

Interview with Brian Leiter

In the last decades, the United States has been characterised by an increasing polarisation in society and by rather extreme swings in the political arena. On the one hand, the election of the first African-American president and mass movements pushing for radical changes (Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, the #MeToo campaign); on the other, the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency and the resurgence of the far-right. There seem to be not one, but (at least) two different countries living within the same borders and growing increasingly distant.

Two major themes recur in the analyses of this polarisation: the return of class at the centre of the political arena (vividly shown by Trump's victory in the deindustrialised states of the 'Rust Belt'), and the limits of, so-called, 'identity politics' with its emphasis on ethnicity, gender and even religion in defining the political agenda. In trying to build a coalition based on identity politics, the argument goes, the Democratic Party – but the same holds true for a significant portion of the Left more generally – has lost sight of economic cleavages, leaving the issue of class to the Right.

The role of class and ideology, and the relation between religion, ethics and politics, have been at the centre of Brian Leiter's research. Moral, political and legal philosopher, Leiter is Professor of Jurisprudence, and Director of the Centre for Law, Philosophy, and Human Values at the University of Chicago. He is a public figure and regularly intervenes in academic and political debates in the United States, both in the mainstream media and in the blogosphere. His new book on *Marx* is forthcoming with Routledge.

Q: Let's start from basics. How would you define identity politics, and how relevant is it for the Left (both mainstream and more radical) and for US society more generally?

A: "Identity politics" means the demand of various historically subjugated groups in the US—Blacks, women, gay people—to be "recognized" and respected for their racial/gendered/sexual identities even under capitalist relations of production. "Identity politics" is the narcissism of the aspiring bourgeoisie, who want to get their share of the "capitalist pie", including their share of "respect" as reflected in language and culture. (Think of the comical controversies about the number of Blacks recognized by the Oscars.) Insofar as "left" politics in the U.S. has been captured by identity politics, it has been rendered impotent against the real obstacle to human flourishing.

Q: The increasing emphasis on identity politics has often led to a shift of the political and theoretical focus towards the cultural, and even linguistic, sphere and away from economic inequalities and class. What are the limits of this change in focus from a political perspective? Can this explain, at least partly, the Trump phenomenon and the demise of the US mainstream Left?

A: The U.S. left has been dead for decades, starting with the state purge of communists in the 1950s and continuing with the neoliberal revolution since the 1980s and the war on the organized labor movement—so Trump is more symptom than cause of the fact that there is no left in the US. There is no single cause of Trump's triumph, but one important factor was widespread (and justified) economic insecurity among the (mostly working-class) victims of the global movement of capital (remember Trump won mainly because of about 100,000 working-class voters who switched from the Democrats to Trump in just three industrial states). Trump offered an "explanation": immigrants, minorities, and foreigners took your jobs. He was largely right about the last category, but too stupid to understand that under capitalism, that was inevitable: if the foreigners will work for less, capital will move there. In placing blame on immigrants and minorities, he got some

ammunition from the often idiotic rhetoric of identity politics in America, but it was not a major factor in his election compared to large reserves of residual racism in the population. Remember the United States is only about two generations removed from a fully apartheid regime.

Q: Issues related to identity and identity politics have surfaced in recent debates on academic conduct and freedom of speech (see the controversy within the feminist community on the *Hypatia* case, for example). In some sections of the US Left, there seems to be a growing segmentation into narrowly delineated identity groups and identity-based academic disciplines, and a propensity to police boundaries and admissible topics.

A: If you remember that identity politics is the narcissism of the aspiring bourgeoisie, then this development is less surprising. Academics in the US overwhelmingly come from bourgeois backgrounds, and as faculty, their lives are economically quite different from the actual working classes; some are even actual or aspiring members of the ruling class. Like other members of their class in non-academic professions like law and business, they want their “piece of the pie” and their share of the cultural capital of respect and recognition. The tragedy here is that in capitalist America the *only* place where radical dissent is regularly possible is the universities. That bourgeois narcissists of the “identity politics” crowd are waging a war on speech and ideas that hurt their feelings in the academy will only legitimize the suppression of ideas that do not simply hurt feelings but also threaten the economic status quo. As Marcuse argued, universities have to be places of “indiscriminate toleration” of all ideas that are part of a *Wissenschaft*.

Q: In your analysis, Marxist theory itself has not been immune to the shift towards identity and also values. Indeed, you have thoroughly criticised the "normative turn" in Marxist theory, and in particular G.A. Cohen and Jürgen Habermas. What role does normative analysis play in their interpretations of Marx? What is wrong about their attempts to reconcile Marxism and normative theory?

A: Cohen and Habermas are obviously not proponents of identity politics, but their “normative turn” has similar causes: the state suppression of communist activism in both North America and Germany; the rise of a huge class of professional scholars at universities in the affluent capitalist countries; and the clear appeal, to the latter, of sitting around thinking about whether comfortable professors and their graduate students have a good moral reason to be opposed to capitalism. The “moral theory industry” in the capitalist universities has a lot in common with the “identity politics industry,” even though the former like to think of themselves as “rigorous” and “analytic” thinkers.

Q: If an appeal to normative concepts and values, such as equality, fraternity, or freedom, cannot motivate the oppressed to revolt against the capitalist system, then what can?

A: Moral and political ideals are very important to human beings, but there is no evidence that the often unintelligible theoretical writings of academics about these ideals make any difference at all. Marx, who was a good writer (unlike Habermas), seized the imagination of revolutionaries in the 19th-century because he explained to them the causes of what was visible to them and what to do about it; he didn’t have to persuade them that they were suffering. No one who reads Marx could mistake him for Habermas. But to answer your question directly: what can motivate resistance to capitalism? Here I agree with Marx: misery. Marx misjudged the smarts of the capitalist class in a crucial respect: it recognized the need not to render too many people miserable in the pursuit of profit, and to do so mainly with people not in their neighbourhood, as it were. (In that regard, Trump is just “more of the same.”) Of course, misery by itself is not enough: people need to

understand *the actual causes of their misery*. That is why Marx is important, and why Habermas is only important to university professors.

Q: You have argued that one of the issues on which "Marx was far more right than any of his critics [is] that the long-term tendency of capitalist societies is towards immiseration of the majority (the post-WWII illusion of upward mobility for the "middle classes" will soon be revealed for the anomaly it was)". Granting the existence of this tendency, and your assumption of essentially instrumentally rational behaviour, one would expect mass movements across the globe calling for a radical change. Yet, the Left is actually on the retreat in most industrialised countries, and hardly any social movement calling for the downfall of capitalism is on the horizon. How can this be explained?

A: These are early days, and we should not repeat Marx's mistake of overestimating the pace of historical developments. Remember that Marx, like many 19th-century utopians impressed by the industrial revolution, thought the era of productive plenty was around the corner. He was wrong. We are closer now more than a century later, but at the same time the ameliorative steps taken by the capitalist classes in the wealthiest countries to obscure the logic of capital—i.e., the profit-driven need for capital to displace human labor with technology, and thus immiserate those who have only human labor power to sell—are only beginning to unravel. When the lawyers, doctors, and corporate managers find their labor power is no longer needed quite so much by capital, then we will see what will happen. All this is complicated by the Internet, the epistemological disaster of the 21st-century, since it filters out neither capitalist ideology nor sheer psychological disturbance. But Marx is an Enlightenment thinker, and economic transformation requires understanding actual cause and effect. Will that be possible in the Internet era? That we really do not know.

Q: You have proposed an innovative reading of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as the main exponents of the "hermeneutics of suspicion". Can you elaborate on this? What is the role of philosophers, and more generally intellectuals, in this perspective?

A: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud taught us to distrust the surface meaning of what people say: behind the surface is a whole other layer of meaning that actually explains the surface. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud were intellectual diagnosticians ("here is the real cause of the superficial appearances") and therapists ("here is what you need to do to change the situation"). Marx's target was society and political economy; Freud's target was the suffering individual; while Nietzsche's was the individual within a particular moral culture. Any plausible view of our situation requires taking seriously what all three taught us, and resolving some of the differences between them, which are at times profound. Marx, for all his genius, was silent on the psychology of individuals, which is why we need Nietzsche and Freud. I go against current academic fashion in arguing that, in fact, the results of the empirical human sciences over the last century vindicate much of their core framework of analysis. Philosophers are relevant only to the extent they follow the lead of thinkers like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud; most philosophers, sadly, are irrelevant these days.