

GLOBALIZING CAPITALISM AND THE RISE OF IDENTITY POLITICS

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For more than a century, the Left has been guided by the conviction that industrial capitalism would inevitably homogenize social life, and thus lay the basis for a universalizing politics. Capitalism meant the expansion of a bourgeoisie whose search for profit would steadily penetrate the social life of traditional societies, and eventually reach across the globe, in the process wiping out 'all fixed relations and their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions.' Meanwhile, industrial capitalism would also nourish an ever-larger working class based in the mass production industries that would bind diverse people together in **class**-based solidarity. And this class would reap the harvest of capitalist destruction and possibility, for it would become the carrier of an **emancipatory** creed uniting all humankind. Capitalism itself, by obliterating ancient differences and polarizing humanity into two great classes, would pave the way for the universalizing mission of the proletariat.

This model now seems shattered. Capitalism has indeed penetrated societies and spanned the globe. In this sense, it is homogenizing social life. But instead of universalizing popular politics, capitalist expansion is weakening and conceivably destroying working class politics. The advance of international markets and technological change are eviscerating the mass production industries, at least in the mother countries, diminishing the working class numbers and organizations which once gave life to the idea of the proletariat as the hope of humankind. And the new mobility of capitalist investment is also reducing the autonomy of the nation state, with a crushing impact on existing forms of working class organization and influence.

Moreover, instead of wiping out all ancient prejudices, a globalizing capital is prompting a rising tide of fractious racial, ethnic, religious and gender conflict. It is contributing to an identity politics which expresses not only the ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions which were presumably to be swept aside, but the apparently inexhaustible human capacity to create new prejudices and opinions, albeit often in the name of

an imagined ancient past. We can see this most awesomely in the conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus, Hindus and Kashmiris in India; between Xhosa and Zulu, Christians, animists and Muslims in Africa; or between Germans and Turks, French and Algerians, Serbs and Muslims and Croats in Europe; or between Chechens, Ossetians, **Abkhazians** and Russians; or between Jews and Blacks, Gays and fundamentalists in the United States. Even the Cossacks are on the move again, demanding recognition, in the words of their supreme leader, 'as a distinct people' with 'our territory, property and traditions all restored.' Two decades ago, even a decade ago, such proclamations from the past would have seemed exotic. Now they seem unremarkable. No people, no place, is immune from the tide of identity politics.

As always, intellectual fashion refracts these real world developments, and perhaps contributes to them as well. After all, the old idea that industrial capitalism nourished universalizing classes was itself an intellectual construction, with large consequences in energizing and guiding the development of working class politics. Left intellectuals took for granted the idea that class mattered in politics, that the social structure of modern societies generated broad collectivities, bound together for political action by common interests, a common experience, and perhaps common visions of emancipation. Now, however, those premises seem hopelessly out-of-date, overshadowed by a stream of theorizing which emphasizes the fractured and evanescent nature of political identities constructed and reconstructed by actors more influenced by cultural orientations than by the constraints of socially structured class **divisions**.² In a way, this sort of perspective with its emphasis on the fluidity of culture seems a poor fit with the apparent rootedness and hardness of the inherited ethnic and religious identities which underly many contemporary conflicts? Nevertheless, the new intellectual fashion challenges the old confidence in class in favour of an emphasis on culture as a force in its own right. So does Samuel Huntington's view that the grand axes of conflict in the world are no longer between princes or nation states or ideologies, but rather between religious **cultures**.⁴

A good deal of the recent discussion of identity politics takes the form of arguments about whether to be for it, or against it.³ The dispute is in one sense pointless. Identity politics is almost surely inevitable, because it is a way of thinking that reflects something very elemental about human experience. Identity politics seems to be rooted quite simply in attachments to the group, attachments that are common to humankind, and that probably reflect primordial needs that are satisfied by the group, for material survival in a predatory world, as well as for recognition, community, security, and perhaps also a yearning for immortality. Hence

people construct the 'collective identities' which define the common traits and common interests of the group, and inherit and invent shared traditions and rituals which bind them together. The mirror image of this collective identity is the invention of the Other, whoever that may be, and however many they may be. And as is often pointed out, it is partly through the construction of the Other, the naming of its traits, the demarcation of its locality, and the construction of a myth-like history of struggle between the group and the Other, that the group recognizes *itself*.⁶ All of this seems natural enough.

If identification with the group is ubiquitous, it is also typically the case that groupness and Otherness are understood as the result of biological nature. Perhaps this is simply because nature provides the most obvious explanation of groupness that is available to people. Even when groups are demarcated by their religion or culture, these mentalities are often regarded as traits so deeply rooted as to be virtually biological, inevitably passed on to future generations. Moreover, the pernicious traits attributed to the Other can easily be woven into explanations of the travails that people experience, into theories of why the rains don't come, or why children sicken and die, or why jobs are scarce and wages fall. This sort of racial theorizing makes the world as people experience it more comprehensible. Even labour politics, ideas about a universalistic proletarian class notwithstanding, was riddled with identity politics. Thus Hobsbawm makes the sensible point that the very fact that 20th century political movements proffered religious, nationalist, socialist and confessional credos suggests that their potential followers were responsive to all these **appeals**.⁷ Politicized workers were bonded together not only and perhaps not mainly by common class position, but by the particularisms of maleness, of whiteness, and of diverse European ethnic and religious identities. In short, features of the human condition seem to drive people to identity politics and, if it is not an inevitable way of thinking, it is surely widespread.

But if identity politics is ubiquitous because of what it offers people in protection, comfort and pride, it has also been a bane upon humankind, the source of unending tragedy. The fatal flaw in identity politics is easily recognized. Class politics, at least in principle, promotes vertical cleavages, mobilizing people around axes which broadly correspond to hierarchies of power, and which promote challenges to these hierarchies. By contrast, identity politics fosters lateral cleavages which are unlikely to reflect fundamental conflicts over societal power and resources and, indeed, may seal popular **allegiance** to the ruling classes that exploit them. This fatal flaw at the very heart of a popular politics based on identity is in turn regularly exploited by elites. We can see it dramatically, for example, in the unfolding of the genocidal tribal massacres in Rwanda, fomented by

a Hutu governing class which found itself losing a war with Tutsi rebels. And of course the vulnerability to manipulation resulting from identity politics is **as** characteristic of modern societies as tribal societies.

Thus identity politics makes people susceptible to the appeals of modern nationalism, to the bloody idea of loyalty to state and flag, which is surely one of the more murderous ideas to beset humankind. State builders cultivate a sort of race pride to build allegiance to an abstract state, drawing on the ordinary and human attachments that people **form** to their group and their **locality**,⁸ and drawing also on the animosity to the Other that is typically the complement of these attachments. The actual group that people experience, the local territory that they actually know, comes to be joined with the remote state and its flag, just as the external enemy of the state comes to be seen **as** the menacing Other, now depicted **as** a threat not only to the group and its locale, but as a threat to the nation state. I hardly need add that this melding of identity politics with state patriotism can stir people to extraordinary acts of destruction and self-destruction in the name of mystical abstractions, and the identity politics that energizes them. Napoleon was able to waste his own men easily in his murderous march across Europe because they were quickly replaced with waves of recruits drawn from a French population enthused by their new attachment to the French nation. And World War I showed that modern states could extract even more extraordinary contributions of life and material well-being from their citizenry, as Europeans seized by nationalist passions joined in a frenzy of destruction and death in the name of state patriotism.'

In the United States, popular politics has always been primarily about race, ethnicity and religion. Perhaps a population of slaves and immigrants of diverse origins, captive and free, provided some objective basis for the cultivation of identity politics, constructed by ordinary people themselves, and of course by political and economic elites who have never been slow to see that division ensured domination.'" From the colonial era, public policy engraved distinctions among whites, blacks and native Americans by enshrining elaborate racial hierarchies by law, by prohibiting sexual liaisons across racial lines, and by punishing with particular ferocity the insurrections in which humble people of different races joined together.

The institutions of the American South, especially the post reconstruction South, are illustrative, for they can be understood as a vast complex of social arrangements which, by strictly segregating **Afro-**Americians, and specifying their obligations of deference, made factitious racial differences real. Similar practices by industrialists had similar if less total consequences in inscribing difference. Employers deliberately drew from diverse ethnic groups for their workforce, and then artfully arranged job assignments, wage scales and residential quarters in company towns so as to maintain and underline those differences. Or note the strident

emphasis on ethnic, religious, and later racial identities in the organizations, the mobilizing strategies and the policy outcomes of big city politics. The labour movement was riddled by these influences and, if it was sometimes strengthened by the gender, racial and ethnic solidarities that flourished within it, particularistic identities also blinded workers to their commonalities, making them vulnerable to employers who pitted one group against another, and leading them also to engage in terrible episodes of labour fratricide. Needless perhaps to add, this history still marks American politics today.

All this notwithstanding, identity politics can also be a potentially liberating and even equalizing development, especially among subordinate groups, and the more so in a political culture already dominated by identity politics. This possibility has sometimes been difficult for liberals honed on ideals of universalism to appreciate. Certainly it has been difficult for a Left preoccupied with class to appreciate.

Contemporary complaints about identity politics would be more understandable if they were aimed at elites who help foment and manipulate divisions. Instead, however, they are often directed at the subordinate groups who assert fractious identities. It may well be, however, that identity politics is especially necessary to lower status peoples, to those who are more insecure, and who are more likely to be deprived of recognition and respect by wider currents of culture and social interaction. Subordinate groups try to construct distinctive and sometimes defiant group identities, perhaps to defend themselves against dominant definitions, at least when they are allowed the cultural space to do so. Moreover, the construction of distinctive identities may be a necessary prelude to **self**-organization and political assertion, and particularly so in a political culture organized by identity politics. Indeed, in the cauldron of an American politics based on difference, immigrants who had previously recognized only a village or a locale as their homeland invented new national identities the better to survive and do battle in contests among nationalities. For them, the construction of new identities was a vehicle of at least psychic emancipation, and sometimes of political empowerment as well.

The black movement of the post World War II era, which is often (unreasonably) blamed for heightened identity politics, is a good example of the emancipatory construction and assertion of group identity. The celebration of Blackness was in the first instance reactive to the racism of American society: to the experience of racial subordination and terror in the South, to the extreme subordination imposed by the North whose cultural imagery at its most benign featured minstrels in blackface, Sambos, and so on. Blacks reconstructed their identity in the face of these

imposed identities, and this was almost surely essential to the rise of a movement demanding racial liberation – and to the substantial achievements of that movement in dismantling the caste arrangements which had engraved racial identity politics.

However, these achievements set in motion a train of repercussions that were not simple. The new assertions of Black pride and the political demands that pride fuelled provoked alarmed and angry reactions from other groups whose own identities depended on the subordination of blacks. And of course political elites, especially but not only Republican party operatives, who stood to benefit from the politics of backlash, worked to sharpen these reactions, making such code words of race hatred as 'quotas,' or 'law and order,' or 'welfare dependency,' focal to their popular appeals. Still, the very emergence of far-reaching race conflict reflected the fact that subordination had come to be contested. Blacks were no longer allowing others to define their identity, repress their interests, and stamp out their aspirations. That was an achievement.

The rise of gender politics followed a similar course. While women do not have what is recognized as a distinctive language or turf, the understanding of gender has in other ways been prototypical of the understanding of group identity. Gender identities are closely similar to racial identities, because the traits which were thought to be feminine or masculine, and the social roles to which women and men were consigned, were always understood as the natural consequence of biological difference. Necessarily, therefore, the emergence of a liberatory movement among women was preceded and accompanied by an effort to cast off this inherited identity and construct new identities that disavowed biological fatalism or, in some variants, celebrated biological difference. Indeed, Zaretsky writes of 'the profundity and the intensity of the identity impulse among women that emerged in the early seventies.'" The most salient issues of the women's movement – the struggle for the Equal Rights Amendment, for reproductive rights, and the campaigns against rape and sexual harassment – are closely reflective of this effort to reconstruct the meaning of gender by challenging the biological underpinnings of traditional meanings. The mounting of such a challenge to the most ancient of subordinations, and a subordination rooted in understandings of nature itself, is surely a stunning accomplishment.

As with Blacks, the consequences were not simple. Liberatory reconstructions of gender struck at deeply imprinted understandings, threatening and arousing people still embedded in more traditional relationships, including many women embedded in traditional relationships. And as had been the case with conflict over racial identities, the contest over understandings of gender became the focus of elite manipulations in electoral politics. By 1980, the Republicans had taken notice, and in an effort to turn

the widening anxieties provoked by gender conflict to electoral advantage, struck support for ERA from their platform, and initiated a campaign that culminated in the odd spectacle of American Presidents – leaders of the richest and most technologically advanced nation in the world – casting themselves as leaders of a holy war against abortion.

While identity politics may always be with us, the contemporary world appears to be engulfed by particularistic conflicts of rising intensity and destructiveness, in a pattern reminiscent of the rising tide of nationalist furies of the late 19th century. The main reasons for this, then and now, can be traced to the transformation of world capitalism. First, in the contemporary period, capitalist expansion is at least partly responsible for the weakening or collapse of nation states, with homfic consequences for ethnic and religious conflict. Second, economic restructuring is enfeebling existing forms of working class political organization which in the past sometimes restrained particularistic conflicts in the interests of class solidarity. Finally, even while the restraining capacities of governments and working class organizations are diminishing, capitalist restructuring is aggravating group conflict, by accelerating the migration of peoples, by intensifying competition for scarce resources, and by creating the widespread economic and social insecurity which always accompanies large-scale change, and particularly so when the changes for many people are for the worse.

Of course, not every instance of the weakening or collapse of central governments that had previously restrained group conflict can be traced to the current **global** capitalist transformation. Ancient animosities can erupt whenever central governments no longer hold them in check. The withdrawal of the British **Raj** unleashed bloody conflicts in India which persist to this day, and the withdrawal of the colonial powers from Africa also spurred tribal conflicts. But other instances of central government collapse cannot easily be disentangled from the changes wrought by world capitalism. Waves of anarchic warfare in the developing world are at least partly the result of saddling third world governments with debt through the imposition of neo-liberal credit **policies**.¹¹ The fall of the Yugoslavian government, and the ethnic wars that resulted, was similarly at least partly the result of the shock therapy administered by the IMF. And other Eastern European governments were undermined by the spread of a consumer culture which fuelled popular discontent with state provision. (The Eastern European revolutions, says Benjamin R. Barber, were less over the right to vote than the right to shop.")

Other consequences of capitalist transformation for the intensification of identity politics are more direct. In a sense, the old prediction has proved

true; the bourgeoisie is on the move with a series of universalizing projects which promise utterly to transform the world, penetrating and homogenizing social life across the globe. But instead of nourishing a growing proletariat, a missionary capitalism is destroying the working class formations of the older industrial order, at least in the rich countries of the West.

I do not want to overstate the unifying influence of the labour movement at its peak. I have already pointed out that worker mobilizations were riven by the particularistic divisions of race and ethnicity, and sometimes gender. Nevertheless, the promise of the labour movement was that class solidarity would override particularisms, and even that proletarian internationalism would override state patriotism. And in instance after instance, where the successful use of the strike power demanded it, labour did indeed override the divisions of identity politics, even in the United States. Now that moderating influence has weakened.

The basic lines of capitalist restructuring and the impact on organized labour are familiar. First, the expansion of global trade, itself promoted by the internationalizing of markets in finance and production, as well as by improvements in transportation and communications, has led to the intensified exploitation of labour and resources across the globe. From Indonesia to China to Haiti, previously peripheral peoples and places are being incorporated into capitalist markets, with the consequence that organized workers in the mother countries find themselves competing with products made by low wage workers across the globe, including workers made docile by coercive authoritarian governments.

Second, the power constellations patterning the policies of national governments have shifted. Organized labour has lost ground dramatically to new supra-national institutions created by capital. It is true, as **Panitch** says, that the nation states are major authors of these institutions, and also continue to serve important functions for internationalizing capital." Nevertheless, once in existence, international organizations and networks, including multinational corporations and international banking organizations, together with their domestic corporate and financial allies who freely use the threat of disinvestment as leverage in their dealings with governments, become major constraints on the policy options of the state. Constraints on the state are also constraints on the ability of democratic publics, including the organized working class, to exert influence through electoral-representative arrangements. The trade unions and political parties constructed by organized workers in the mother countries gained what influence they had through their leverage on governments, where strike power, trade union organization and working class voting numbers made them a force with which to be reckoned. If capitalist internationalism circumscribes what national governments can do, it inevitably also circumscribes working class political power.

Third, as a consequence of both internationalism and the shifting power constellations within nations, the economies and politics of the **mother-**countries of industrial capitalism are being restructured, with dire consequences for the **old** working class. This process is most advanced in England and the United States where unions are weaker and welfare state protections less adequate. The old mass production industries which created the industrial working class are being dismantled or reorganized and decentralized, with the consequence that the numbers of blue collar workers are shrinking. And as communities disperse and the mass media supplants the local pub, the old working class culture also crumbles. Those who remain have become excruciatingly vulnerable to the threat power of a mobile capital, unable to resist shrinking wages and benefits, and the worsening terms of work, including speedup, and forced overtime for some, and involuntary part-time or temporary work for others, all of which undermines union organization. At the same time, capitalists have launched a specifically political project to dismantle the institutional supports created by working class politics, by attacking unions, and slashing welfare state income and service protections which shielded workers from the market, and by discrediting Keynesian macro-economic political regulation."

Finally, a capitalist class on **themove** has launched an ideological campaign to justify and promote its expansionary mission. International markets exist, but they have also been cast as a superordinate order, operating according to a kind of natural law, penetrating national economies more deeply than they actually do, and beyond the reach of politics. In fact, this neo-laissez **faire** doctrine cloaks the capitalist class with the mantle once claimed by the proletariat. Capital is forging the way to the future, it is the great force for progress, the hope of humankind. And as with 19th century laissez **faire** notions to which this doctrine owes its main tenets, the ideology is touched with fanaticism, with a zealous **utopianism** that ignores the actual needs of the human subjects of any world order. Of course, this ideological campaign is as persuasive as it is because international markets are also real, and the palpable evidence of capital and goods mobility lends the sweeping doctrine of neo-laissez **faire** a certain material reality.

In all of these ways a universalizing capitalism has weakened the old industrial working class as a political force. No wonder unions and labour parties that were the instrument of this class have also lost their ideological footing. The imagery which gave-working-class politics is **élan**, the idea that the future belonged to the workers, and that workers acted for all humankind, has collapsed. That universalizing myth now belongs to a capitalist class on the move.

The surge of identity politics is not just the result of a collapsing central governments or a receding class politics. It is also the result of the massive dislocations of people set in motion by capitalist restructuring. More and more people are being drawn into the orbit of capitalism. Considered abstractly, that process is universalizing. In the actual experience of people, it has had the effect of heightening particularistic identities and conflicts. **Gellner**, writing of an earlier phase of capitalist transformation and the nationalist furies it helped to set loose, showed how an 'explosive blend of early industrialism (dislocation, mobility, acute inequality not hallowed by time and custom) seeks out, as it were, all the available nooks and crannies of cultural differentiation, wherever they be.'¹⁶ The pattern is being repeated in the contemporary era. In other words, instead of wiping out the 'train of ancient and venerable prejudices,' the advance of global capitalism is whipping ancient prejudices to fever pitch.

Identity politics is pervasive, and probably inevitable. But group conflict is likely to rise under some conditions, and subside under others. One important source of disturbance has to do with the large-scale migration of people spurred by capitalist penetration of subsistence agricultural economies, with the consequence that conflicts over land escalate, and people no longer able to survive in agriculture migrate to urban centres." At the same time, the spread of consumer culture also attracts people from the periphery, while the development of **globe-spanning** circuits of communication and transportation facilitates the recruitment of cheap labour to the **metropole**.¹⁸ 'Every migration,' says Enzensberger, 'no matter what triggered it, what motive underlies it, whether it is voluntary or involuntary, and what scale it assumes, leads to conflicts.'" Or as Jean Daniel, editor of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, warns about population movements and the 'unprecedented' mingling of peoples, we should remember that 'Babel . . . was a curse.'"

If unfamiliar proximity is likely to intensify group consciousness and fractionalism, this is especially so when outsider groups are seen as competitors for limited jobs, neighbourhood space, honour and influence. In his last book, **Ralph Miliband** wrote that intra-class conflicts among wage-earners involving race or gender or ethnicity or religion can reasonably be understood as the effort to find scapegoats to explain insecurity and alienation?' If he was not entirely right, he was surely at least significantly right. Group conflict is far more likely when people feel growing uncertainty about their own future and as is true in many instances, are experiencing real declines in living standards. When times get harder, and competition for **scarce** resources intensifies, theories about the Other, and how the Other is to blame for these turns in events, being ubiquitous, are readily available. And, of course, such interpretations are more likely to be seized upon when alternative and perhaps more systemic

explanations of the troubles people face are not available, or when such explanations yield no practicable line of action. No wonder there has been a spread of an identity politics, often a hate-filled identity politics, in the metropole. As Vaclav Havel says, 'The world of our experiences seems chaotic, confusing. . . And the fewer answers the era of rational knowledge provides . . . the more deeply it would seem that people, behind its back as it were, cling to the ancient certainties of their tribe.'²²

Finally, as so many times before, the group divisions of identity politics are being worsened by political elites who seize the opportunity for gaining advantage from popular division. In particular, politicians on the Right – Le Pen's Front National in France, the Christian Right in the United States, the Freedom Party in Austria, the Falangists in Spain, the Lombardy League in Italy, or the Republicans in Germany where half a million immigrants arrived in 1992 alone – work to stoke the anger against outsiders. They draw popular attention away from the economic transformations underway, and try to hold or win anxious voters by directing resentment against outsiders. Or, as a retired Russian officer commented to a *New York Times* reporter about the conflict between the Tatars and ethnic Russians, 'Half the population is building mosques, the other half is building churches. And the bosses are building big brick houses for themselves.'

Once again, the United States is at the forefront. Last October, *BusinessWeek* editorialized about the 'unprecedented widening of the income gap between winners and losers in the workplace.' *BusinessWeek* worried that the losers might ignore its advice that 'Growth is the single most important salve for the high-risk, high gain society' and seek scapegoats, such as 'elitist big business.'

There are of course reasons for *BusinessWeek's* concerns about the resurgence of class politics. Big business is politically mobilized as never before, having developed over the past two decades a range of vehicles to do ideological and policy warfare, from big think tanks, to revived trade associations, to new associations of peak corporations. Reflecting both these developments and the changed international economic context in which they have unfolded, enormous changes have taken place in the American class structure, as the rich have gotten much richer, the poor much poorer, and most people have gotten poorer as well. National wealth increased, but the vast majority of wage earners lost ground, with the consequence that more people are working, working longer, and harder. The U. S. Census reported that **between 1973** and 1989, the real income of male high school graduates dropped by a third; the income of those who didn't make it through high school dropped by 40 percent. And the palpable evidence of economic trauma also grew, in the form of visible

poverty and pathology, of beggars and spreading homeless encampments in all of the major cities.

Still, *BusinessWeek* needn't worry, at least not so far. Americans are being led by their political leaders to other scapegoats, and certain conditions prepare the way. For one thing, organized labour is on its back, its membership at 11 percent of the private sector labour force, down from 30 percent only two decades ago. For another, economic changes are not the only shocks to the American psyche. Cultural changes which undermine the established bases of identity are contributing to widespread unease. Contested racial boundaries and, not less important, changing sexual and family mores are eroding a world in which whites were in command, men were men, women were women, and the rules for mating and family life were clear. Needless to say, in a society in which the culture of group identity figures so largely, changes of this sort generate a distinctive terror. In this sense, the numerous commentators who blame the black movement and the women's movement for the rightward shift of the past two decades are not entirely wrong. In a world of identity politics, mobilization by the Other is always a provocation.

Thus economic and cultural change are combining to generate popular anxiety and anger. But the economic transformation, its impact on hard-hit groups, the measures that might moderate the transformation or its impact, do not figure much in American political discussion, except sometimes in the speculations of pundits trying to account for electoral discontent. Instead, public anger has easily been routed into the familiar channels of identity politics, as issues like immigration, crime, and welfare, all code terms for Afro-American and Latino minorities, (with welfare a code evoking wanton women besides) dominate the political discussion. Republican and Democratic leaders alike are following the precedents of American history. Hemmed in by a politically mobilized and aggressive capitalist class, party leaders promulgate arguments which account for the felt problems of ordinary people by singling out the Other. Political discourse is dominated by a narrative in which immigrants, or criminals, or welfare recipients, are variously pointed to as the source of America's problems.

The focus on welfare is a good illustration. As these things go, welfare (or AFDC) is a small programme. Yet to listen to all of the talk, including talk about 'reforms' that would slash millions of children and their mothers from the rolls, one would think that this small and benighted programme is a main reason for high taxes, spreading poverty, out-of-wedlock births, and just about everything else that people find upsetting. The argument works as well as it does because it meshes with American racism and chauvinism, (and also because people are prepared for it by a history of welfare practices which denigrate recipients by keeping them so miserably poor

that they are inevitably outsiders, and by stripping them of any procedural rights).

Interestingly, the old intellectual justification for identity politics is also having a modest renaissance. **As** economic hardship spreads, theories about the genetic roots of economic success and failure are once more respectable, as signalled by the reception given *The Bell Curve*, the racist tome by Charles Murray and Richard **Herrnstein**. Their argument is a justification for the most extreme sort of identity politics, proposing as it does that an innate and biologically determined intelligence influences economic and social circumstances, making it more likely that some people end up poor (and deviant), and others end up rich. In other words, the argument goes, class itself, and especially the widening class polarization of the contemporary period, is rooted in biology.

Still, all is not hopeless. The de facto bipartisan coalition now directing American popular politics may be overreaching. At the very least, there are signs that the Republican initiatives in particular may have triggered a fight, maybe even the opening salvo in a bigger war against congressional moves to accelerate economic polarization with a **three/fifths** vote rule on tax cuts and a balanced budget amendment. Together with their promised funding cuts, these measures will seal off the tax and expenditure advantages of the well-off so they are impervious to the currents of democratic politics, while slashing programmes that reach wider publics, beginning with the programmes that reach the poor.

This is boldly and clearly class legislation. But the groups that are moving to resist are not the familiar organs of the working class. Rather, in the past few months the civil rights and advocacy organizations created by the black movement and the feminist movement have been spurred into action, goaded by estimates of the impact of the more outrageous proposals of the new congress on their constituencies. In other words, if this is a class war, one side is moving into battle in the familiar formations of identity politics.

Of course, the Republicans are likely to prevail, at least in the short run, especially since a weak-kneed and business-oriented Democratic administration seems to be conceding much of their programme. Nevertheless, there may be a public battle, where until now there has been little resistance to business aggression from any quarter. Some will see in this kind of battle the dim outlines of a reconstituted working class mobilizing along the lines of its diverse identities to resist a capitalist class assault. I think that is partly true, maybe even more true than not.

Still, the other part of the truth is the politics of identity.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Fred Weir, 'Riders on the Storm,' *In These Times*, May 16, 1994.
2. For similar observations, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'Identity Crisis,' *In These Times*, June 13, 1994.
3. Of course, inherited identities may serve merely as the raw material from which contemporary identities are constructed, a point made by Zygmunt Bauman, among others. See 'Europe of Nations, Europe of Tribes,' *Sociologisk Rapportserie*, no. 2, 1993, Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen.
4. See Samuel Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?' *Foreign Affairs*, summer, 1993, and Samuel Huntington, 'If not Civilizations, What?' in *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1993.
5. See for example Todd Gitlin who faults proponents of identity politics for fracturing the commitment of the **Left** to universalism, leading to 'paranoid, jargon-clotted, post-modernist **groupthink**, cult celebrations of victimization and stylized marginality! 'From Universality to Difference: Notes on the Fragmentation of the Idea of the Left,' *Contention*, Vol. 2, no. 2, Winter 1993, p. 21.
6. Weber discussed racial groups as subjective constructions, resulting from common political actions, or common experiences in antagonism to members of an obviously different group. See *Economy and Society*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1922, vol. 1, p. 387. See also Stuart Hall, 'Ethnicity: Identity and Difference,' *Radical America*, Vol. 23, no. 4, October 1991.
7. On the overlap and tension between the appeals of national identity and class in working class political mobilization, see Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1789*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.
8. On the relationship between the development of the nation state and nationalism as ideology, see John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, University of Chicago Press, 1982.
9. Hobsbawm defines nationalism as a principle which holds that the duty of the citizen to the nation **overrides** all other obligations. See *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 9.
10. Wacquant points out that 'the symbolic work necessary to establish race or class as salient subjective principles. . . can be successful only to the extent that it corresponds to the material differences inscribed in objectivity.' See Loïc J. D. Wacquant, 'The Puzzle of Race and Class in American Society and Social Science,' *Scholarship and Excellence*, Benjamin E. Mays Monograph Series, Vol. 2, no. 1.
11. Eli Zaretsky, 'Responses,' *Socialist Review*, Vol 23, no. 3, 1994.
12. See Manfred Bienefeld, 'Capitalism and the Nation State in the Dog Days of the Twentieth Century,' *The Socialist Register*, London: Merlin Press, 1994. Hobsbawm and Bauman both argue that, in general, the assumption by supra-national agencies of functions once performed by nation states may so eviscerate the idea of nationhood as to encourage the proliferation of claims by upstart 'nations.'
13. 'Jihad Vs. **McWorld**,' *Atlantic Monthly*, March, 1992.
14. See Leo Panitch, 'Globalization and the State,' *The Socialist Register* 1994.
15. These developments are clearest in the United States. However, see the Organizations for Economic Cooperation and Development, *The OECD Jobs Study*, Paris, 1994, which recommends broadly the same directions for Europe.
16. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 112.
17. The *New York Times* reported that the number of intrastate and interstate refugees in the world had reached 49 million. See August 8, 1994.
18. On the push and pull factors in migration, see Amartya Sen, 'Population: Delusion and Reality,' *New York Review of Books*, September 22, 1994.
19. Hans Enzensberger, *Civil Wars from L.A. to Bosnia*, The New Press, 1994.
20. See Jean Daniel, 'God is Not a Head of State,' *New Perspective Quarterly*, Vol. 11, no. 2,

spring, 1994.

21. **Ralph Miliband**, *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994, p. 22, 192-3.
22. **'The New Measure of Man'**, *New York Times*, July 8, 1994.