Fractured

‘An important and timely analysis rich in historical detail. It challenges crude denunciations of “identity politics” on both right and left, and reiterates that intersectionality is indeed political economy.’

—Alison Phipps, Professor of Sociology at Newcastle University, author of Me, Not You: The Trouble With Mainstream Feminism

‘In these pages, Michael Richmond and Alex Charnley draw on the living communisms that are Black feminism, decolonial struggle, and trans solidarity to create a new revolutionary synthesis for a working class that, as they remind us, has always been divided. Combining years of experience of left organising with theoretic sophistication, this book demonstrates why, in material terms, capitalism produces constantly shifting relations (between oppressions) that take the appearance of divisions, and also how movements right now are labouring in and against those fractures. As new forms of *soi-disant* “anti-identity politics” rise up in the colonial heartlands (from gender-critical feminism to nativism), *Fractured* issues a powerfully argued appeal to the left to finally understand that “Prioritising solidarity for those most marginalised or under attack is not about guilt or charity or ‘virtue-signalling’. It is part of what can get everyone free”.

—Sophie Lewis, author of *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* and *Abolish The Family: A Manifesto For Care and Liberation*. Her essays have appeared in the *New York Times, Harper’s, Boston Review, n+1, the London Review of Books* and *Salvage*

‘Provides us with an astute, readable and utterly compelling history of our present predicament. This sharp, thoughtful, generous little book helps us see the many roads that lead to better worlds, arguing that to get there we need to abandon those noisy, nasty, noxious debates on “identity politics”. It clears ground, carefully tracing histories of resistance and reaction, reminding us that the working class is and always has been manifold - and therein lies our strength.’

—Luke de Noronha, academic and writer at the Sarah Parker Remond Centre, University College London and author of *Deporting Black Britons: Portraits of Deportation to Jamaica* and co-author, with Gracie Mae Bradley, of *Against Borders: The Case for Abolition*
‘This is a stirring book, full of inspiration, insight, provocation. Fractured insists that if we are to grasp the radical possibilities of connection, we must first understand the political legacy of division. Expect to be educated, made to think, or better still, urged to reconsider.’
—Vron Ware, author of Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History and Out of Whiteness: Color, Politics, and Culture

‘A sharp and lucid rejoinder to all the political trends that in recent years have imbued “identity politics” with magically divisive powers. Fractured is essential to understanding anti-racist politics today.’
—Arun Kundnani, author of The Muslims are Coming!: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror and The End of Tolerance: Racism in 21st Century Britain

‘A searing materialist critique of the historical origins of attacks on Identity Politics from the right, a clarifying text that analyses the strategic purpose of the imagined “culture war” that continues to engulf mainstream politics. Richmond and Charnley understand, fundamentally, that the purview of the left should be the creation, cultivation, and fierce defence of a liveable life for all. This book is evidence of an unshakeable commitment to those principles.’
—Lola Olufemi, a black feminist writer, researcher and organiser from London and author of Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power and Experiments in Imagining Otherwise

‘Class reductionism sheds little light on our crisis-ridden times. Instead, Fractured uncovers both the historical entanglements of class and race and the multitude of solidarities that continually rise to oppose oppression. Richmond and Charnley gift us with the analysis, and hope, we need to fight on.’
—Alana Lentin, a scholar who works on the critical theorisation of race, racism and anti-racism and co-author with Gavan Titley of The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age and author of Why Race Still Matters
Fractured
Race, Class, Gender and the Hatred of Identity Politics

Michael Richmond and Alex Charnley
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Introduction

In order to build solid political alliances in the future there has to be some awareness of the historical processes that have brought different groups together and kept them apart.¹

*Vron Ware*

Solidarity is the best weapon in the struggle of life.²

*Aaron Lieberman*

Throughout this book we examine conservative propagations of ‘identity politics’ – a political smear that has been monopolised by the right, but also has form on the centre and left. These discourses will often feature other terms: ‘culture war’, ‘political correctness’, ‘multiculturalism’, ‘neoliberalism’ (mainly on the left), ‘cultural Marxism’ (mainly on the right), ‘free speech’, and now ‘gender ideology’ and ‘wokeness’. Each has their own meanings and contexts depending on where the reaction is coming from. ‘Identity politics’, and these related terms, act as ideological frames for explaining social and political division. We refer to them all at some point and relate them back to histories of class struggle. We call these social divisions ‘fractures’, which have become antagonised and deepened by a breakdown in the liberal democratic consensus. The following tendencies characterise this escalation:

- More confrontational government frames pitting ‘the people’ against threats to nation
- A weak or resolutely defeated ‘formal’ opposition to the right (i.e. social democratic parties and trade unions)
- A discredited model of neoliberal progress or ‘centre ground’
- An ethically motivated and environmentalist youth politics
- Black resistance against the police and racism
- Conspiracies about elites
• A convergence of fascist rhetoric and personalities into the mainstream
• Insurrectionary street politics from diverse formations

The ambiguity produced by a breakdown of liberal democratic legitimacy invites ambiguous political framings. Identity politics is a metaphor all political persuasions have been able to rely upon. The term ‘identity’ allows for multiple meanings in transit. In pejorative discourses of identity politics, one of the main implied meanings is a politics guided by manipulation. This emphasis works through the slipperiness of the word ‘identity’, especially in an internet age, where persona construction is built into the medium. These terms function as organising points for conspiracies of cultural decline, demographic change and national weakness. Far-right conspiracies of national weakness are then connected to mainstream adjuncts to the far right, such as Jordan Peterson, who claims there has been a ‘backlash against masculinity’.3 ‘cultural Marxism’, ‘Black Lives Matter (BLM)’ and ‘Anteefa’ are wielded by the right as abstractions, mysterious entities, threatening to impose ‘woke identity politics’ on innocent populations.* ‘Marxism’ hasn’t been this talked about in decades, with conservative literature on the subject enjoying bestseller status.4 Imagery derived from the culture of liberalism – its speeches, corniness, dissimulations, talk shows – fuels a politically fluid hatred of liberals that is nostalgic for a nation governed by pure conservative ideals: strong men, strong state, free speech, nuclear families.

Aspects of this reaction also travel through the political centre. ‘Cancel culture’ moral panics regularly explode in Britain, one of the main production houses for transphobic conspiracy theory. The proliferation of these conspiracies, as we explore in Chapter 3, has come through liberals, and some on the left. Identity politics

* ‘Antifa’, as a set of organising ideas and practices, can trace its lineage back to the anti-fascist movements in interwar Italy and Germany. ‘An-TEE-fa’, with emphasis on the second syllable, references a tendency today, particularly on the political right, to not only mispronounce the word but also to misrepresent anti-fascist action, particularly in the USA, as more coordinated, hierarchically led and conspiratorial than it is. ‘An-TEE-fa’, are regularly blamed for acts of violence or ‘false flags’, many on the right claimed that they were responsible for the 6 January Capitol Insurrection.
and wokeness are conservative propagations, then, but they are not limited to the right. Conservative discourses can drag others into them, while the discourses themselves are blended with left terminology. Centrist free speech absolutists have travelled deeper into this territory as their opposition to anti-fascist movements became more pronounced. In 2021, journalist Glenn Greenwald, lionised for his defence of WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden, reacted to the use of BLM and Pride imagery in government recruitment videos, tweeting,

Contempt for it on the merits aside, one has to acknowledge the propagandistic genius of exploiting harmless-to-power identity politics as the feel-good cover for perpetuating and even strengthening the neoliberal order and further entrenching corporate and imperial power.

From GCHQ bathing itself in the rainbow flag to CIA celebrating Women’s Day to General Dynamics waving the BLM banner, this tactic is now perfectly honed to make liberals swoon and believe they’re supporting revolutionary change as they actually cheer for status quo power.5

The anti-capitalism of ‘masks’ (and the performance of their unveiling) is no longer a minor canon of left theory and culture. These kinds of oppositional discourses are now a widespread part of popular culture and popular conspiracism. This ideological haywire is typical of our times. The spurious ways these discourses shift and re-attach produces its own trivialisation effect. Suffering is trivialised. Where examples of suffering are raised, one can easily ask who benefits and what the agenda is. This cynicism is a problem for left-wing traditions that must make arguments under the most hostile conditions. Left figureheads and media cultures, to make matters worse, have become dependent on these discourses to exert influence and grow media subscriptions (with a view that some presence is better than none). Charges of disunity, even sabotage, are projected onto trans people by some feminists and socialists. Common to all is a bitterness and resentment over the direction of left-wing politics, a dire certainty that ‘identity politics’
divides or repulses the working class. But the working class has always been divided.

*Jacobin*, the most successful English-language socialist magazine of the last decade, became a platform for anti-identity politics and anti-woke discourses. This began in reaction to Obama, but was also propelled by an interest in new right populist movements like the Tea Party (and Trump voters in the ‘rustbelt’). The factional stresses that accompanied a new socialist accommodation with electoral politics also became a factor. After the Ferguson insurrections of 2014, the liberal appropriation of ‘woke’ in popular culture constructed a symbolic screen that the right used to prove the left dominated the mainstream. The US political left – keen to maintain ideological distance from their rivals in the Democratic Party – attempted to steer anti-elite momentum towards a critique of neoliberal elites. This strategy was expressed in polemics opposing ‘neoliberal identity politics’ – a supposed hangover from liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s – to a longer socialist tradition. Adolph Reed has been a stalwart of this position. His critiques of anti-racism have been persistently used to remind socialists that Black Lives Matter (BLM) was a distraction:

Notwithstanding its performative evocations of the 1960s Black Power populist ‘militancy’, this antiracist politics is neither leftist in itself nor particularly compatible with a left politics as conventionally understood. At this political juncture, it is, like bourgeois feminism and other groupist tendencies, an oppositional epicycle within hegemonic neoliberalism, one might say a component of neoliberalism’s critical self-consciousness; it is thus in fact fundamentally anti-leftist. Black political elites’ attacks on the Bernie Sanders 2016 presidential nomination campaign’s call for decommodified public higher education as frivolous, irresponsible, or even un-American underscores how deeply embedded this politics is within neoliberalism.

As the traditional means of organising left programmes became more restrictive (i.e. conservative and corporatised labour unions became more service-oriented), explanations for the weakness of the left have been found in some of the new movements and iden-
tities that have emerged: BLM, in particular. Reed has blamed anti-racism for divisions on the left since the late 1970s and he is only one among many. The impression that neoliberalism is somehow ‘fundamentally’ serviced by a deployment of minority concerns is a more free-floating conspiracy today and one with an undeniable structure familiar to a particular strand of quasi-Marxist thinking. The problem here is not the simple relaying of facts. There are Black political elites, there are corporate feminists, there are reactionaries who are queer/trans. Identities can be used to ward off class privileges, especially in a public sphere that selects for diverse representation at the surface level. But this is also the case for ex-socialists like Tony Blair, who used his socialist identity to ward off challenges from the left and scale the heights of Davos. Indeed, socialist parties across Europe have used their historical identifications with progressive movements to cement their place in ‘hegemonic neoliberalism’. The same ‘fundamentally anti-leftist’ features were part of the most militant early socialist and trade union movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (featured in Chapters 4 and 5).

The easiest thing to communicate is that power corrupts. The problem is that the hypervisibility of a liberal multiracial public sphere is now being used as evidence to propagate a reactionary myth: that minorities rule, minorities corrupt. The tendency of the electoral left to look to centrist politicians for signs of ‘hegemonic neoliberalism’ has meant they have become politically blind to the international spread of neoliberal anti-identity politics. The corny proclamations of racial justice that are daily churn in US politics are, if anything, a distraction from forms of anti-cosmopolitanism now being innovated in the USA, Britain and elsewhere (including within left movements themselves). Angela Nagle, formerly within political left circles, was recruited by conservative platforms to perform this exact function. Now appearing on Fox News, Nagle has form arguing the ‘Left Case Against Open Borders’, while pivoting to mock socialist movements. Imagining that every kind of contemporary anti-racist or feminist politics is yet another vital expression of neoliberalism verges on the reactionary and fast-tracks some comrades right over to the other side.
FRAC T U R E D

UNQUALIFIED UNIVERSALISM

It would be easier if this was just a problem of social media, but there are structural blindspots on the left that have become more obvious with time. Liberation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s have been a major neurosis of socialist historiography and are part of the reason these conservative currents keep coming back around. The structuring assumption for many is that the post-war compact made workers movements stronger, while liberation movements, by the late 1970s, had become debased and incorporated within a new neoliberal regime. We look at different versions of this claim throughout this book and challenge the assumption. It is understandable why it stuck. If it is assumed that socialist traditions were defeated or corrupted by class enemies (and were not themselves internally contradictory and subject to challenges, as we argue), then they may return every decade to re-enact similar lines and programmes. Robin D.G. Kelley picked up on the tendency early. When Todd Gitlin complained: ‘much of the left is so preoccupied with debunking generalizations and affirming the differences among groups – real as they often are – that it has ceded the very language of universality that is its birthright,’9 Kelley answered:

The idea that race, gender, and sexuality are particular whereas class is universal not only presumes that class struggle is some sort of race and gender-neutral terrain but takes for granted that movements focused on race, gender, or sexuality necessarily undermine class unity and, by definition, cannot be emancipatory for the whole … Thus, when black gays and lesbians take to the streets to protest violence against them, that’s ‘identity politics’. When angry white males claim that affirmative action is taking jobs from them, that’s class politics muffled beneath a racial blanket they themselves don’t understand. When white people vote for David Duke and Pat Buchanan, that’s class politics, not ‘identity politics’. Something’s wrong with this picture.10

The 1990s were dominated by this sort of schematisation. Identity politics underwent a pejorative turn after the social movements of
the 1960s–1980s dispersed and a massive deskilling of industrial labour was facilitated, freeing capital to exploit labour across the world. Rights-based discourses and social justice issues were gradually limited to campaigns within the state or NGOs. There were massive Western restructures of former Soviet economies, new imperialist wars in the Middle East, Northern Ireland peace processes, the Srebrenica massacre and Rwandan genocide. Nancy Fraser argued that a ‘post-socialist’ split between a politics of ‘recognition’ (the establishing of minority or cultural rights) and (economic) ‘redistribution’ had expanded globally with potentially genocidal forms of ‘recognition’ part of the new terrain: the world had entered an ‘age of identity politics’.11

What was suggestive about this global theory of identity politics is that it surveyed an increasingly fragmented and violent world that was supposedly united by a new consensus of Western, liberal democratic values. However, such theories of fragmentation could also become introspective and project back a false image of past unities, against a new tide of minority causes. In 1996, Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm declared: ‘The political project of the Left is universalist: it is for all human beings.’ Adding, ‘identity politics is essentially not for everybody but for the members of a specific group only’.12 Hobsbawm ascribed inordinate power to unspecified identity groups, imputing they had the desire and ability to sideline or steamroller others: ‘Identity politics assumes that one among the many identities we all have is the one that determines, or at least dominates our politics … and of course that you have to get rid of the others.’13 His point was that socialism is rooted in universal principles and ‘identity politics’ threatened to fragment it:

Today both the Right and the Left are saddled with identity politics. Unfortunately, the danger of disintegrating into a pure alliance of minorities is unusually great on the Left because the decline of the great universalist slogans of the Enlightenment, which were essentially slogans of the Left, leaves it without any obvious way of formulating a common interest across sectional boundaries.14
This was the stem of a wider structure of resentment some socialists fell into and failed to properly differentiate. The idea that ‘Right and Left are saddled with identity politics’ is precisely how the Trump era has been portrayed by liberals. It is an equivalence that explains nothing. Socialist explanations for the 1990s transition identified a fracturing of political traditions but tended to separate ‘economic’ and ‘cultural’ lefts, with the latter meaning any politics including a focus on race, gender, sex, disability, ethnicity. This could keep alive a traditional focus on labour movement politics – just as labour parties and institutions further turned against workers. These theories also risked adapting conservative divisions of tradition and cosmopolitan ideologies of race and sexuality into an economic/cultural split. They rested on unqualified forms of universalism that were themselves cut loose from the changing character of working-class conditions during this transition.

An interesting exception is a remarkable polemic against identity politics by long-time director of London’s Institute of Race Relations (IRR), Ambalavaner Sivanandan. In the late 1980s, the journal Marxism Today tried to forge a broad left vision, anticipating that Tory rule had finally run out of steam. They envisioned a more flexible class politics organised around multiple single-issues and ‘identities’ from within the Labour Party. Many of these figures went on to court New Labour positions. Some, like Stuart Hall, remained critical. Sivanandan argued against this approach and for a return to class, as many socialists sceptical of identity politics do today. But he also argued that relevant class perspectives were ‘eviscerated’ by a political focus ‘thrashing around for a showing at the polls’. Indeed, any electoral, issue-based politics – environment, class, race, gender, anti-imperialism, sexuality – was distorted when not related back to the ‘exploitation of workers … all the bits and pieces of the working class that the new productive forces have dispersed and dissipated of their strength’. The electoral focus narrows in on the national, where an international perspective was needed more than ever, ‘the centre of gravity of that exploitation has shifted from the centre to the periphery and,
within the centre, to peripheral workers, home workers, ad hoc workers, casual, temporary, part-time workers. Sivanandan’s response is interesting because he was unattached to more sensitive defenses of the workers’ movement under strain of new intellectual trends. He was reacting to a specific interpretation of Gramsci, Althusser, Lacan (sometimes veering off into generalisations), alongside his criticism of a ‘working class movement’ that had ‘turned its face against’ the ‘profoundly socialist’ aspirations of new social movements. Sivanandan’s arguments weren’t nostalgic for traditional socialist movements or determined by US-centric anti-racism discourse. His barbs can sound like those of Reed and Fraser, but as a post-war immigrant to Britain, he had no illusions about the racist character of national politics and trade unions. He suspected, like Fraser, that economic determinism was being substituted for forms of cultural determinism, but unlike Fraser, he did not wish for a return to a traditional politics of redistribution, nor did he think state recognition of identities was a fortuitous thing. He spent his life analysing and fighting the British state, the Labour Party and trade unions, which collaborated to impose racial division on the working class in the name of redistributionary principles. He railed against an individualist turn in politics, but whereas Reed envisions working-class universalism in one country and favours immigration controls, Sivandandan studied and fought them throughout his life. Reed dismisses ‘anti-racism’ as neoliberal ideology tout court, while Sivanandan differentiated ‘state anti-racism’ from the grassroots cultures of anti-racism he experienced and contributed to. Familiar critiques of identity politics turn up alongside a more discrete emphasis on race and class issues, as is evident in this passage:

The ‘personal is the political’ has also had the effect of shifting the gravitational pull of black struggle from the community to the individual at a time when black was already breaking up into ethnics. It gave the individual an out not to take part in issues that affected the community: immigration raids, deportations, deaths in custody, racial violence, the rise of fascism, as well as everyday things that concerned housing and schooling and plain existing. There was now another venue for politics: oneself, and
another politics: of one’s sexuality, ethnicity, gender – a politics of identity as opposed to a politics of identification.\textsuperscript{17}

It has become conventional today to write off personal or subjective experience as a symptom of neoliberal individualism and consumerism. But Sivanandan’s polemic was not limited to pointing at the speech of some Clintonite lackey or a CIA advert to unmask neoliberal ideology. Crucially, he maintained a distinction between grassroots political cultures and the electoral formation of individual and group identities, ‘The personal is the political may produce radical individualism, the political is personal produces a radical society.’\textsuperscript{18} This gets us to the nub of the identity problem: what working-class vantage points and perspectives were innovated by participants who brought their own personal experiences to them? If they became overshadowed and overpowered by conformist trends and identity-thinking – nationalism, careerism, sectarianism – how did this occur? These same questions should be applied to socialist movements which, Sivanandan acknowledges, repressed the kind of expanded analytical frames that feminist enquiries innovated. This matters not because bad actors need rooting out, but because we can understand more concretely how liberal societies are constituted by fracture: polarisation is nothing new, on the contrary, it is the point.

Despite his polemical and caustic style, Sivanandan left open a fuller idea of working-class problems of ‘plain existing’ (including deportations, deaths in custody) that are not accommodated in other socialist framings of class. In the Sanders’ movement in particular, an orthodox view of class sought to mobilise a colourblind alliance of voters. This identification with the working class was of a centrist technocratic design: made to land well with Democratic voters who moved to Trump, while attacking the ‘wokeness’ of centrist factions within the party. Defunding or abolishing the police were not issues socialists could ‘pitch to voters’. These issues were also doubled down on in Corbyn’s manifestos, where increases in police numbers were promised. This is not surprising: social democratic programmes are functionally limited in what they can do. What is more concerning is how ‘anti-wokeness’ became a
popular socialist snide. It has been strange to see left-wing US
tropes of ‘identity politics’ and ‘cancel culture’ reach into the heart
of public discourse in Britain. Contexts for these discourses vary
from place to place, as we examine in Chapter 1, with the toppling
of the Colston Statue and the reaction that followed. This direct
action produced a new enthusiasm for anti-colonial histories of
abolition. It also sparked spiraling anti-woke discourses that went
right to the summit of politics and entered into policymaking.
Centrists and tabloids took hold of the identity politics charge and
used it to band together socialists and anti-racists as woke extrem-
ists who hated Britain. As we argue throughout, the left cannot
control how these discourses evolve and they do not universalise
well. Conservatives promote a conspiracy of liberal elites and
signpost ‘progressive’ language as the cause. The most witless/reac-
tionary left currents have imitated this reaction and found
themselves swallowed whole by it. The most witless/reactionary
left currents have imitated this reaction and found themselves
swallowed whole by it. Strands of left populism now lie marooned
within jaded and pointless oppositions, having achieved nothing
but rancour, suspicion, intellectual stagnation, yet growing media
platforms for a few.\textsuperscript{19} When all is marked by inauthenticity, reveal-
ing the inauthenticity of the world is comforting, but class mantras
offer no alternative. If these projects were working, they would not
need strawmen to qualify them. There must be other ways.

\section*{IDENTITY POLITICS REVISITED}

In Chapters 2 and 3 we revisit the original identity politics concept.
We look at the work of Black feminists in the USA and Britain and
compare how identity politics was conceived and related to very
different Black experiences and histories. The Combahee River
Collective – who coined the term – published a statement in 1977
outlining a sophisticated appreciation of the interrelationship
between exploitation under capitalism and racial/gendered/sexual
oppressions: