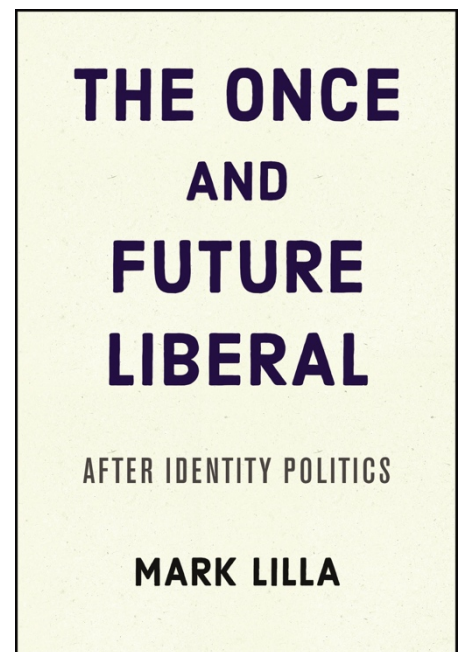
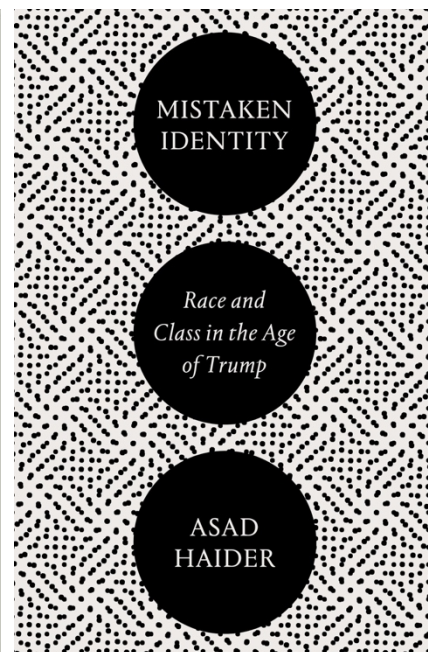
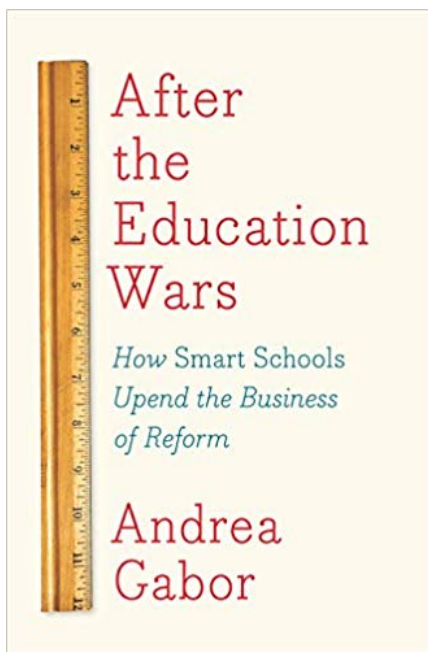


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review Identity and Its Discontents

by Sarah Chinn



After the Education Wars: How Smart Schools Upend the Business of Reform, by Andrea Gabor (The New Press, 2018)

Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump, by Asad Haider (Verso, 2018)

The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics, by Mark Lilla (Harper, 2017)

Poor identity politics. In the early 1980s it represented a new way of imagining political activism that took into account the realities of lived experience, and the failures of 20th century movements that systematically (if informally) excluded, ignored, or trivialized issues that might “distract” from the central problem at hand. Hence the active exclusion of black women from the suffrage movement of the early 20th century, the hostility towards any complaints from women of discrimination in the New Left, the decades-long unspeakability of homosexuality in pretty much every movement, and so on.

Identity politics was designed to end all that by insisting on the significance of marginalized identities, as well as the necessity to bring those identities to bear on seemingly unrelated issues. Coupled with this was the clear message that more marginalized people were often at the forefront of movements that did not take their oppression seriously: gay men in the New Left, black women in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, lesbians of all races in the fight for reproductive rights (and in Gay Liberation and in anti-apartheid organizing and in the fight against US involvement in Central America and struggles against anti-semitism and racism. In fact, lesbians in every movement). It was also a kind of *realpolitik*: a pragmatic recognition that no one was going to advocate for Asian American women or Chicana lesbians or disabled people except themselves. As the Combahee River Collective, the spiritual godmothers of identity politics, declared in 1977,

Our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. (Taylor 18)

History had shown again and again that the price of involvement in 20th century political movements meant subordinating one's own liberation to the larger struggle, and activists arguing for an identity-based critique of systems of power had had enough. While working for reproductive rights, advocating for survivors of rape and other kinds of gender-based violence, running community clinics, the women of Combahee refused to subordinate their own identities for the “greater good.”

Over the ensuing decades, “identity politics” shifted shape and was redefined, mostly negatively. The culture

wars of the 1990s were an outcropping of debates around identity as much as “values.” In his speech to the 1992 Republican National Convention, Pat Buchanan said as much, calling out feminists, the “homosexual rights movement,” and various other offenders against American values. Republicans, he maintained, were engaged in “a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself” not so much against ideas as against people: not just the Clintons but all the leftists, radicals, feminists, homosexuals, mobs, from whom “we must take back our cities, and take back our culture, and take back our country.”¹

Increasingly, identity politics was embraced by the right (although not in those terms) and repudiated by the left. When Barack Obama ran for President, he sidestepped questions about racial identity as much as he could. Even in his lauded 2008 address on race, Obama decried “the temptation to view my candidacy through a purely racial lens.”² He criticized his former pastor Jeremiah Wright for “express[ing] a profoundly distorted view of this country – a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America.” Even as he identified slavery as part of the founding of the United States – indeed, its “original sin” – Obama returned again and again to a message of “unity,” a word he used three times, and the need to maintain the “union” of the nation, used eight times.

It's not surprising that identity politics has careened back into political discourse in the wake of the election of Donald Trump. Trump's campaign was organized around demonizing various racial and gendered others, and glorifying American whiteness as a transcendent identity, a tendency he's carried through to his presidency. And yet, rather than acknowledging that a progressive identity politics from the left might counteract Trump's appeals to white and male supremacy, many on the left are still running as far away from that label as they can. This allergy to identity is not limited to one element of the left, as the books reviewed here show. Both Asad Haider on the Marxist left and Mark Lilla, a centrist Democratic historian, see identity politics as a temptation, a trap, in which claims to victimization trump real political action.

Haider is, at least, sympathetic to claims to identity politics, deeply informed about its origins, and a believer in an intersectional approach to political problems. In the final analysis, though, he sees identity as “an abstraction, one that doesn't tell us about the specific social relations that have constituted it. A materialist mode of investigation has to go from the abstract to the concrete” (11). For Haider, things went wrong somewhere in the early 1980s, in which “emancipatory mass movements..., which struggle against racism” were distorted into “the contemporary ideologies of identity, which are attached to the politics of a multiracial elite” (20). That is, identity is an easier pill for bourgeois people of color, queer people, white women, etc. to swallow than, say, the redistribution of wealth and a robust critique of capitalism.

As a Marxist, Haider prioritizes a materialist analysis. This is not to say that he sees race, gender, and sexuality as irrelevant. He's well aware that racism,

misogyny, and homophobia infuse US politics, and that those interlocking systems are not going to be magically undone by a workers' revolution (not least because the people who suffer under those systems *are* the majority of the working class). He's clear-eyed that racial solidarity among white people has been a powerful political and cultural force from the beginnings of the United States as a national entity and was a major factor in the 2016 election. Moreover, he understands the practical as well as ethical damage white racism has done on the left, especially labor movements, pointing out – correctly, I think – that “the cost of this indifference to race [by unions] was that socialism was always competing for recruitment with whiteness” (59), a dynamic that has had an alarmingly long half-life.

For Haider, the remedy to white racial solidarity is “class solidarity across races” as well as gender and sexuality (59). His case study here is the British miner's strike of 1984-85, in which feminist and queer groups – notably Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners – joined efforts to support miners politically and materially. This kind of integrated class analysis was instrumental in maintaining the miners' commitment to their strike (as well as keeping food on their tables), even if they were ultimately defeated by Margaret Thatcher. This relationship was reciprocal: over the course of the 1980s, the miners' union pushed through support of LGBT civil rights.³

Ultimately, Haider advocates for what he calls “insurgent universality” (109), which will both include an intersectional analysis and focus on anti-capitalism. After all, “it is the structure of the capitalist system that prevents all people who are dispossessed of the means of production, regardless of their identities, from having control over their own lives...in all their particularity” (51). I'm sympathetic to this argument, but to my mind it leaves important questions unanswered.

How, for example, does a primarily materialist analysis understand the mechanisms by which even middle-class and affluent people of color are as proportionately disadvantaged by race as their poor and working-class counterparts? Starting in the early 1980s, researchers have repeatedly found that in simulated hiring situations at every class level, “white” candidates (identified either by photographs or by “white-sounding names”) are selected for interviews up to twice as frequently as their “black” counterparts.⁴ Elite orchestras have moved to “blind” auditions, in which musicians play behind a curtain so their race and/or gender are not visible to conductors and concert masters, precisely to counter the self-perpetuating dominance of white men in classical music. Gendered, homophobic, and racialized violence occurs both within and across class lines, muddying the rhetoric of class solidarity. Finally, while I'm fully behind an intersectional, anticapitalist politics that roots political action in the struggle of liberation for all, I'm not sure that looking to control over the means of production will get us there.

While Haider's argument, despite its lacunae, is sharply argued and grounded in the scholarship of leftist, antiracist, and other liberationist approaches, Mark Lilla plays much, much faster and looser with his argument, resulting in a head-scratcher of a book. This may be in part because *The*

Once and Future Liberal is really a long essay dressed up in a book's covers. It achieves its 139 pages through the kind of tricks I criticize in my students: large font, wide margins, inches of space between paragraphs, as well as frontispieces to each of its chapters. I have to confess I struggled to be impartial about this book, although Lilla makes that very hard, not least due to the blurb by Fareed Zakaria. But Lilla gives the reader plenty of ammunition with which to shoot down his thinly-defended arguments.

Perhaps most egregious, especially for an academic, is the almost total lack of evidence for any of his claims, citations for his arguments, or any kind of bibliography that readers might consult to undergird the book's approach. Lilla's favorite rhetorical form is the *ex cathedra* pronouncement unsupported by any proof: “the paradox of identity liberalism is that it paralyzes the capacity to think and act in a way that would actually accomplish the things it professes to want” (14); “equal protection under the law is not a hard principle to convince Americans of” (126); “Black Lives Matter is a textbook example of how not to build solidarity” (127); etc., etc., etc.

Lilla imagines his audience here to be much like him – vaguely left-leaning folks with a vested interest in the Democratic Party. If Haider's guiding light is historical materialism, Lilla's is a liberal Democratic Party, to whom all those on the left should subordinate their own concerns (more on this in a minute). His version of identity politics is a kind of mushy narcissism in which political commitments take a backseat to self-knowledge and growth. What those in the New Left, for example, “wanted from politics was more than social justice and an end to the war, though they did want that. They also wanted there to be no space between what they felt inside and what they did out in the world” (74). In a vaguely disturbing metaphor, he characterizes identity as “an inner homunculus, a unique little thing composed of parts tinted by race, sex, and gender” (65).

Since he is a historian, Lilla can't ignore the effectiveness of the various movements he derogates, but he offers the reader a kind of bait-and-switch. On the one hand, pre-identity politics, civil rights organizers were Obamas *avant la lettre*, who saw fidelity to a more perfect union as their ultimate goal: “the civil rights movement offered a constructive way of serving both the African-American community and the country as a whole...not to idealize or deny difference...but to render it politically impotent”(63-4). On the other, while gay liberation, feminism, antiracism and the like may have made the country “a more tolerant, more just, and more inclusive place than it was fifty years ago,” their fatal mistake was that they “didn't contribute to the unification of the Democratic Party and the development of a liberal vision of Americans' shared future” (76).

The kind of bad faith – not to mention chutzpah – that Lilla displays here is astounding. Implicitly he is claiming that the activism he decries as narcissistic and impotent did achieve some of the major cultural, legislative, and legal changes of the past decades, but their focus should have been not their own concerns but the health of the Democratic Party. Moreover, these changes did effect far more unity than the Dems themselves by fighting for parity

for all Americans, of whom people of color, queer people, and white women are the majority (not to mention, of course, that marginalized people, especially black women, are far more likely to vote Democratic). Lilla wants to snatch the cake out of our mouths and eat it himself, while complaining that it's too dry.

Finally, Lilla is tone-deaf about the organizing of the past couple of decades. Radical organizing has been characterized by big-picture thinking. Occupy is a prime example of this, in which activists explicitly spoke to and as the 99% of the population who do not control the means of production. The Women's March was hardly narcissistic, unless one considers the concerns of women of all classes and races self-indulgent. And protests against Trump's "Muslim ban" were broad-based and justice-oriented: perhaps the most striking image of 2017 was of people swarming JFK airport to offer legal and moral support for detained travelers. Not only is there no mention of the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America both on college campuses and around the country, Lilla grossly misrepresents Black Lives Matter, which he calls "a textbook example of how not to build solidarity" (127 – at this point I have to confess that I threw the book across the room).

To paraphrase Asad Haider, not only is identity politics an abstraction to Mark Lilla, so is every concern beyond loyalty to the Democratic Party, which has a very mixed record on upholding the rights of the putatively self-involved identity groups Lilla berates for not being "liberal" enough. Indeed, both books are short on concrete examples of what the pragmatic avoidance of identity politics might look like. I'd argue that that's because the politics of identity are inextricable from policy, from government, and from lived experience, rather than beholden to them.

This intertwining of on the ground reality and the abstractions of identity is played out expertly by Andrea Gabor in *After the Education Wars*. On the surface, the book seems like a methodical, heavily-researched takedown of what we've come to think of as neoliberal education schemes: high stakes testing, charter schools, "accountability," and the like. And in those terms it's a success. Gabor recognizes that "[s]ince the beginning of the millennium, the story of education has been, in important respects, a business story" (2). She's not wrong: from the idea that schools should be run by businesses to the increasing influence of philanthropist business people, the language of the marketplace infuses K-12 education. As Gabor puts it, business-oriented educational reformers value "ideas and expertise forged in corporate boardrooms over the knowledge and experience gleaned in the messy trenches of inner-city classrooms" (4).

Gabor walks her readers through the genesis of charter schools, which were initially imagined (by Albert Shanker no less!) as laboratories for progressive teaching and intellectual exploration, unfettered by restrictive union regulations and a city-wide curriculum.⁵ They were organized around an educational philosophy that advocated for schools that were "participative, collaborative, *deeply democratic*" (15), schools that taught the whole child and engaged the whole teacher. But over the years, filtered through neoliberal mantras like entrepreneurialism and

accountability, and often bankrolled by billionaire businessmen, schools in general and charter schools in particular developed into the opposite of this progressive vision. Instead, they were skills and test prep oriented, individualistic, and top-down.

On closer examination, though, the story Gabor tells is not just of the corporatization of public education – although she does tell that story, and well. As her case studies of New York, Texas, and New Orleans show, these policies were put into place in majority black and brown school systems, systems often living in the shadow of legal segregation, white flight, and federal and state abandonment of cities. Gabor's contrast of corporate boardrooms and inner city classrooms is about class, of course. But it's also, and in many ways intrinsically, about race. The structure of a neoliberal schooling – drills, "no excuses" discipline, the throwing away of students who can't keep up and an inability/refusal to offer meaningful special education, the policing of dress and speech – are all in the mold of a Jim Crow conception of black children as lazy, slovenly, unable to control their behavior, and responding only to threats.

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The starkest example of this pattern is New Orleans, both pre- and post-Katrina. Gabor has done her homework, and traces the historic lack of investment by the city and state in education in general and black education in particular. After the withdrawal of Union troops and the end of Reconstruction, New Orleans established race and gender segregated schools. Not only was this a financial disaster (each district had to have four schools: white boys, white girls, black boys, black girls, rather than one coeducational integrated school), it set the pattern for disparate spending on education for African Americans. After desegregation, white New Orleanians did what their counterparts across the South did: pulled their children out of public school. By the 1990s, New Orleans schools were among the lowest-achieving, lowest-funded, and dangerous schools in the country.

Hurricane Katrina destroyed the majority of school buildings and Louisiana, governed by Mary Blanco, and New Orleans, with mayor Ray Nagin, saw an opportunity to remake the city's schools along the charter school model, converting the whole school system to charters. They also sought philanthropists from the business world, especially the Gates Foundation, to fund this change, which was designed to be anti-union, top-down, and market-oriented. And they invested in an educational philosophy implicitly

based in the idea that black children need more discipline, are more impervious to punishment, have minimal mental health needs (despite the massive trauma of the storm), and must be pushed relentlessly to succeed.

Even Haider's sophisticated analysis of the intersections of identity politics and anticapitalism get us only so far here. On the one hand, it's true that the corporatization of New Orleans education was a significant part of the handover to charter schools, many of which were run by corporations like KIPP and Success Academy. But to my mind the governing issue here is not class but race. The majority-white city of Gulfport, Mississippi was destroyed by Katrina, but its education system was not auctioned off to entrepreneurs and charter school companies. In addition, the charter school network in New Orleans provided minimal support for children with special needs, effectively encouraging the most disadvantaged students to drop out without a high school diploma, and shunting them towards low-wage work and/or prison.

It's hard to imagine what scheme could have single-handedly rescued New Orleans schools. Students had spent months away from their homes, often doubling or tripling up with relatives, after having experienced the shock of the flooding itself. New Orleans was already a violent city with high rates of gun violence, and a poor black city. But the rebuilding of New Orleans schools represents an opportunity squandered in large part because the city and state government and the philanthropists they sought out could not imagine a participatory, progressive education system

that educated the whole – often profoundly traumatized and already undereducated – black child.

Andrea Gabor shows us how race makes an enormous difference in educational policies and outcomes. In *After the Education Wars*, race is not an abstract identity. It is, rather, a confluence of forces that makes things happen to people of color that rarely if ever happen to white Americans. And it's not clear what an "insurgent universality" or a liberal, civic-minded Democratic Party can do about that.

Notes

- ¹ For the full text of the speech, see <http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/buchanan-culture-war-speech-speech-text/>
- ² For the full text of this speech, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/us/politics/18text-obama.html>
- ³ Unfortunately, this solidarity did not stop Thatcherism's erosion of the trade union movement or the passage in 1986 of Section 28, which stated that local authorities could not "intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship."
- ⁴ A typical title of one of these articles speaks for itself: "Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination."
- ⁵ This is not to say that Gabor is anti-union (and Shanker was decidedly not!). In fact she finds that on the whole the presence of unions has "a positive effect on student achievement" (11).



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