At first sight, *No Politics But Class Politics*, edited by Anton Jäger and Daniel Zamora, seems to be inconspicuous. After all, this is a collection of essays previously published in a scattered way, elsewhere. The essays were authored or co-authored by political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. and literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels, both renowned and original thinkers.[1] Their essays are accompanied by four interviews conducted in 2021, vivid and insightful exchanges between Reed and Michaels on the one side, and Jäger and Zamora on the other side. Still, is it accurate to call this collection “groundbreaking,” as claimed in the blurb on the back of the book? Can publishing essays spanning from 1997 to 2020 be considered a timely project in 2023?

On both counts, I think the answer is yes. Even if Reed and Michaels’s approach is familiar to some observers of current affairs, the fact remains that it is not widely used, either in political and social commentary or in academic research. This volume not only compiles some of their strongest critiques from the angle of class politics, but also serves to highlight the acute relevance of class politics to contemporary issues. It is in this sense that *No Politics But Class Politics* is truly groundbreaking. The book is not just timely, but long overdue. As the editors note, “the arguments that emerged from their collaboration mark out Reed and Michaels not only as two of the sharpest commentators on the contemporary class-race discussion on the American scene, but also as writers with a potentially international reach” (p. 22). Further, “the essays...constitute one of the most sustained and coherent critiques of contemporary anti-racism advanced from the left,” which is especially urgent in a world where the only other alternative to identitarian perspectives comes from the right of the political scene (p. 13).

Reed and Michael, in contrast to neoconservative and right-wing criticisms of identity politics, offer a perspective that neither ignores, dis-
criminates, nor denies the rights of identity-based groups. But they are concerned that anti-discrimination policies in their current form perpetuate rather than fight against these inequalities. Their agenda is to reexamine the ways in which we understand the causes of inequalities in order to combat them effectively. Both in the essays and the interviews, the authors and the editors repeat and elaborate compelling arguments for their agenda. It is worth highlighting a few of them.

First, *No Politics But Class Politics* presents a niche approach to class. In an era where culturalist or descriptive approaches dominate in economics as well as in the humanities and social sciences, the edited volume reminds us that materialist perspective can be prescient and refreshing. Reed and Michaels draw on Marxist perspectives to emphasize that class is determined by what one does, not who one is, and is based in material exploitation. The authors emphasize the difference between class and identity, stating that “owning the means of production does not represent your identity, it constitutes that identity” (p. 129). Class is embedded in relations between people, and does not imply anything about cultural or personal characteristics. In contrast to culturally oriented class analysts and intersectional theorists, Reed and Michaels argue that class is not about discrimination. They are clear that class is about economic exploitation.

For Reed and Michaels, class politics in general is a kind of politics that puts an onus of action on class struggle. Specifically, class politics is a strategy for political action by the working class. Politics should be based on the realities of class exploitation. The reality of discrimination based on race and other ascriptive identities is chilling and outraging, but without first tackling issues of class exploitation, discrimination will never be uprooted. Otherwise, the arena of discrimination shifts between different identity groups. As an example, the incorporation of women into the paid workforce is a positive development for the women who find well-paid employment and diminishes some of the obstacles placed in their way, but it does not address the difficulties of women whose work is confined to the domestic sphere, nor does it address the plight of poorly paid men. Under capitalism, inequalities based on ascriptive identities are fluid: those discriminated against today can be uplifted tomorrow and vice versa, a dynamic that is not possible when viewing the working class as a totality, since “the relation between labor and capital is essentially antagonistic. [However,] you can imagine a [capitalist] world where all the identities get along” (p. 305).

Reed and Michaels focus heavily on the identity politics as a form of class politics conducted by the capitalist class, for example with their corporate diversity projects. Reed and Michaels note the ease with which corporations (and by extension, capitalists in general) have embraced anti-racism and gender equality. The authors are clear and unequivocal that they support the quest for economic equality and all other forms of equality as well. The problem is that the neoliberal embrace of anti-discrimination policies is used to push aside economic inequalities. For Reed and Michaels, class exploitation is foremost because it maintains and exacerbates the inequalities based on ascriptive identities (such as race and gender). While capitalist and middle-class pundits address culturally based inequalities within workplaces and society at large, they are unwilling to do the same with class inequalities. The latter are essential for capitalist accumulation, but racism and gender discrimination are detrimental to it: “Why? Because discrimination is costly to the employer: you have to pay not just for the labor but also for the labor’s skin color or gender, which in a truly competitive market, you can’t afford to do. Hence employers who discriminate—like employers forced by unions to pay expensive benefits and higher wages—are doomed. Indeed, from this standpoint, the problem with discriminatory hiring practices is the same as the problem with unions: they both make labor costs higher, and a company less competitive” (p. 153). Although the politics of diversity
politics are firmly anchored in academic settings, Reed and Michaels do not clearly specify which has influenced the other—the academic focus on ascriptive identities or neoliberal economic and social agendas? But they suggest that these two go hand in hand. Crucially, the popularity of anti-racism politics and programs is neither coincidental, nor innocent. Rather, “anti-racism—anti-discrimination in general—is the beating heart of neoliberal ideology” (p. 255).

The most important contribution of Reed and Michaels is to bring back class in its Marxist sense to the front of social analysis. This might seem unnecessary, given the attention and research about the ever-widening gaps between the 99 percent and the 1 percent and the headlines about billionaires and multimillionaires enriching themselves at a time which might be considered harsh for everyone else. Economic inequalities are pernicious. However, the authors demonstrate that delineating class from culturalist interpretations is essential for understanding inequalities in general. Their arguments are convincing when one realizes that—with the exception of patchy, means-tested, and mostly inadequate welfare programs—class inequalities are rarely tackled. At the same time, anti-discrimination programs, based on ascriptive identities, flourish. While race and gender inequalities are met with outrage, class inequalities have become normalized and naturalized. Reed and Michaels's thesis is clear: the struggle against class inequalities is essential to the struggle against racism, gender, and other identity-based forms of discrimination, but to combat the latter, one must start by combating material, class inequalities.

No Politics But Class Politics is a bold volume that questions existing dogmas within contemporary social analysis. Even those who disagree with the book's main arguments may find much to think about. That said, the volume could have been made easier for readers if the editors had explained more commentary in the footnotes. Nevertheless, No Politics But Class Politics is essential reading for academics, students, politicians, activists, and everyone who is concerned with the most pressing social pathologies of our time, that is, those produced by the capitalist system.

Note

[1]. One essay is coauthored by Merlin Chowkwanyun, another by Daniel Zamora.