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JAKSA CSABA

Class struggle instead of racial struggle

HAIDER, Asad, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso, 2018)

The past few years of struggle against racism brought certain features of anti-racist (and gender) movements to the surface which, in the end, limit any real political advancement. Although misguided social fights are nowhere new, Asad Haider's book draws our attention with its shrewd critique to the inauspicious tendency of hijacked progressive movements. Finding the authentic target and form of the revolution only grew in relevance since the publishing of the thin volume with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. It is difficult to properly evaluate a movement from outside, but the findings of *Mistaken Identity* provide perspectives and tools to understand and support the current events. Haider, most importantly, attacks the recent development in identity politics but he approaches the issue through addressing social movements against racism, which usually distinguishes between two sides: racists and anti-racists (where, in the latter, sometimes only people of colour are allowed). In the fight against racism, the general argument today is a simple prohibition, a premise which can be attributed to the liberal opinion-policing and summed up as: do not be racist. The problem with this simple answer is not its content but that it misses the main point of political interaction among people, it reduces people's political practice to a passive role instead of creative political participation; if anything, it deprives the political subject to form a political judgment. This is the crucial point where Haider differs from this rough sketch of the opinion-

policing safe space culture we experience today. In his analysis, he connects the struggle against racism with class struggle that allows him to step out of the general categories and understand the mistakes of individual political demands: the false importance of identity. Verso books once again delivered a volume which provides a radically new perspective and vocabulary – a theory – for an exigent question. Although Haider only talks about the United States, his approach is not bound to a single locus because it reveals a more fundamental mechanism that determines social developments in other societies in the same way as they all share the capitalist mode of production. The book raises a multitude of questions and uncommon perspectives, it presents how capital neutralized anti-racist movements and identity politics in different historical periods.

The introduction of the author is the same as of the book's because the volume is an imprint of Haider's political life and thought. Haider reflects on his special marginal position as it has shaped his political consciousness and on its role in writing this book. His parents immigrated to the United States before he was born, but growing up in Pennsylvania, he found himself in a multitude of marginal positions for being neither truly American nor Pakistani, for being a person of colour but not being black, and for being marginalized but still growing up in a well-off intellectual family. The personal moment of the book is the "homeland security" status of his identity which produced a political experience for him that is the opposite of our days. The diverse background of the author did not lead him to submerge himself in his identity but made him realize the ambiguity and intangibility of identity politics. Haider, an activist himself, went through various political experiences from organizing demonstrations and leading debates, to being part of organizations. He saw at first-hand how a collective struggle can narrow down to very particular images of identities. He also recalls a story when he was excluded from a meeting because he was not dark enough. Regardless of these experiences, his

particular marginal position and scholarly work enabled him to grasp the problem at its root instead of falling into the same mistake that many others do by keeping their eyes only on their own particular features and interests.

What makes Haider's book more than an interesting lesson on the American political situation of the people of colour is the leverage of a different concept into the analysis, namely class-struggle. Besides race and class, he mentions gender as another important perspective to incorporate into the analysis, however, he does not undertake to explain the third aspect of the "Holy Trinity of identities" because these abstract categories require the explanation of their own specific histories. Nonetheless, an extensive historical analysis should always encounter other kinds of social relations, such as gender, as it is a constitutive element of our "concrete history." Haider shows how the social understanding of race has developed, and he does it through the relation of anti-racist movements to workers' movements. I interpret this the following way: social class – in itself – is also a matter of identity, however, it has a closer relation to class struggle than anti-racist struggle does. Haider added in a podcast interview that Marxism in the rough sense is insufficient, not "everything should be understood in ultimately economic terms [...] that's certainly not an accurate description of Marx himself."¹ Anti-racism fills in (one of) the hole(s) in class-struggle which is missing from the solely economic critique of political economy. The combination of anti-racist struggle with class-struggle can discard the fundamental position of identity as a determinant factor in the *distribution of the sensible*, of the political. Haider states that without class-struggle the racial emancipation is not only impossible but also a false path. Thus, the key to understanding identity is not simply to attack the concept, we also have to undermine its central position

¹ DENVIR, Daniel, *Mistaking Identity Politics*, The Dig (Podcast), Hozzáférés: 2020. 08. 25. <https://www.blubbry.com/thedig/35625071/mistaking-identity-politics/>

and importance, to reject it as the foundation of our thinking. This thesis has a serious consequence because identity is structured by the State. People are described by their features in the everyday life which is prescribed by the State. These features are primary for identity and the experience of the personal information forces us into the order and logic of the State, thus one has to take, with Haider, an anti-etatist position in order to free oneself from the rule of identities. Haider says that in order to understand the role of race in our political thinking, one has to examine the “history of race, racism and antiracist movements” (p. 16).² The contemporary political discourse, in general, is devoid of this historical materialism which reveals the connection between the initial appearance of the idea (of race), the everyday use of it as identity, and the processes between them which shaped the concept.

The first chapter undertakes the analysis of the historical process in which identity politics was created and transformed. Later, identity politics has no longer insisted on the necessity of coalition with other revolutionary groups. Identity politics – Haider elaborates – was created by the Combahee River Collective (CRC), a group of lesbian black women, who were marginalized within their other movements. In light of their oppressed position in the already oppressed social group, the collective put its own experience forward, saying that workers’ movement which is not feminist and antiracist does not guarantee their liberation. Their analyses and practices were rooted in their particular identities focusing on their oppression, because “the most profound – as they wrote it in their Statement – and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression”.³ Although identity politics came out of personal experience, its main principle was

² The simple page numbers behind the citations will refer to Haider’s book.

³ Combahee River Collective, „The Combahee River Collective Statement”, in szerk. SMITH, Barbara, *Home Girl*, 264–274 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 267; See also: HAIDER, *Mistaken identity...*, 13.

the rejection of abstract individuality in which the individuals are separated from any collective political idea. The repudiation of the abstract individuality opened the possibility of political action on a universal idea, the CRC linked individuality to class-struggle. The dismissal of closed particularities (i.e. exclusive identities) constitutes the political potency (or usefulness) of the theory of the collective, opposite to the contemporary idea of identities. Haider does not emphasize enough nor elaborates exhaustively on another difference between the historical and the contemporary use of identity politics, that is for the CRC, identity politics was a conglomerate of identities, where within this multitude the elements can coexist. Solidarity became the leading principle of the collective in organizing the movement. As founding member Demita Frazier recalls it, “we understood that coalition building was crucial to our own survival” (p. 12).⁴ In the original sense, identity politics was the sublation of identities where the personal experience is not subordinated to collective acting but identity can function as a creative source which can advance common causes. It should be noted that the political practice of the Combahee River Collective corresponds with Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s concept of multitude, where the individuality of the elements is not dissolved in the collective. Furthermore, this means that identities have a condition in order to fit into this system. Identities must have revolutionary potency, something that can connect them to a universal struggle, otherwise, they would create irreconcilable oppositions, rendering the concept of identity implausible in an emancipatory political thought. Identity can form a progressive political category insofar as it can integrate other identities into its political practice which are not opposed to cooperation in principle.

⁴ FRAZIER, Demita, „Rethinking Identity Politics. Interview by Karen Kahn”, *Sojourner: The Women’s Forum* 21, 1. sz. (1995): 12–13.; See also: HAIDER, *Mistaken identity...*, 14.

Haider concludes that identity politics and movements against racial oppression were stripped off their content, dehistoricized, and neutralized to a simple expression of a particular identity. Identity category “corresponds to the way the state parcels us out into individuals. But – Haider argues – it is nevertheless an abstraction, one that doesn’t tell us about the specific social relations that have constituted it” (p. 15). One can discover in this mechanism the ruling system’s amazing capability in integration, or as Haider puts it, “identity politics is an integral part of the dominant ideology” (p. 33). Haider defines the new “identity politics as the *neutralization* of movements against racial oppression. It is the ideology that emerged to appropriate this emancipatory legacy in service of the advancement of political and economic elites” (p. 15). Haider presents this practice through different concrete examples. For example, quoting Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Martin Luther King Jr. has been rendered an empty symbol, ‘frozen in 1963’” (p. 17). His acts are devoid of wider political issues; thus, Martin Luther King’s position is not linked to his opposition to the Vietnam war which, in his analysis, is a path from segregation to imperialism, and people forgot about “his support for a sanitation workers’ strike when he was assassinated in Memphis” (p. 17). According to this, the state or the ruling system allows black businessmen and politicians to rise up as long as they do not disrupt the determining base of the existing social relations. These new elites are also good to use racial solidarity to cover up their class positions and the oppressive nature of the system. In truth, the interests of the new elites always contradict the interest of the black working people.

Chapter three examines racial ideology and its development, how it created the binary opposition regarding this historical analysis: whiteness and blackness. But an analysis also should consider how Asians call themselves yellow, and among other places, skin colour-based racism is very strong in many parts of the Far-East, especially against black people. In Haider’s definition “the ideology of race claims that we can categorize people

according to specific physical characteristics, usually by skin colour” (p. 36). This ideology reduces our relation to other people to pure “biological qualities”, and it will be a determining social relation between people. It is so profound that even if one rejects racism still can fall victim to the ideology of race. Haider explains that “taking the category of a race as a given, as a foundation for political analysis, still reproduces this ideology”. Although I could agree with his conclusion that “the ideology of race is produced by racism, not the other way around” (p. 36), the conclusion doesn’t follow from its premises, because it is equally true that the ideology of race reproduces racism. One problem here is that the difference between racism and racist ideology is not defined. The ideology of race manifests in practical social relations into privileges. In analogy with Haider, one can say that privileges create whiteness, not the other way around, but in the social production, the two come hand in hand. Haider shows that racial ideology did not appear until the end of the 17th century in Virginia colonial law when white workers got different rights from the black workers on the plantations, however, this doesn’t mean that racism was unknown before. The Irish settlers’ case provides a perfect example of the change in racial ideology. The Irish people, who were oppressed and enslaved by Britain, coming to the New World, faced with the opportunity to change their social status by joining the other Europeans in the racial collective, and of course, in oppressing and enslaving the Africans. Thus, racial slavery becoming mainstream, “white supremacy and the white race are formed within the American transition to capitalism”. The racial ideology fills the void where mass organizing is missing, hence the ruling social structure reinforces its position against the interest of the working-class. Why it is hard to fight is because the constituent elements of the oppressed group are the various forms of oppression by the state: insult, brutality, and contempt; instead of solidarity, joy, and collective strength. In this violent relationship between the citizen and the state, as well as in the world of commodities, “racism is redressed as individual injuries” (p. 48). Haider concludes that if

one attacks identity politics and through the critique (s)he denies the framework (of race), it appears as “an attempt to deny the validity of antiracist struggle”. Passionate attachment to racial identity is an affection, not rational, thus criticizing it appears as the devaluation of personal injuries. (The contradiction between the organic, biological view and the idea of social construction comes from the denial of society as a cultural construct which is rather interesting if one looks at (national) arts or airplanes, the high-end products of human culture, while essentialists cling to natural determination.)

One should add one more general remark, the liberal capitalist ideology turns the attention to the particular, and in this individualistic world when the marginal and particular groups are criticized the understanding of the criticism is pushed to the personal level.

In Chapter four (Passing), Haider analyses what I call the dialectic struggle for power. Passing means the shift in which people of colour become (culturally and socially) white by becoming intellectuals, powerful or rich. Haider presents the story of Ameer Barakat (formerly known as LeRoi Jones), a writer with white-collar parents. Barakat, after “he passed through the brown and yellow world of Howard University” (p. 53), shifted his political position with the black emancipatory struggle growing more intense. He engaged with black nationalism more advancing in exclusionary identity politics, in black separatism. Here one should reconnect with the first chapter in explaining the mechanisms which neutralize anti-racist struggles. Black nationalism became popular at the expense of the movements which grew out of the combination of anti-racist and class-struggle and won ground in nationwide politics, “the parallel institutions nationalism had mobilized a grassroots base to build were now being incorporated into the state itself” (p. 57). The black people who became leaders of various institutions stuck in the middle between the oppressed and the ruling elite. The black representatives lose the direct connection to the people who

previously constituted the movements and in order to preserve their position in power they had to accommodate the rules of the socio-economic system which prefers social division instead of equality. By helping black men getting political positions, Barakat was able to recognize the presence of a systematic issue in the course of struggle. By becoming politicians, the former rebels accepted the marginal position of black people and the effective political system. Thus, *passing* here is a counterexample because the failure to grab political power within the already existing “white” system revealed that the struggle is only consolidated to fit the politico-economic order.

The fifth chapter, Law and Order, shows how class-division was transformed into a matter of security by the state, posing young black people as the source of instability or danger. In the 1970s, the media representations of muggings increased in associating the thefts with the black youth. Besides framing them as criminals, another tendency strengthened the social split. The economic recession hit the black communities the most since they were the first targets of layoffs, and in the mid-‘70s, they were also “faced with cuts in welfare, education and social support” most severely (p. 64). “Working-class organization was undermined not only by the ideology of racial division but also by its decomposition through unemployment” (p. 66). The failing economy and the increasing unemployment produced a special standing point where the “refusal to work” was imagined as a weapon of struggle to “strike at capital”. Groups of black people, including the youth, refused to take part in the competition of production, and their secession was joint with crime as another form of resistance to the dominant mode of production. Haider, referring to the book *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* by Stuart Hall and others, explains that the class oppression/exploitation is experienced through race.⁵ In

⁵ HALL, Stuart et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Maximilian, 2013), 224.

the discussed historical situation, this modality of race helped black people to comprehend their class situation. Haider warns the reader not to interpret the conjunction of the racial and class experience as an ahistorical and abstract rule. However, the case illuminates a profitable political practice, although it is not without dangers because the movement might stick in the perspective of a particular. The cited book elaborates that capital controls the divided working class through internal divisions which “have ‘racism’ as one of their effects”. Supplementing the analyses, I would add that the division of consciousness by racial ideology is not only prevalent in the oppressed by the feeling of exclusion and through the experience of a particular identity, but it is also the determining consciousness of the dominant race as it does not support them in banding up with a great proportion of society in their common struggle. White supremacy keeps white workers in the mud, too. From the historical moments of the struggle for equality it becomes clear, that just as in Marx’s explanation the capitalist is also the victim of the capitalist mode of production, the anti-racist fighter can bear the vision of the racist just as much as its oppressor.

The book is an heir to Marxist philosophy, it approaches the topic through historical materialism, and as a philosophical work it refrains from giving any concrete advice but it designates theoretical principles, hence the last chapter is called Universality. The universal extension stands against particularity embodied by identities. On the level of movements, identity politics appears as the protection of a certain category of identity is always reduced to the momentary struggle, an ephemeral category. “When the liberal language of rights is used to defend a concrete identity group from injury, physical or verbal, that group ends up defined by its victimhood and individuals end up reduced to their victimized belonging” (p. 77). Haider explains the problem (through Badiou), the paradigm of rights and the defence of victims are imperialist mechanics which consolidate the framework system. Following Massimiliano Tomba’s interpretation of the first

French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789), a consequence of the French revolution.⁶ Massimiliano calls this imperialist practice *juridical universalism*: “the universalism that comes from above and that implies a subject of right who is either passive or a victim who requires protection.” This means that people are political agents inasmuch as they are the subjects of the state, “their only political existence is mediated by their protection by the state”. Opposed to this, we find the example of the Haitian revolution (leading to the second version of the *Declaration* in 1793), the *insurgent universality* does not refer to abstract political agents (“bearer of rights”), but “particular and concrete individuals and their political and social agency” (p. 78). Translating this to our historical experience, for the Combahee River Collective not specifically the blackness or womanness was central, but the experience of the (marginalized) position constituted by the totality of these elements. The emancipation is not of an abstract entity, but the self-emancipation of the concrete, struggling people.

The book points out probably the most crucial organizing principle of today’s politics which also lies within the inertia of the Left. Identity is the organizing form of the individual, it emphasizes the particular, and it is supported by the capitalist elite to prevent any move towards universality. Meanwhile identity is an emotional power which can mobilize the people, however it is only one form of the affections we use to interact with others. The conclusion of the book is something obvious for those who read politics through the critical lens. The movements should open up for cooperation and solidarity, instead of being divided into *particular contradictions*.⁷ For Mao, particular contradiction means a social problem which is preferred over the principal

⁶ TOMBA, Massimiliano, „1793: The Neglected Legacy of Insurgent Universality”, *History of the Present. A Journal of Critical History* 5, 2. sz. (2015): 109–136, 111.

⁷ MAO Zedong, „On Contradiction”, in MAO Zedong, *On practice and Contradiction*, 67–102 (London, New York: Verso, 2017), 67.

contradiction, namely class-struggle. In Mao Zedong Thought the particular can be the predominant aim of a struggle, in order to serve the struggle against the principal/universal contradiction (which is class-struggle). Particular contradictions are the very same thing that Haider grasps with insurgent universality, or concrete universality in Hegelian vocabulary, that the universal can only be revealed through the particular. What we must learn from this book is that we must not take our eyes off the principal contradiction. The chance of universality resides in the concrete struggles, and the book presents the reader how estranged identities are all connected through class struggle. “From the plantation insurrections to the Combahee River Collective, this is a universality that necessarily confronts and opposes capitalism”.