

If this inequality persists and deepens, technological and economic interests will eventually subsume the interests of the human beings who gave rise to them. This is why a new pact is necessary to protect humanity from its own capacity for self-destruction, just as in the eighteenth century, the idea of a social contract served to defend society from endogenous risks of implosion.

He repeats this call for a renewed social contract towards the end of the book. Conceding that ‘the intolerable sensations and perceptions that afflict us constitute a call for changes to our systems of production and consumption’, Chabot turns not to Marx but to Hobbes. Burnout ‘reflects certain unsustainable values within our society’ but rather than burning anything down or considering how burnt out people might struggle to participate in conventional forms of political struggle, Chabot merely advocates ‘opening our eyes to our way of life’.

Reading Chabot’s account of burnout, I was struck by the assumptions it makes about excess and speed under capitalism. He pays more attention to the experiences that burn people out than he does to the experience of feeling burnt out; he is more interested in the stimulating world than the depleted subjects he claims it produces. He describes burnout as a ‘mirror disorder’ but is inertia really the mirror image of excess? As a counterpoint I thought of Lisa Baraitser’s recent book *Enduring Time*

which describes care as ‘the arduous temporal practice of maintaining ongoing relations with others and the world.’ Baraitser perceives that care is not only about expending energy or working too hard or too compassionately for others:

To care is never simply a matter of labour or simply a matter of the wish to repair the world. To care is to deal in an ongoing and durational way with affective states that may include the racialized, gendered and imperially imbued ambivalence that seeps into the ways we maintain the lives of others. Care is an arduous temporal practice that entails the maintenance of relations with ourselves and others through histories of oppression that return in the present again and again.

Sometimes things are not fast. Sometimes nothing much happens. Sometimes the demands made on people by capitalism and each other are quiet and ongoing. Sometimes care also contains a violent aspect. Thinking about the temporal aspects of care thematised by Baraitser seems to provide a more promising way of understanding and ameliorating the effects of something as chronic and pervasive-seeming as ‘burnout’ than Chabot’s proposed return to eighteenth-century notions of social contracts.

Hannah Proctor

Insurgent universality

Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London and New York: Verso, 2018). 144pp., £10.99 pb., 978 1 78663 376

In an editorial in the *New York Times* written ten days after the 2016 presidential election, Mark Lilla (Professor of Humanities at Columbia University) challenged the so-called ‘Whitelash’ thesis, arguing that the reason for Trump’s victory wasn’t his ability to translate economic insecurity into racism, but rather that the Democratic Party under Hillary Clinton’s leadership was itself too focused on identity questions. Identity politics, Lilla argued, were more ‘expressive’ than ‘persuasive,’ and, as a consequence, never won elections but often lost them. Lilla’s argument, subsequently elaborated in his 2017 book entitled *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, is that liberals within the Democratic Party

should spend less time emphasising gender, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation – that is, what *divides* Americans – and more time emphasising the United States’ great liberal-democratic institutions – that is, what Americans share *in common*.

This was apparently oblivious to the way in which Trump had actually won the election himself on the basis of a kind of White identity politics (what has been called ‘identitarianism’). After all, 53% of White women voted not for the White woman but for the White ethno-nationalist candidate. Nonetheless, since Lilla’s op-ed and book, two other notable books have appeared on identity politics in the wake of Trump’s election: *Identity:*

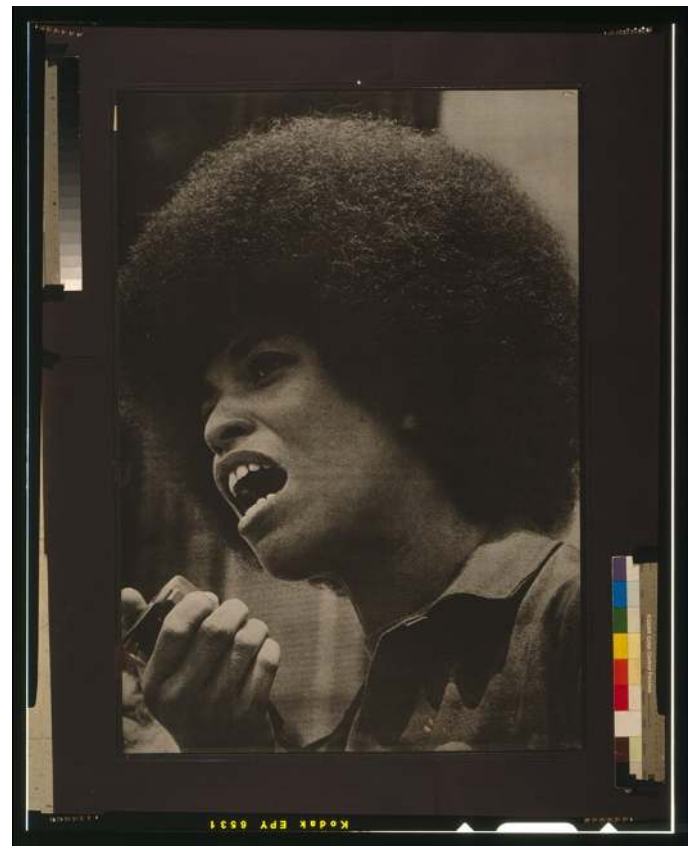
The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment by Francis Fukuyama (author of the once celebrated ‘end of history’ thesis), and *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* by the esteemed gay Ghanaian-English philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah. The former argues that the rise of identity politics is the result of an excessive form of what the Greeks called *thymos* (θυμός) or ‘spiritedness’ entailing the desire for recognition; the latter shows the fuzzy or imprecise nature of the identity categories that are often taken as immutable givens or essences.

The 2016 election is also the jumping off point for Asad Haider’s book, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*. The book is divided into six short, crisply written chapters. The first offers a genealogy of an identity politics initially theorised as central to a revolutionary transformation of a racist, patriarchal-capitalist order to its recent appropriation by the Democratic Party. Absent a structural critique of capitalism, Haider argues, identity politics ends up taking the bourgeois, heterosexual, White masculinist ideal as normative. This is followed by a chapter that poignantly shows how identity politics has not only become the ideology of the prevailing neo-liberal order, as critics such as Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed Jr. have cogently argued, but also short-circuits genuine movements on the Left seeking to transform it. He provides the example of the counter-productive and occasionally comical debates amongst people of colour on the campus of UC Santa Cruz, where Haider was a graduate student, over the use of the word ‘occupy’ in reference to protests against the administration which had recently raised tuition fees. He also considers the much more serious political conundrum of the ‘Afro-Pessimism’ of Frank Wilderson that was to exercise growing influence on #BlackLivesMatter insofar as it refused to reciprocate the solidarity offered to the movement by Palestinian activists. This, I think, is the most important aspect of Haider’s argument but one that he fails to develop fully enough.

The third chapter addresses the deep paradox of a tenacious attachment among young activists to the idea of race, in spite of the fact that it has been thoroughly de-mystified as possessing little or no substance in biological terms, while the following chapter is a fascinating reflection on the stand-off between Philip Roth and Amiri Baraka, as well as a reflection on what is, for Haider, the exemplary case of Rachel Dolezal. A White woman who

passed for several years as African American and, indeed, played a role in her local chapter of the NAACP, Dolezal is exemplary, Haider argues, precisely because she engages in ‘a peculiar introjection of white guilt.’

Chapter five seeks to understand the rise of Trump through Stuart Hall’s pioneering work on authoritarian populism as well as Wendy Brown’s development of Walter Benjamin’s notion of ‘Left-wing melancholy’ – the full-scale embrace by the Left of its own marginality and failure. Finally, the last chapter develops an alternative that returns to the original spirit of the earliest statement of identity politics by articulating a case for an ‘insurgent universality,’ based not on an abstract concept of rights-bearers but, rather, on ‘particular and concrete individuals – women, the poor, and slaves – and their political and social agency’.



Overall, this is a bracing and valuable contribution *from the Left* to the often vituperative debates swirling around identity politics. Rather than focusing, like Lilla, on the Democratic Party, however, Haider locates its origins in the earlier, pioneering work of the Black lesbian feminist Combahee River Collective. At the same time, Haider articulates a worry about the capacity of identity politics today to serve as the basis for a radical political

agenda. In contrast, therefore, to Lilla's rather patronising dismissal, Haider engages in a genuinely immanent critique of identity; that is, he criticises its contemporary *practice* on the basis of its own strongest *theoretical self-understanding*.

Accordingly, Haider defines contemporary identity politics as the 'neutralisation of movements against racial oppression.' This relocates identity politics in a liberal agenda of seeking restitution for victimhood by way of a juridical discourse. Quoting Judith Butler, Haider maintains that 'what we call identity politics is produced by a state which can only allocate recognition and rights to subjects totalised by the particularity that constitutes their plaintiff status.' Contemporary identity politics, in this view, remains fatally trapped within the liberal-bourgeois institutions of the state and its laws.

While Haider's impulse to try to understand the intertwined nature of race and class is correct, it is important to emphasise the way in which race cannot in any straightforward way be understood in terms of Stuart Hall's Althusserian formulation – which Haider himself draws upon – as 'the modality in which class is lived' (the original formulation is from Hall et al.'s pioneering book *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, published in 1978). In contemporary identity politics, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other identities demand recognition and affirmation, and in societies constituted, in part, by the mis-recognition or non-recognition of these identities, this is perfectly understandable and legitimate, to some extent at least. This is especially the case with 'trans' and indigenous identities that have asserted and re-asserted themselves, respectively, in recent years with particular force.

Yet proletarian identity – not unlike the condition of homelessness – cannot be understood in quite the same way. Thought in radical terms, such a form of identity is not simply an empirical sociological category but manifests a form of structural negativity that, as such, demands its own *negation*; just as people who are homeless, far from wanting their homeless condition to be recognised and affirmed, want it to be eliminated through, amongst other things, the provision of adequate housing. Capital cannot properly 'include' the proletariat on the basis of whose un-remunerated surplus labour its own expanded reproduction is premised. In other words, while other identity categories have an interest in recog-

nition and affirmation that, arguably, can be met within capitalism, the proletariat simply cannot. The realisation of proletarian identity is, ultimately, negative rather than affirmative; proletarian 'identity,' unlike most other identities, has an interest in *its own self-dissolution along with that of class society as a whole*.

I would suggest that rather than an individualistic, rights-based model, as Haider argues in invoking Butler, identity politics is based on a particular reified account of experience. Identity politics entails a *proprietary* relation to a reified form of experience – unchanging, fixed, substantive – that can be understood as the possession or property of a given group that is, paradoxically, constituted by that very form of experience. In German the word for authenticity or *Eigentlichkeit* is closely associated with the word for property or *Eigentum*. Identity politics often makes a claim to authenticity and such claims are closely linked to questions of ownership rights. This is why identity politics is often embroiled in questions of 'cultural appropriation.' One suspects that, despite his telling anecdotes, it is far from clear that Haider fully appreciates precisely how deleterious and fractious identity politics can be for Left politics, a glimpse of which we saw in the treatment of the Sanders campaign by Hillary Clinton and her backers at the Democratic National Committee.

Such a proprietary relation to experience is especially well exemplified by Hannah Black's infamous open letter attacking White painter Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till, the African-American boy beaten to death by White supremacists for allegedly looking the 'wrong way' at a White woman in 1955, and entitled *Open Casket* (2016), during the Whitney Biennale in 2016. 'The painting,' the letter reiterates several times, 'must go.' Co-signed by some 47 other artists, curators and critics, it demands not only that the painting be removed from the exhibition but also that it actually be *destroyed*. The key reason for this, according to Black, is that Schutz has *no right* to the experience of Black suffering. One immediately wonders whether West German students required a 'right' to Jewish suffering to raise the question of the Holocaust and collective German guilt in the tumultuous years of 1967-77. Why Dana Schutz should be any different is far from clear.

Black's letter is instructive because it makes a truth claim about a particular representation of suffering

without carefully attending to the painting's own sensuous particularity (as Zadie Smith precisely does in her response to *Open Casket* in a 2017 article in *Harper's Magazine*). The very premise of the claim confuses ontology with epistemology: that the representation was bereft of truthfulness by virtue of the fact that the race of the artist was simply wrong. The claim has the status of an *a priori* over an *a posteriori*, it is apodictic rather than based on attention to the details of the framing of its subject matter, its composition, use of colour, texture of its brush strokes, and so on. It therefore rules out in advance the possibility of a critical judgment of the work's overall success or failure. The claim, surely, is not simply that the work cannot *succeed* but that it also cannot *fail*. It ought not even be permitted to fail. It rules out in advance Samuel Beckett's claim that art works can fail and they can fail better and they can fail worse.

Artworks, as Benjamin and Adorno both suggested, are constituted by both truth and falsity, and the work of criticism is to draw out their 'truth-content' (*Wahrgehalt*). When they fail better, they fail in such a way that we can learn something from them, including, for example, the conditions of their own (im)possibility. Perhaps, at some level, *all* artworks seeking to express or represent suffering must fail in so far as such artworks remain deeply complicit with the world that produces such suffering in the first place. Surely, it is the role of art criticism to make such judgments about the nature of such failures? Yet Hannah Black moralistically rules out such criticism in advance by advocating the painting's liquidation.

This demand for the work's destruction is the logical conclusion of the radical particularism of identity politics or the idea that identity-based groups are unified by certain experiences that other groups simply have no *right* to. The relationship is one suggestive of property ownership yet a relationship also overdetermined by a sense that the loss of such property entails not just a monetary loss but an ontological one – a loss of being itself. From this perspective, claims or representations made by members of one group about another are not simply to be addressed by judgments, and, therefore, criticisms, because such claims and/or representations constitute hateful and harmful attacks on these very groups. This is also, for example, what came into play in the much-discussed case of Rebecca Tuvel's March 2017 *Hypatia* article on 'trans-racial' identities and the open letter

signed by over 800 hundred academics demanding its retraction as opposed to its critical discussion.

If it is true that central to identity politics is a reified account of experience, then a much more promising approach to it, I would suggest, is to be found in Frantz Fanon's dynamic understanding of experience. Given that Fanon's work, especially *Black Skin, White Masks*, is so central to identity politics in general, and to Afro-pessimism in particular, (from which in fact the main tropes of Hannah Black's letter seem to be drawn), it is unfortunate that Haider's immanent critique of identity politics remains confined to the U.S. Black radical tradition. Or to put it another way, it is unfortunate that it doesn't seek to engage in an immanent critique of Afro-pessimism's own rather one-sided appropriation of Fanon's thought. In what is surely one of the best accounts of Fanon's thought, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (1997), Ghanaian philosopher Ato Sekyi-Otu argues that it is within a 'dramaturgical' structure that we must seek to understand Fanon's narrative of liberation. 'Thanks to this formal characteristic', he argues, 'Fanon's narrative can give credence to the apprehension of a historical object in its immediate mode of appearance, and yet prepare us for a comprehension of this object – that is to say, a fuller knowledge of its appearance and its conditions of intelligibility.' Attention must be paid, therefore, to the various speech acts that constitute the often contradictory dramaturgical 'stagings' of experience itself.

Through a reading of the *Wretched of the Earth* (rather than *Black Skin, White Masks*), Sekyi-Otu charts the movement of experience beyond the Manichean world constituted by the binary logic of colonialism itself, a logic sedimented in the very architecture and built environment of colonised space as brilliantly represented by Gillo Pontecorvo in *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). Once the armed struggle commences, the colonial world, characterised by an Aristotelian logic of mutual exclusivity, quickly gives way to a more properly dialectical and temporal logic of mediation in which difference between colonised and coloniser is transformed into an internal differentiation of the colonised themselves. The becoming-human of the colonised corresponds, paradoxically, with the dynamic disclosure of difference within the colonised rather than the static and reified difference constituting the Manichean world of the colony.

The immediacy of *identity* based on the supposedly

‘natural’ fact of race now is fundamentally altered through what Marx called, in the first volume of *Capital*, a transformation in the ‘dramatis personae’ into *non-identity*; that is, divisions based on social class between a nascent national bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and workers and peasants, on the other, come into view. Sekyi-Otu felicitously calls this the ‘dialectical enlightenment’ of the post-colonial world, one in which:

Reason’s triumph, the faculty of dialectical disclosure, is in Fanon achieved experientially through a corrosive destruction of the rigidity and simplicity to which a racialised apprehension of the world had reduced everything. Thanks to this ‘bitter discovery’ of exploitative relations and distributive injustice as intraracial facts, as human, all-too-human possibilities, the nascent postcolonial subject is ready for a veritable political and epistemic reorientation.

What is important to grasp is the centrality of a reified or static understanding of *experience* lying at the heart of identity politics. If contemporary identity politics can be understood as *neo-liberal*, it is because it internalises the

logic of the value form at a particularly deep level. This becomes especially clear in the example of Hannah Black where we find precisely what Sekyi-Otu calls the ‘rigidity and simplicity to which a racialised apprehension of the world reduced everything.’ It is such a ‘racialised apprehension’ that grounds her demand for the destruction of an artwork.

If the work opens up a world, in Heidegger’s sense, then, in demanding *work*-destruction, Black nihilistically demands *world*-destruction – the destruction of the structure of meaning and of sense which the work generates, but also the basis on which that very same work may itself be *criticised*, as exemplified by the oppositional response of Black painter Parker Bright to *Open Casket*. Such world destruction, at the same time, then, profoundly forecloses the possibility of the ‘insurgent universality’ that Haider champions. Indeed, it forecloses the very possibility of politics as such.

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Contemporary Agamben?

Giorgio Agamben, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018). 114 pp., \$55.00 hb., \$18.95 pb., 978 1 50360 220 5 hb., 978 1 50360 221 2 pb.

Giorgio Agamben, *Taste*, trans. Cooper Francis (London and New York: Seagull Books, 2017). 90 pp., £14.99 hb., 978 0 85742 436 5

In seminars with Giorgio Agamben, he frequently expressed his admiration for Walter Benjamin’s notion of ‘citing without quotation marks’. Although part of a long-standing rhetorical and academic tradition, it is worth bearing this tactic in mind when we read the short preface that Agamben has composed for the five essays collected under the title *What Is Philosophy?* – the title itself already an act of ‘citing without quotation marks’, insofar as this titular inquiry is indelibly associated with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s final collaboration. In his preface, Agamben writes that these five texts ‘contain an idea of philosophy’ that becomes evident ‘only to those who read them in a spirit of friendship’. It is this ‘spirit of friendship’ that is meant to guide our reading. And it demands we encounter what Agamben writes as much as what he alludes to by ‘citing without quotation marks’.

What troubles me about this act of reading is that Agamben’s primary focus in these texts is what he calls ‘the original metaphysical problem of the fracture between the visible and the invisible, or appearance and being.’ There is nothing unique in identifying this fracture or even situating it as ‘the metaphysical problem’ of Western philosophy. But Agamben argues as if this originary fracture – traversing as it does aesthetics, political theory and ethics – is exposed and reckoned with only through his own singular, undeniably erudite, form of philological close reading, which engages only with the founders of ‘our’ philosophical discourse itself: Plato, Aristotle, etc. Such a focus renders the work of nearly all of Agamben’s philosophical peers silent. For instance, he simply ignores Alain Badiou’s reconceptualisation of Platonic love in relation to his ‘inaesthetics’, or Jacques