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LOVE 2
HATE YOU:
JOUISSANCE
BETWEEN
IDENTITY
AND
CAPITAL

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Lawrence
Slattery







What does the phrase identity-politics mean? Pinning down a category—as identity politics itself frequently attempts to do—is a slippery task. This difficulty is increased when the concept and/or object in question is not necessarily tangible or sealed into a frame of characteristics. Identity politics is not simply the understanding oneself and others as being part of a category of identity that is always-already political, or, understanding power and hegemony through privileges ascribed to certain identities in culture, or, using the language of identity to focus political arguments in the hope of positive political change toward equality. All of these quasi-definitions sound wonderful to me. However, for contemporary identity politics, the (impossible) definition must span rhetoric, actions and affects. In recent years the shifting shape of identity politics has gathered new forms that, instead of undermining or destabilising hierarchies, often reflect and nourish them. It is for this reason that I hope to unpack this contemporary zone of identity politics through critiquing the ways in which it shares and mimics characteristics and tropes of late-capitalism.

In 2014, Facebook launched an array of gender categories one could choose from when creating

a profile, rectifying the limiting male/female options. Today, in 2018, this has changed again to simply “male”, “female” and “custom”, so customers of all gender persuasions can define themselves with whichever label they find most comforting. As Angela Negle argues in their 2017 book *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan And Tumblr to Trump And The Alt-Right*, we might understand this moment as representing years of “identity politics” brewing online. Facebook’s gender options can be read as a peak for identity politics in the sense that it becomes an emblematic moment of recognising categories of identity previously dismissed by hegemonic culture. Of course, Facebook’s subsequent assimilation of these categories of identity potentially invites aspects of marginalisation into a fold of so-called acceptance. Although “acceptance” sounds like a positive destination, when capitalism attempts to “include” radical and/or non-normative positions and attitudes, it does so only in the sense that it renders them inert.

A popular episode from the TV series *Black Mirror* titled “Hang the DJ” (2017) succinctly articulates this paradigm of acceptance and assimilation within the social techno-sphere. Various articles







have appeared since the episode was available to stream, regarding it as happier and more uplifting than the show's more regular dark tonality, traits only thought to be shared with season 3's episode "San Junipero" (2016).¹ Yet, despite the contentedness the central characters in these episodes seem to enjoy, by the final credits the political (under) tones remain sinister.

In "Hang The DJ", we witness the multiple failings of a dating app which allocates the time a matched couple must spend with each other with the eventual outcome of true compatibility after many failed attempts. We are introduced to Frank (Joe Cole) and Amy (Georgine Campell) as they arrive on their first date with one another, both first-time users of the app. Their compatibility is instantaneous but, after their allotted 12 hours is up, both are relegated to unfulfilling, longer-term relationships which they must trudge through. After a few narrative peaks which confirm Frank and Amy as a perfect match that the app does not recognise, the couple say fuck this system of relating. As they begin to revolt against a nearby security guard, Frank and Amy realise that the people surrounding them are more automated figures than

people, who quickly become frozen and passive. The couple take off, running through their bland, urban environment until they encounter a seemingly endlessly high wall and begin to climb a ladder that stretches the length into seemingly infinite space. Whilst making this vertiginous journey, the city around them has a black out and, like a collapsing house of cards, unfolds itself into a black landscape of digital nothing. Transformed, Amy and Frank stand on this blank stage which they now share with many other amalgamations of themselves, Amys and Franks in slightly different outfits, all blinking into a strange abyss, until they dissolve into pixelated particles, rise and combine into colourful balls of floating light energy, like new-age angels, like marbles of digitised love, each one counting a simulation. Above, a screen of numbers racks up to 1000 and a pinging sound is made, indicating a completion of some sort. Shortly after, another number is itemised: "998 rebellions logged". As this halo of data registers, the camera zooms out to reveal a phone in Amy's hand which reads "99.8% match" alongside an image of Frank. The final twist is revealed: the episode, before now, had been one of many simulations in service of an algorithm to





construct a dating app in “reality” that has, eventually, successfully put these two people together.


The ending here is a happy one in the sense that our compatible protagonists appear as if they are about to embark upon heterosexual coupling. However, the joyful reaction from viewers profoundly misses the point of the episode’s conclusion. In some senses, “Hang the DJ” could be considered one of the most dystopian endings that the show has offered. In this techno-future, even rebellion has been successfully co-opted into a (dating) algorithm. That is, even acts which initially appear to function against a dominant structure are brought into the fold of hegemony. There is no rebellion, there is only simulated rebellion that aids the continued mapping of the heterosexual couple as the ultimate (and only) desirable kinship formation.


A similar line can also be drawn to the previously mentioned episode “San Junipero”, which ends with the two central women living out a harmonious romance, albeit one singularly existent in cyber-reality. Here, the future is again bleakly painted under the guise of a so-called happy-ending. Although this techno-future allows for the successful uploading of consciousness posthumously,

allowing a fantasy of lesbian monogamous coupling, the “real” world outside of cyber space still does not accept lesbianism. *Black Mirror* has repeated certain tropes in the majority of its episodes. The thematic similarities are regularly understood as highlighting all-too-close potential dangers of technology in late-capitalism. What I find is often missed in analysis of the show is its consistent centring of the (failed) heterosexual or heteronormalized relationship. Frequently, the show’s tragic and uncanny conclusion is not that technology has eroded subjectivity, but that technology has disturbed a nuclear coupling.²

“San Junipero” and “Hang the DJ” mirror Facebook’s gender options in the sense that all three describe a relationship between seemingly successful technology which appears to reduce friction and perform inclusivity, whilst remaining deeply embedded in an online, capitalist system. If Facebook provides non-binary gender options, it only signals that such genders can now be smoothly assimilated into capitalist discourses and practices of identity.

From Coca-Cola’s famous “I’d Like to Buy the World a Coke” (1971) to River Island’s recent “Labels are for People” campaign, advertising continues to






remind us that capitalism does not care which race, gender or sexuality one is, as all these categories can become a basis for consumerism. Thus, employment of identity-politics can often play into the hand of neoliberalism when it becomes a device to understand oneself as functioning through categories of distinction and “brands” of identities. Like brands, identities become trends, assumed and dropped in rapid successions. (Trans and non-binary are this year’s flavour. Next year I predict polyamory will take centre stage. The following year? Asexuality.) Facebook literalises such a conflation as every selected characteristic is routed through the algorithm of tailored advertising. Internet entrepreneur Jonah Peretti lucidly points to the intimacies between online cultures, late-capitalism and identity in his 1996 essay “Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Contemporary Visual Culture and the Acceleration of Identity Formation/Dissolution”:


I assert that the increasingly rapid rate at which images are distributed and consumed in late capitalism necessitates a corresponding increase in the rate that individuals assume and shed identities. Because advertisements link identity with the need to purchase products,

the acceleration of visual culture promotes the hyper-consumption associated with late capitalism.³

Other aspects of contemporary identity politics also reflect a bond with neoliberalism. With rhetorical trends including call-out culture and no-platforming, a hierarchy of more or less “oppressed” or “privileged” positioning is established. This is not to deny the truth in assertions which consider the more bountiful access to success afforded to certain bodies. Cis, white, male, and straight peoples clearly benefit from certain aspects of the current political, social, and cultural landscape. However, the dogmatic border patrol of identities can be prone to slip into areas of fetishization of oppression, (per)forming an economy of “othering”.

There are various reasons that might help us account for this new intensity in identity politics. Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt suggest it could be due to the result of baby-boomer parents over-protecting their kids⁴. We might also find some explanation if we consider the current socio-political-economic climate as one which understands value as being produced not only at the level of material and immaterial labour but also cognitive,







social, and psychic labour mined from all aspects of our lives. Franco “Bifo” Berardi understands our current phase of capitalism as semiocapitalism: “the production and exchange of semiotic matters, [that] has always exploited the soul as both productive force and market place.”⁵ Although neoliberalism traditionally places the market as the most important aspect of its paradigm, social-capital can also function as a natural extension of neoliberal importance when the “self” is accentuated and worth is accounted for within these individualistic boundaries. Berardi also defines neoliberalism as subsuming subjectivity into its folds, transforming “every domain of social life” including “health care, education, sexuality, affects, culture”. “Neoliberalism eliminated the ties that protected society from the economical dynamics of competition; therefore an effect of biopolitical branding was produced in the collective mind-body.”⁶ Indeed, the internet and, in particular, social media can also be understood as intensifying this recent trend. When creating online profiles, the self is more easily disenchanted from the material body, allowing for smoother access to free floating signifiers of identity through technological engagement. Because

of this, despite better availability for morphing and ambiguity when not tethered to the strictly corporeal, the self-expression of identity is frequently described using linguistic categories.

One of the most significant issues that I perceive to be attached to identity politics in recent times concerns the frantic energy that is released surrounding concepts of safety and, in particular, “safe-spaces” and “trigger-warnings”. These rhetorical devices become performative acts that position the corporeal as a fragile entity that must be protected by deeply entrenched categories of distinction.

As an example, is the non(or less)-privileged body understood within identity politics’ social paradigm as a fragile form? It seems that the rhetoric around strength and fragility already create strange cultural spheres that are exacerbated in paradoxical manners. If the non-othered body is granted cultural privilege, we recognise it as possessing a status of stability rendered through security of physical and mental borders erected by normative culture. In turn, such bodies are read as “natural” whilst “others” de-authenticate this “nature” through change, realisation, or questioning. In this (binary) logic, the non-normative body is rendered precarious in that






it does not possess cultural security. By producing a border of “safety” and a way to support precarity, identity politics can be seen as being in agreement with this binary paradigm of fragility and strength. This rhetoric is troubling, especially when “safety” is understood in difference to and preventative of “danger”. Who and what is relegated to the danger or safety “side” and who does the relegating? Is safety really a desirable emblem for radicality? Though the argument that culture is always-already safe for bodies granted a “normalised” status is pertinent, a force field of distinction surrounds such understandings of identity categories in cotton-wool comfort. Without denying that trauma exists for many oppressed people, what happens when trauma becomes part of social-capital? What happens when subjectivity is understood as lacking for oppressed people under hegemony, but this lack then forms its own economy of subjectification? And what happens when trauma, as a quasi-coinage of subjectivity, then gets relegated to categories of identity that have a reverse correlation to privilege?


Although neoliberalism is central to contemporary hegemonic capitalism, and identity politics is thought of as a tool to disrupt hegemony, by

obsessively labelling the self—corporeal and otherwise—such linguistic determinations mirror and encourage neoliberal subjectivity. To understand oneself and others as inscribed by a series of identity-markers that refuse ambiguity (gender-ambiguity is still used as a stable marker) in order to express notions of trauma and borders of “othering”, a hierarchy is established that encourages a form of competition around whose struggle is most concerning. By consistently illuminating facets of the corporeal and embodied self, it can be argued that a cross-pollination is formed with more conservative calls for censorship. Though I appreciate that identity politics from the “left” differ massively than those from the (alt-)right in their political desires, the holding-down and erasure of certain discussions is a conservative act.

Lukianoff and Haidt’s analysis of new identity politics describes this phenomenon succinctly, noting that the character of new identity politics differ from previous movements:

That movement [of the 80s and 90s] sought to restrict speech (specifically hate speech aimed at marginalized groups), but it also challenged the literary, philosophical, and historical canon,







seeking to widen it by including more-diverse perspectives. The current movement is largely about emotional well-being. More than the last, it presumes an extraordinary fragility of the collegiate psyche, and therefore elevates the goal of protecting students from psychological harm. The ultimate aim, it seems, is to turn campuses into “safe spaces” where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable. And more than the last, this movement seeks to punish anyone who interferes with that aim, even accidentally.⁷

If we consider the traditional understanding of trauma as an encounter with the Real that is erased by the psyche but which is compulsively returned to (such as PTSD)⁸ then barring all reference to its source is surely not contingent with therapeutic health. As well as this, unity, solidarity and intersectionality become increasingly difficult to achieve as we think of ourselves as more and more different instead of sharing commonalities in tandem with recognising fluctuations in lived experiences.

In this linguist economy of call-outs and labelling as a notion of self-empowerment, a type of *jouissance* is repeatedly performed.⁹ As hyperbolic

intensities morph concepts of the “traumatic” and reactions to those who do not toe the impossible lines of political-correctness reach new heights of venom, a seemingly extreme behaviour becomes allowable¹⁰. This excess seems to take on a life force of its own, gathering momentum and finding excessive pained-enjoyment as what is deemed offensive gathers in volume. Indeed, being “offended” becomes the life-blood of establishing the power of social-capital. To *not* be understood, to have a struggle others *do not* understand becomes a more desirable position than the counter. We see this in the identifying speech that pervades conversations: “as a [gendered], [raced], [sexuality] person I find...”. Whilst such introductions serve to situate the subject in a cultural milieu, they also propose that knowledge is explicitly implicated in experience and motivates a validity based on such. Here, the more forms of oppression you suffer, the more authoritative a source you become. Capitalism can thrive off this paradigm that disenchants intersectional cohesion. Supporting a view by prefacing it with one’s identity can also presume an affinity between a gender/race/sexuality etc. with a more general struggle against oppression. Pankaj Mishra,







in their review of Ta-Nehisi Coates' "We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy"¹¹, points to the ways that Coates' writing is "remarkable for its missing interrogations of the black president for his killings by drones, despoliation of Libya, Yemen and Somalia, mass deportations, and cravenness before the titans of finance who ruined millions of black as well as white lives." In a similar vein, Leo Bersani describes the racism in the gay scene of the 60's and 70's: "Men whose behaviour at night at the San Francisco Cauldron or the New York Mine-shaft could win five-star approval from the (mostly straight) theoreticians of polysexuality and had no problem being gay slumlords during the day and, in San Francisco for example, evicting from the Western Addition black families unable to pay the rents necessary to gentrify that neighbourhood."¹² Both these examples illuminate the ways in which splintered groups more easily miss the ways in which some struggles can hinder others, a blind spot that can deplete powerful intersectionality.

In the fetishization of not-being-understood, identity politics finds a *jouissance* in its reactions to our dominant psychic global environment of contemporary capitalism and thus forms a type of

dependency on capitalism. That is, by situating oneself between these borders of offense—language and identity—subjectivity becomes partially constructed and contingent on the *jouissance* found through capitalism's hegemony. Here we see how identity politics is dependent upon aspects of capitalism. If those engaged in identity politics' describe their disparity in culture through a series of individual inscriptions of how they lack power, this is only made possible through a dialectic which understands the other (in this case, the privileged body) as enjoying excess. The relationship between the self's lack and the other's excessive enjoyment is essential for capitalism's continual functioning. We can draw out an example here where both sides of the paradigm use similar logic to undercut the other: the marginalised body reads itself as lacking access to opportunities in capitalism because the other fills this space with its excessive privilege. In a simultaneous reversal, the privileged body which is always-already dissatisfied (as all subjects are in capitalism) produces a prejudice toward its other (the more marginalised in society) because it views them as enjoying excess they believe they should rightfully have. This latter view can be easily







exemplified by part of the ideological claims made by the right-wing supporters of Brexit, such as worries about how immigrant workers coming to the UK (somehow) both “take our jobs” and “cost the taxpayer by signing onto welfare”.

Between brands of identity, categories of distinction and reactive jouissance, identity politics thereby repeats, re-enacts, and structurally and affectively relies on neoliberal hegemony despite claiming a desire to undercut and reject the various strands of dominance capitalism protects. By articulating a cultural subjectivity primarily through oppression, oppression then becomes a desirable entity, which thus relies on capitalism’s borders to articulate one’s subjectivity and (lack) of agency. When identity politics appears to be the logical outcome of consumer capitalism, is gay marriage, the “pink pound”, and continued corporate sponsorship of gay pride any surprise? By having a knitted relationship to capitalism, assimilation is made easy.

The examples I have drawn from are slanted. The “campus wars” which often dominate academic investigation into identity politics are somewhat myopic, due to the campus being a space where academics are familiar. In the same way, the topic

of prejudice in the “workplace” is more readily up for discussion by journalists as the space of a writers’ relative comfort routes at least part of the issue at hand. I am not here to dispute people’s struggle, or undermine or ignore the immense difficulties that occur in cultural blind-spots, indeed *my* cultural blind spots. Identity politics as having structural reflection and reliance upon capitalism is, perhaps ultimately, an issue *within* a movement away from capitalism’s ongoing and current crisis, of which I am in full support. The issue here is not that various struggles find and carve a voice, but how we might consider the power of rhetoric and potential issues in communication. There are many examples of radical actions taking place that I would not consider as operating within the same rhetorical frameworks of identity politics. Sisters Uncut, Black Lives Matter, E15 Mums, and Occupy are a few examples out of many that eschew labelling as a central device of understanding subjectivity. Unlike identity politics, these groups do not compete in an individual lack that is made visible by the other’s excess. That is, if those engaged in identity politics might describe their disparity in culture through a series of individual inscriptions of how they lack






power, this is only made possible through a dialectic which gives inscriptions of “excess” to the perceived “other”. Another useful attitude which I believe opts-out of capitalism’s logic is *queerness*, despite the often misuse of the word that simply conflates it with LGBT+ movement in its various formations. Queerness is able to retain radical agency as it is specifically about countering hegemony through fluid subjectivity that thus resists competition. If identity is unleashed from fixity, then labels become useless activities of symbolic exchange that can be thrown away instead of cashed in.

In saying all of this, it is worth noting that I am certainly not above or beyond the seductive pull of identity-categories. Indeed, I have and continue to find expression in certain terms that designate me as a body, a psyche, an attitude. Despite these moments of conflation of myself with categories that potentially suggest a wider “community”, I still find myself feeling alienated and distant from such potential grouping. Identifying as non-binary for the last twelve years has both allowed me to notice sea-changes in attitudes—especially concerning language—which simultaneously makes me glad to see acceptance, worried about co-option

of identities into trends, provides an unhelpful self-righteousness about my identity, *and* produces an alienation from a perceived community of people with whom I feel I do not “fit” (whether this group is actual or imagined as part of super-ego or big-Other is unclear.) Indeed, the way in which I navigate language surrounding my identity has and will surely continue to morph over time.

Thank you to Corin Faife for their suggestions.

- 1) See Sophie Gilbert and David Sims, “*Black Mirror*: ‘Hang the DJ’ Explores Dystopian Dating”, *The Atlantic*, 30 December, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/12/black-mirror-hang-the-dj/549371/>, James Hibberd, “*Black Mirror*. Here’s the ‘Hang the DJ’ ending you didn’t see”, *Entertainment Weekly*, 29 December, 2017. <http://ew.com/tv/2017/12/29/black-mirror-hang-the-dj-ending/>, Devon Maloney, “*Black Mirror*’s Dating-App Episode is a Perfectly Heartbreak- ing Portrayal of Modern Romance”, *Wired*, 29 December, 2017. <https://www.wired.com/story/black-mirror-hang-the-dj/>. It is worth noting that Phil Owen, “‘Hang the DJ’ Is ‘Black Mirror’ at Its Most Beautifully Cynical (Commentary)”, *The Wrap*, 30 December, 2017, does consider the episode as one of the most cynical in the series’ history: <https://www.thewrap.com/hang-the-dj-is-black-mirror-at-its-most-beautifully-cynical-commentary/>



2) Although almost every episode can be read as performing this narrative drive, season 1's episodes *The National Anthem* (2011), *Fifteen Million Merits* (2011) and *The Entire History of You* (2011) best articulate this.

3) Jonah Peretti, "Capitalism and Schizophrenia", *Negations*, 1996. http://www.datawranglers.com/negations/issues/96w/96w_peretti.html.

4) Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukinoff, "The Coddling of the American Mind", *The Atlantic*, September, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>

5) Franco 'Bifo' Beradi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (London, UK: Semiotext(e), 2009) 208.

6) Beradi, *The Soul at Work*, 189.

7) Haid and Lukinoff, "The Coddling of the American Mind".

8) as is argued by Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1961.)

9) I am using a definition of Jouissance outlines well by Bryan Levi "Let's Talk About Jouissance, Baby!", *Larval Subjects* [blog], 27 March, 2013. <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2013/03/27/lets-talk-about-jouissance-baby/>

10) See Angela Nagle description of the distasteful reaction to Mark Fisher's death by Stavvers in *Kill All Normies* (UK: Zero Books, 2017), 110.

11) Pankaj Mishra, "Why do white people like what I write?", review of *We Were Eight Years In Power: An American Tragedy*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, *London Review of Book*, 22 February, 2018, 20.

12) Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave*, (Chicago/ London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 11.

