

**RACE AND ETHNICITY** **THE LEFT** **THAT'S DEBATABLE**

# What Is the Left Without Identity Politics?

*Four writers consider the question dividing the Democratic Party.*

By Walter Benn Michaels, Charles W. Mills, Linda Hirshman and Carla Murphy

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Black Lives Matter activists, including Marissa Johnson (holding microphone), prevent Bernie Sanders from speaking at Westlake Park in Seattle on August 8, 2015. (*Wikimedia Commons*)

In the wake of last month's shocking defeat, the Democratic Party, and the left more generally, is engaged in a new round of collective soul-searching into what went so devastatingly wrong. Some, like Mark Lilla in *The New York*

*Times*, argue that American liberals have overly focused on racial, gender, and sexual identity, thus renouncing a more universal appeal. Others, like *Nation* columnist Laila Lalami (also writing for the *Times*), say the election cannot be explained without understanding whiteness itself as an identity politics. And many have made the case that pursuing economic justice is wholly compatible with other movements.

We asked four contributors to weigh in on this debate. Is the left too focused on “identity politics”—and what the hell does that term even mean? Their responses follow.

*Richard Kreitner*

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## **WALTER BENN MICHAELS**

### *A UNIVERSE OF EXPLOITATION*

The defensible heart of identity politics is its commitment to opposing forms of discrimination like racism, sexism, and homophobia. I share that commitment. But opposing discrimination today has no more to do with a left politics than do equally powerful ethical commitments against, say, violence or dishonesty. Why? Because the core of a left politics is its critique of and resistance to capitalism—its commitment to decommodifying education, health care, and housing, and creating a more economically equal society. Neither hostility to discrimination nor the accompanying enthusiasm for diversity makes the slightest contribution to accomplishing any of those goals. Just the opposite, in fact.

They function instead to provide inequality with a meritocratic justification: If everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed, there's no injustice when some people fail.

This is why Adolph Reed and I have been arguing that identity politics is not an alternative to class politics but a form of it: It's the politics of an upper class that has no problem with seeing people being left behind as long as they haven't been left behind because of their race or sex. That's why elite institutions like universities make an effort to recruit black people as well as white into the ruling class. They're seeking to legitimate the class structure, not abolish it. Of course, if we're going to accept a ruling class, one that's open to people other than straight white men is preferable. But shouldn't the left be more committed to doing something for the vast majority of people of all races, genders, and sexual orientations who will never belong to that class? We've never thought the fact that a few white people get to become rich was a victory for poor white people, so why should substituting in a few black people change the equation?

It's not racism that creates the difference between classes; it's capitalism. And it's not anti-racism that can combat the difference; it's socialism. We're frequently told that black poverty is worse than white poverty—more isolating, more concentrated—and maybe that's true. But why, politically, should it matter? You don't build the left by figuring out which victim has been most victimized; you build it by organizing all the victims. When it comes to the value of universal health care, for example, we don't need to worry for a second about whether the black descendants of slaves

are worse off than the white descendants of coal miners. The goal is not to make sure that black people are no sicker than white people; it's to make everybody healthy. That's why they call it universal.

Discrimination is neoliberalism's theory of inequality. Even poor whites have started to buy it—a large number appear to think anti-white bias is their real problem! Obviously, they're wrong, but when, as Barbara and Karen Fields point out, the language of victimization has become so impoverished that it consists of nothing but discrimination, you go with what you've got. A new left politics will need to change that. Instead of a more complicated understanding of identity—of race, sex, and intersectionality (that opiate of the professional managerial class)—we need a more profound understanding of exploitation.

## **CHARLES W. MILLS**

### *WHOSE IDENTITY POLITICS?*

The causes of Donald Trump's stunning electoral victory will be debated for years: FBI director James Comey's October 28 letter about Clinton's e-mails, her "basket of deplorables" comment, the Democratic campaign's neglect of the Rust Belt states, and so on. But the pernicious and enduring role of identity politics was crucial.

I refer, of course, to the white racial identity politics that has shaped the United States from its birth.

Needless to say, this is neither the standard narrative nor the usual framing. For the orthodox white left, now claiming a cheerless we-told-you-so vindication, identity politics is *their*

politics—particularistic, pandering to special interests, balkanizing; *ours*, of course, are supposedly very different—universalist, general-interest, unifying. Not “recognition,” but redistribution; not “identity” but material inequality; not “race,” but class. The proletariat, Karl Marx informs us, is the universal class, subject to no racial or gendered categorizations, whose emancipation is going to free everybody. In a somewhat diluted non-revolutionary form (social-democratic redistributivist capitalism), this vision still informs white mainstream left-liberal thought today.

But if it was wrong even in Marx’s time and Marx’s world, it is even more mistaken in the United States of the 21st century. American capitalism (white-supremacist from the start) created heterogeneous structures of subordination that had different effects on white workers than on black and brown workers. White working-class identity politics—even as a junior shareholder in the overarching system of white supremacy—would pay off for its subscribers in multiple ways: not just in terms of greater political input and civic/social recognition than their non-white counterparts, but also in the form of material access to better jobs, better (segregated) neighborhoods, a better education for their children, and far greater wealth (through racially discriminatory mortgages and state transfer payments, the racialized implementation of the GI Bill, and so forth). The so-called identity politics of people of color has always been reactive, recognizing whiteness as an illicit set of entitlements to these political and economic advantages.

Doesn’t the white working class have legitimate grievances? Of course it does. But these must be separated from illegitimate grievances about diminished white privilege,

both identitarian and economic. After all, the non-white poor and working class are hurting worse, and (for the most part) they didn't vote for Trump. Achieving a genuine universalism responsive to the interests of both the white and the non-white disadvantaged will require an admission of whites' differential historic positioning in the political economy, and how the prism of race has always refracted their perception of their group interests. As plutocracy and the New Gilded Age of inequality consolidate themselves, the white left needs to ask itself whose identity politics brought us to this point in the first place.

## **LINDA HIRSHMAN**

### *EXPANDING THE CIRCLE*

The call for the left to abandon its appeals to not-white-men violates the very premises of the American project. The Declaration of Independence describes a world in which “all men are created equal,” where “they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” and that “to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” Even the slaveholders' Constitution prefaced its enterprise with the purpose of “secur[ing] the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” At the hearings for her confirmation to the Supreme Court in 1993, Ruth Bader Ginsburg stated it precisely. The American project started with white men's freedom and equality, and has been, for more than two centuries, all about expanding the circle to include more and more people in that blessed plot. It has almost always been the left that forces such expansions.

One argument for disregarding identity politics seems to be that it would free the left to focus solely on reducing economic inequality. But in the United States, where so many issues are entangled with race, such a turn to the material would still have a powerful racial element. (That explains at least in part why confronting inequality has been so much harder to do here than in the mostly white states of Western Europe.) The future of identity politics, and thus the moral and political mission of the left, is predicated on its capacity to organize people who are not white men.

The right question, then, is not whether to keep faith with identity politics but how. Despite the white-male naysayers, multiracial organizing can be done. It just takes old-fashioned face-to-face, labor-intensive organizing. Here are three rules to follow: One, take the moral high ground. Two, keep your eye on the interest you represent. Three, have weekly meetings.

There are positive examples of such organizing even in these dark times. An Arizona group called People United for Justice defeated the awful Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, an icon of the anti-immigrant white male establishment. “This is about community organizing rather than electoral campaigning,” said Viridiana Hernandez, the leader of People United who sent out organizers to have thousands of kitchen-table conversations. The progressive community in North Carolina deserves a lot of credit for unseating Pat McCrory, the anti-trans governor. How did they do it? Moral Mondays took the moral high ground. They met every week. They focused on their interest, which happened to be reining in the newly empowered Republican

state government. They didn't win it all, for sure. But on December 6, McCrory conceded the state house to his Democratic opponent.

Why write "The End" on the American project now? It's inconceivable to envision an American left worthy of the name if it chose to do without identity politics.

## **CARLA MURPHY**

### ***BEYOND THE DISTRACTION***

These past weeks the dominant post-election debate among liberals and progressives has centered on "identity politics." The term is a Rorschach test. Everyone sees something different depending on their cynicism towards diversity or experience with Others. More telling than its highly subjective content, however, is its origins. "Identity politics" is an internal argument by and for the white academic-media-donor-managerial class, about how *they* incorporate people of color into *their* institutions. I've heard this cultural squabble every year since I was a black kid at prep school and Charles Murray and Richard Hernstein published *The Bell Curve*. It imagines people of color as problems for white people to solve. I am profoundly uninterested in legitimizing such a discussion.

Toni Morrison helped me to resist debates about—not *with*—me. Her literature mines the lives of working-class people, and quite a long time ago she said that "the very serious function of racism...is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work." It keeps you in what she called "a prison of always reacting to racism." The recent identity-politics debate is an invitation to enter such a prison. Enough. An



autocrat with poor impulse control is heading to the White House. Wages and job security have fallen while news outlets tout recovery from the recession, random mass shootings have become our norm, police officers escape justice even when their crimes are videotaped. I could go on. Seriously—enough.

When I think of what's next for progressives and liberals, getting a Democrat elected president doesn't motivate me. What does is concern for what will happen to poor and working-class people of color should a major crisis occur under Trump. What horrors will Americans justify then in the name of security? But what also motivates me is faith that common interest binds the American working class more thoroughly than race-based residential segregation divides us. We need to tell that story more consistently and more engagingly than we have up to now.

Here's what we need to do: Promote leaders from within the working class who value inclusion and who will address racial, geographic, and cultural divides within it. Accept that working on the progressive project requires the low but reachable standard of common interest, not the higher bar of absolute purification. Step up the fight for wage increases for the working poor. And finally, as one organizer of low-income women told me, become self-reflective about axes of power. Battling micro-aggressions is important. But, as she notes, the prefix "micro" is there for a reason. The aggressions we really need to aim our firepower at—those that destroy women's lives and livelihoods—are macro. ●

**62 COMMENTS**

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