. For instance, Derrick Bell, who is considered the "godfather" of Critical Race Theory, approvingly cites the following description of CRT by the literary theorist Stanley Fish: "a ramshackle ad hoc affair whose ill-fitting

joints are soldered together by suspect rhetorical gestures, leaps of illogic, and special pleading tricked up as general rules, all in the service of a decidedly partisan agenda that wants to wrap itself in the mantle and majesty of law."[42] At best, what white allies can do is eat their own. Once the bogeyman accusation of class reductionism has been shown to be misinformed and opportunist, the charge shifts to individualized *ad hominem* attacks and social media blasts. One is accused of just about anything or one is censored according to procedural issues like "tone" and other in-group mysteries that Jo Freeman defined forty years ago already as problems of organizational – and now intellectual – structurelessness.[43] Since the advent of online mobs, the structurelessness of activist struggles against various social norms is now affecting educational institutions, the media, business and government. While one might think that this petty-bourgeois reform agenda has something to do with social critique, the generally individualized nature of the attacks and the rejection of common sense as suspect betrays the reactionary anti-Enlightenment attitudes that now inform the trendy agents of wokeism.

There is a class position on the various forms of oppression, but the rejection of left critiques of identity politics as class reductionist will not help anyone come to that understanding. In fact, the goal of the social justice reform agenda is to prevent people from coming to that level of class consciousness and collectivize through principled organizational means that are oriented towards mass movements and labour organization rather than professional, academic and subcultural in-groups. A postmodern culture that is ostensibly beyond all forms of prejudice in actual practice enacts the worst kinds of positivistic laziness. The Marxist materialism that was once taken for granted by postwar leftists is now a lost referent to the woke wave of neo-postmodernists. Since one cannot advance new ideas on the Marxist left without also knowing the foundations of radical and critical theory, the perspective of class reduction is essential. That Marxist method is non-reductionist without at the same time being eclectic, nihilistic and relativistic makes Marxism the better way to approach fields like science, economics, culture and law. That Marxism also provides a better overall social theory than all postmodern theories combined will very likely remain the case so long as we are living under the yoke of capital. This realization brings historical time into consideration.

In an August 2021 discussion on "The Uses (and Abuses) of History" on the *Jacobin* YouTube channel, Reed and Michaels comment on the irrelevance of the past to the politics that woketivists proclaim in the present.[44] This line of critique reiterates Michaels' analysis in *The Shape of the Signifier*, in which he argues that the heightened significance of slavery, the Holocaust or Native genocide to contemporary anti-racism is by and large derivative of the need to affirm questions of ontology rather than politics. Under the rubrics of postmodernism, post-structuralism or post-historicism, he writes, the world is organized "by subject positions instead of beliefs and divided into identities instead of classes."[45] For Michaels, the fact that someone's ancestors

were slaves or were killed in the Holocaust should not matter if their politics is concerned with improving the lives of everyone, including the descendants of victims of the Gulag and other atrocities. Appeals to history and memory, like experience, is sometimes taken by people as justification for nearly anything. While one can fully appreciate Michaels' argument, there are legitimate uses of history for the present that are not limited to justifications of identity.

Wokeism argues that we cannot settle macro-political issues until we attend to demands for equity. This makes social life complicated since these demands are tied up with the interests of the ruling class and its neoliberal ideology of post-representation. Woke enclaves are perverse microcosms whose purpose it is to make class consciousness dissolve into affects, clicks and other fetishes of the technocratic-cybernetic class. This is why crony politicians who "look like me" have taken up woke ideology as fodder for their intramural exchanges. Since, according to this class strata, the power of capital cannot be challenged, its reified parliamentary powers seek to reflect its reified subjects. They do not represent us. They simply look like us since that was all that we asked of them. The U.S. Army now promotes diversity at the same time that it advocates the "decolonization" of the Russian federation.[46] While such appropriations of the discourse of decoloniality are no reason to abandon anti-oppression causes, they also cannot be denounced by the groups that are thereby invoked because, at the very least, identity groups, however tenuous such classifications may be, are not politically monolithic. What people require is not better representation within capitalism but organizations that advance the strategies necessary to bring historical time and human becoming in line with social needs.

Consciousness brings historical time into the political frameworks that advance emancipatory social change.[47] In socialism, the working class ceases to be a particular class that can be satisfied with higher wages and short-term material gains. It becomes universal as a class only when it seeks the abolition of class society, capitalist relations of production and private property regimes. Wokeism, in contrast, is a petty-bourgeois politics of the decadent professional-managerial middle class. It is a defence of the established order. By attacking wokeism, conservatives only pretend to be radical. The only way in which the right can strike a correct note with the working class is when it mocks the political correctness of the suburban elite. The rest is deception. Only the left has a legitimate critique of wokeism because only socialism has a conflictual sense of time that is open to social change. Wokeism is not committed to historical change but rather to the infinite forms of being. Like everything else about capitalism, it evades serious scrutiny. Wokeism has the aura of the capitalist command structure. That is why it is successful in today's neoliberalized postmodern academia, media and culture industry. Its function is paradoxical insofar as diversity is used to induce ideological cohesion through differences that make no difference. When people struggle against capitalism, they shed their short-term wokeism for a long-term vision of human freedom

and equality. They take up the burden of historical time and fight for the survival of a now endangered humanity.

Notes

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Index