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# Intersectionalism, the highest stage of western Stalinism?

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# Intersectionalism, the highest stage of western Stalinism?

Mike Macnair

*This article argues that ‘intersectionality’ is at the end of the day derived from the People’s Front policy of the 1930s Comintern, as modified by late 1960s–1970s ‘soft Maoism’, and then adopted in the late 1970s–1980s by the political representatives of US capital as an ideological colouration for the growth of economic inequality under financialisation. In the result, the project is self-defeating, giving way to ‘white identity politics’ and similar formations.*

*Keywords: Intersectionality; Class; Feminism; Race; Stalinism*

## Introduction

Oxford University in 2017 started to offer a rainbow lanyard with which members of staff and students can carry their university identity cards – a useful device since an increasing number of university and college buildings are now covered by security devices which require you to tap your university card in order to get in. The rainbow symbol, derived from Jesse Jackson’s 1984 ‘Rainbow Coalition’, has become a symbol used particularly by the ‘LGBT+’ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans\*, etc.) movement, but also more generally in its original ‘broad diversity coalition’ significance.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that some sort of lanyard is desirable shows that the university is moving towards being a closed ‘gated community’ controlled by identity cards. It is not coincidental that this increased security paranoia coincides with the circumstance that Oxford has great difficulty in meeting its OFFA targets for recruiting ‘disadvantaged’

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford University: University of Oxford Equality and Diversity Newsletter Michaelmas term 2017, [http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/media/global/wwwadminoxacuk/localsites/equalityanddiversity/documents/newsletter/Equality\\_&\\_Diversity\\_Newsletter\\_mic17\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/media/global/wwwadminoxacuk/localsites/equalityanddiversity/documents/newsletter/Equality_&_Diversity_Newsletter_mic17_WEB.pdf); and cf. also the figures, ‘spun’ as far as possible in favour of the university, in the annual Admissions Report, <https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/Oxford%202018%20Annual%20Admissions%20Report.pdf>. Rainbow Coalition: on the Jackson movement, see Adolph Reed Jr., *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986); Jakobi E. Williams argued in *Tikkun* that the idea was actually initiated by the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party, <https://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/the-original-rainbow-coalition-an-example-of-universal-identity-politics>.

students – a formula which in itself downplays the extent to which privately educated students, i.e. the very well-off, are *over-represented* in Oxford (and Cambridge) admissions.<sup>2</sup> Card access to buildings can also be used to track the movement of staff and students, an idea sold as promoting control of ‘computer misuse’, i.e. as an instrument of surveillance intensification. The rainbow lanyard *colours* this movement of an elite institution into closure and surveillance with the imagery of anti-discrimination.

This Oxford development is a trivial symptom of a much larger trend: that ‘intersectionality’ and ‘anti-discrimination’ have become watchwords of *the political representatives of the ruling class*, for use against the left. The attention of the left has been (or should have been) drawn to this phenomenon by two recent and ongoing political phenomena. In the USA, the Clintonista wing of the Democratic Party race-baited and gender-baited the Sanders movement in the 2016 presidential primary campaign (and has continued to do so since).<sup>3</sup> In Britain, the victory of Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour leadership campaign in 2015 led quickly to accusations that the left was poisoned by ‘sexism’ among leftists hostile to women MPs from the Labour right,<sup>4</sup> and then to an escalating orchestrated campaign accusing first various leftists, and then more recently Corbyn himself, of ‘antisemitism’ and thus of ‘racism’.<sup>5</sup>

The left has been so deeply committed to ‘intersectionalist’ approaches for so long (though the widespread use of the *terminology* is relatively recent) that it has been to a considerable extent ‘wrong-footed’ by these accusations. Moreover, endeavours to find alternatives to liberal anti-left intersectionalism have been trapped within the foundational assumptions of what became ‘intersectionalism’.

My argument in this article is that ‘intersectionalism’ is essentially founded on the ‘people’s front’ concepts of the Seventh Congress of the Comintern; and on theorisations of the 1921 ban on factions in the Russian Communist Party which interpreted all organised disagreement as representing class (or other) interest conflicts. Anti-factionalism, implying that there could be no unity without silencing criticism, was indirectly reflected in Georgi Dimitrov’s offer at the Seventh Congress that the

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<sup>2</sup> ‘[O]f the four specific targets Oxford set itself in 2012 in its access agreement with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), only one (on disability) has been met consistently’, Report of the ADEX Working Group on Access Targets, May 2018, [https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/media/global/wwwadminoxacuk/localsites/aad/documents/Report\\_of\\_the\\_Adex\\_Working\\_Group\\_on\\_Access\\_Targets.pdf](https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/media/global/wwwadminoxacuk/localsites/aad/documents/Report_of_the_Adex_Working_Group_on_Access_Targets.pdf) (consulted September 17, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Most clearly documented by Adolph Reed Jr. in ‘Black Politics After 2016’, *Nonsite* issue #23, 11 February 2018, <https://nonsite.org/article/black-politics-after-2016>.

<sup>4</sup> Sexism: e.g. Jess Phillips, ‘Why I Won’t Shut Up About Misogyny and the Left’, *Guardian*, 7 January 2016; Suzanne Moore, ‘Men on the Left Are Sexist. Labour Needs to Do More to Fix It’, *Guardian*, 14 August 2017; Sarah Ditum, ‘Women Should Say Goodbye to a Sexist Left’, *The New European*, 1 June 2018.

<sup>5</sup> There is too much material for convenient citation. A summary narrative from a pro-Palestinian perspective, Jonathan Cook, ‘Anti-Semitism. Orchestrated Offensive Against Jeremy Corbyn in the UK’, *Orient XXI*, 8 May 2018, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/anti-semitism-orchestrated-offensive-against-jeremy-corbyn-in-the-uk,2446>; a recent extreme example, ‘Chuka Umunna Says Labour is Institutionally Racist’, *Observer*, 9 September 2018.

Communist Parties would self-censor their criticisms of Socialist (and liberal) allies for the sake of unity against the fascists; a policy which became generalised in ‘official communism’.

On these foundations were overlaid ideas of the exclusive authority of personal experience, derived from 1960s–1970s US leftists’ interpretations of the Chinese Communist Party’s ‘speaking bitterness’ technique in its land reform campaigns.

Intersectionalism can be called the ‘highest stage’ of western Stalinism because it carries the popular-frontist project to the point of erasing the significance of the *ruling* class as a class; it also becomes a justification not merely for *party* self-censorship, but for *generalised* censorship regimes in the names of ‘no platforming’, ‘safe spaces’, and so on; and it logically implies the actual liquidation of any independent workers’ or communist party into liberalism (as happened in Britain and Italy in the 1990s); so that by fully adopting intersectionalism, Stalinism disappears as such into a (more repressive) form of liberalism.

The underlying commitments to alliance with the ‘democratic bourgeoisie’ (meaning pro-capitalist liberals), on Dimitrov (self-censorship) terms, produce in political practice the ability of right wing populists to portray the *left* as an elite project. Vote Clinton, get Trump; and so, *mutatis mutandis*, globally. The result is to get *actual* racists and sexists in power, so that the ‘intersectionalist’ project is self-defeating *on its own terms* (of prioritising gender, race, etc., over class).

There is an enormous literature on ‘intersectionality’ and on what lies behind the term, that is, theories of the relations between gender and class and race and class (to go no wider) in politics and social struggles. I will not address the vast bulk of this literature here; I am concerned *merely* to show the Stalinist foundational assumptions of ‘intersectionalist’ politics – and hence that it is impossible to oppose effectively the liberals’ use of intersectionalism as a stick with which to beat the left, without *also* breaking with these assumptions.

### Crenshaw’s intersectionality

The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined by black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. Born 1959, Crenshaw is just a little too young to have been an active participant in the left wing feminist and/ or black movements of the late 1960s and early- to mid-1970s. She is in her higher education a child of the opening up of the elite universities in the 1960s–1970s: she got her BA in Africana and Government at Cornell in 1981, JD (law degree) at Harvard in 1984, and LLM (postgraduate law degree) at Wisconsin in 1985, clerked for a senior Wisconsin judge, and got her first teaching job at University of California Los Angeles in 1986.<sup>6</sup>

The more widely cited of Crenshaw’s early articles is her 1991 ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of

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<sup>6</sup> Convenient summary of the biographical information at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kimberl%C3%A9\\_Williams\\_Crenshaw](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kimberl%C3%A9_Williams_Crenshaw).

Color,'<sup>7</sup> probably more widely cited because the issue of violence against women had become so central to radical feminism in the 1980s (as contrasted with the 'economic' concerns of the 1970s leftists). The core of this article is a complex and careful study of the double oppression aspects of race and gender in the contexts of rape and domestic violence, analysed in terms of structural intersectionality, political intersectionality (conflicts of organised feminism and organised antiracism), and representational intersectionality (cultural figures of violence). The article, however, *assumes* the intersectionality analysis and develops it, rather than initiating it.

Crenshaw's first published use of 'intersectionality' earlier was her 1989 law review article 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.'<sup>8</sup> The first part of this article is an analysis of court decisions on US antidiscrimination law which allowed employers to argue that they were not discriminating against black women either because they treated white women better, or because they treated black men better.

The term 'intersectionality' reflects this specific context: it is taken, not from the relationship between different oppressed sections of society (as it is now commonly understood among activists) but from the 'intersection', the road junction, reflecting the position of black women as injured by both the racist and the sexist streams of traffic travelling in different directions and colliding.

It is perhaps a result of a British academic lawyer's assumptions that I found it surprising that Crenshaw explained these decisions on anti-discrimination law by an 'intersectional' gap in the legislation, rather than as fairly obvious examples of artificial reasoning animated by judicial bias in favour of employers.<sup>9</sup>

The second part of the article is addressed to feminist theory. Crenshaw comments that

When feminist theory attempts to describe women's experiences through analyzing patriarchy, sexuality, or separate spheres ideology, it often overlooks the role of race. Feminists thus ignore how their own race functions to mitigate some aspects of sexism and, moreover, how it often privileges them over and contributes to the domination of other women. Consequently, feminist theory remains white, and its potential to broaden and deepen its analysis by addressing non-privileged women remains unrealized. (p. 154)

The only citation in support of this claim is to the 1982 book *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us are Brave*, edited by Gloria T Hull,

<sup>7</sup> *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (1991), pp. 1241–1299.

<sup>8</sup> *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, (1989), pp. 139–167.

<sup>9</sup> Compare D. Renton, 'Tribunals and Tribulations', *International Socialism Journal*, 124 (2009). Compare also J.A.G. Griffith, *The Politics of the Judiciary* (5th ed., London: Fontana, 1997), ch 3 and pp. 175–181. I add that a recent article indicates that the concept of the 'intersection' does not *in itself* overcome the difficulty of the 'comparator' problem in legal argument in discrimination cases: Shreya Atrey, 'Comparison in Intersectional Discrimination', *Legal Studies* 38 (2018), pp. 379–395. (The possibility of bias *in favour of the employer* remains absent in Atrey's account; in *Hassam v Jacobs*, the South African case she uses as an example of the success of a fully contextual approach, the issue was an intestate succession dispute which raised an issue of the constitutionality of apartheid-era private law legislation, which clearly did not directly impact either class or state interests in 2008–09).

Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith and published by Feminist Press – cited (p. 139 n. 1) as ‘Gloria T. Hull et al. eds.’. This form of citation hides behind Hull, who had the most conventional academic career, her co-editors Scott and Smith, who were members of the leftist black feminist ‘Combahee River Collective’ in the mid-1970s. The form of citation may well be merely the journal’s conventions; but it is certain that the appeal to Crenshaw’s terminology, and hence the use of her articles as foundational, have the effect of *cutting off* the linkages of the ideas to 1970s leftism. With it disappears also the splintering of the women’s, and black, movements in the 1970s–1980s by sectarian ‘trashing’ and by competing identity claims.<sup>10</sup>

In Crenshaw’s account in these articles, intersectionality is primarily the condition of being affected by double forms of oppression, which standard single-issue politics fails to engage. ‘The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite – that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences.’<sup>11</sup>

The problem with this approach is that it tends to preclude the possibility of solidarity. This matters little for a law review article, because radical lawyers are precisely seeking ‘saviours from on high’ (the judges) to deliver their clients from oppression – not collective action, and hence not requiring solidarity.

What ‘intersectionality’ has *become* in general is something broader than Crenshaw’s use, but still with the same vices. It is a combination of the claim to pre-emptively and exclusively ‘speak about’ one’s own oppression on the basis of personal experience; and hence to a veto of any collective statement by the larger group which might be taken as adverse to the particular group. Conversely, it implies that every resolution or public statement *must* engage all sections. And though class may be *admitted* to the ‘sections’, in the sense of admitting that there is a form of discrimination against the working class, *the ruling class and discrimination in favour of the ruling class as such is still made to disappear*.

## Combahee River

The Boston black feminist ‘Combahee River Collective’ CRC is commonly credited with launching the idea of ‘identity politics’ in its 1977 ‘Statement’, but CRC

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<sup>10</sup> In the women’s movement: e.g. discussion in Sara M. Evans’ review article ‘Re-viewing the Second Wave’, *Feminist Studies*, 28:2 (2002), pp. 258–267 at pp. 262–263 (paranoia and the role of FBI provocateurs), 264 (splintering in the mid-70s). For one contemporary document on the issue, see Jo Freeman (‘Joreen’) ‘Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood’ (1976), <https://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/trashing.htm>. In the black movement: discussion e.g. in Rod Bush, Review of Manning Marable, *Blackwater*, in *Contemporary Marxism*, No. 4 (Winter 1981/1982), pp. 140–146 at pp. 144–145; for a symptomatic Maoist document, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/bwc-history.htm>; some illustrative narrative in Asad Haider’s discussion of the trajectory of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, *Mistaken Identity* (London: Verso, 2018), at pp. 67–80; also for more general context, Adolph Reed Jr., ‘Splendors and Miseries of the Antiracist “Left”’ (2016), <https://nonsite.org/editorial/splendors-and-miseries-of-the-antiracist-left-2/>; and for Britain, Kulbir Shukra, *The Changing Pattern of Black Politics in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1998) Chs 2 and 3.

<sup>11</sup> Crenshaw *Stanford Law Review* article at p. 1242.

participant Demita Frazier observed that ‘we never ... really practised what people now call identity politics’ and Barbara Smith has argued that ‘the reason Combahee’s black feminism is so powerful is because it’s anticapitalist’.

Both quotes come from the 2017 book *How We Get Free*,<sup>12</sup> which includes the famous 1977 *CRC statement*, an introduction by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (a younger generation writer) and her interviews with three CRC participants, Barbara Smith, her sister Beverly, and Demita Frazier, and with more recent activist Alicia Garza (one of the initiators of ‘Black Lives Matter’) and a comment from historian and activist Barbara Ransby.

Combahee River Collective started as the Boston branch of the New York based ‘National Black Feminist Organisation’ (which formally existed in 1973–1975) and broke from them in the mid-1970s because the Boston group wanted more radical politics. They took the name ‘Combahee River’ from the 1863 Union army raid on Combahee Ferry, during the American Civil War, in which a leading role was played by the pre-war ‘underground railway’ organiser Harriet Tubman, and in which black Union troops rescued around 700 slaves.<sup>13</sup>

The *CRC statement* (pp. 15–27)<sup>14</sup> offers in essence a lucidly written combination of ideas about the combined effect of multiple oppressions which were, in fact, widespread in the 1970s left. These ideas were linked to ‘soft Maoist’ interpretations of ‘labour aristocracy’ theory, the idea that the bulk of the actual organised working class movement was corrupted by privileges. Without using the terminology, the *CRC Statement* says that ‘We might use *our position at the bottom*, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action.’<sup>15</sup>

The *CRC statement* is *brief*; it is *well-written*; and it has the *political authority* within the general ‘identity politics’ paradigm of being written by black women (and some of them lesbians too ...). This might be enough to have given it its subsequent celebrity and ‘foundational status’. But there are also both silences in the statement, and positive elements, which will have made it more widely acceptable.

For example, the Maoist left in the US was sharply split by the Boston ‘busing crisis’ over school segregation, of 1974 and after.<sup>16</sup> One might imagine that school segregation would be a matter which was significant to Boston black feminists writing a couple of years later, but the issue is absent from the *CRC statement*.

The *CRC statement* says that the group are socialists, and Barbara Smith in the interview insists on anticapitalism, while Demita Frazier says that she considers herself a socialist ‘with a lot of qualifications’. These amount, essentially, to saying that socialism is attractive but an issue for the unforeseeable future (pp. 125–126).

<sup>12</sup> Chicago, IL: Haymarket.

<sup>13</sup> Outline at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raid\\_on\\_Combahee\\_Ferry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raid_on_Combahee_Ferry).

<sup>14</sup> Also online at several places, e.g. <http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>.

<sup>15</sup> p. 22 – emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> Some materials collected at <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-2/index.htm>.

But the original statement was already extremely guarded about socialism and Marxism.

Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as black women. (p. 20)

But they offer no actual explanation or even illustration of *how* Marxist theory needed to be 'extended' for this purpose. The statement may be true. But a little earlier in the text we have 'Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources' (p. 20) – which is purely Lassallean, the exact claim *criticised* by Marx in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.<sup>17</sup>

It is then unsurprising that the next sentence is that 'We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation.' Again this formula is a commonplace of the feminist left and of the anti-racist left of the period. It should be obvious and anodyne that there are no *guarantees* possible for anyone from socialist revolution – or from any other form of struggle (electoral activity, strikes, single-issue campaigns, building feminist collectives, etc.). But this obviousness implies that what CRC were actually implicitly arguing was not the obvious and anodyne point, but something different, along the lines that: '*we will not support* a project of socialist revolution (or whatever) that is not explicitly feminist and antiracist within the meaning that we as a group give to these terms'.

Beverly Smith in her interview similarly says that '[F]or example, if someone's a socialist, it's only about economics. It's only about work. It's only about material conditions. It's only about capitalism. And its's often only about men' (p. 101).

This language of 'reading down' socialism in the *CRC statement* and Smith's interview is complete nonsense by comparison with the *Communist Manifesto*, the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Engels' *Origins of the Family*, and so on. I flag these particular texts because they were neither hard to get hold of, nor inaccessible to read, in the 1970s. And both Barbara Smith (p. 52) and Demita Frazier (p. 130) comment on the amount of reading and 'movement education' which went on in the 1970s.

It follows that the vulgarised version of 'Marxism' and 'socialism' in the *CRC statement* is not a politically innocent result of authorial ignorance. Rather, it is a conscious choice. In this choice, it has a *Eurocommunist* aspect, like 'dual systems feminism' which emerged in the same period, and actually *forms part of the transition to neoliberal intersectionality*. It is likely that this aspect of the *CRC statement* has influenced its popularity as a foundation-text for black feminism widely used in the US academy.

The interviews with the authors add some background to the statement. I have already referred to references to the educational quality of the 1970s movement. There is more on the CRC's involvement in 'coalitions', meaning single-issue

<sup>17</sup> Part I, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>.



campaigns of the sort that the 'Leninist' left tends to call 'united fronts', and local organising work. And there is more elaboration of how the authors came from their experiences with the 'white women's moment' and 'white left', and with male-dominated black nationalist groups, to the conclusion that they had to organise separately as black feminists.

Barbara Smith says that '[W]e were socialists. We were part of the organized left. We were not sectarian. We did not belong to any parties or groups. Both Demita and I have never belonged to any party or organized formation' (pp. 43–44). And 'Because we were black women. Our value systems were not shaped primarily by the airless ideological sectarianism of the white European male left' (p. 59). But CRC was itself a small group (p. 54). It does not seem to occur to her that their refusal of membership in any broader party was *itself* a form of sect construction.

The fourth interview, with Alicia Garza, and the comment by Barbara Ransby, illustrate *modern* identity politics: not the black women's organisation as an element of the broader movement engaged in coalition-building, as the three CRC authors describe it, but as but as *demands for leadership and veto*. Thus Garza says, for example,

[W]e don't just want a seat at the table.

We want the table. And we want to decide who is sitting at the table.

[laugh] Right? And then maybe we want to get rid of the table.

It should be *obvious* that this political method is ultimatic and hence will lead only to splits, demobilisation, and in turn – in the absence of solidarity, which it renders impossible – dependence on 'saviours from on high to deliver'.

Just as the use of Crenshaw's 'intersectionality' draws a line against the earlier politics, so too, in a different way, does the promotion of the *CRC Statement* as representing a radical foundation alternative to liberal versions of 'intersectionality'. But in fact, before there was 'intersectionality' and before there was 'identity politics', there was already talk of 'double oppression,' 'triple oppression' and the 'class-gender-race trilogy'.<sup>18</sup>

### Behind the 1970s left

*Science and Society*, the theoretical journal associated with the Communist Party USA, in its April 2018 issue carries a symposium on 'intersectionality' from 'Marxist-feminist' points of view, with short pieces by Hester Eisenstein, Martha E Gimenez, Barbara Foley, Lise Vogel and Shana A. Russell.<sup>19</sup> Two of the authors in this collection

<sup>18</sup> The immediate point that the promotion of the *CRC Statement* as a foundational reference obscures the antecedent history is also made by Becky Thompson, 'Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism', *Feminist Studies*, 28:2 (2002), pp. 336–360, and (more briefly, using slightly different materials) Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016) Ch 3 at pp. 65–67 (Collins and Bilge's account goes on to celebrate CRC foundationality at pp. 67–71). These authors should not be taken as making the present point, that selecting CRC as foundational implicates political choices whether in favour of 'new' forms of left against 'old', or, more commonly, in favour of Eurocommunism.

<sup>19</sup> Vol 82, issue 2.

point to the 'trilogy' and ideas of 'double oppression' substantially preceding the usage by 1970s leftists; and do so particularly in the context of the participation of members of the Communist Party USA in what became the civil rights and women's liberation movement.<sup>20</sup> This involvement has been extensively documented in Kate Weigand's 2001 book *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation*.<sup>21</sup>

Equally, Asad Haider in his 2018 book *Mistaken Identity* draws attention to the work of 1960s Maoists Theodore Allen and Noel Ignatiev on race and class.<sup>22</sup> Behind this work in turn, Robin Kelley's book *Hammer and Hoe* on Alabama Communists in the 1930s shows precursors to what became 'civil rights'<sup>23</sup> though early Maoist leader Harry Haywood identified a later shift into substituting 'white guilt' manoeuvres within the party for actual struggle on race issues within the rightwards moving trade union movement.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, behind the work of the CPUSA in the 1930s-60s in turn is a tradition which goes back to the beginnings of the Socialist Party of America, founded in 1901 as a fusion of smaller groups and in political solidarity with the Second International. The Socialist Party in 1901 could without hesitation demand gender equality in its platform, and could have in that year a serious debate about race. It could also denounce US policy in Puerto Rico, and 'call the attention of the working class to the fact that our judiciary is but a servile tool in the hands of the capitalist class and hostile to the interests of labor'.<sup>25</sup> The party's commitments to gender equality and to anti-racism tended if anything to strengthen over its existence, though the issue was one which divided right and left in the party, and were unsurprisingly carried over into the early CPUSA, as Paul Heideman has shown in his 2018 collection *Class Struggle and the Color Line: American Socialism and the Race Question 1900-1930*.<sup>26</sup>

As Heidemann points out in his introduction, antislavery and antiracism go back still further in the socialist movement, to Marx's writings and to the First International's support for the Union side in the American civil war.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, one socialist platform Marx was directly concerned in drafting, the 1880 *Programme of the French Parti Ouvrier*, begins with the claim that 'l'émancipation de la classe productive est celle de

<sup>20</sup> Particularly Gimenez (at pp. 262-265), and Vogel (at pp. 275-281).

<sup>21</sup> Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. See also the Symposium on the book in *Science and Society* 66:4 (2002), pp. 498-535 and the further comments by David Laibman and Paul Mishler in vol 67:4 (2003), pp. 481-488. Cf also Landon R.Y. Storrs, 'Red Scare Politics and the Suppression of Popular Front Feminism: The Loyalty Investigation of Mary Dublin Keyserling', *Journal of American History*, 90:2 (2003), pp. 491-524.

<sup>22</sup> London: Verso.

<sup>23</sup> *Hammer and Hoe* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); cf. also chs 5 and 6 of his *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> Haider, op cit., pp. 61-62.

<sup>25</sup> The 1901 platform, which has the same general character as other Second International platforms, and report of the conference, is at, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/spusa/1901/0817-herald-socialistconv.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Chicago, IL: Haymarket.

<sup>27</sup> pp. 3-9.

tous les êtres humains sans distinction de sexe, ni de race’, ‘the emancipation of the productive class is that of all human beings without distinction of sex or race’.<sup>28</sup>

The problem posed is how the left (in broad terms) has moved from this foundational aspiration to *universal* human emancipation, to accepting the ‘intersectional’ idea of coalitions based on sections (white women, black men, black women, workers ... and so on), with each section having wholly autonomous (and often opposed) interest claims and veto rights in the ‘coalition process’?

### From universal emancipation to intersectionality

The answer has three elements. The first is that the left itself, led by the CPUSA, moved into asserting the conceptual autonomy of racism, sexism and so on within the framework of the People’s Front. The second is the additional contributions, within the people’s front framework, of US ‘soft’ Maoism in the 1960s–1970s. The third is the active interventions of capital, its state and its political representatives, to manage opposition. In particular, a section of the political representatives of capital saw that the model of conceptual autonomy of the ‘trilogy’ could be deployed to construct a new pro-capitalist coalition structure using anti-discrimination to neuter the workers’ movement and the left, and from the mid-1970s this approach became dominant in the US. Its subsequent spread is from the US outwards.

#### *People’s front*

Modern identity politics, and ‘intersectionality’ as an outgrowth of identity politics, begins in a sense with ‘official’ communism in the period of the ‘people’s front’ policy, which aimed to resist the threat of fascism by uniting with the ‘democratic’ wing of capital or party of liberty, on terms that the workers’ parties would not go beyond what was acceptable to the party of liberty.<sup>29</sup>

Though it is conventional to refer to the People’s Front policy, the texts of the 1934 Seventh Congress of the Comintern also included a reformulation of the *united* front. As originally posed by the Comintern in the early 1920s, the united front idea involved unity in action of the workers’ organisations, both independent of the capitalist parties (a principle abandoned in the People’s Front idea) and *on terms that there would be no suspension of criticism on either side*.<sup>30</sup> But Gyorgi Dimitrov at the 1975 Seventh Congress of the Comintern argued that

<sup>28</sup> Text at [https://www.marxists.org/francais/inter\\_soc/pof/18800700.htm](https://www.marxists.org/francais/inter_soc/pof/18800700.htm); translation at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/05/parti-ouvrier.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> There are many general discussions. Charlie Post, ‘The Popular Front: Rethinking CPUSA History’, *Against the Current* 63 (July–August 1996), <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/63/p2363/>, has the merit of not expecting more of the CPUSA than it could possibly have delivered – and therefore pinning down points where the policy *did* lead the party to reinforce the Democrats and the union bureaucracy and weaken the working class.

<sup>30</sup> December 1921 ECCI ‘Theses on the Workers’ United Front’ in John Riddell ed., and trans. *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922* (Leiden: Brill, 2012)

‘The Communists attack us,’ say others. But listen, we have repeatedly declared: We shall not attack anyone, whether persons, organizations or parties, standing for the united front of the working class against the class enemy. But at the same time it is our duty, in the interests of the proletariat and its cause, to criticize *those persons, organizations and parties that hinder unity of action by the workers.*<sup>31</sup>

Since then, the acceptance that unity requires suppressing or at least toning down disagreements has been extremely widespread on the left. The history is now largely forgotten; all that is left is a cultural tic of toning down polemic for the sake of unity.

The point is not that the CPUSA became for the first time left promoters of feminism and anti-racism in the popular front period. It is rather that, as Charlie Post indicates in his study of the CPUSA in this period, the popular front policy led them for the first time to treat ‘official’ women’s movement leaders, and ‘official’ black community leaders, as ‘legitimate representatives’ of group interests wholly separate from the class interests of the working class – and to begin to elaborate ‘class, gender and race’ as a trinity.

The ‘trinity’ and the underlying people’s front approach inherently carried with it the idea that the specific interests of workers would be defended by the workers’ movement – and that these would be essentially, economic, trade union issues; that the specific interests of black people would be defended by the black community and black nationalists and ‘community leaders’; and that the specific interests of women would be defended by a women’s movement and its liberal leadership.

It already, therefore, entailed acceptance of the ideas of the Rooseveltian Democrat trade union bureaucrats that gender and race issues, and so on, were not ‘trade union’ issues: what Lenin in *What is to be done?* called *tred-iunionizm* and the ‘bourgeois politics of the working class’, transcribing an English word into Russian to describe what in 1901–1902 looked like a peculiar British phenomenon (people in the US began in the early twentieth century to use the more evocative term ‘business unionism’).<sup>32</sup>

*In theory*, the defects of the various single-issue operations recommended – trade unions for ‘worker’ issues, women’s groups for ‘women’s issues’ and so on – would have their defects made up for by the role of the *party*. However, in reality the concepts of the united front and of the people’s front defended at the 1935 Seventh Congress of the Comintern were – as Dimitrov, quoted above, explained – predicated on the party actually *self-censoring in order to maintain unity*. The logical consequence would be that the party *could not* substitute for the economism of the unions, for the ‘pure feminism’ of women’s groups, and so on.

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Appendix 7a, Thesis 17 at p. 1170; more summary form in the Fourth Congress resolution ‘On the Tactics of the Comintern’ in id. Appendix 7, point 10, at pp. 1158–1159. The general background is discussed in outline by Riddell in the Introduction to this volume at pp. 5–9, and more fully in id., ‘The origins of the united front policy’, *International Socialism Journal* 130 (2011), <http://isj.org.uk/the-origins-of-the-united-front-policy/>.

<sup>31</sup> [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08\\_02.htm#s7](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08_02.htm#s7) (emphasis added).

<sup>32</sup> Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), the point distributed in a series of places – see index references for ‘tred-iunionizm’. ‘Business unionism’ conveniently referenced at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Business\\_unionism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Business_unionism).

The logic of the policy was thus, precisely, to drive the issues of class, gender and race apart, rather than to pull them together. The consequence was, in turn, that the party's *primary* self-censorship drives would focus on protecting relations with the party's most powerful imagined potential allies – the trade union bureaucracy and the Rooseveltian Democrats. This in turn would necessarily push women and black activists towards oppositional and independent policies and the rejection of the party itself. It was in this context that 'soft' versions of Maoism emerged in the later 1960s, aimed at borrowing what were seen as creative Maoist ideas rather than creating definite Beijing-line anti-revisionist Marxist-Leninist parties.<sup>33</sup>

### *Maoist contributions*

The Maoists retained the people's front idea but brought to the orientation two further elements, 'speaking bitterness' or 'consciousness-raising,' and a 'hardened' concept of the labour aristocracy as an irredeemable privileged caste.

'Speaking bitterness' was a Maoist technique of mobilisation and political education in land reform campaigns through drawing on peasants' personal experience.<sup>34</sup> It was popularised in the west by William Hinton's *Fanshen*, published in 1966, and was adopted in an adapted form as women's liberation 'consciousness-raising'.<sup>35</sup>

'Speaking bitterness/consciousness raising' carried with it the corollary that personal experience was to be the only guarantee of veracity. This has the consequence, as Adolph Reed Jr pointed out in relation to Jesse Jackson, and continues to point out in relation to the 'black leaders' of the 2010s, that there can be no criterion of political trustworthiness other than authenticity of 'position' (as woman, as black, and so on) – and as a result mountebanks and agents of the establishment can set themselves up as leaders of the interest groups.<sup>36</sup> 'TERF wars' – no-platforming arguments about 'who

<sup>33</sup> 'Soft Maoism' is an idea readily recognisable to contemporaries and used casually by several writers: e.g. Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956–1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) at p. 163 (characterizing *Monthly Review* in the early 1970s); Chris Harman, 'Crisis of the European Revolutionary Left', *International Socialism Journal*, 2:4 (1979), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1979/xx/eurevleft.html>; Kara Zugman Dellacioppa, *This Bridge Called Zapatismo: Building Alternative Political Cultures in Mexico City, Los Angeles, and Beyond* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009) p. 7 (characterising the anti-party strand of the post-1968 Mexican left); <https://bigflameuk.wordpress.com/2009/05/30/lotta-continua/> (characterising the Italian group Lotta Continua). But online searching doesn't produce a systematic treatment of the trend, I guess because the much of the trend was rather ephemeral and a good many participants have become respectable academics who don't want to parade their Maoist antecedents. In France (and hence by the Mandelites) the trend was called 'Mao-spontaneism': Robert J Alexander, *Maoism in the Developed World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001) at pp. 75–76; 'Preparatory Text for the 1971 Conference of the leaderships of the European sections' in [Socialist Workers' Party, US] *International Information Bulletin* Nov 1972, at p. 6 point 4.

<sup>34</sup> Eg Guo Wu, 'Speaking Bitterness: Political Education in Land Reform and Military Training Under the CCP, 1947–1951', *Chinese Historical Review*, 21 (2014), pp. 3–23.

<sup>35</sup> New York, NY: Monthly Review Press. On the relation between Hinton's account and feminist 'consciousness-raising' see Carol Hanisch, 'A Women's Liberation Tribute to William Hinton and the Women of Long Bow' (1999), <http://www.carolhanisch.org/Speeches/HintonSpeech/HintonTribSpeech.html>.

<sup>36</sup> *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon* above n. 1; 'Black Politics after 2016' above n. 3.

counts as a woman to speak as such' – provide another example of the destructiveness of the method: the point being that if legitimate speech grows out of personal experience, whose experience is sufficiently legitimate for their speech to be legitimate? The issue posed can *only* be addressed through exclusions (by the so-called TERFs) and no-platforming (by their 'trans rights' opponents).<sup>37</sup>

The labour aristocracy theory was derived from Lenin's *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism* but considerably exaggerated from that text.<sup>38</sup> It was taken to explain right wing control of trade unions – and the idea which was interrelated to the concept of 'surrounding the cities' (peasants the true revolutionary class) or (globally) 'third world first', and also formed the foundation of 'privilege theory' (whether white privilege, or male privilege, or ...).<sup>39</sup>

The plausibility of privilege theory in fact remains dependent on the plausibility of 'hard' labour aristocracy theory. And this was always seriously problematic. The 'labour aristocracy' were the skilled workers who were able to organise early and extract higher wages from employers. Engels in the 1880s–1890s identified these as the social base of the 'apolitical' right wing in the British trade union movement.<sup>40</sup> Lenin adopted this view of Engels's to explain the ascendancy of the 'social-chauvinists' in World War I. In reality, however, highly organised skilled workers are *not* consistently the right wing of the workers' movement; and on the other hand, the T&GWU, a general rather than a craft union, was a bastion of the right wing of the British labour movement between its 1922 formation and the 1950s. The labour aristocracy theory therefore lacks solid predictive value.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> There is a vast amount of material on this issue available on the web, but first ten pages of search results under several searches are mostly very badly reasoned indeed, whether from trans activists, from their feminist opponents, or from conservatives who wish to use the issue to smear both sides. Some degree of caution is displayed by Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist\\_views\\_on\\_transgender\\_topics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_views_on_transgender_topics); and in relation to 'no platforming' by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201719/jtselect/jtrights/589/58902.htm> (albeit the latter group displays caution because they support the no-platforming of anti-zionists).

<sup>38</sup> For Lenin's account see 'Imperialism and the Split in Socialism' (1916), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/oct/x01.htm>; cf also G. Zinoviev, 'The Social Roots of Opportunism' (1916), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zinoviev/works/1916/war/opp-index.htm>. Contrast N. Bukharin, *Imperialism and World Economy* (1915/17) Ch 14, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1917/imperial/14.htm>. For two recent examples of the Maoist version of the argument, see Bernard D'Mello, 'What is Maoism?', *Monthly Review*, 22 November 2009; and <http://moufawad-paul.blogspot.com/2013/01/the-theory-of-labour-aristocracy-and.html> (2013).

<sup>39</sup> See for an early instance Ignatiev (Ignatin) and Allen, 'White Blindspot' (1967), <https://www.sds-1960s.org/WhiteBlindspot.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> Documentation of Engels' arguments (in what I consider an unsound argument) in Jonathan Strauss 'Engels and the theory of the labour aristocracy' (undated), <http://links.org.au/node/45>.

<sup>41</sup> There is a useful discussion of Lenin on the 'labour aristocracy' by Eric Hobsbawm, 'Lenin and the "Aristocracy of Labor"', *Monthly Review*, August 1970, <https://monthlyreview.org/2012/12/01/lenin-and-the-aristocracy-of-labor/>. A (debatable) critique by Charlie Post, 'The Myth of the Labor Aristocracy, Part 1', *Against the Current* No. 123 (2006), <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/123/p128/> and 'The "Labor Aristocracy" and Working-class Struggles: Consciousness in Flux, Part 2', *ATC* No. 124 (2006), <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/124/p129/>. Bevin and T&GWU: numerous references, but James Moher, 'Walter Citrine and Ernest Bevin (Part 1)'

Rather, it seems that *successful workers' organisation*, whether of skilled or unskilled workers, attracts the managerial attention of capital and its state with a view to displacing or coopting militant and leftist leaderships. For merely a single example, an interesting article by Barry Eidlin examines the history of the Teamsters in the 1930s–40s, in which the right moved for state intervention against radicals of a sort which became more common post-war.<sup>42</sup>

### *Pro-capitalist interventions*

The capitalist class consciously manages those below. It engages in divide-and-rule tactics – which is why, for example, managers want to retain discretion over to hiring and firing, limit the intervention of employment tribunals, etc. It is why they want to keep individual wage agreements private and do not like collective bargaining. Managers equally resist having to disclose sex (or race, or whatever) discrimination in pay precisely because they need to manage those below in every way they can. Part of managing those below is controlling trade union leaders either directly by paying them off or by putting in policemen; or by cultural or political incorporation. In return the trade union bureaucracy is expected to ‘manage the members’.

Both business and political managers for capital think consciously about how to manage those below. Regulatory regimes affecting labour are constructed *with a view to facilitating this management*. There may be (and usually are) carrots as well as sticks involved.

In the USA, the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, or ‘Wagner Act’, was passed in response to the strike wave which had begun earlier in the 1930s, with the aim of canalising worker dissent into more ‘regulated’ structures.<sup>43</sup> Accepting the carrot – partial state legalisation of trade unions – carried with it the possibility and legitimacy of more intrusive regulation, as occurred with the 1947 ‘Taft-Hartley Act’.<sup>44</sup> It also implied more generally the legitimacy of judicial and state regulation of labour conflicts. Reuel Schiller in his 2015 book *Forging Rivals* shows, through a series of historical vignettes, how this framework of judicial and regulatory control already in the 1940s, but pushing onwards through the 1950s–1970s, set up the conditions for litigation about race discrimination to be used to further undermine trade union independence, and for race and class to be posited as opposed issues – but *not* to actually

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(2017), <https://labouraffairsmagazine.com/past-issues/2017-02-magazine/2017-02-walter-citrine-and-ernest-bevin-part-1/> cannot be accused of being a leftist attack on Bevin.

<sup>42</sup> “‘Upon this (Foundering) Rock’: Minneapolis Teamsters and the Transformation of US Business Unionism, 1934–1941’, *Labor History*, 50:3 (2009), pp. 249–267.

<sup>43</sup> A couple of references from an extensive literature: Theodore J. St. Antoine, ‘How the Wagner Act Came to Be: A Prospectus’, *Michigan Law Review*, 96:8 (1998), pp. 2201–2211; Jean-Christian Vinel, ‘Reconstructing the Wagner Act’, *Transatlantica: Revue d’études américaines*, 1 (2003), <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/628>.

<sup>44</sup> A convenient discussion by Colin Gordon, ‘The Legacy of Taft-Hartley’, *Jacobin*, 19 December 2017, <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/12/taft-hartley-unions-right-to-work>.

achieve an end to race discrimination.<sup>45</sup> If trade unionism is to be ‘business unionism’ which merely seeks a reallocation of the spoils of the firm’s profits (but assumes that there *must be* profits) gains for one section of the workers must be at the expense of other sections. Equally, if the judge is to be the saviour from on high who will deliver the workers from the boss, or the black people from the whites, such oppositions are to be expected – *because*, as I referred to earlier, judges are normally biased in favour of employers.<sup>46</sup>

The next step in this side of the story was the 1957 publication of Gary S. Becker’s *The Economics of Discrimination*. According to Becker’s introduction to the 1971 second edition, the book was originally only published due to the strong support of the University of Chicago’s Department of Economics – which pretty much says what needs to be said about its political purposes.<sup>47</sup> The argument is essentially one which applies a pure subjective marginal utility analysis, in order to reach the conclusion that discrimination is against the interests of capitalists (whether as employers or as vendors of commodities) but arises from the preferences of consumers or workers.

Becker provided an argument which supported the ‘competition between workers’ approach to discrimination issues. But it was in the 1970s that the positive idea of what has become ‘rainbow capitalism’ emerged, initially in the political margins.

Low-grade rightist science fiction writer GC Edmondson’s 1980 book *The man who corrupted Earth* has as its hero a buccaneering aerospace entrepreneur hero Gus Dampier, who has a black business partner Albert, who plays up to racist assumptions by pretending to be Gus’s chauffeur as ‘protective coloration’. This team sends a young black man and a young white woman into space to prospect the asteroids for minerals, using reconditioned decommissioned space shuttles which have been left in orbit, plus solid rocket boosters. For funds, the heroes team up with a Gulf-state princeling Mansour, who has saved up the millions from his allowance, which he has pretended to spend on high living. The whole theme of the book (whose plot and characterisations are ultra-clunky) is the capitalist hero of anti-discrimination.

Gus shook his head in disbelief. ‘Why couldn’t they [a federal agency] have just asked me?’

[Albert] ‘Oh, dey never asks us minorities. They always know what’s good for us.’

Mansour began to suspect that some of the subtleties of American dialect might be eternally beyond him. ‘Mr Dampier is of a minority?’ he asked.

[Albert, or Gus] ‘How many of us millionaires you think there are in the United States?’<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Macnair ‘Free Association Versus Juridification’, *Critique*, 39:1 (2011), pp. 53–82 and sources and literature cited there.

<sup>47</sup> 2nd ed., Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1971; this point at p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> New York, NY: Ace Books, 1980, p. 129.



Edmondson is transparent because his writing is crude. But the basic idea was far more widespread: anti-discrimination, if coupled with anti-statism, can be a banner for the protection of the rights of the ultra-rich and of corporations. The Libertarian Party was founded in Colorado in 1971 on just such a platform.<sup>49</sup>

Western US small-l libertarian rightism went partway down this road. Pure rightist cynics, like SF writer Jerry Pournelle (1933–2017), did so in *High Justice* (1977) and *Exiles to Glory* (1978);<sup>50</sup> though the large bulk of Pournelle's writing is far more traditionalist on gender roles, and so on. For a couple more SF examples, Larry Niven's short story 'Arm' (1975), set in a liberal rather than libertarian future, adds trans rights,<sup>51</sup> while anarcho-capitalist L Neil Smith's *The probability broach* (1980) adds animal rights.<sup>52</sup> In short, it was already obvious to at least some free-market rightists by the time of the 1977 *CRC Statement* that anti-discrimination ideas could be deployed for pro-capitalist projects.

US defeat in Vietnam brought the equalities agenda from the margins to the centre. The black civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s fed almost seamlessly into the anti-Vietnam war movement of the 1960s–1970s. It was a notable feature of the war that black youth were disproportionately conscripted and sent to the 'sharp end'; and that the US army was marked by a mainly white officer corps presiding over a mixed-race rank and file.<sup>53</sup> By the 1970s, the extent of general opposition to the war, and the race issue within the US army, were leading to a real crisis, both of the draft, and of military discipline in the field.<sup>54</sup>

In April 1975 the US scuttled out of Saigon, and the open recognition of defeat in Vietnam became inevitable. It was in the late Vietnam and post-Vietnam period that the US armed forces began to take seriously the issues of anti-discrimination (beginning with race). If they could not get over the 'wrong war' problem, and had to be cautious with 'Vietnam syndrome' they could at least deal with the race issue which had radically exacerbated their problems.<sup>55</sup> With the state core, the armed forces, moving on the issue, resistance to formal anti-discrimination measures more widely faced considerable difficulties.

The anti-discrimination agenda also actually fitted well with the more general project of neoliberal financial globalisation and Francis Fukuyama's 1992 *The end of*

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<sup>49</sup> Convenient short summary of its history at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libertarian\\_Party\\_\(United\\_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libertarian_Party_(United_States)).

<sup>50</sup> *High Justice* cited here from London: Orbit, 1987. The stories collected date from 1972–75. *Exiles to Glory* (New York, NY: Ace Books, 1978).

<sup>51</sup> Cited here from *The Long Arm of Gil Hamilton* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1977).

<sup>52</sup> New York, NY: Ballantine Books/Del Rey, 1980.

<sup>53</sup> Some outline discussion in GF Goodwin 'Black and White in Vietnam', *New York Times*, 18 July 2017. A well-reviewed full study is J.E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 1999).

<sup>54</sup> An account from the left is Derek Seidman, 'Vietnam and the Soldiers' Revolt', *Monthly Review*, 1 June 2016, <https://monthlyreview.org/2016/06/01/vietnam-and-the-soldiers-revolt/>.

<sup>55</sup> The US Army was already trying to move on the issue by 1973: *Race Relations and Equal Opportunity in the Army*, December 1973, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a077751.pdf>.

history,<sup>56</sup> Thomas Friedman's 1999 *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*,<sup>57</sup> and all the other similar apologetic products. Anti-discrimination 'sold' the free market as going along with other forms of 'freedom'.

### At the end of the rainbow

At the end of the rainbow is a pot of gold ... not. The Labour right's 'statesmanship' in defending the Union in the Scots independence referendum in 2014 produced a Nationalist landslide in 2015 and a Scots Tory revival in 2017. The Clintonistas' polemic against the Sanders camp, that only their rainbow alliance of the various women, ethnic groups, and so other oppressed, with Wall Street money could beat Trump, got its come-uppance when Trump won – in doing so winning several old working class areas – and the Republicans obtained control of both Houses of Congress.<sup>58</sup>

The clearest argument for why this should have happened has been offered by American scholar Walter Benn Michaels.<sup>59</sup> In short, since the turns of the late 1970s–1980s towards financial globalisation and 'human rights' and anti-discrimination, *economic* inequality has sharply increased.<sup>60</sup> Michaels looks at the distribution of household income in the US in 2015 by quintiles. For example, 6% of US households earn more than \$200,000 a year, but only 2% of blacks; 45% earn less than \$50,000 a year, but 61% of blacks. If race discrimination was got rid of, since black people are around 13.2% of the US population, they would form 13.2% of the very rich, and so on: and 6% of black people would be in the top quintile, 45% in the bottom quintile.

The point is thus made graphically obvious that 'the point of eliminating horizontal inequality is to justify individual inequality.' And

This is why some of us 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 left behind as long as they haven't been left behind because of their race or sex.

Equality-of-opportunity anti-discrimination discourse blames the victims of economic inequalities: they had the opportunities but didn't take them – unless they can claim that their victimhood is the result of race or other discrimination. It is a natural consequence that there should be a growth of 'white identity politics' and

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<sup>56</sup> London: Penguin.

<sup>57</sup> London: HarperCollins.

<sup>58</sup> Nate Cohn, 'Why Trump Won: Working-class Whites', *New York Times*, 9 November 2016 – almost certainly overstated, but Stephen L. Morgan, and Jiwon Lee, 'Trump Voters and the White Working Class', *Sociological Science*, 5 (2018), pp. 234–245, is more rigorous. There is a much wider literature on the issue.

<sup>59</sup> 'The Political Economy of Anti-Racism', *Nonsite* issue #23, 11 February 2018, <https://nonsite.org/article/the-political-economy-of-anti-racism>.

<sup>60</sup> Again, endless literature, but a convenient (inevitably debatable) outline is available at <https://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-summary-english.pdf>.

‘male identity politics’ among poorer white Americans. This politics is merely people who cannot make an anti-discrimination claim as black, or whatever, applying the methods of the rainbow-ers to themselves.

The point is not that ‘white’ or ‘male’ identity politics is a meritorious point of view. It isn’t. The point is, rather, that the result vote Clinton, get Trump was the *natural and probable consequence* of the rainbow alliance with Wall Street, the people’s front policy; and that the epistemological and moral claims of ‘speaking bitterness’ and ‘consciousness-raising’ *inherently logically imply* that US white men have the right to ‘self-define’ themselves as oppressed.

And then the practical result is that we not only get Trump, but also get at least one far-right extremist, Neil Gorsuch, on the US Supreme Court (which is the actual sovereign in the US constitution)<sup>61</sup> and are likely to get another even if Brett Kavanaugh is in the end not approved.<sup>62</sup> On this basis, intersectionalism’s refusal of class issues in the hope of alliance with the ‘democratic wing of capital’ defeats *its own* non-class objects: the intersectionalists will have achieved not only savage attacks on the working class as such, but also the impending reversal of *Roe v Wade* on abortion rights, of affirmative action programmes, and so on.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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<sup>61</sup> Predicted: Howe Cheatem, ‘Put Not Your Trust in Judges’, *Weekly Worker*, 16 February 2017 (and numerous other commentators); shown in practice, Ian Millhiser, ‘Gorsuch Just Wrote an Opinion So Radical that Clarence Thomas Wouldn’t Join It’, 11 June 2018, <https://thinkprogress.org/neil-gorsuch-sveen-v-malin-most-radical-opinion-yet-233125a182f6/>.

<sup>62</sup> On Kavanaugh’s background see Branko Marcetic, ‘Brett Kavanaugh, Establishment Extremist’, *Jacobin*, 10 July 2018. At the time of writing Kavanaugh’s nomination is facing attack because of sexual assault allegations. But even if the Republican-controlled Senate doesn’t dismiss these, there are plenty of other right-extremist lawyers out there to be nominated before the mid-terms.