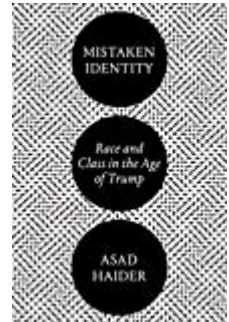


Asad Haider. *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump.* Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2018. 144 pp. \$17.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-78663-737-6.



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Words and categories are the tools we use to survey ... the terrain of ... past activism; they are our beacons, which can blind as well as illuminate. —Nancy F. Cott

1. Illuminating the Path of Resistance

Although scholars who study post-1960s efforts to revive socialism in the United States are probably not the primary audience that Asad Haider imagines for his first book, it is they who will profit most from a close reading of this ambitious but brief volume. When approached as a published primary source, it will prove invaluable as a record of the ideas of participants in one twenty-first-century revitalization project. These readers will encounter an author who has pursued radical activism of various sorts since his teens, when he was inspired by Black Panther party founder Huey Newton's socialist reinterpretation of the American tradition of popular sovereignty as "the people in power" (p. 14).[1] Today, Haider numbers among the founders of the self-described "militant research collective" that

publishes [Viewpoint Magazine](#). He is also a PhD candidate at the prestigious History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The "Resistance" that has coalesced in response to President Donald Trump's brazenly authoritarian, racist, and sexist conduct is one of the movements likely to serve as the formative activist experience for many of the dedicated activists who may eventually create a disciplined, enduring, socialist mass movement. Haider sees it as necessary to warn these future comrades that the identity politics that today appears to be genuine radicalism is actually a cleverly disguised liberal opportunism.

Mistaken Identity offers guidance on how to spot such opportunism and how to apply materialist method in order to avoid unconsciously replicating its thinking in one's own political activity. In the process of offering that advice, Haider draws extensively on scholarship and addresses an audience that certainly includes many scholars. But this first book is not an attempt to expand the academic literature on recent social

movements, rendered in the deliberative idiom of scholarship. Rather, Haider has hastened into print something more akin to a position paper and primer on existing socialist knowledge about identity politics for a new generation of activists. He warns the nascent Resistance that the form of identity politics that they will inevitably encounter in today's political culture bears only superficial connection to the "emancipatory legacy" bequeathed to posterity by African American revolutionaries of the 1970s. He informs readers that those seemingly long-ago revolutionaries (though not they alone) still stand "at the apex of thinking on the concept of race" (p. 12). Among their bequests was the generic term *identity politics*, invented by the African American—and in equal measure lesbian, feminist, and socialist—Combahee River Collective. Haider argues that the popularized identity politics of today functions, contrary to Combahee's intentions, as an ideology in the Marxist sense—a beguiling obfuscation of social reality that channels potentially revolutionary popular discontent into elite-controlled liberal party politics. This liberal cooptation of the Resistance aims to narrow the popular vision of political possibility to winning the (mostly rhetorical) assimilation of people of color and other proletarians into that ill-defined entity, the middle class. Today's identity politics, says Haider, while still associated in popular consciousness with the militant antiracism of Black Power, in fact promotes "the *neutralization* of [radical] movements against racial oppression" (p. 12; emphasis in original). How should Resisters avoid the pitfalls of this subtle, pernicious, and now pervasive form of social control?

Unlike some on the left, Haider explicitly recommends neither a wholesale rejection of identity politics (which would efface Combahee's legacy) nor a dogmatic reprise of Combahee's thought and practice (which would, presumably, ignore Marx's advice against "historic conjurations of the dead past").^[2] Instead, he counsels Resisters to subject today's abstract liberal ideology of race,

and its program of rhetorically inclusive identity politics, to "a materialist mode of investigation" that "mov[es] through all the historical specificities and material relations that have put [that liberal ideology] in our heads" (p. 11). Today's primary contradiction is that arising between the emancipatory legacy of popular militancy and the long, tragic history of American race relations and class struggle, the most recent chapter of which features the New Right's neoliberal, post-New Deal program of "capitalist restructuring and ... decomposition of the working class and its political institutions," imposed during the global economic crisis of the 1970s and beyond (p. 79). This restructuring included the absorption of African American elites into the structure of liberal-capitalist party politics. Much of *Mistaken Identity* is taken up with presenting a synthetic historical account of the emergence of this contradiction, an account intended not only to explain to Resisters the degenerate state of today's identity politics but as well to model the kind of dialectical analysis that Resisters-turned-socialists can use to design the "program, strategy, and tactics" (p. 114) appropriate for a revitalized, militant mass movement. Together, the critique of present-day identity politics and this sketch of recent political economy form Haider's intertwined main narratives.

2. *Theorizing the Neoliberal Terrain*

After an introduction that foreshadows these themes, Haider presents a critique of liberal identity politics drawn primarily from the work of philosopher Judith Butler and political scientist Wendy Brown. He prepares readers for this discussion by first focusing on the circumstances that prompted Combahee's coinage of *identity politics* in the mid-1970s. Quoting from the Collective's famous manifesto, he argues that their praxis of building wide-ranging coalitions among activists in the Boston area derived from their insight that "the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (p. 7).^[3] They thereby, says Haider, rejected the class reductionism endemic to the En-

gelsian form of Marxism that circulated widely within the then-massive American social-movement sector.

Class reductionism is not a term that Haider defines explicitly for nonspecialist readers. He drops the term into his discussion at the beginning of the first chapter (at p. 6), and it appears sporadically in later discussions. But this is a very weak signal to readers that, in fact, the concept illuminates Combahee's significance in the recent history of socialism. That this is the case becomes much clearer in an essay by Haider's *Viewpoint* colleague, Salar Mohandesi. The latter explains that the term refers to the then-current, ethnocentric habit among socialists of deducing the oppressions of women and people of color around the world from the experiences of the generically white, male industrial worker situated at the metropolitan center of the world capitalist economy. Combahee's theoretical innovation consisted in recentering analysis, in their own words, on "the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers" (p. 7).[4]

Haider then contrasts the Combahee example of radical identity politics with the liberal variety that he intends to criticize. He offers as representative an example articulated by Jennifer Palmieri, the communications director of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign of 2016. Palmieri was invited to appear on the Cable News Network in January 2017 to offer commentary on the massive Women's March that took place across the United States on the day after Donald Trump's inauguration. Alas, Haider's quotation of Palmieri is too brief to foreground the elements of her liberal construction of identity politics that distinguish it from Combahee's radicalism. Once again, Mohandesi's "Identity Crisis" clarifies. For Palmieri, the Marchers' repudiation of Trump was grounded in something quite other than a Combahee-style socialist feminism. Haider does show Palmieri arguing that political pundits should not conclude "that the answer to [the March's] big crowds is [to

move public] policy to the left" (p. 10). But what else did Palmieri say?

In "Identity Crisis," we hear her curious insistence that the protesters' choice to attend the March dressed in comfortable, casual clothing be construed as "rejecting" the ladylike consumerism purveyed by the likes of "Nordstrom's and Neiman Marcus." But that rejection did not, for Palmieri, make the Marchers a body united under the sign of the red rose. She claimed that many in the down-dressed crowd derived the "power" (Palmieri's word) to reject consumerist femininity from their recognition of Hillary Clinton as the embodiment of their individualistic aspirations to social mobility within the existing social hierarchy, a mobility that Trump's sexist, racist authoritarianism threatened to choke off. Ventriloquizing the Marchers' viewpoint, Palmieri declared that "Donald Trump doesn't take [us] seriously. Well, [we are] showing [him our] value and ... power" through public protest and electoral loyalty to the Democrats. This, concludes Palmieri, is "like our own version of [the] identity politics o[f] the left"—but "more empowering," presumably because its personal rewards in terms of individual class mobility are potentially great and immediate, while it avoids the risks to the individual's life, limb, and property concomitant with insurrectionary modes of social change that take the French Revolution as their precedent. Haider's (and Mohandesi's) point, of course, is that this liberal logic narrows the scope of the exercise of popular sovereignty to a choice between Democratic-centrist and Republican electoral options—a range of neoliberal choices that minimizes popular participation in politics among citizens who, in actuality, possess the latent collective power to *govern themselves* by reversing the entire political discourse (in that term's Foucauldian sense). In this view, electoral politics on liberal terms is suffocating, not empowering. As Mohandesi declares (and Haider clearly agrees), "identity politics of [Palmieri's] kind is now explicitly wielded by the Democratic party to keep [socialism] at

bay.”[5] Unfortunately, in Haider’s text, that point is not hammered down all the way. *He* knows what he means, but he does not make his meaning explicit for readers who may not find their way to *Viewpoint*.

We should pause for a moment to consider the sources of this disjuncture between Haider’s intention to produce a broadly accessible text and the actual necessity on the part of readers to consult other texts, and to sort through widely scattered passages in Haider’s own text, in order to discern his intended meaning. These are hallmarks of what compositionist Linda Flower calls *writer-based prose*. Such prose, says Flower, is characteristic of a middle stage in every author’s transformation of inchoate understanding into verbalized argument. As we have already seen, Haider’s published text reflects the terms in which he has come to represent *to himself* his recently minted framing of identity politics from a socialist perspective. (On this as a recent preoccupation, see pp. 40-41.) Clearly, this middle stage is critical to the development of Haider’s project. Yet writer-based prose leaves much unarticulated. “In its *structure*,” says Flower, it “reflects the associative, narrative path of the writer’s own confrontation with her subject”; while “in its *language*, it reveals her use of privately loaded terms and shifting but unexpressed contexts for statements.”[6] A further, final stage of revision is necessary in order to communicate the argument to readers who have not experienced the transformation of consciousness that resulted from Haider’s self-immersion in the problem of identity politics. At this final stage, which Flower calls *reader-based prose*, the writer must articulate the heretofore tacit semantics that will bring claims and evidence into meaningful relationship to an uninitiated audience. This requires a restructuring of the author’s habitual self-representation of the problem to *foreground the work that the argument intends to do in the world* instead of recapitulating the author’s idiosyncratic process of discovery. Although some moments in *Mistaken*

Identity rise to this level, it is not a book that consistently achieves the transition to reader-based prose. True, readers already immersed in the flow of contemporary socialist discourse may find the text accessible and illuminating. I suspect, however, that newcomers to that discourse will not. That is why, despite Haider’s sincere intentions of accessibility, I can recommend this work for undergraduate pedagogy only in situations where course structure will bring students to fluency in contemporary socialist discourse. In the absence of such preparation, his writer-based prose exacerbates the risk inherent in any complex text: that from it, readers may take messages contrary to those which the author intended to convey.

Believing that the contrast between Combahee’s radical and Palmieri’s liberal identity politics is now vivid in readers’ minds, Haider offers a model explaining how centers of hegemonic power perpetuate themselves by tailoring individuals’ identity to power’s purposes. He draws on Butler’s and Brown’s reworkings of Michel Foucault’s argument that power is more fundamentally discursive than juridical. In this view, power is less a force external to the individual that limits her agency than the *a priori* productive energy that always already constitutes the individual as well as the state and the private institutions that mediate social relations. Butler, in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), speculates on the psychological characteristics of individuals formed in power’s image, borrowing from Brown’s earlier reformulation of Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment*. For Nietzsche, *ressentiment* was the intense loathing for aristocrats felt by the commoners of the ancient world, the latter being relatively powerless to alter the social conditions within which their self-proclaimed “betters” (my term) exploited their unearned status as beings of superior natural gifts. For Brown—and, in turn, for Butler and Haider—this concept also explains key elements of the power dynamics of modernity, including its historically specific, interlocking hierarchies of gender, race, and class. When the modern subal-

tern becomes aware of herself through the repeated experience of being “called by an injurious name,” says Butler, that subject “comes into social being.” Butler argues that through a largely unconscious process, “because [the subaltern feels] a certain inevitable attachment to [her] existence, because a certain narcissism” indigenous to the subaltern’s psyche “takes hold of any term that confers existence,” she is led “to embrace the terms that injure [her] because they constitute [her] socially. *The self-colonizing trajectory of certain forms of identity politics*”—for Haider, those present-day forms standing in sharp contrast to the discourse-reversing radicalism of Combahee—“*are symptomatic of this paradoxical embrace of the injurious term*” (quoted, p. 63; my emphasis).

Butler’s micropolitics of the individual psyche is the fraternal twin of Wendy Brown’s macropolitics of the citizen and the state in *States of Injury* (1995). “What we have come to call identity politics” in the neoliberal era of state suppression of popular militancy, says Brown, “is partly dependent upon the demise of a critique [both] of capitalism and of bourgeois cultural and economic values.” Under these conditions, “identity politics ... will appear not as a supplement to class politics, not as an expansion of left categories of oppression and emancipation, not as an enriching augmentation of progressive formulations of power and persons—all of which they also are—but as tethered to a formulation of justice that reinscribes a bourgeois (masculinist) ideal as its measure” (quoted, p. 21). Thus, liberal identity politics offers us a form of political agency that recoils from radical change. Haider agrees that today’s Palmieri-style identity politics “locks us into the state, [and] ensures our continued subjection” to the dominant forms of discursive power (pp. 10-11). In contrast, the aim of the genuine radical would be, says Haider, now quoting Butler, to “[refuse] the type of individuality correlated with the disciplinary apparatus of the modern state” (quoted, p. 11)—to uproot the narcissistic identifi-

cation with injurious names, and to ignore the state’s blandishments of, on the one hand, integration of the injured into the bourgeoisie and, on the other, the state’s proffer of legal remedies for injuries inflicted by private parties. In effect, Brown is suggesting that the ostensible protections of the state actually function as a protection *racket*. This argument has been made before,[7] but Brown is rearticulating it in a poststructuralist, antifoundationalist explanatory framework. The state redress of injury, says Haider, has produced only that variety of racial integration of the existing power structure “in which the white cop would be replaced by a black cop” (p. 19), with police and politicians of whatever racial identity continuing to perform the neoliberal task of suppressing radical visions of justice.

Haider offers readers examples of this complex dynamic drawn from his own political experience in chapter 2. In the absence of a materialist analysis of race and class as fundamentally conjoined phenomena, activists at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who had absorbed a denatured form of identity politics via the university curriculum and mass media, adopted a dogmatic, anachronistic racial separatism as their analysis of university-wide tuition increases in November 2014. Rather than connecting the tuition increase to a broad effort by the state to exclude poor people as a multiracial class from continued participation in advanced education—one of the neoliberal state’s disciplinary efforts to incapacitate the entire working class as a political force—they instead argued that the tuition increase expressed a monothematic hostility to people of color, making the unsupported claim that “rising tuition ‘hits students of color the hardest’” (p. 31). From this beginning, the protest movement became increasingly focused on the expression of *ressentiment*. A separatist faction emerged, insisting, by conventions of 1960s protest no longer fitting in an era of neoliberal retrenchment, that people of color should direct the movement and keep it focused entirely on the injuries of race—even if that

meant, Haider points out, extending solidarity to *liberals* of color in the university administration, national politics, and news media. The dogmatic impulse toward separatism divided the protest movement internally and irreparably damaged its capacity to recruit students and faculty in numbers. This same dynamic, he argues, played out again in the local elements of the Black Lives Matter movement—initially a grassroots activism espousing a universalist opposition to both race and class, but quickly factionalized by the dogmatic separatism of activists suspicious of multiracial coalition-building. They enacted the logic of oppression as an injury to be remedied by state action, unconsciously “generalizing the condition of the plaintiff: equating political practice with the demand of restitution” (p. 35). This dynamic appears repeatedly in subsequent chapters, but especially in chapters 3-4, where a Butlerian logic explains why the present-day understanding of white privilege effectively polices movement participants’ choice of vocabulary but builds no genuine solidarity around a program of anticapitalist antiracism.

Chapter 3 also marks the point in the text where Haider begins to elaborate his historical narrative, which treats the social construction of a “white race” beginning in the colonies of British North America. Much of the literature he cites descends from Edmund Morgan’s brilliant study (*American Slavery, American Freedom*, 1975) of how planter elites who, transplanted from a densely populated nation in which land was scarce, devised by trial and (nearly catastrophic) error a stable labor system for a colony in which the critical scarcity was of available labor-power, not acreage. In the wake of Bacon’s Rebellion of 1675, the planter elites implemented a racialized form of transgenerational lifetime servitude grounded in designations of skin color, one discontinuous with European historical practice of slavery for a term of years (for Haider’s synopsis, see pp. 53-56). Proceeding from this historical benchmark, Haider’s task becomes one of demon-

strating that amid the diversity of political analyses circulating among generations of antiracist activists, there developed a legacy—only sometimes explicit—of simultaneous resistance to race and class. It is the carrying forward of that legacy, in the view that Haider shares with many others, by which Americans can rebuild a movement to realize Newton’s vision of “the people in power.” It is precisely that legacy, he argues, which the present-day “ideological” form of identity politics inhibits, because it reproduces the divide-and-conquer dynamic of class division by race.

3. Beacons and Blind Spots: Human Inventiveness and the Defense of Political Traditions

Now that we have drawn together some of the loose threads of Haider’s writer-based prose, his intentions become clear, as do the limitations of the text that stand in the way of his fullest realization of them. What should also become clear is that *Mistaken Identity* is not designed primarily as a vehicle for spelling out the “program, strategy, and tactics” (p. 114) of a revitalized, twenty-first-century American socialism. Rather, its purposes are primarily defensive: to redraw for the benefit of new activists a bright-line boundary that distinguishes the Marxian tradition of radicalism from liberal imposters, and to synthesize and recirculate some of that tradition’s best thinking about the relationship between identity and politics.

Yet, in a synthetic work such as this, the defense of tradition necessarily replicates its blind spots along with its strengths. I have come to believe that identity politics falls into a persistent blind spot in our knowledge about the long twentieth century, one which Marxism shares with other major political, historical, and philosophical perspectives. To paraphrase historian Lawrence Goodwyn, who wrote about a conceptual problem pertaining to an earlier era, we are still, today, “not only culturally confused” about the historical origins of identity politics, but “our confusion makes it difficult for us even to imagine our con-

fusion.”[8] For decades, scholars have persistently attempted to explain identity politics in the terms provided by the established schools of political thought, without considering the possibility that at least some aspects of identity politics may in fact signal the formation of a new political worldview. Understanding of that new worldview requires that we consider it on its own terms before we can discharge our responsibility as scholars and citizens to subject it to a full and fair critique. Amid the vast output of scholarly works whose titles contain the terms *identity* or *identity politics*—too extensive for any one reader to examine—I have encountered only one project that has approached the question of the origins of identity politics in a non-defensive way (although it does not suggest that the phenomenon might be a new political worldview): Linda Nicholson’s *Identity before Identity Politics* (2008).[9]

The impulse to interpret identity politics from the standpoints of established political traditions is understandable, but it tends to suppress awareness that partisans of established traditions are engaged in techniques of boundary maintenance somewhat similar to those employed by the elite natural scientists studied by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (1970). For good reasons, the first impulse of scientists, when confronted by anomalous data, is either to force them into their paradigm’s conceptual boxes, or, failing there, to question the methods used to generate the data. Kuhn might not have been personally disposed to paraphrase Marx in order to explain the interpretive conservatism of scientific thinking. But if he had been, he might have said that when scientists dismiss anomalies, unaware that they contradict their paradigm’s conceptual foundations, the paradigm that has hitherto facilitated deep inquiry becomes their fetters. [10] Only the paradigm-destructive activities of a scientific revolution can clear the ground required for the emergence of a new sense of what the universe is like.

We must recognize, however, that knowledge production among political radicals does not entirely follow the patterns studied by Kuhn, in which elite scientific communities are guided by a single paradigm. Rather, it more nearly resembles what he describes as the “pre-paradigmatic” pattern in which diverse, competing schools of thought following distinct paradigms converge on an area of study. Among pre-paradigmatic communities of knowledge production, partisans must frequently reassert first principles, since they are constantly in competition with rival schools of thought. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, 3d ed. (2007), offers further diagnosis of the problem of blind spots in dialogues originating under such pre-paradigmatic conditions. Pre-paradigmatic schools practice the same types of boundary maintenance visible within the paradigmatic sciences. But there is the additional tendency of deliberations between rival pre-paradigmatic schools to deadlock owing to the at least partial incommensurability of the worldviews each has generated by pursuing independent processes of inquiry. Inquiry moves its partisans centrifugally, with each school or revisionist variant developing its fundamental premises, along with a distinctive idiom by which to (1) relate premises to evidence and (2) attribute meaning to the “topographical” contours of reality that their theories reveal as significant. In the modern world, says MacIntyre, there exists no overarching body of standards by which to adjudicate the rival truth claims arising from such independent processes of inquiry. The result is interminable disagreement among competing schools of thought. “From our rival premises,” he observes, “we can argue back to our rival premises; but when we do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion.”[11] He offers the chronically stalemated discourse on the morality of abortion as one of his primary examples.

Applying the earliest version of MacIntyre's model of disjunct modern inquiry to the case of factionalism among American radical feminists, literary scholar Madeleine Brainerd succinctly characterizes interminable disagreement among radical feminists as "an endless regress of debate over the terms of debate." Facing stalemate, the contending schools continue to assert their rival premises, while each school develops rhetorical strategies allowing it to claim victory "by fiat"—by imposing their own paradigm's truth criteria as if they were precisely the transcendent standard which MacIntyre argues is lacking. They do this by "translating" (Brainerd's term) arguments by rival schools of thought into the unsupportive idiom of their own school, an operation which undermines the integrity and credibility of rivals' thought. Brainerd characterizes this translation strategy as a process of turning the opponents' logic "inside out." [12] In political knowledge production, when the rival schools are contesting the terms by which opposition to the status quo can be considered radical rather than merely reformist, the most effective means of defensive, self-interested translation is to unmask (my term, though not mine alone) opponents' thought systems as replicative of the logic of the oppressive status quo. We have already heard Brown, Butler, and Haider engage in precisely this kind of unmasking. Those whose approaches to identity politics have been turned inside out and unmasked by antifoundationalists generally return the favor—for that is the characteristic pattern of interminable disagreement.

Unmasking suffices to defend the boundaries of a rival radical political worldview when it can produce supporting evidence in some quantity—evidence which, by the standards of the paradigm being defended, supports the claim that opponents are following the very logic of the status quo that they claim to oppose. Given that, according to political scientist Susan Bickford, efforts to create radical democratic social change must, of necessity, "perform the paradoxical task of

achieving egalitarian goals in egalitarian ways in an inegalitarian context," [13] and that activists must carry out this task by undertaking a messy process of trial and error, it should not be surprising that partisans seeking to unmask their rivals will usually be able to find sufficient evidence to confirm their suspicion that their rivals have succumbed to the blandishments of power. Because unmasking is a defensive maneuver, its practitioners often cease their efforts to comprehend their rivals' worldviews once they locate evidence sufficient to maintain their own paradigm's integrity. This results in a form of confirmation bias. Suffering from confirmation bias, opponents often do not persevere until they have, as MacIntyre puts it, "learn[ed] how to think as if [they] were ... convinced adherent[s] of that rival tradition." [14] As a result, the unmasker's defense of paradigm by fiat frequently comes to rest well short of a recognition of the blind spots of her own standpoint.

By drawing on Butler and Brown, Haider has persevered longer than do most leftist unmaskers of identity politics—long enough to locate the Combahee River Collective's determination to syncretize Marxism and identity politics. He is thus in a stronger position than many of his comrades to recognize that at least some kinds of identity politics are not inimical to socialism. As we have already heard Haider, Mohandesi, and Brown say, Combahee's syncretization enriched and supplemented the Marxist politics of class and race, seemingly without disturbing Marxism's foundational assumptions. (The potential for contradictions to emerge within Combahee's syncretization remains unexplored in their formulation, though I will not treat that complex problem here.) Yet, with that enrichment and supplementation safely contained within the conceptual boxes of antifoundationalist analysis, Haider shuts the door on further exploration of identity politics as firmly as those who, before him, have indiscriminately condemned it as a modern variant of the utopian socialism against which Marx and Engels in-

veighed. In an interview occasioned by the publication of *Mistaken Identity*, Haider closed this metaphorical door by claiming that “the Combahee River Collective proposed the term *identity politics* for a very specific context [and] with a very specific goal, and [today] there’s no need to cling to it in an entirely different,” neoliberal “political context,” especially “when it’s been taken up to mean something that’s the opposite of the political agenda they had.” Therefore, it is now anachronistic, in Haider’s view, “to speak about a radical identity politics, and, you know, a moderate identity politics, or something like that. We don’t need the term anymore. What we need is [Combahee’s] legacy ... which is one almost of *disrupting* identities, more than it is about claiming a fixed one.”[15]

This leaves readers of *Mistaken Identity* to infer, first, that because Combahee coined the *term*, we can assume that they invented the radical *practice* as well. Second, it encourages us to infer that, from this perspective, all that remains of identity politics today—besides liberals’ insistence that all inequalities be litigated as injuries to individuals within the juridical-political framework of state power criticized by Brown—is a faux radicalism grounded in what Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1999) unmasks as a “foundationalist frame” that “presumes, fixes, and constrains the very ‘subjects’ [whom] it hopes to represent and liberate” (quoted, p. 12). Certainly, even within the confines of a short text intended for a broad, non-scholarly audience, Haider presents evidence from his own experience and from the historical record that, taken on its face, supports this as a plausible view. The plausibility of this view, in turn, justifies Haider’s historical account of identity politics as a phenomenon that emerged among socialists, in response to the intramovement problem of class reductionism. Locating the historical antecedents of radical identity politics wholly within the legacy of socialist, communist, and African American revolutionary-nationalist antiracism further reinforces the credibility of both

of Haider’s main narratives. But in my view this history is a product of antifoundationalists’ confirmation bias. They have successfully defended their paradigm, but they have left unexplored important dimensions of the history of identity politics.

A more nearly sufficient accounting can emerge only if we apply historical method less as a means to defend existing radical political traditions, choosing instead to explore the inventiveness of humans who sometimes create new worldviews, new political practices, and new vocabulary as they pursue Bickford’s paradoxical task of creating a just society by egalitarian means within a social order that rewards and protects dominance. I hypothesize that identity politics unfolded within the historical context not only of socialist, communist, and Black Power resistance to the compartmentalization of race and class, but also in response to dramatic twentieth-century changes in the scientific understanding of human nature and the scientific enterprise itself. Historian Mike Hawkins, in *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought* (1997) shows that Darwin’s famous theory of evolution by natural selection undermined existing explanations of the place humans occupy in nature. Over succeeding decades, political theorists treated Darwinian theory as a new worldview, one which grounded a range of new political ideologies (in the social scientific sense of that term).

Beyond Hawkins’s frame, but following close on the heels of the Darwinian developments he studies, was the elaboration by anthropologist Franz Boas of a relativistic theory of culture as the central characteristic of the human adaptation to life on earth. The close collaboration between Boas and pragmatist philosopher John Dewey shaped a school of scientific and philosophical thought that, like Darwinism, could be construed by activists and political theorists as a worldview requiring the development of new explanations of politics, power, and inequality. Boas fashioned a

relativistic conception of culture partly in opposition to the scientific racism of late nineteenth-century evolutionary anthropology's social Darwinist explanation of the wide range of cultural variation among humans. Evolutionary anthropologists presumed that the diversity of human cultures had emerged through a process of natural selection. Taking their own North Atlantic lifeways as the pinnacle of "civilization," they interpreted "primitive" adaptations as unsuccessful attempts to achieve a civilized transcendence of nature. They attributed this "failure" to the inferior *biological* adaptive capacity of non-European "races." Boas rejected this line of thought as, in substantive terms, rank ethnocentrism. He countered that the "Western" way of life was only one accumulation of meanings and practices among many equally legitimate adaptations. But he also rejected it on other grounds. Formally trained as a physicist, he nevertheless opposed evolutionary anthropology's misapplication of the methods of the physical sciences to the study of human adaptation, which included meaning-making and its social transmission. The principles guiding the development of human cultural diversity could not be found in the biological composition of the species. Accordingly, he focused anthropological fieldwork on the distinctive material *and symbolic* patterns of meaning and practice in each culture, the development and generational transmission of which occur historically and contingently, not genetically (as in modern sociobiology) nor through the transmission of acquired characteristics (as in earlier understandings of Darwinian evolution).[16] Scientific inquiry could not be reduced to the positivistic search for universal laws derived from the physical makeup of the universe. Historian David A. Hollinger is correct in his assessment that "reflection on the possible implications for 'Western Civilization' of what had been discovered about other cultures ... is what made anthropology in the cultural-relativist mode a major episode in the intellectual history of the twentieth century, rather than simply another

movement within a discipline." [17] It thus makes sense to investigate this major episode as one which, like the Darwinism that emerges from Hawkins's inquiry, may have provided mid-twentieth-century activists and thinkers with a new way of understanding what it means to be human that challenged some of the foundational assumptions of existing political and social theory.

How did Boasian culture theory become a widely available, often taken-for-granted understanding of human nature? The story of how it diffused into American society through multiple circuits of transmission is only partly studied; even so, it is too complex to summarize here. For now, we can say that it captured the imaginations of many Americans without displacing its positivist rivals from their positions of intellectual and popular hegemony.[18] Even less well studied is the process of trial and error by which political activists and social theorists worked out the radical political implications of the culture concept—although doing this was often not their conscious intention. The work of sociologist Wini Breines offers us a window into one moment in that process by which American New Leftists struggled, in the early years of their movement, to articulate a political vision for which neither the rich idioms of liberalism nor those of Marxism were adequate. She astutely identifies an "unresolved tension" at the core of the political practice of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the early 1960s. On the one hand, she points to the influence of long-standing political theorizing about the coalescence of political interest groups, including Marxian materialist theorizing about class conflict, all of which justified for SDS members the instrumentalist "intention, necessitating organization, of achieving power or radical structural change in the United States." On the other hand, she also detects a competing tendency, not named by her sources, which she calls *prefigurative politics*. The latter, born of "a wariness of hierarchy and centralized organization, ... imposed substantial tasks" on radicals, "the central one being to create

and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that ‘pre-figured’ the desired society,” and frequently undermined efforts to unify the movement around a particular program.[19]

As I read it, prefigurative politics derived from an incipient awareness that power is cultural in the Boasian sense, and that it followed that inventing the cultural forms of a new order became an essential dimension of the struggle to displace the old—a theory-in-form that contrasted sharply with the more positivist forms of socialist materialism that gained prominence within the New Left in the late 1960s. For a generation seeking, as Breines puts it, to understand “the hold which advanced capitalism had on people’s consciousness,” culture theory combined with existentialism, psychoanalysis, and media theory to make the New Left *new*. [20] Only once, and tangentially, does Breines connect prefigurative politics to identity politics, partly because that term was not available to SDS members in the early 1960s and appears almost nowhere in her sources. [21] If my reading proves warranted, then the belief that power is cultural as well as material, and that radicals must therefore attend not only to power’s material bases but to the cultural implications of socially constructed identities, is detectable in the historical record more than a decade before Combahee’s coinage of the term, and its antecedents, socialist and otherwise, stretch back to the turn of the twentieth century. Moreover, given the powerful influence of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s elaboration of what historian Charles M. Payne calls the African American organizing tradition on early SDS, I suspect that important elements of identity politics can be found in the interplay between a widely diffused culture concept, organic African American political consciousness, and the socialist and communist antiracist activism that is Haider’s focus. [22] The evidence for such a proposition is widely scattered and, often, subtextual.

The work of supporting such claims will be challenging.

The examples I have presented are interesting, but they are a bare beginning. Broaching the hypothesis necessarily prompts questions I cannot yet answer in detail. For example, what elements of Haider’s Marxist-revisionist ontology does a radical identity politics problematize from a Boasian-pragmatist perspective? At present it is difficult to say, partly because that new tradition has yet to theorize itself in systematic ways. [23] For now, I can only hint at an answer by pointing to George Shulman’s characterization of Marx’s tendency “to reduce symbolic life to a mere ‘reflex’ (distorted or true) of an underlying ‘material’ life, as if the symbolic and material could be separated into a [causal] sequence” from material base to epiphenomenal, cultural superstructure. [24] The Boasian culture concept expands the Marxian base to include its superstructure, joining the endpoints of his causal sequence to form a circuit for current flowing in both directions. Even though Shulman’s critique derives from a different intellectual tradition, a parallel critique of Marxian materialism is evident in the famous claim that “as work is to marxism [sic], sexuality to feminism is socially constructed yet constructing, universal as activity yet historically specific, *jointly comprised of matter and mind*.” [25]

4. *The Mirror, the Gaze, and the Limits of New Beacons*

The satisfactions of seeing the emergence of identity politics as in important ways deriving from the diffusion of the Boasian-pragmatist culture concept as well as from the practice of established radical political traditions probably resemble, to some small degree, those that Copernicus derived from reconceiving the solar system in heliocentric terms. The mid-twentieth century polymath Michael Polanyi (whose political views I do not share) suggests that a “delight in abstract theory” was the reward that Copernicus ultimately derived from overriding the evidence of his sens-

es, that the sun "rises." Polanyi goes on to suggest that that delight is enhanced by the expectation that "our theory may yet show forth its truth ... in ways undreamed of by its authors." [26] Nevertheless, although we may delight in the enrichment of our understanding of identity politics by tracing its origins to an additional important source, we cannot lose sight of how Marxism and other dominant political theories form the predicate for such a scientific revolution—if it is that. Activists like Haider have made a difference in the world by asserting their paradigm fully and frequently. The irony is that over time, that is also the process which brings the paradigm's blind spots to consciousness.

Much is at stake in how we respond to Haider when our eyes adjust to their blinding by that tradition's beacons. If we attempt retribution against him by turning the tables, asserting by fiat our new standard as a transcendent one, we risk forgetting that blind spots are not the same as total blindness. We cannot simply dismiss Haider's experiences of the debilitating effects on movement-making of dogmatic, poorly conceived, or corrupted applications of identitarian theory. And, given the ferocious complexity inherent in Bickford's paradoxical task, and the opportunities for failure and error inherent in that complexity, we are ill-advised to think of Haider's experiences as rare exceptions.

In search of knowledge, we position a mirror, trying to see some part of reality as best we can within the limits of our capacity to observe. [27] Positivists believe that they can, through strenuous efforts at disinterested objectivity, position it at the Archimedean point and capture enduring knowledge of nature. Antifoundationalists over-correct in reaction to positivism, claiming that "knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting." [28] They position their mirror so that what we see is the would-be knower "looking at [her]self looking at [her]self," and from there, exploiting the endless possibilities for per-

formative parody of positivist hubris. [29] To posit culture theory as the distinctive element of a political worldview from which emerged diverse schools of identity politics requires a different placement of our imperfect mirror, a placement which has been partly articulated as a form of philosophical realism in which we try to reflect on ourselves as would-be knowers—but not only that. [30] As well, we try to glimpse a provisionally useful image of the world, the "nature" of which we are an integral part. Haider's predicament, in which by synthesizing his tradition's strengths he unwittingly replicates its blind spots, should remind us that, soon enough, the blind spots in our own imperfect reflection of the world will become our fetters. [31] We can only hope to mitigate that eventuality by remembering that Haider's determination is not only to understand the world, but to change it; and by heeding MacIntyre's counsel to learn as much as we can from those with whom we disagree.

Notes

- [1]. Huey P. Newton, quoted in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Black Panthers Speak*, reprint ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 50.
- [2]. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Daniel De Leon, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1913), 10.
- [3]. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement" (1974); first published in Zillah R. Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 362-72; reprinted in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2000), 268.
- [4]. Combahee, in Smith, ed., *Home Girls*, 264. On *class reductionism*, see Salar Mohandesi, "Identity Crisis," *Viewpoint Magazine*, March 16, 2017, par. [17] (counting all textual breaks as "paragraphs," including block quotations, but excluding section headings).

[5]. Palmieri, quoted in Mohandesi, "Identity Crisis," pars. [10-13].

[6]. Linda Flower, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing" *College English* 41, no. 1 (September 1979): quotations at 19-20.

[7]. Susan Rae Peterson, "Coercion and Rape: The State as Male Protection Racket," in *Feminism and Philosophy*, ed. Mary Vetterling Bragg, Frederick A. Elliston, and Jane English (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), 360-71.

[8]. Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), ix.

[9]. Recently, Marie Moran has offered an interesting critique of scholarship, including Nicholson's *Identity*, arguing from the cultural-materialist perspective of Stuart Hall's colleague in the Birmingham School, Raymond Williams, that the meaning of *identity* in the term *identity politics* is an invention of the mid-twentieth century in the Atlantic world. Moran argues that Nicholson and others have mistaken the lexical continuity of the word *identity* as evidence that recent elaborations of individual and social identity deploy an understanding long in existence, when, from her perspective, this new invention points to an emergent need for new terms to articulate self-understanding after the shift from the nineteenth-century producerism to twentieth-century consumerism. Marie Moran, "Identity and Identity Politics: A Cultural-Materialist History," *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* 26, no. 2 (July 2018): 1-24. Moran's strikes me as an insightful argument, and her cultural-materialist approach is congruent in many aspects with the one I employ here. Yet it underplays the role of the culture concept in the development of conceptions of social identity. This derives in part from the strengths and limitations of Williams's work. His treatment of *culture* as one of the most important of his "keywords" (*Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1983]) brilliantly traces

the complex eighteenth- and nineteenth-century etymological development of the term. In the mid-twentieth century, anthropologists influenced by counter-Progressivism and structural functionalism in the social sciences mistakenly criticized Boas and his culture concept as anti-Darwinian. Unfortunately, Williams developed his ideas about the *culture's* fortunes in the twentieth century before the reappraisal of Boas's significance in the 1990s. See Herbert S. Lewis, "Boas, Darwin, Science, and Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 3 (June 2001): 381-406; and James P. Boggs, "The Culture Concept as Theory, in Context," *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 2 (April 2004): 187-209. (Note that by happenstance, anthropologist James Boggs shares a name with a labor activist cited by Haider; see *Mistaken Identity*, 16.)

[10]. Karl Marx, *Preface and Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1976), 3.

[11]. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 8.

[12]. Madeline Brainerd, "Translation and Politics," *Critical Matrix* 3 (Fall 1987): 66-67.

[13]. Susan Bickford, "Anti-Anti-Identity Politics," *Hypatia* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1997): 111.

[14]. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, xiii.

[15]. [Asad Haider, "The Betrayal of Identity Politics," interview with Katie Halper](#), TYT Network, June 22, 2018; accessed December 9, 2018; quotation at 05:52; emphasis original.

[16]. For a mid-twentieth century assessment of the Boasian culture concept's transformation of scientific understanding of human nature in conjunction with the modern evolutionary synthesis (the integration of Darwinian and genetic theory, along with recent findings in archaeology, paleontology, and evolutionary biology), see Clifford Geertz, "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man," in *New Views on the Nature of Man*, ed. John R. Platt (Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1965), 93-118. On the Dewey-Boas collaboration, see Gabriel Alejandro Torres Colón and Charles A. Hobbs, "The Intertwining of Culture and Nature: Franz Boas, John Dewey, and Deweyan Strands of American Anthropology," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 76, no. 1 (January 2015): 139-62. On Boas's transformation of the concept of social science, see Lewis, "Boas, Darwin." On Boas's culture concept as a scientific theory finding its principles not solely in the behavior of physical matter but also in culturally coded information, see James P. Boggs, "Culture Concept as Theory."

[17]. David A. Hollinger, "Cultural Relativism," chap. 9 in *Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity: Studies in Ethnoracial, Religious, and Professional Affiliation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 170.

[18]. In addition to some of the works listed in the following note, see Joanne Meyerowitz, "'How Common Culture Shapes the Separate Lives': Sexuality, Race, and Mid-Twentieth Century Social Constructionist Thought," *Journal of American History* 96, no. 4 (March 2010): 1057-84; and Hollinger, "Cultural Relativism."

[19]. Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 6.

[20]. Breines, *Community and Organization*, 16.

[21]. Breines, *Community and Organization*, 90, citing Norman Fruchter, "SDS: In and Out of Context," *Liberation*, February 1972, 26.

[22]. See, among other works, Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), chaps. 5-8; Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt and William Shedrick Willis, *Franz Boas and W. E. B. Du Bois at Atlanta University, 1906* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2008); John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Knoxville: University of Tennes-

see Press, 1996); Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Francesca Poletta, "How Participatory Democracy Became White: Culture and Organizational Choice," *Mobilization: An International Journal* 10, no. 2 (June 2005): 271-88; Richard Flacks, "Philosophical and Political Roots of the American New Left," in *The Port Huron Statement: Sources and Legacies of the New Left's Founding Manifesto*, ed. Richard Flacks and Nelson Lichtenstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 224-38. My reference to "organic African-American political consciousness" is an extension of the term *organic intellectualism*, applied but not limited to Ella Baker, key figure in the coalescence of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, by Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[23]. Historian Claire Bond Potter, in her study of one nexus of what she calls "identity-based activism," offers an important clue as to why that is so. Identifying herself as a professional scholar inhibited her access to activist networks comprised of radical feminists "who valued [politically] engaged intellectual labor" over affiliation with an academic feminism that they perceived as driven more by the demand for abstract theory. Claire Bond Potter, "When Radical Feminism Talks Back: Taking an Ethnographic Turn in the Living Past," in *Doing Recent History: On Privacy, Copyright, Video Games, Institutional Review Boards, Activist Scholarship, and History that Talks Back* ed. Claire Bond Potter and Renee C. Romano (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 167-68.

[24]. George Shulman, "Marx's Nightmare: Marxism, Culture, and American Politics," *New Labor Forum* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 24-25.

[25]. Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for

Theory,” *Signs* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1982): 516; emphasis added.

[26]. Michael Polyani, *Personal Knowledge*, corrected ed. [1962], 2; 4.

[27]. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[28]. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D. F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 154.

[29]. Catharine A. MacKinnon, introduction to *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 16.

[30]. For the partly articulated position that identity politics stands on a counter-postmodernist philosophical realism, see Linda Martín Alcoff and Satya P. Mohanty, introduction to Alcoff et al., eds., *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[31]. Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1976), 65.

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