

INTERVIEW

# United States How identity politics has divided the Left

Friday 1 June 2018, by [HAIDER Asad](#), [KUMAR Rashmee](#) (Date first published: 27 May 2018).

**IDENTITY POLITICS HAS something for everyone — but not in a good way. In her 2016 election campaign, Hillary Clinton invoked “intersectionality” and “white privilege” as a shallow gesture of allyship to young liberal voters. Richard Spencer and members of the “alt-right” refer to themselves as “identitarians” to mask that they are, in fact, white supremacists. And for some “woke” people, wearing a shirt that says “feminist” and calling out celebrities for being vaguely “problematic” is the extent of political participation.**

What was once intended as a revolutionary strategy to take down interlocking oppressions has become a nebulous but charged buzzword co-opted across the political spectrum. A new book, “Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump,” [1] undertakes a rigorous analysis of race politics and the history of race in the United States to grapple with the shifting relationship between personal identity and political action.

In “Mistaken Identity,” Asad Haider argues that contemporary identity politics is a “neutralization of movements against racial oppression” rather than a progression of the grassroots struggle against racism. Haider, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Santa Cruz, puts the work of radical black activists and scholars in conversation with his personal experiences with racism and political organizing. He charts out the process through which the revolutionary visions of the black freedom movement — which understood racism and capitalism as two sides of the same coin — have been largely replaced with a narrow and limited understanding of identity.

Identity, he argues, has become abstracted from our material relationships with the state and society, which make it consequential to our lives. So when identity serves as the basis for one’s political beliefs, it manifests in division and moralizing attitudes, instead of facilitating solidarity.

“The framework of identity reduces politics to who you are as an individual and gaining recognition as an individual, rather than your membership in a collectivity and the collective struggle against an oppressive social structure,” Haider writes. “As a result, identity politics paradoxically ends up reinforcing the very norms it set out to criticize.”

The concept of identity politics was originally coined in 1977 by the Combahee River Collective [2], a group of black lesbian socialist feminists who recognized the need for their own autonomous politics as they confronted racism in the women’s movement, sexism in the black liberation movement, and class reductionism. Centering how economic, gender, and racial oppression materialized simultaneously in their lives was the key to their emancipatory politics. But their political work didn’t end there. The women of Combahee advocated for building coalitions in solidarity with other progressive groups in order to eradicate all oppression, while foregrounding their own.

By grounding his critique in specific histories and material relations, Haider takes a multi-pronged

approach to exploring just how sharply identity politics has veered from its radical roots.

Through his involvement in organizing against tuition hikes and privatization, Haider describes the missteps of movements that falsely separate economic and racial issues into identity-based “white” issues and “POC” issues. His examination of “white privilege” reflects on the development of the white race, codified in 1600s colonial Virginia by the ruling class to justify economic exploitation of Africans as slaves and preclude alliances between African and European laborers following Bacon’s Rebellion [3].

In his chapter on “passing,” Haider attempts to understand the case of Rachel Dolezal as an example of “the consequences of reducing politics to identity performances.” He examines the work of novelist Philip Roth, as well as the political transformation of poet Amiri Baraka, who embraced black nationalism in the 1970s and later renounced it for Marxist universalism. Finally, Haider explains how Donald Trump’s election was foreshadowed through the rise of neoliberalism in electoral politics decades before. Through the work of British cultural theorist Stuart Hall, he draws careful comparisons to how the U.K.’s Labour Party managed economic crisis and moral panic in the 1970s, which paved the way for Margaret Thatcher to take power.

Haider’s short book concludes with the paradox of rights as the end goal of mass movements. Instead, he calls for a reclaiming of an “insurgent universalism,” in which oppressed groups position themselves as political actors rather than passive victims. At turns fascinating and provocative, “Mistaken Identity” steps back from Twitter fights and think pieces to contextualize debates on identity politics and reconfigure how race informs leftist movements. *The Intercept’s* interview with Haider has been condensed and edited for clarity.

### **Rashmee Kumar - Can you walk through how identity politics shifted from a revolutionary political practice to an individualist liberal ideology?**

Asad Haider - 1977 was a historical turning point. First of all, it was a crisis for mass movements, which can be traced back to the civil rights movement — the New Left of the 1960s and black nationalism that came after that. These mass mobilizations and organizations ran up against their own strategic limits, they were confronted with state repression, and so their dynamism was declining. At the same time, there was what Stuart Hall called a “crisis of hegemony,” in which the coordinates of American politics were being totally rearranged — and the same process was happening in Europe — in which the economic crises of the 1970s had led to a total reorganization of the workplace, trade unions were on the defensive, and mass movements were decomposing. And so part of what happened in this period is that the language of identity and fighting against racism got individualized and attached to the individual advancement of a rising black political class and economic elites who were once excluded from the center of American society by racism, but now had a passageway to entry.

I think in the current moment, we lack a political language that can shift from division to solidarity, and that’s something that was a major question for the anti-racist movements from the ’50s to the ’70s, and that’s what the Combahee River Collective was writing about. We don’t have a language about collective struggles that take on issues of racism and can incorporate cross-racial movements. So I think part of the reason that this individualistic kind of identity politics comes up so much on the left among activists who really do want to build movements that challenge the social structure is because we’ve lost that language that came with mass movements, which could allow us to think of the ways to build that solidarity.

**You write that “the ideology of race is *produced* by racism, not the other way around.” What does this mean?**

In this book, I don't talk about "race" in general because we could think about many different historical contexts in which divisions are introduced between groups, which become hierarchical, and some of them may be related to color of skin. But there are examples of that type of group differentiation that isn't related to color of skin, like the case of the Irish and English colonialism in Ireland in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which I refer to in the book. You could look at different examples of plantation slavery in the Caribbean, and you'd have to explain [race] differently because there were not only African slaves, but also "coolies" from India and China.

I talk about a very specific history of race that emerged from forced labor in colonial Virginia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. ... My argument is that the first racial category that gets produced is that of the white race, in order to exclude African forced laborers from the category that European forced laborers were placed in, which was one in which there was an end of their term of servitude, [as opposed to] the category of slaves, who had no end to their term. The white race was invented, as Theodore Allen said [4], in the way that the laws changed regarding forced labor, and that's the beginning of the division of people into racial categories in U.S. history. What racism did in this case was it differentiated between different kinds of economic exploitation and ultimately became a form of social control, which divided the exploited through introducing hierarchies and privileges for some people, which prevented them from seeing a common interest [between European and African migrant forced laborers] and a common antagonism against those who were exploiting them.

**Your personal encounters with racism and observations of campus activism are woven throughout the book. How have your own identity and experiences informed your understanding of race?**

I always refer to a quote from Stuart Hall, who said that identity is not about returning to your roots, but about coming to terms with your routes. So in that sense, identity is not your essence or what's inside you or at the foundation of you, but it's about all the movement that has led to putting you where you are. I can trace my own identity back to my ancestors migrating from Iran to India, and then after the Partition, from India to Pakistan, and from there, my parents to rural Pennsylvania. That's a story of movement across the globe and at every step, a mixing and mingling that transformed what was moving. My awareness of that has always made me skeptical of making the leap from identity to a particular kind of politics because identity can't be reduced to one fixed thing, and when you have a politics which does that, it's a disservice to people and to all of our histories of mixing and traveling and dynamism.

Regarding campus activism, my experience was as a person of color who was radicalized largely by learning about the Black Power movement and Marxism through the Black Power movement. So I never imagined that people would see an incompatibility between them, especially because Marxism was the powerful force that it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it was taken up and adapted in the non-Western world. That's something that's forgotten or suppressed today. So as a person of color getting involved in social movements, I was getting really dismayed that often, race became the source of division and fragmentation and defeat, instead of being part of a general emancipatory program. It was that frustration that led me to thinking about and writing about what went into this book.

**The left is often accused of being "too white" or "too male." How can the left begin to address internal racial dynamics?**

If you have an organization or a movement that is dominated by white men, that is a political and strategic problem. If you treat it as a moral problem, you're not going to be able to solve it. I think the important thing is to actually be able to change the situation. Anyone who has participated in activism knows that in a meeting, someone may be called out or told to "check their privilege."

There's an interesting article that came out of the feminist movement by Jo Freeman called "Trashing" [5] — the contemporary equivalent of "trashing" is "calling out." The funny thing about calling out is that it doesn't work because it centers all the attention on the white man who engaged in whatever transgression is being morally condemned. It also creates an atmosphere of tension and paranoia so that even people who aren't white men may feel nervous about speaking because they might say the wrong thing — and get trashed. So it's a question that people who are involved in organizing have to take seriously, that white men have to take seriously.

There was a principle that the black communist Harry Haywood said was fundamental in organizing during the anti-racist struggles of the 1930s. He said that everybody has to come to terms with their own national position. So white comrades have to oppose white chauvinism, and they have to take a leading role in opposing it. And he said black comrades have to take the leading role in opposing reactionary nationalism, which at the time was Garveyism [6] and the like. He said that with this division of labor, which was part of actual mass movements, you could start to overcome these problems. But then he said later on, when the party dropped their actual campaigns against racism, they started policing each other's language, and that division of labor was gone, and the problem didn't get addressed. So that's something that still holds. White men in movements have to take the lead in trying to overcome those hierarchies that manifest themselves in social interactions, but also people of color have to step up and say, "We don't accept this division between racial and economic issues, between race and class, and if someone is coming in and trying to say that these issues are all 'white' or this is a 'white movement,' that's not true because we're here and we're playing a role, and we believe these issues are connected and we can work on them together."

### **Can you talk about the ideas behind black nationalism in the 1970s and its limitations? How has black nationalism endured in contemporary U.S. politics?**

After 1965, after the civil rights movement had achieved major policy changes, it was unclear where the movement should be headed. Even leading figures in the civil rights movement were thinking that now that legal segregation had been formally undermined, they still had to deal with the fact that most black people were in poverty and that there were de facto structures of exclusion. Martin Luther King, for example, started to get interested in the Poor People's Campaign, which is what he was working on at the end of his life. But another approach at this point was what some people called "riots" and what others called "urban rebellions" in the northern cities, revolting against the economic control of landlords and white businessmen and so on. In the northern, urban context, black nationalism as a political program was about building alternative institutions, rather than asking for integration into white society.

So there were two things happening. One was black nationalists building parallel institutions, and the other was the overcoming of legal segregation and the rise of a new black political class and economic elites, which had always existed to some extent, but the scale completely changed. And so black nationalist organizations were behind many of the campaigns to have a black mayor in a majority black city. In the case of Amiri Baraka, it was Kenneth Gibson. Part of the reason Baraka turned from black nationalism toward Marxism was the realization that once Gibson was in charge of Newark, politics as usual continued. I think black nationalism had a revolutionary role in its period — it was a very important strategic and political development — but throughout the '70s, with the ascendance of the black political class and black economic elites, it ran into a contradiction.

Black nationalism became tied to black political and economic elites because it had an ideology of racial unity, and when people were completely excluded from governance and control over their own lives, it made sense for there to be a kind of alliance between these more elite figures and the lower economic strata because they were both confronting racial structures of exclusion. But as the process of incorporation of black elites into the existing political and economic structures continued,

those interests were no longer aligned, especially in the 1970s, as politicians at every level were starting to impose austerity on their populations, cutting social programs and so on. It became the black politicians who were doing that, and so the contradictions between the black elite and the majority of black people in cities became very clear. And so what I think persists now is that division between the elites and ordinary working people, and a residual ideology of racial unity that is often used to cover up that class division. That was very much the case with Barack Obama.

### **How can identity politics be brought back to its radical origins within contemporary political discourse and organizing?**

I think we have to be open to understanding that our identities are not foundations for anything; they are unstable, they are multifarious — and that can be unsettling. But we have to find ways to become comfortable with that, and part of how we can do that is by creating new ways of relating to each other, which can come through mass movements. The way we can overcome the fragmentation that identity seems to lead to now is precisely by recognizing what the Combahee River Collective proposed: being able to assert a political autonomy and also being in coalitions. I think that's very practical. It's not going to come from having endless arguments on Twitter; it's something that has to come through political activity. It's through working on concrete, practical projects in coalition with others. That in itself is a process in which racism is undermined, and white people who are working together with people of color can learn to question their own assumptions and overcome racist impulses.

I'm very inspired by the rapid growth of socialist organizations right now, but I am concerned sometimes that socialism gets equated with some kind of program for economic redistribution that has been the same since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Socialists have always been engaged in coalition-building — there was always a principle of internationalism, there was never a fixed conception of the kinds of demands a socialist movement has to put forward. Sometimes a demand that may not seem to be directly related to the redistribution of wealth can be part of coalition-building and mobilizing people. If a socialist organization is at the forefront of a movement against racism — and this was the goal of certain black members of the Communist Party in the '30s — then people are going to look around and say, "Who's on our side? It's these people. When we were dealing with police violence, these were the people, this was the organization that stepped in to help. And this is an organization that is multiracial, and they think that these issues we encounter in our daily lives matter, just as much as any other economic demand might matter." So socialist organizations also have to be open to experimentation and flexibility in order to pre-empt identity as a source of division and instead, pre-emptively build solidarity.

### **Can you explain your vision of a universalist political framework?**

We have to set aside the kind of universalism that resolves divisions and difficulties in advance by saying that we have some kind of universal foundation, like human nature or materialism like it's some physical matter, which has nothing to do with materialism as Marx talked about it. That's not the universalism I'm advocating for because that kind of universalism has historically been caught up with exclusion and domination — like what was put forth by the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the American Revolution, which were systematic with slavery, colonialism, and various forms of violence. ... My understanding of universalism is when the people and groups that are excluded from this [definition of] universal rise up and claim their autonomy to produce a new kind of universality. It's not something that pre-exists; it's a break with the existing state of things. The classic example is the Haitian Revolution, which came after the French Revolution, which pointed out that France still held colonies in which there was slavery, despite whatever was happening there.

We'd be able to see a new universalism if these rigid divisions between so-called identity categories like race and gender and the category of class were overcome in a real, practical movement. If we were able to see organizations emerge and make real, concrete change in which they bridge those gaps — in which it would become impossible to say that “this is a white organization” or “this is a male-dominated organization” — it would necessarily involve challenging economic inequality and the class structures of American society. For a movement to arise, which tackled the fundamental structures of inequality, domination, and exploitation in American society in such a way that identity as a force of division could not exist — that would be a real universal moment.

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\* The Intercept, May 27 2018, 5:30 p.m:

<https://theintercept.com/2018/05/27/identity-politics-book-asad-haider/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/2716-mistaken-identity>

[2] ESSF (article 44587), [US Black feminists and Lesbians: The Combahee River Collective Statement](#).

[3] [http://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_About/002\\_04-background-02-08.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-02-08.htm)

[4] <https://www.amazon.com/Invention-White-Race-Oppression-Control/dp/1844677699>

[5] <https://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/trashing.htm>

[6] <https://socialistworker.org/2012/05/18/politics-of-marcus-garvey>