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Trump in the Age of Identity Politics

By Joshua Sperber
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When I think of the liberal response to the election of Donald Trump I'm reminded of, as much as anything else, accounts of the shock and trauma that Germans experienced at the end of the First World War. Ordinary Germans were so inundated with years of wartime propaganda asserting that Germany had been winning the war that the belated realization that it had in fact lost – and would, moreover, be held entirely responsible for the war – shocked and disoriented Germans and helped lead to the notorious “Knife in the Back” conspiracy that held that the German military was defeated not on the battlefield but by treacherous domestic forces. While nobody is blaming the Jews for Hillary Clinton's loss, bewildered liberals have nonetheless lashed out against leftists, Russians, the FBI, and, most recently, political correctness or identity politics itself.

Notably, liberals who are now advocating eschewing identity politics are doing so for the very same reason that they originally adopted them: to advance the interests of the Democratic Party. Accordingly, the liberal critique, recently articulated by Mark Lilla, is a flailing and self-incriminating exercise that more than anything else betrays the national and racial chauvinisms of liberal ideology, chauvinisms that have periodically laid dormant, until now, for the sake of political expediency. As Katherine Franke notes, “Lilla's op-ed makes an argument for the commonalities between Americans, arguing that we have to move on to a ‘post-identity liberalism,’ refocusing our attention away from identities to broader, more abstract ideas of ‘citizenship.’”

Such an effort to manufacture a “post-identity liberalism” within the parameters of the contemporary capitalist nation-state of course will not – and cannot – transcend identity politics and will on the contrary only reproduce them in more pernicious forms; obliterating recognition of the social and economic disparities that are continually reproduced by the capitalist state, such “post-identity liberalism” can only default onto the white, male, “American” norm that is historically defined via the subordination of everyone else.

Significantly, Lilla’s prescription for national unification is precisely what Trump has promised to do: to “Make America One Again” (or, as Newt Gingrich has declared, “I am for the 100 percent”), begging the question of what such oneness consists of and what – and who – must be erased or forced to conform in order to achieve it (it’s notable that other hierarchical and violent institutions, such as corporations, also profess their undoubtedly sincere desires to create unified communities, binding bosses and workers into a “common good” that mystifies the fact that the aggrandizement of the former occurs primarily through the exploitation of the latter).

While the Lillian critique of political correctness is, as Franke notes, nationalistic and white supremacist, the counterargument – in which “talking about identity, or better yet status-based power, does not preclude discussions of class, war, the economy or the common good” – nonetheless minimizes the historic origins of identity politics and their unique suitability to pluralistic class society. In the hands of the Democratic Party identity politics have become a valuable tool precisely because of the systemic material restrictions on economic policies that, since the 1970s, have replaced postwar Keynesianism with a growing consensus geared toward regenerating growth via the accelerated impoverishment of workers.

Notably, this economic transformation has been a bipartisan and international affair, indicating that “neoliberalism” is hardly a matter of culture, ideology, or misguided political strategy, and that it cannot be simply willed away by the “good” politicians. It was due to the evolving demands of global capitalism, not caprice, that socialists such as Francois Mitterrand announced that “The French are starting to understand that it is business that creates wealth, determines our standard of living and establishes our place in the global rankings”; Labor Prime Minister James Callaghan “glumly explained to his colleagues, ‘We used to think that you could just spend your way out of a recession...I tell you, in all candour, that that option no longer exists’”; and Bill Clinton declared, “the era of big government is over.” Those melancholically fixated on the lost possibilities of a Bernie Sanders presidency need only look at the recent election of Syriza – in which an explicitly anti-austerity party became the latest enforcers of austerity – to see the limits of economic reformism within the current stage of capitalism.

Needing something, anything, to offer voters in an era shaped by a glutted global economy in which “practical” solutions entail privatization, deregulation, and reduced taxation, the Democratic Party institutionalized identity politics. Converting the liberatory and universal potential of the radical politics of Black liberation and feminism into an electoral strategy, the Democrats instrumentalized identity politics, propagating a liberal criticism of racism in which the problem is not that racism provides an intellectually bankrupt explanation of social reality but that it is offensive. Democrats perforce relied on this subjective, rather than on an objective, critique of racism, since an acknowledgement of the utter fallaciousness of racism would bring

into question not merely the identity of the system's losers but the very fact that the system requires losers in the first place.

The seed of the anti-pc backlash sown within it, it was only a matter of time until so-called white nationalists appropriated the language of identity for themselves. Seeing that they too can be losers, white nationalists mistake themselves for one among many Others (rather than the antithesis of all Others), concluding that they are struggling because of race rather than in spite of it. Their simultaneous identification with the state leads them to internalize its pluralistic façade, as they obsess over the critics of the racist and sexist effects of an alienating and exploitative system rather than over that system itself.

The climax of the Democrats' encounter with identity politics occurred with the 2008 election. Confronting an angry electorate disgusted with George W. Bush and open to alternative political solutions amid an imploding economy, the Democrats provided voters with the unprecedented electoral choice of an African-American man or a white woman who were nonetheless both committed centrists, ensuring that his race and her gender would not intrude upon the demands of capital. Indeed, any discussion of Obama's legacy ought to begin by noting that Obama, equipped with a mandate for change following eight years of George W. Bush's expansion of the executive office, consolidated and further augmented presidential power by enhancing surveillance, persecuting whistle blowers, composing kill lists, increasing drone warfare, and otherwise ensuring that Bush's state of emergency would be made permanent.

Another significant aspect of 2008 was not only that the first African-American president had been elected but that some white conservatives, including racists, voted for him. David Roediger and Kathryn Robinson have recently shown that historically racist white towns in Wisconsin – so-called “Sundown Towns” – in fact voted far more heavily for Obama in 2008 than for Clinton in 2016. This and other evidence suggest that most white voters are not fixedly opposed to identity politics per se – and are willing to accept them if they are perceived to be aligned with a promise of greater “change” – but turn against them once they see that they are ultimately attached to an overall strategy of governance that does nothing to meaningfully reduce their suffering and, on the contrary, often exacerbates it. Precarious and visible, identity politics become the fall guy, tainted as “elite” not because of their content as such but because of a cynical Democratic messenger that is transparently committed to pursuing power for its own sake. That is, the racist, sexist, homophobic backlash against identity politics is the price that the Democratic Party is willing to pay for its refusal to either meaningfully challenge the predations of capitalism or resign from politics.

To be sure, there are constraints on Trump too. His rhetoric on trade and China is the expression of the naïve economic nationalism of someone who has only encountered the demands of the global economy from the perspective of a myopic businessman rather than a state. Amid the enduring decline in global growth, it is unlikely that Trump will pursue an unwinnable trade war with China notwithstanding Mike Pence's new understanding that “The free market has been sorting it out, and America's been losing.” It is similarly unlikely that Trump will seek to deport 11 million migrant workers. What he will almost certainly do, and what is wholly consistent with both the racist zeitgeist and the material needs of the state, is to further empower what Nicholas De Genova has described as the US “deportation regime,” intensifying the political and social

precarity, and thereby exploitability, of undocumented workers not by deporting them all but by ensuring that they all exist in a heightened state of “deportability.”

Whereas undocumented migrants and Muslims are on the frontlines of Trump’s threatened attacks, Trump’s recent suggestion of stripping flag-burners of their citizenship reveals the growing vulnerability of everyone. Seeking to reduce critics to the legal status of enemy combatants, Trump resembles Putin only insofar as they both exemplify an executive whose power and aggressiveness are proportionate to the demands of the unending crisis in global capitalism. Representing the logic of not only US history but also the contemporary global system, Trump promises a furious assault on labor nevertheless delivered, first and foremost, in racialized form.

It is then not only that liberals have failed to meaningfully ameliorate the intensifying misery of a capitalist global system in crisis; they have actively provided authoritarians like Trump with the material capabilities and ideological justifications to increase that misery.