

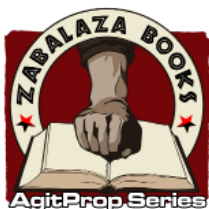
it seems clear that there would be far more space for fighting such things in a non-capitalist world.

Now it's worth reiterating, so this talk is not misunderstood by any who would have us abandon our specific struggles in favour of some abstract class struggle conceived of as separate to various struggles against oppression, that my conjecture that the defeat of capitalism is tied to the elimination of all forms of oppression does not mean that oppression doesn't need to be struggled against now. Rather, grasping that oppression is inextricably linked to capitalism leads to the view that in order to fight capitalism, we must fight oppression directly, and that this is as important as any other struggle. Thus I finish by echoing Selma James:

"Power to the oppressed and therefore to the class."

This text is taken from an audio recording of a talk and discussion in the Black Rose anarchist social centre in Sydney, Australia on the theme of identity politics and its relevance today. The text is taken from the website of the Irish Workers' Solidarity Movement.

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Identity Politics, Class and Autonomous Organising

The Great Identity Politics Competition (Semi-Finals)

① As a gay man of color, I think... As a man of a more oppressed nationality than you, I disagree...

As a woman, who is more oppressed than any man, my opinion is...

As a trans, differently-abled victim of genocide, I must insist...

② heh.

"Knowledge is the key to be free!"

I.

I was asked to give a talk on identity politics, and provide a critique of it. One problem with this task is that few people, if any, openly describe themselves as supporters of identity politics. Identity politics, especially in radical circles, is mostly used as a pejorative. It is a term that applies to that person over there, but not to us. Nonetheless I think there is a recognizable tendency in contemporary politics that could be described as identity politics, a movement which has developed its own practices and language. I am sceptical of the value of more precise definitions than this because I do not think there is one, and trying to provide one does violence to the fluidity of the subject matter. Like other movements, such as the New Left, identity politics resists classification.

My main concern with the discourse around identity politics, with its manifestations in places like the online blogging service Tumblr, are that it represents the fight for social justice as being a fight against an incredibly diverse array of oppressions, without a sense of an underlying structure that maintains, exacerbates and reproduces them. It therefore tends to articulate a quite liberal politics. In my view, a deeper critique of oppression's underlying unity in diversity is required.

We can be very clear on one thing. What we mean by a critique of identity politics in the context of this talk is simply the critique of a politics which sees different forms of oppression as separate though interconnected social systems. We are contrasting this with a view according to which oppression arises from, or more accurately is part of, a single social system. A system centred on the extraction of labour from we who produce this world into the parasitic bourgeoisie. While identity politics tends to support this conception of different and at least somewhat independent oppressive systems, naturally the broad collection of positions it encompasses has many other aspects. We are thus critiquing identity politics in this talk in a very narrow sense. Still I think this conception of fighting various forms of oppression, where each struggle is its own distinct thing, is very close to the methodological heart of what is generally called identity politics.

Supporters of what is loosely called identity politics are usually well aware of how different forms of oppression interact, through invaluable concepts

V.

So I've argued that it's absolutely essential to attacking capital to attack oppression, indeed every attack on oppression is an attack on capital, but what about the converse, that in order to attack these oppressions, we must ultimately try to dismantle capitalism.

Capitalism doesn't simply passively benefit from divisions in the working class, as if they were simply pre-existing problems. Rather capitalism actively works to sustain them. The popular culture it produces mirrors existing prejudices back at us. The way its wage systems are structured means that it renders many more women dependent on men than men dependent on women. The so called justice system is really a massive prison industrial complex which serves mostly to defend property rights and simultaneously maintain white supremacy, othering and criminalizing people of colour.

But what about prejudice, the subjective component of oppression, wouldn't that stick around after a revolution, even if the material base of oppression in the extraction of labour is defeated? It's one thing to abolish the class structure, but how would this act to end things like racist slurs, queer bashings or even rape?

Well I don't think that anyone could guarantee that 'interpersonal' oppression would disappear immediately if capitalism were defeated. By the same token though I don't believe that prejudice is simply a free-floating system of ideas, rather I think that without the material bases that capitalism provides for prejudice, such as the production of competition between groups, racist, sexist and queer-phobic popular culture and the massive violence of the state, prejudice would fade.

In school we are taught that prejudice is a kind of mistake that people tend to make sometimes. We are rarely, if ever, taught to think about the systematic roots of oppression. Our whole society tells us that oppressive conduct is primarily a mistake that individuals make, as if it were a problem similar to lying, being mean or cheating at cards. The truth is though; because prejudice is not natural it must be constantly reinforced. The ways capital does this are immeasurable- by dividing communities so we only spend time with people like us, by the generation and propagation of images of prejudice for mass sale, by telling us that our jobs are at threat because of women or people of colour. Thus I think there is reason to be confident that just as oppression of all sorts is indispensable to capitalism, so capitalism is indispensable to all forms of oppression. Now you might argue that prejudice could continue indefinitely after the dismantling of capitalism because it is embedded in our discursive structures or something like that. But even if you do think that it would,

IV.

A few things follow from the key role of various forms of oppression in class. One of the most important points to make is that anyone who wants to defeat class society has an interest in weakening the divisions created by oppressions. That is, to try and rip down the internal structures that holds up capitalism. If one were to attack a body, it would be prudent to target its vital organs. If class society depends on the division of the working class into dominant and subaltern components, then it is a necessity that these divisions should be attacked.

Moreover, it is useful to make a distinction between relative advantages and absolute advantages. It's obvious that straight people have it relatively better than queer people, white people relatively better than people of colour and men relatively better than non-men. But this does not imply that both groups wouldn't be better off if oppression were defeated, i.e. this doesn't imply that straight people gain an absolute advantage from hetero-normativity. If this is the case, then it is very important we be aware of it. If working class men ultimately benefit from patriarchy, then it is unclear how non-males could persuade them to fight against the oppression of women, except through abstract appeals to morality. However, if we see that we have a common enemy it is clear why working class men should be allies to working class women, because the liberation of one is bound up in the liberation of the other. Our solidarity should not be based on charity; rather it should be based on a shared path to liberation.

The solution to attacking the system of relative advantages given to parts of the working class is not to pretend that they don't exist, but to recognize that fighting and ultimately defeating them through the abolition of capitalism is essential. Precisely because the advantaged within the working class lose out less from oppression, and are often even duped into thinking they gain from it, it is important that those most interested in defeating every form of oppression, the oppressed group themselves, have space to organize autonomously against their subjugation.

I'm concerned that the picture of oppression as made up of a series of separate cultural institutions which are independent but interacting has encouraged movements to think that their various interests are either potentially opposed to each other, or not intimately linked. When we realize that we have a shared enemy, we can act in a greater spirit of love, solidarity and mutual support, fighting oppression more effectively both within our spaces and within broader society.

such as intersectionality. What is missing in modern identity politics is not an understanding of the interaction of forms of oppression, but an understanding of their root unity in a capitalist social system.

II.

The problems of this world appear to us, at first, like a huge pile of broken things; War, poverty, environmental destruction, and of course racism, sexism, queerphobia and ableism to name a few. The suggestion that these forms of strife are not independent, but share a common root, is an old one. These days however, it is common to suggest that different forms of political problems are independent social systems.

I am going to argue that various forms of oppression centre around capitalism, or a system where a few individuals own the means of production, and primarily live off the takings of that, while most have no choice but to work for a living, or if they can't find work, live on charity or unemployment benefits. Capitalist society is by its very nature a class society, but before we go on it's important to understand how this crucial term 'class' is best defined.

The most popular way of looking at class bases it on how much money you earn, what schools you went to, whether you like high-brow or low-brow art etc. However, none of these are directly related to class in the Marxist sense. Class in the Marxist sense, a sense also used by many anarchists, is a question of whether you earn your living through your labour, or through ownership of the means of production. Those who earn their living through work are said to have 'surplus labour' extracted from them: that is the labour that we are not directly compensated for through wages, that goes into the employer's pockets for free. These victims of surplus labour extraction are said to be the proletariat or working class.

So class is defined by the extraction of surplus labour. What many critics of Marxism, and even many Marxists, don't realize though is that we don't merely have surplus labour extracted from us at formal jobs and workplaces. For example, home-makers who raise children and clean houses are doing labour which is absolutely indispensable to the maintenance of the workforce, that capital needs in order to continue, yet they are not paid for it directly. Instead they in effect receive a portion of their spouse's income. Students at schools and universities are doing work that capitalism absolutely needs to function, they are transforming themselves into value added human capital, yet

they are also not compensated for it directly. Instead they are given the often false promise of higher wages or better jobs down the track if they keep at it and do well.

Then there are even stranger ways still that surplus labour is extracted from us. If you've ever used a self-serve checkout, labour is being extracted from you; you are effectively doing some of the work for the capitalist who is selling you things. If you've ever used Facebook, you've helped generate information which is then used to market products to you.

We can even go further than that. If you've ever given a friend a shoulder to cry on, you've done some of the emotional labour that capital needs to keep its workers healthy. All the time, always, we are doing things which keep this society running, for the disproportionate benefit of a few. I would hazard a guess and say that every single person in this room is a member of the working class, yet many of you have never set foot in a factory in your life.

III.

So we've seen that this extraction of surplus labour can happen anywhere—in the home, at university, and of course at our jobs. The division between those who do most of this labour, and those who benefit from it through their ownership of the means of production, defines the division between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, or in other words the producing class and the ruling class.

But class can't just exist as this simple abstraction: some do the work and some profit. It needs more than just this one single asymmetry. Marx said that the peasants of France were like potatoes in a sack, homogenous. Each village, each farmstead and ultimately in a sense even each peasant was similar. With peasants this doesn't really matter to class society, because of their geographic dispersion and the difficulties this creates for them in organizing effectively.

Among the working class though, if there were a lack of internal divisions, there would be little preventing them from revolt. Without the logic of competition within the working class itself, revolution would be a quick inevitability. The only possible, sustainable working class is a working class riven with divisions. Thus the working class is organized into a series of binaries or oppositions, one part of which is superior in power and the other subordinated. To name a few such divisions, men and non-men, straights and queers,

whites and people of colour, white collar workers and blue collar workers, workers in the Global South and the Global North. The division between the producers and the exploiters can only be sustained through a vast number of other social divisions.

In addition to dividing the working class, these divisions also serve to create specialists. Women are nudged into being reproductive labourers, housemakers and the like, and also into various forms of care work, like social work and nursing. People of colour are channelled into low paying jobs, and all too often into the prison industrial complex. Trans* people are disproportionately funnelled into sex-work for a variety of reasons. When we realize the vast complexity of the different types of labour people do, white collar and blue collar, waged and unwaged, legal and illegal, it becomes easier to see the intricate patterns class takes in relation to oppression than when we are stuck with an image of the proletariat as factory worker.

All too often, Marxists have bought into the following picture of the working class that I am critiquing. In the first instance it really is just a sack of potatoes, and then secondary to that there are divisions and differences. I would like to emphasize again how deeply wrong this is. In addition to being an abstract relation of surplus labour extraction class is always a concrete institution with indispensable specificities. Class cannot live separated from its specificities, any more than a body can live separated from its organs. Those organs may change and mutate over time, perhaps some might even come in and out of existence, but the organs as a whole are absolutely essential to the body. It is not merely that the body causes the organs to come into existence, rather, neither can survive long without the other and really they are one.

What I am proposing is not that class is primary exactly. Class is no more primary than, for example, gender—because gender is absolutely essential to defining the actual shape that class takes in our society. Rather I think that class is not the same sort of thing as these other modes of oppression. In order for it to be a concrete thing, in order for it to be class as it is in any particular society at any particular moment of time, it needs a whole series of differentiations and complexities. Any capitalist society without such differentiations would be overthrown quickly. Oppression is vital part of that structure of differentiations and complexities.