

Book Review (United States): Charting a Path in the Identity Politics Debate

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Fainan Lakha reviews a book by Asad Haider that makes a contribution toward helping activists in movements opposing oppression grapple with important debates.

Asad Haider, *Mistaken identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*. Verso, 2018, 144 pages, \$17.95.

SOME PHRASES demand a reaction. Whether it's because of quibbles over the exact meaning of the term, the flush of emotions tied to experiences associated with it, or the serious discussion over where it came from and what do about it, perhaps no phrase on the left today seems quite as touchy as "identity politics."

And for good reason: With both movements against oppression and a new wave of struggle in workplaces in people's political consciousness, there can be quite a lot of pressure to take one side or another in these discussions.

The media are using the phrase "working class" again—but mainly to chide white working people for being responsible for the Trump phenomenon, and always with the assumption that women, people of color, queer and trans folks, and immigrants have nothing to do with any working class.

On the left, there is a tendency to believe either that "real" socialism means privileging economic struggle, or that no struggle should be considered more important than the one against racism or sexism or transphobia or disability or some intersection of these and other categories.

Protesters take to the streets of Los Angeles on International Women's Day
The larger framework for this latter attitude is the belief that one's own identity or identities are the most important way of thinking through resistance to oppression and injustice.

In opposition to this, author Asad Haider points out that socialists can emphasize movements against oppression and simultaneously recognize the centrality of working class economic struggle.

Haider does this skillfully in his book *Mistaken identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*—above all, by suggesting that oppression can matter without everything being about identity.

From this point of view, which is inspired by the best elements of the socialist movement, Haider's book offers us a new way of thinking about the specificity of racism and other oppressions, and the politics needed to end them, in a way that is deeply suited to the specific issues facing the movement today.

Haider is the executive editor of *Viewpoint Magazine*, a left-wing project that has consistently attempted to offer fresh yet serious ideas for a U.S. left facing new challenges in the 21st century.

His book is no exception. He has charted a theoretical and political approach that is a remarkable contribution to the left's understanding of the politics of identity.

The book is smart, insightful and relatively breezy at a cool 144 pages. This length is a particularly striking accomplishment, given that it takes up some notoriously difficult thinkers, like left-wing social philosophers Judith Butler and Louis Althusser, and renders their ideas in an accessible and politically relevant way.

Haider should also be credited for a serious engagement with the Black radical tradition, from whom he is able to derive a wealth of insight. I imagine that Haider's book could very well function as an introduction to all of these thinkers for a new generation of socialists.

THE BOOK begins with a thesis on the nature of identity politics—which Haider refers to as “the neutralization of movements against racial oppression.”

This formula expresses both that identity is untenable as the basis of truly emancipatory (i.e., revolutionary) politics, and also that it is something that can be deployed by the ruling class as a way to co-opt and weaken movements against racism.

This criticism is clarifying and strong—it shows what is missing from identity discourse, and how it is that the ruling class can appropriate the language of identity to make radical-sounding ideas that never actually force people to confront the system we live under.

At the same time, Haider's formulation could lead one to miss some of the ways that identity operates in our current political situation. While it's true that becoming politicized on the basis of your identity doesn't suddenly make you a revolutionary, that doesn't mean identity can't have a more radicalizing effect.

Identity can be a force for genuine radicalization, and people with the politics that Haider is criticizing can find, through their identity, a way to socialist ideas. The fact that Angela Davis is such a significant inspiration for so many young activists today is an important testament to that fact.

Besides that, this is a debate that has to do with language. Radicalizing youth encounter this language floating around in the world, and the terms aren't always clearly defined. They can use the same words to express multiple, even contradictory sets of ideas.

Paying attention to these multiple meanings of words that circulate as activist discourse allows us to also see how, for example, people can speak of privilege and still be in favor of solidarity and social transformation, rather than the more personalistic direction that identity politics often take.

Thinking this way also pushes against an overemphasis on the moral value of certain words over others.

At one point, Haider gives the example of some Occupy-era organizing on campus getting torn apart by debates prompted by identity politics. He describes a debate about whether it was suitable to refer to a university occupation with the word “occupy,” given the word's colonial connotations. He points out, rightly, that such a debate belongs more in a seminar on language than in the throes of struggle.

Haider proposes that a return to the language and ideas of the Black radical tradition is needed to redirect developing anti-racist activists away from the neutralizing politics of identity—which in this example demobilized people, rather than advanced the struggle, including those who didn't see this debate as the most important thing from the start.

This is a valuable point. But absent in Haider's account is a way of accounting for more successful organizing among the substantial layer of new organizers who have been drawn into struggle as a response to oppression, and who express themselves in the terms of "identity politics."

On campuses, struggles for prison divestment—which has been successful in a few places, including Columbia University—and for the removal of Confederate statues and renaming of university buildings named after slave owners are two examples of meaningful struggles that have emerged and expressed themselves in these terms.

Another example is how the movement for Black lives has led to a break from older, more Democratic Party-aligned organizations like Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network in favor of new networks of activists who are trying to grapple with the political questions Haider himself spends so much careful time taking up.

Practically speaking, these struggles opened up a space for their participants to draw more radical conclusions.

SO THIS is to warn against a one-dimensional conclusion that any sign of identity politics is automatic proof that a struggle is doomed to their "neutralizing" effect.

Nonetheless, Haider makes an exceedingly convincing case about the profound limits to the way "identity politics" work. Drawing on philosopher Judith Butler and social theorist Wendy Brown, Haider analyzes the liberal and legal grounds that inform the politics of identity.

Identity, he writes, is always rooted in "injury," and is thus always framed as an appeal for individual remedy addressed to the state. This implies a politics fundamentally rooted in victimhood, leading to the pitting of different claims of injury against one another in a hierarchy of oppression.

For anyone who has experienced "identity politics" in action, it seems clear that Haider's framework speaks exactly to the way of thinking of many young activists.

Haider sees a solution in the "identity politics" of the Combahee River Collective, a pioneering collective of Black lesbian feminists and revolutionaries. Their meaning of "identity politics" centered on an awareness of race and gender oppression within their perspective on the need to overturn capitalist society through common struggle on many fronts.

A similarly important idea has come out of elements of the Black left, and particularly out of what is known today as Black Studies. These scholar activists argue that understanding race through the lens of the effects of oppression alone limits our understanding.

They point out the way that another conception of identity, one centered on resistance, is useful in struggle exactly because of the distinctive and positive content of group experience—something that is most importantly true for African Americans.

Although this idea is sometimes presented as a criticism of parts of the U.S. socialist movement, it is also an argument with its precedent in the socialist tradition.

Thus, for example, African American socialist and historian W.E.B. Du Bois makes the point that Black Christianity offered a collective language of liberation during Reconstruction. Likewise, Trinidadian revolutionary socialist C.L.R. James talked about how Voodoo, the syncretic religion and set of rituals practiced by the Haitian slaves, was used as a language to communicate insurrectionary plans during the Haitian Revolution.

In both of these cases, elements of identity came to the fore as part of people's self-awareness as revolutionary agents. It is, in part, for this reason that C.L.R. James argued that the Black struggle tends toward a radical, even revolutionary direction.

Haider also spends a considerable amount of time tracing the origins of racism and of the concept of whiteness. He makes a valuable contribution by showing the shortcomings of politics built around white guilt and white privilege, and again points to the revolutionary tradition as an alternative rooted in shared interest and common struggle.

Haider notes the need for an analysis of white supremacy for contemporary radicalism and makes a convincing case that the left has no business making whiteness anything but a category we should challenge as vigorously as possible. He revisits some strategies from the Communist Party's heyday in the 1930s as a means of thinking about how to combat racial divisions on the left today.

THE HIGHLIGHT of the book, however, is its last two chapters.

In the first of these, Haider skillfully undertakes a summary and then criticism of the thinking of two more contemporary Marxists: Stuart Hall and his account of urban revolt in the lead-up to Thatcherism in Britain and Ralph Miliband's description of neoliberalism's assault on organized labor.

Miliband and Hall, who died in 2014, were leading Marxists in the UK during the period from the late 1970s on, when neoliberalism took hold.

Hall, who is famous for starting the academic field known as "cultural studies," analyzed media representation and combined it with sociological analysis to argue that the depth of the crisis made management of resistance in poor, racialized, urban areas exceptionally important for the ruling class.

Hall admired movements that arose in these settings—located at a distance from the point of production and which put a premium on a politics built around survival—as the direction of future resistance during the era of what would come to be known as neoliberalism.

Miliband addressed the crisis in a rather different way, emphasizing the aggressiveness of ruling class strategy in relation to trade unions as the central aspect of the crisis, and thus pointing to their renewed labor militancy as the major site of resistance.

Haider finds a way between these two positions, taking the best of each of their arguments in order to do so.

The result is a deeply nuanced analysis. It recognizes the way that extra-workplace struggle carried out by sections of the working class that are being suppressed and excluded is crucially important, as well as how socialists can understand it in terms of Marxist analysis.

At the same time, Haider shows how the success of struggle depends on the strength of political organization, most especially organization that emerges through workplace struggle.

In this way, Haider avoids a false polarization of oppression and economic struggles with an approach of invoking a broad Marxist social analysis and a perspective on socialist strategy.

Thinking as he does in terms of strategy and politics, I couldn't agree more with the way this presents the problem. Haider is right to discuss the difficulties that our current situation produces for building multiracial alliances against capital—and he makes a powerful case for a change in

thinking, away from the question of survival emphasized by Hall, and toward liberation.

The final chapter of the book, “Universalism,” is a theoretical reflection on this analysis. Against a vision of the solution of problems for oppressed groups coming from above, according to a universal principle of equality, the chapter’s vision centers around the idea that it is exactly through particular struggles for a better life that a universality rooted in emancipation is realized.

On this basis, a rich idea of solidarity emerges—one that avoids reductionism as well as crude universalism, refusing victimhood as well as selfishness. Haider calls this principle “insurrectionary universalism,” a term which I think pithily sums up the best of the socialist tradition’s legacy on anti-racism.

For the arguments here, for their clarity and sophistication, this book is essential reading for anyone interested in bringing socialist ideas into movements against racism today.

Fainan Lakha

P.S.

* Socialist Worker, May 18, 2018:

<https://socialistworker.org/2018/05/18/charting-a-path-in-the-identity-politics-debate>