

USA beyond the ISO:towards a critical défense of 'identity politics

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This is an expanded and updated version of a document written by [Pranav Jani](#) during the period leading up to the ISO's 2019 national convention in February. Along with a general call for more democracy and openness in the ISO amid the labor upsurge and growing socialist movement, people of color (POC) at the Convention demanded a recognition of their experiences of racism and discrimination in the ISO, and identified theories and practices that prevented the development and leadership of POC members.

Delegates at the convention elected POC comrades to national leadership in unprecedented numbers, including over 50 percent representation of POC/Native members on the Steering Committee. While the ISO [voted to dissolve itself](#) following news of a [badly mishandled rape allegation in 2013](#) that decimated the group, many comrades will continue to work together in identifying what went wrong, and contribute to building a socialist movement that is truly grounded in fighting all instances of oppression.

THIS ESSAY calls for a critical defense of "identity politics" in order to better respect the experience and knowledge that people of color and those from other oppressed communities bring to socialist organizations in the U.S. — and to prevent their marginalization from these groups.

My argument, which applies broadly but centers race, has two aspects: 1) rejecting the ISO's understanding of identity politics as oppositional to Marxism, a position I reluctantly enforced for many years; and 2) suggesting that the Bolsheviks' critical support for anti-colonial nationalism in the 1920s provides an excellent template for defending identity politics in a critical way.

But first, in light of current discussions about assessing the ISO as we begin the process of dissolving the organization, let me explain a bit about my own experiences in the ISO, and how this argument fits in a bigger picture.

Building an anti-racist socialist organization

I joined the ISO as a graduate student in 1995, when I was 23 years old. Brought up at the heart of a South Asian immigrant community in New Jersey with two unionized educators, I held a mix of ideas, from anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and pro-labor positions on the one hand, to fairly conservative positions on gender and sexuality on the other.

While I was starting to learn about Marxism in my classes, it was nothing like the education I got in the ISO. Besides learning about an entirely new way of looking at the world through study groups, meetings and discussions, I went to my first picket lines, organized my first rallies and actions and coalitions and started working with activists from a variety of backgrounds and communities — challenging and transforming my political ideas.

Make no mistake: despite disagreements on how we talked about race I stayed in the ISO for nearly

24 years because of our consistent anti-racism and anti-imperialism, which we placed at the center of the fight for socialism.

The ISO's politics and organization gave me space to lead on these fronts again and again: fighting against our campus police having guns in 1995; launching a branch of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty in 1996; organizing against Bill Clinton's crime bill, welfare cuts and "humanitarian" wars; challenging NYC police brutality in the late 1990s; building the global justice movement after Seattle 1999; rejecting post 9/11 Islamophobia and militarism; protesting the Iraq War of 2003; organizing for immigrants rights in 2006; mobilizing for Trayvon Martin in 2012; supporting the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2014 and after; building campaigns for BDS and Palestinian rights; fighting fascism and white supremacy after Trump; and on and on.

On the theoretical front, the ISO always aimed to reject the sort of class reductionism that is interested in race, gender, sexuality and the like only as a function of economics. With whatever limitations we had — and this essay is about a major limitation — we never argued that the fight against oppression was a secondary issue that would miraculously solve itself once we did away with capitalism.

And we would be innovative as well. In recent years, for example, I have had ample room to develop our understanding of colonialism, racism, and anti-colonialism through talks on Indian revolutionaries like M.N. Roy, the 1857 Rebellion in British India, African liberation movements, and Marxist theories of colonialism.

And yet, despite all of these incredible experiences and ideas, and despite our layer of experienced POC leaders across the nation — absolutely visible at the convention — the ISO had a dubious track record in encouraging the leadership of POC, in retaining POC cadre, and encouraging POC spaces for communication and development.

On the individual level, as comrade after comrade publicly testified at the Convention, we experienced disrespect and belittling, severe pushback when raising arguments for caucuses or for new ways of approaching identity and privilege and aggressions and microaggressions that, frankly, are our daily experiences in white-majority spaces.

Time after time, we were kept from leadership positions. In an organization with a historically low number of POC leaders at the national level, I only joined a national leadership in 2017, after over two decades of work. Many other POC comrades can share stories of being passed over despite ample evidence of their political ability to lead.

As many have noted, POC comrades ourselves often enforced these arguments to other POC. This shows that the issue was systemic and not only individual. Mainstream society trains everyone to diminish people of color — so it is quite easy for people of color in positions of authority to do the same.

Or, we learned to hold our tongues. In the middle of so much good activist work against racism and imperialism, and with the absence of alternatives on the left, we often raised debates but then let them go after facing a wall of resistance. This was precisely my experience when challenging the ISO's positions on "white skin privilege" and "identity politics" over the years.

To be clear: I reject the idea that the group that I helped to build for decades was a racist organization. That would erase the hard work of comrades of color, especially, and doesn't explain the whole story.

But I also reject the idea that anti-racist practices and ideas themselves could have made the ISO, or

could make any white-majority socialist group, immune to the racism that rages around us. Whether through direct acts of racism from individuals, ideas that ended up targeting and invalidating POC experience or undemocratic practices that had a disproportionate impact on POC, comrades have been victimized for years. And we are the ones who stayed.

The socialist left, if it is ever to be successful, needs to transform itself to meet the needs of POC comrades, and to stamp out the ugly presence of racism wherever it raises its head.

Rejecting the dismissal of “identity politics”

Socialists can start by rejecting over-simplified criticisms of what is called “identity politics.” In fact, we should probably stop using the term altogether because its meaning is unclear and imprecise — and gets in the way of connecting with people from marginalized and oppressed communities.

At worst, the criticism of identity politics seems to minimize subjective experiences of social reality — and to suggest that comrades who have not experienced racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and the like are in the best position to advise and correct those who have.

For Marxist organizers, the knowledge and perspective that develops through someone’s direct experience of oppression/exploitation should be not only worthy of our full respect but a crucial building block to revolutionary consciousness.

We know this in practice, as evidenced by decades of Socialist Worker pieces foregrounding people’s own voices when talking about politics and struggle. Frankly, the ISO would have never been able to organize a single rally or action or strike, not to speak of recruiting comrades from marginalized backgrounds, if its members didn’t have a fundamental understanding of this central point.

Yet, we persisted with an approach that said we needed to “win people away from” or “break people from” identity politics. We cited “identity politics” as a shorthand for a negative political assessment of comrades, and lost the opportunity to actually dialogue with them beyond this label.

Such practices construct a rigid barrier between socialists and those who — precisely because of oppression — tend to foreground their identity in articulating their politics.

In fact, at its worst, “identity politics” could be used like a club to silence people — doing a great deal of harm to members and contacts of the ISO who were POC, queer, trans and/or otherwise marginalized in society.

The historic argument against Black or POC caucuses in the ISO — which I also made, for years — is a clear example of how our excessively critical approach to identity issues tended to push oppressed communities back.

The implicit assumption here is that POC getting together would somehow weaken our project of building a multiracial socialist organization. Such lack of trust is extremely harmful, and reproduces the marginalization that POC feel in society everyday.

In 1938, speaking to the Socialist Workers Party (US), C.L.R. James went much further than caucuses, arguing that:

The awakening political consciousness of the Negro... takes the form of independent action uncontrolled by whites. The Negroes have long felt, and more than ever feel today, the urge to create their own organizations under their own leaders and thus assert...their claim to complete equality with other American citizens. Such a desire is legitimate and must be vigorously supported

even when it takes the form of a rather aggressive chauvinism.

Why is it that we always defended the right of the oppressed to resist in any way they choose, but restricted our own members from doing so?

How can we, as the broader socialist left, embrace the knowledge and perspectives coming from the experience of oppression and recognize it for what it is — a strong, potential basis for revolutionary and socialist organizing?

Expanding Marxist theory

What I'm saying here is in line with much bigger shifts and developments inside the ISO starting at least a decade ago — and the tremendous work by our comrades in conceptually applying and developing Marxist methods to understanding social oppression and resistance.

By 2019, ISO members were asked to understand the relationships between capitalism and sexuality, disability, gender, race and settler colonialism — a far cry from years past. Intersectionality, social reproduction theory, the contributions of Black feminism, trans liberation, Native liberation — these were now part of the language we used and the radical traditions we cited.

For many of us, these changes took far too long. It seems outright laughable that “feminism” was not a term we used regularly before, seeing it as a stand-in for middle-class, bourgeois ideology.

But the shift was real, and reflected our taking seriously the idea that Marxism is a living, breathing tradition, that other radical traditions have concepts and observations that can be compatible with Marxism and that we need to explore what we can learn from them.

My call for a critical defense of identity politics aims to continue this opening up of Marxism and socialist organizing. Socialists need to better understand the identities and experiences of the oppressed, and learn how to link them more firmly to the development of revolutionary consciousness.

Talking identity

As Marxists, we stand (and ought to stand) for the unity of the working class across lines of social identity (race, gender, sexuality, nationality, caste, religion, etc.). We maintain that:

the working class is composed of people of all identities; ruling-class ideology and the workings of capitalism fragment the working class and turn it against itself; and the historical development of capitalism is integrated with and reproduces structures and institutions that perpetuate social oppression (settler colonialism, slavery, colonialism, the family and patriarchy, gender binaries, etc.)

Identities, then, are constructs, and products of historical divisions and conflicts.

But saying identities are constructs doesn't mean they are therefore “fake” — any more than saying race is a historical construct wipes away the realities of racism. Identity plays a big role on the level of consciousness, self-perception and self-pride for oppressed groups — and often opens up a path to understanding oppression as part of a system.

Identity has at least two aspects: a name or category that a person chooses for themselves, and a box that a person is shoved into when they enter the world. In fact, the two are inseparable.

Even if a person feels their self-definition is utterly unique, and that they or their community are distinct from everyone else, that desire itself should be seen by Marxists as a product of history, not just as the projection of an individual.

And in fact this history is one of oppression and alienation — commonly known as “othering”. Those from oppressed and marginalized and/or minority groups often are the ones who rush towards identifying themselves as distinct; those of majority groups, comforted in being seen as “normal” or even “universal”, don’t often feel such a need — except in response.

This is why “Black power” and “women’s rights” in the U.S. can articulate a radical position and the expansion of liberation, but “white power” and “men’s rights” points to a world of greater oppression.

Criticism of “identity politics” from the left is something to think very hard about and question. Not just today, when the right is falling all over itself to go after identity politics, but even in earlier decades.

Some have argued that identity politics in the 1980s and 1990s was a product of postmodern anti-Marxism and therefore had to be fought sharply by those seeking to preserve a socialist current.

There is some truth to this, but we need to ask more questions and dig deeper. Why is it that, when we read the postmodernists, they too are quite critical of identity politics, seeing it as opposed to “difference”? How did “identity politics” as used by the Combahee River Collective in their manifesto of the late 1970s differ from and/or contend with the postmodernist critiques of the term?

One might have criticism of how a particular worldview linked to an assertion of identity answers important questions like why oppression happens, what liberation looks like and who are allies and enemies. But it’s best to criticize that worldview, not the origins and experiences that produced it.

In fact, we would be better served going in the opposite direction, asserting the value and importance of identity and experience first, before becoming suspicious of “identity politics.”

Valuing experience

Valuing experience is not new for the socialist and Marxist left. In fact it’s crucial to our ideas about history and change. We know that reporting the experience of the oppressed and the exploited is central to contesting ruling class ideology and media, which projects ruling class experience and interests as universal truth.

When someone walks into a meeting or up to a mic and shares their experience — of being a person of color, of being a worker, of being disabled — we value that immensely, even if we don’t agree with all of their political framework or ideas.

And when we assert that grassroots movements are what makes change, or that revolutions are festivals of the oppressed or that the “emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself,” we are showing how much we value people’s ability to think and act against capitalism and oppression because of their own experiences, and the understanding that flows from that.

Marxists critical of identity politics are actually opposing — and should continue to raise questions about — a set of ideas and practices that refuses to see capitalism as linked to social oppression, or

sees anyone who does not experience a given oppression as automatically complicit in that oppression or encourages reactionary politics on the name of fighting oppression.

Nothing I am saying is about dropping these positions. Rather, I'm saying they should not be counterposed to "identity politics" (which appears to critique the origins of the politics) but to the political positions themselves, with a method and approach that begins by respecting the oppressed and marginalized person's experience and knowledge.

Parallels with national liberation

Marxism, especially in its Leninist formulations, already offers a great template for valuing an oppressed group's self-definition and identification while also maintaining a critical approach.

I'm referring to the tradition's historic approach to anti-colonial nationalism — particularly in 1921 and 1922, after the Comintern brought together Bolsheviks and anti-colonial and anti-racist revolutionaries from around the globe — including MN Roy, Claude McKay and many others — who themselves participated in shaping the policy.

A very brief outline of the position is as follows:

- 1) Marxists value the self-determination of oppressed nations, and regard this is crucial to the fight against imperialism, against capitalism and for true and democratic internationalism.
- 2) Anti-colonial movements are made up of diverse elements but tend to be objectively against capital — and need to be defended by Marxists.
- 3) But this defense is critical, not absolute. The cross-class alliance inherent in any anti-colonial struggle is repressing a clash of class interests. Marxists side with the workers and peasants within anti-colonial movements, as well as oppressed groups within the movement, because only a fight against capitalism and oppression — not just the securing of an independent nation-state — can bring genuine liberation.
- 4) Some anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles are reactionary, and supporting them would go against the current that potentially flows from national liberation to socialism. Working classes and oppressed groups within oppressed nations are targeted by and need to fight such elements, and our affiliation is with the oppressed.

The term "identity politics" is so broad that it cannot be simply blended with anti-colonial nationalism. While the latter's fight to win political freedom is in part motivated by identity and culture, it is also sharply defined by the centrality of land recovery and democratic self-rule.

But the method and principles by which Marxists have developed the critical defense of anti-colonial nationalism shows us what a critical defense of identity politics would look like.

Moving with, not against, identity and experience

Beyond listening to people, not writing them off, and other good practices that we should always strive for, we need to get away from a mindset that says "we need to get people to be critical of identity politics, but for now we want to connect with them."

Instead we should be for moving, with the stream, from people's identities and experiences toward Marxist understandings of oppression and exploitation — with an appreciation of identity and experience as crucial places where people from marginalized groups first cut their teeth in

questioning a world that others them and oppresses them.

Besides becoming more and more open to the radicalization today, this understanding will alleviate a huge burden that many of us, including myself, have always felt in squaring our theory with our practice within socialist spaces.

Rather than feeling we are going into battle when speaking with contacts and new members who radicalized out of their experience of marginalization, rather than feeling we have to name their questions as “identity politics” (either to them or in reporting to contact organizers), rather than seeing Marxism as an “inoculation” against the “pull” of identity, socialists can see our task as engaging with what people already know and feel, listening and learning from this exchange, and putting forward ideas and perspectives that we have in a comradely dialogue.

I’m not arguing that revolutionary socialists shouldn’t voice disagreements and arguments with people. If we don’t share a vision of working class organizing across identities and experiences, then we might be in disagreement about some fundamental questions regarding oppression, resistance and change. This needs to be acknowledged and discussed.

My argument is simply that we need to recognize that people from marginalized communities who engage with socialist groups are already radicalizing, way before they meet us.

In terms of POC comrades, the socialist left must realize that those who come to our meetings and events are already expressing an interest in multiracial organizing. They/we are already facing censure from “our own” communities for working closely with or within a (white) socialist formation.

The left, in this period of working class fightback and rising white supremacy, must — at minimum — do everything we can to reduce the barriers between such POC comrades and socialist organization.

Only then can we even start to think about the layers and layers of POC and specifically Black leadership that would be necessary to imagine a workers’ revolution in the U.S.

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