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Identity Politics of the Left and Right: An Interview with Chetan Bhatt

Chetan Bhatt in conversation with Stephen Cowden and Rashmi Varma*

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Abstract

Chetan Bhatt is the Anthony Giddens Professor of Social Theory in the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics. Chetan's research has looked at the global rise of religious fundamentalism, the international authoritarian far right, and the power of nationalism and racism historically and in contemporary political movements. Some of this work is discussed in his TED talk: Dare to refuse the origin myths that claim who you are. His most recent book is entitled *The Revolutionary Road To Me* (Cambridge & Hoboken NJ: Polity Press, 2025). This book looks at the way the rise of identity politics, and its underlying form of 'identitarianism', has paralysed the Western political Left. He argues that identity politics has divided progressive and Leftist political parties in a highly damaging way, leaving organisations and campaigning groups mired in intractable conflicts. Most importantly, the predominance of identity politics has diverted the Left from its founding political mission – addressing the human misery caused by the vast increases in poverty, inequality and violence across the world, driven as this is by capitalism's relentless drive for accumulation. He also discusses the way contemporary corporate capitalism has adopted the language of identity politics, transforming what were once genuine demands for addressing discrimination into a corporate branding exercise. The form of identity politics on the Left, in so degrading the capacities of the Left to address people's real concerns, has created a golden opportunity for Right to respond with their own forms of identity politics based on racist nationalism and misogyny, which is paraded before the populace as though it is they who now represent the interests of 'ordinary people' against 'cultural elites'.

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What is the politics behind Identity Politics?

Stephen: Welcome, Chetan. We are interviewing you in the context of your new book *The Revolutionary Road to Me*. This is a book which offers one of the most trenchant criticisms of identity politics and the role they

play in Left and progressive politics. You're writing this book at a time when authoritarian, reactionary and fascistic political tendencies are on the rise. At the same time, you also are attacking the kind of identity politics that have come to be called 'woke', which are associated with the Left. So, an important question we would ask you right at the outset is, where do you position yourself politically within the current moment in terms of the critique of identity politics which is offered in your book?

Chetan: Thank you, I very much appreciate *Feminist Dissent* taking the time to do this interview.

Consider the 'culture wars' as beginning in the 1960s, coming from the political Right, in a small way initially, and then getting more ferocious into the 70s, and then accelerating massively under Ronald Reagan's Republicanism alongside the rise of the Moral Majority and the Christian Right from the early 1980s. What the culture wars represent is a political reaction to certain kinds of progressive thinking and the diversification of the sphere of rights that grew out of the Civil Rights movement in the US from the late 1950s. You can think of the Civil Rights movement as representing particular groups aiming to make real the universal claims that were promised to them. From the experiences of racist segregation, discrimination and violence, claims based on universal rights arose. These claims were made in the period after WW2 which also saw the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). In that crucial moment, universal rights were claimed, but they failed. The Civil Rights movement was itself destroyed. Even though you had the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the reaction to the Civil Rights movement and the opposition to segregation in the US was ferocious. What came after that was black nationalism in the form of the Black Power movement. One way of thinking about this is that you then had the rise of the first form of identity politics. And then a number of other social movements emerged, in particular Women's and Lesbian and Gay liberation. And they were situated alongside other movements that were largely left-wing or socialist in orientation and were more focused on socio-economic factors and class. So, what I've briefly outlined is one way to tell the story of identity politics and how it emerged.

While such narratives about identity politics are widespread and typically talk about the further development of identity politics from the 1980s, I want to put these narratives about the origins of identity politics in a different frame. What I argue in the book is that the modern political Right has historically been driven by identitarianism and identity politics.

The culture wars represent a contestation between different varieties of identitarian thinking. From the Right, it's focused on race, nationalism, religion and gender, and it's marshalled against the Left. The attacks that are currently taking place against Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) policies, are an example of this. These attacks from the Right are not made to defend universalism, but instead to further the Right's own forms of identitarianism that are largely based on preserving various inequalities.

The original template for identitarian thinking comes from the rise of ethno-nationalism in the 19th century, a period when elites asked people to ask themselves: "Who are we?" If you think of the 'template' of identity politics as being formed in that way, then you are addressing a different historical, political understanding of identitarian thinking. It's not simply that the Left has identity politics and the Right opposes it. Rather, the Right exhibits a ferocious form of identity politics, which you see emerging today largely as white racial and cultural nationalism across Europe and the US. This is currently taking the form of a nationalistic techno-fascism, which we see clearly in the people who are around Donald Trump in his second presidency. It also represents new elite capitalist class that has broken from the logic of the way these elites have organised themselves politically since the 1990s. The Right is using identitarian thinking in a visionary, fascistic way that is not simply a reaction to the Left, and it represents a formidably bleak period for the Left and its values of equality.

Now, let's turn to the Left. There have been left-wing critiques of Left identity politics from the moment they arose. And those critiques have taken two main forms. The first is liberal universalism largely based on Human Rights or a liberal conception of equality. This represents a meritocratic, colour- and gender-blind approach. The second is a different kind of universalism, usually socialist or Marxist in orientation, in which the working classes, as the exploited classes, represents universality. However, both of those forms of universalism have been insufficient, and were precisely the reason that the new social movements of the 1960s arose.
Within the Left, contestations between universalism and identity politics have been longstanding. Identity politics has been internally contested within the Left for a long time. But this contestation failed to happen in the way it needed to. In my experience of activism from the 1980s onwards in various campaigns and movements, activists saw the rise of

identity politics and often joked about it its absurdities and zealotry. But we failed to challenge it in any significant and sustained way – whether those identities were libertarian or authoritarian, religious and communal or based on race, gender, sexuality and their so-called intersections, each simplistic and impoverished ways of thinking about people and their lives.

In parallel, left identity politics of authoritarian religious kinds as well as supposedly liberatory ones were adopted by Local Government in UK as a means to bring about certain kinds of inclusion, consciously creating spaces for different identity groups. At the same time these sorts of Local Government policies were attacked from the Right – there was a huge campaign from the Conservative Party and the right-wing press to describe these policies as "Loony Left". The shape of the attacks were very similar to the ones we see today, though today they are much more ferocious, as seen with the Trump administrations. The targets then were similar to those today; anti-racism, feminism, lesbian/gay rights.

Then, as now, this creates a political trap, a false one in my view, but still a trap of sorts. Many people on the Left used to remain relatively silent about of the absurdities of Identity politics because they were worried about not attacking sections of the Left that were prime political targets for the Right – for example, not criticising left wing Labour Local Authorities when the Right was attacking them. I think that that's a really difficult position for some on the Left to be in. It creates a defensiveness. It places the Left in the position of defending not only the absurdities and idiocies of identity politics but also morally indefensible actions and events undertaken by some members of identity communities. And, it makes much Left politics driven by a purely reactive oppositional stance based on how the Right will react, and so it is unable to engage in internal reflection and critique without constantly thinking about how the Right is going to respond. So, you cannot discuss this issue because it will fuel racism, and so on, an internal policing by identitarians. This distorts the possibilities for different visions for what the antiracist Left can and should do.

In retrospect, the Left should have been far more robust in its critique of certain forms of identitarian thinking within the Left. A good example of this is the way 'multiculturalism' transformed into 'multi-faithism' under the Blair period, after which both the state and the political Left were jointly empowering very reactionary forces within minority communities, including powerful authoritarian religious movements with defined

political interests who were transnationally organised and had more resources and political experience than the Left activists who worked to amplify them solely as immaculate victims of racism or Islamophobia. These forces were pushing forward their ideology and controlling communities, particularly controlling women within those communities. So, within the Left and the alliances it formed, there was a huge scope decades ago for taking this on, and this wasn't done. This was a major failure because this politics represented a different kind of logic which is narcissistic in orientation and can only think in communal terms. This results in the Left fostering divisive communalist politics. This kind of politics is simply focused on itself, it cannot extend solidarity to other groups. It was in such ways that the narcissistic and communal logic of identity politics changed the culture of the Left, and this created the situation we now find ourselves in.

Consider the horrific, systematic abuse of largely white working class girls by largely South Asian men over decades in Rotherham, Rochdale and elsewhere. This represents a key example of the evacuation of moral judgement on the identitarian anti-racist left. These events are spoken about by many sections of the Left solely through the consequences for racism, the stereotyping of Pakistani or Muslim men. I know full well that the main, determined and dogged prosecutor for the Rochdale cases was a Pakistani lawyer. I know that around five hundred mosques coordinated sermons against child abuse, I know after the revelations how the far-right mobilised at least a dozen times in Rotherham, often violently, against the South Asian community. An elderly South Asian man was brutally murdered in Rotherham following these mobilisations.

But imagine a different situation where the South Asian and antiracist Left's approach from the start of the revelations was solidarity with those girls and their families, and the possibility of an alliance across white and South Asian working class communities that isolated the abusers and worked for support and justice for those girls and young women and their families together. Instead, to this day, some of the antiracist left essentially continues – 'yes, isn't it awful what happened to those girls but let's focus on racism against the men, that is more important, otherwise you're fuelling the far-right'. Their attitude matches that of the police services who saw those girls as disposable. And it was their position that massively fuelled the far-right. This, to me, is precisely the moral corruption of some of the antiracist left. Everyone can see it as moral corruption. And those events, and the response of many

antiracists, have empowered the right and far-right and will continue to do so powerfully for years to come. It's a key example of how identitarian thinking is destroying the political possibilities for Left.

The Professionalisation of Identity Politics

Returning to the social movements of 1970s and 1980s, it is critical to recognize what they achieved. Those movements didn't have a penny between them. They emerged from the actions of ordinary people and communities and, while they were often focused on specific campaigns, they didn't necessarily take identitarian forms of the kind we see today. They emerged as social movements largely dealing with the coercive arms of the state, particularly the police and the law in the case of black and gay communities, but also in terms of reproductive and other rights as these affected women.

That's quite different from what we have seen since the late 1990s where identitarian forms of thinking have been shorn of that community base and delinked from the people and communities who created those movements. Identity politics has been largely taken over by NGOs in partnership with the state and other institutions. And its agents are largely credentialed middle-class activists. This shifted the political logic from one of ordinary people demanding rights to one of NGOs becoming technocratic experts, working in alliance with the state, businesses and international philanthropies that fund them, those NGOs deciding what those communities are and what they want. Once you have institutions like that becoming involved, then a different set of logics come into play that are not about ordinary people, but about the management of populations. So, if the modern state has the key task of managing people – how they live, how they die – then identity politics has become enmeshed with the management of populations. Multiculturalism is not a mechanism for ordinary people to demand their rights but a means for the state to manage minority populations.

The corporatisation and professionalization of social movements as NGOs also has many consequences. Imagine for a moment some left-wing activists are meeting, maybe a student groups or staff in an NGO. How would this group of largely middle class activists relate to others if the same discussions were taking place in an ordinary working class community? How would they relate to the people living in those communities? How meaningful are the languages of corporate identity

politics for working with and speaking to the people in those communities? How does the language used in contemporary identity politics reflect the people being spoken about? There is a huge disconnect. A good example of is between what what is now called LGBTQ + and ordinary gay and lesbian communities. Unlike the gay movement, LGBTQ+ is a corporate invention and not a representation of an organic movement from below. The same could be said of many lobbying and advocacy organizations for BAME communities – there is a deep disconnect between the people they claim to be speaking for and those professional people who work in the NGO sector.

While some of this politics was certainly present in some of the early funded groups, in the 70s and 80s, there was also a natural orientation towards the communities. Activists didn't largely see themselves as experts. There was more commonly a democratic orientation towards the communities and what they felt or wanted. Public meetings that involved families and communities affected were often the organisational norm in antiracism, for example. Early funded organisations may have provided essential welfare and other services, but also tried to link the people to politics. Once you start thinking of politics in terms of NGO experts, equalities procedures, institutional policies, discrimination procedures, you're systematically depoliticizing everything. You're taking issues out of the realm of political struggles and converting them into apolitical procedures. It is in this way that NGOs have facilitated the incorporation of identity politics into institutions and made it the political language of the professional and credentialed classes. This is a major change from that of the social movements and their organisations from the past.

Identity politics and the rise of Authoritarian Nationalism

Rashmi: Thank you, Chetan, for giving us such a rich account of the fault lines within left responses historically to identity politics. I want to sort of shift the discussion now to the current moment, which is the rise of identity politics in the age of Trump and Trumpism. And here, of course, it's interesting to also look at what some of the other left commentators are saying who are also critical of identity politics. So we have someone like Vivek Chibber [1] who got a lot of flak for saying this when he

[1] Interview with Vivek Chibber 'Why Elites Love Identity Politics' Jacobin 14/1/25 Available at: https://jacobin.com/2025/01/elite-identity-politics-professional-class

suggested that left identitarian politics were responsible for the rise of Trump. And then, of course, other commentators recently, such as Ash Sarkar from Novara Media [2] is also reflecting now on the role that identity politics have played in the rise of authoritarian politics globally, but specially in the West. So I was wondering if you could reflect on that, on the kind of causal argument. Do you think identity politics has caused the rise of Trumpism or is it one of the factors? What is the relationship between the form of identity politics, and the rise of someone like Trump?

Chetan: Some of the tendencies you mention are examples of identitarian zealotry and post-truth politics on the Left. That they are saying something slightly different now means little in terms of their sustained role in digging even deeper holes for the Left. The Left knows the Right will use culture war issues to attack them - it has known this since the mid-60s and particularly from the 80s onwards. Yet, look at some of the senselessness around identity politics, the many easy targets the Left continually presents to the Right, as if it has learned nothing from the experience of previous decades. In this sense, sections of the Left share a huge responsibility for creating the conditions in which the Right can so ferociously attack the basic rights of minority groups. But the consequences of this on minority groups and ordinary people will manifest in ways that some of the Left refuse to acknowledge or take responsibility for.

One of the points made in the book is that the identitarian Left sees itself as inherently morally good and morally benign, so part of the Left's self-belief is that nothing it can do is ever wrong since it, after all, is committed to supporting marginalised groups, opposing oppression and so on. It is a dangerous delusion to believe you or any group are morally perfect or morally excellent. In parallel, those seen to belong to identities consecrated by the Left are ciphers rather than real people - perpetually immaculate victims rather than full humans, a form of dehumanization that the progressive Left engages. The questions the Left needs to ask are not 'why are you attacking identity politics, these are marginalized groups?', but instead: 'Why is Trump in power? What are our failures that enabled this populist fascist to arise? What role did left-wing identity politics play in the popular support for figures like him?' And certainly,

[2] This Is Why The Right Are WINNING, Aaron Bastani meets Ash Sarkar https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZS3UlB7aXmE

some of the absurdities of left-wing identity politics have played a critical role in the rise of the authoritarian Right, including, quite directly, of Trump[3]. Authoritarian Right or fascist figures such as Victor Orban in Hungary among several others across Europe are making instrumental use of gender issues, migration and racism by pointing directly at some of the inanities of left-wing identity politics. Instead of holding onto its sense of moral righteousness, the Left needs to ask itself how they are doing this. What is the impact of their identity thinking on ordinary people? Why have people, some of whom previously voted for Obama, shifted to Trump? Why did small sections of black communities and significant numbers of Latino and Asians shift towards Trump in the last election? As significantly, how is the anti-racist Left going to re-orient itself to the rise of what has been called 'the multiracial far-right', one where virtually every major far-right project in the United States and in many European countries, including white supremacist groups, has a significant presence of individuals from minority communities, from the Proud Boys and the Stop the Steal campaign in the USA to Reform UK and the followers of Tommy Robinson here.

So, while sections of the Left were focused on 'privilege politics' or were wanting to queer, decolonize and abolish everything, themes largely meaningless outside of NGOs and middle class or student activism, and while guilt ridden liberal whites were berated in 2020 about their racism by expensive antiracist trainers who would never engage Trump or Reform UK supporters, much of the Right was vigorously renewing its claims about *natural inequality*. While some Left groups are focused on the specialness of their identities, the populist and far right are calling for mass involuntary repatriation, what they call 'remigration'. There is a surreal disconnect between the identitarian obsessions of some of the Left and the dangerous mainstreaming of ideas formerly articulated by small neo-Nazi and neo-Fascist groups. It is critical in this overheated, volatile political period not to underestimate how powerful the far-right has become, its reach, its appeal among ordinary people and mainstream politicians and the impact it is having on the fabric of civil societies across the West. What were previously fringe neo-Nazi themes marginal to politics are now mainstream, including forced mass deportations, the normalising of hatred and polarising politics, and the consequences of

[3] 'How the Transgender Rights Movement Bet on the Supreme Court and Lost', Nicholas Confessore, *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/19/magazine/scotus-transgender-care-tennessee-skrmetti.html

that politics for generating vigilante violence in local communities against migrants and refugees.

A major part of the issue is the alienation of many people from the politics that the Left presents. This is related to the elitism of Left politics and the university-sourced languages and cultures of the Left within which identity politics is central. What does it mean for ordinary people to have the Left speaking languages that don't relate to them? To what extent is the Left active in work with ordinary people and communities? In other work I'm involved in, during meetings of working-class people, what you are immediately aware of is that the organised Left is hardly present in the lives of those people or, where it is, it often comes out with absurdities and languages that don't speak to them. This wasn't the case before. At the same time, people are being constantly exposed to the relentless, toxic disinformation that's coming from the authoritarian far-right and its local foot-soldiers.

A dimension to this is that when many people make use of public services, they constantly see messages associated with minority groups, for example the 'liberation' flag plastered everywhere. They see the outcomes of left-wing policies that tell them 'men can be women', or their children can change their biological sex. If this goes against what those people may believe, or the evidence of their own eyes, or just basic biological science, then many people on the Left would call them uneducated or prejudiced bigots. But, if the Left is promoting blatant untruths, why should people believe anything the Left says? If you're a public sector worker, you'll be required to do training courses where these kinds of ideas are put forward as unassailable truths. Now, I think there's a huge amount of scepticism around them from people who are required to attend these events. And for some people that scepticism results in cynicism or disengagement. But this scepticism can also take political forms and can mobilise people in unpredictable ways.
So, around trans policies, for example, particularly in schools, you see large sections of communities protesting against them, organizing protests as parents. The Right or far-right may be involved in organising some of these protests, but the concerns extend well beyond them and started outside and before any far-right involvement. The Left, which is supposedly based on reason, evidence and truth, has created the situation in which many ordinary people have legitimate concerns about their kids being taught biological untruths. Or they have legitimate concerns about the impact left-wing identity politics is going to have on

their children, including the possibility of them being put on pathways to potential medical transition. In a context where these approaches have been shown to be harmful for children[4], why is the Left surprised that people are becoming open to the ideas and projects of the Right and far-right and turn ferociously against the values historically associated with the Left? These issues are playing out in a situation where you have massive social media disinformation and the spread of multiple, complex and compounded lies that are well beyond the reach of fact-checking, reason and associated approaches. We're in a very different universe of large-scale lies and distortions in politics that are impossible to unravel effectively, and which are becoming embedded in the infrastructure of mainstream politics. In that context, it becomes even more critical for the Left to work with ordinary people, win them over to its values. Those values can't just be a coalition of identity communities. The Left has to be much more visionary in terms of offering people a different, better life and engage with ordinary, often deeply polarized and often impoverished communities in other sustained ways.

Diversity policies as Corporate Branding

Stephen: I think you have set out some very important points there, so just to pick up on the whole question of Trump. One of the key elements of Project 2025 was Trump's commitment was to dismantle Diversity, Equality and Inclusion initiatives. You've talked about the way identity politics have travelled into this bureaucratic form and the scepticism that many people feel towards these kinds of policies, as well as the fact that they are often imposed on them rather than something that comes from the grassroots or involves them. In the context where you have a fascist right which is attacking these same DEI initiatives, what should a Left anti-racist feminist response be to the attack on these be?

Chetan: A fundamental baseline for the Left is absolute universal human equality, and equality between men and women, and institutions have to ensure that. Institutions have to prevent discrimination, whether it's around hiring and promotions or service provision. So, support for antidiscrimination policies arises naturally from a commitment to

[4] *Independent review of gender identity services for children and young people*, Hilary Cass, April 2024, https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20250310143933/https://cass.independent-review.uk/home/publications/final-report

universal equality. At the same time DEI policies have shifted since the early 2000s from addressing, real measurable, evidenced forms of discrimination, inequality, harassment and bullying, to a different set of ideas based on promoting particular identity groups within corporate spaces. The focus is rarely about addressing real and measurable discrimination, but often concerns the value which accrues to the corporate brand by linking particular identities to that brand. It's almost as though the identity becomes connected to the corporation's brand value and image.

There is also strong evidence that, for example, racism awareness, unconscious bias and other related training hardly do anything to address actual discrimination, and they barely change people's attitudes. Identitarianism in the liberal corporate environment has economic and bureaucratic logics that are different from the intention to prevent discrimination and address unfair treatment based on discrimination. Much identitarianism owes to transformations in corporate workplaces and changes in the labour processes for middle-class workers. In the major intensification of their work, corporations compensate by making people feel valued in particular ways. This often works through developing certain cultural sensibilities within a broadly liberal corporate sphere that stretches from the UN and NGOs through to large liberal corporations like IPM, Apple and Google. But even with companies like BlackRock, a global financial institution in its own right, having larger assets than those of several countries combined, these corporations have enormous influence in determining what financial and banking institutions do. They can make it mandatory that you have to certain DEI policies if you're want to continue working with them.

Now that's very different from addressing real discrimination. It's one thing to have groups, what are called employee resource groups for Latino or LGBTQ+ people and their 'allies', and addressing real discrimination or economic poverty. I would agree with writers who have said that many aspects of discrimination, racial discrimination as well as aspects of discrimination against women, could be addressed by addressing economic discrimination and inequality more widely. But that, of course, can't be the solution for large corporations because their interests stop at the moment at which economic inequality come into play because this would go against their primary goal of accumulating wealth for their owners and shareholders.

The Trump and Musk type of attack on DEI policies has to be seen as part of their political strategy, their instrumental, symbolic use of the DEI industry that might be important in some people's lives but represents, even with its global value of several billion dollars, a small amount of money for the USA or any large Western economy. The attack on DEI serves many political and symbolic functions because it makes people think we're finally dealing with these absurdities and unfairness. But it is essentially a way of polarizing populations and maintaining support among your supporters.

Authoritarian populism, which is often a sanitized term for the word 'fascism', works in liberal democracies by focusing on the 30 to 40% of the electoral vote required to win and then working towards making future elections unwinnable by the democratic opposition or challenging unfavourable outcomes in other ways. So, the strategy is of severe polarization that will create the section of the electorate that you need to win and create conditions in which you make it difficult, if not impossible for the other side to win. This is achieved through testing and challenging the constitution in multiple ways, ignoring law or settled procedures, using various arms of the state – whether taxation, NGO legislation, immigration services or the police to harass the opposition, critics, journalists, make life very tough for them. Through multiple means, formal, informal, personal, institutional, legal and extra-legal, the goal is to make it hard for opponents to win and ensure that the balance of power is always for you. This need not be done in a systematic way, such as targeting every liberal journalist for example, but sporadically, chaotically, this generating greater uncertainty and dislocation for the Left.

It's important not to be distracted by the chaos and perpetual crises that authoritarians systematically generate and for which they present themselves as the only solution. These forms of authoritarian governance may be relatively new in the United States but are very well known elsewhere. Additionally, virtually all populist figures tend to be colourful characters that throw tantrums and manufacture personal conflicts. That is not accidental and is intended to focus public attention on them and not elsewhere. Similarly, engaging in large symbolic acts around DEI, for example, is about turning public focus on them. That takes attention, scrutiny away from what their administration is doing. In the first Trump presidency, this meant the replacement of Supreme Court justices and numerous judges at federal levels, and enacting many other changes

through executive orders and policy. These have become ferocious during the second Trump administration with aggressive, unlawful, punitive attacks on migrants, protestors, critics, opponents of Israel's genocide against the population of Gaza, and the human rights of transgender adults, similar to what you see across many authoritarian populist states. So, there is another dimension to the culture wars and the easy targets that identity politics provides: they are the basis for mobilizations that can also distract from the actions taking place beyond public scrutiny and accountability.

Identity Politics and the Crisis of the Left

Rashmi: Could you talk about what you think is at stake in all of this, for feminist politics in particular going forward. We are in a context where there are elements of identitarian thinking within feminism, as well as tensions between feminism and other social movements, such as the trans rights movement, around identitarian thinking.

Chetan: In the past two decades, you've had vast range of Left social movements across the world. You could locate the trajectory of these movements of resistance from the Zapatistas through to the Arab Spring, Occupy, Black Lives Matter and the recent mass demonstrations against Israel. There has been a great upsurge of people and energies across the globe, people initiating and engaging in progressive and democratic political struggles. But not a single one of these large movements has succeeded in its aims over the past few decades. Instead, there has been a repetition of failures and the international rise of fascism and proto-fascism in country after country. Why has the Left continually failed? Despite these massive uprisings of people, why have the models of organisation, the ideas, projects and visions, failed? This is a complicated area to unpick, but if now is not a time for internal political, moral and ethical reflection and reorientation, when is?

We can see at a microlevel these kinds of transformations and failures with the example of socialist feminism in the UK that arose from 70s, 80s into the 90s. This was a universal form of feminism. It was usually libertarian in his approach to questions of pornography and sexuality. It supported lesbian and gay rights. It saw the involvement of women and feminist demands within trade unions and the labour movement as of key importance, and many socialist feminists came from labour movement work. It integrated questions of class. Now, from around the

early 2000s but especially from 2015 onwards, that brand of socialist feminis was faced with younger women on the left who are speaking for trans rights and the inclusion of transwomen in women's spaces. In the UK, unlike the USA, the 'gender-critical' movement began largely through left-wing socialist feminist activism. Subsequently, that element of the movement has receded and the meaning of the term 'gender critical' has widened in terms of the political orientations of those within its umbrella, including anti-feminists and some women in or rapidly moving to the populist right or far-right.

The far-right link transgender issues to questions of migration, Muslim communities, the decline of public life in a seamless narrative. So, you give people a clear link between trans rights activists and their ideology, Muslim minorities in the West, so-called Muslim 'rape gangs', 'mass migration', the decline of public services and the quality of life in European cities, and alleged rises in crime, producing, for many, a compelling, essentially fascist world-view. This is typically articulated in a way that positions all (white) women and children as under threat from all Muslim and migrant men, as well as from transactivists. These are often linked to a broader conspiracy narrative about the 'globalists' who have caused this decline in Western societies. It is a neat story and reproduced in many forms across social media. I've heard variants of this far right narrative from some formerly liberal women, gay men and South Asians.

I think if you are a feminist on the left and the main focus in recent years has been 'decolonizing' feminism, including 'decolonising' reproductive rights and abortion, and you see around you the crude identitarianism that says little more than 'white feminists are racists' or 'white feminism is colonial'. And at the same time, virtually the entire left is telling you to accept a fully intact adult human male as a woman because of the way they are dressed. In such a situation, you can see the alienation of women who would have been formerly committed to the Left but now find ready-made friends on the political right. This is not just a problem of fragmentation, but about the way in which certain tendencies in liberal and radical feminism have openly allied with the transatlantic far right and have become more powerful in that context.

Parallel faultlines to these occurred around 15-20 years ago in relation to feminism and political Islamism where, again, the political right and far-right opened its arms to welcome people who were liberal or left-wing

but were active around the impact of religious fundamentalism on women. Of course, in these earlier cases and today, the Right has its own political agenda, anti-Muslim or anti-feminist. But a common factor in both is how Left identitarianism consecrates all members of its favoured oppressed groups as morally excellent victims of oppression who do not have the capacity for any independent agency unless it is that involved in fighting racism or colonialism. Of course, no group can be this morally excellent group.

And as the Left within feminism has receded, or rather has been largely replaced by an identitarian form of it, this also reflects a generational issue, a clear dislocation between the older traditions of anti-racist, internationalist socialist feminism and something that calls itself feminism but whose origins are largely elite universities and Western NGOs. Put crudely, it believes sex work is work, natal men are women, all whites are racist, feminism needs to be queered and decolonized, and so on – but these would be meaningless to, for example, black and white working class women. So, I think the older splits between radical, revolutionary and socialist feminists have been superseded by these newer divisions and fuelled by corporate and NGO identitarianism. And in its impact, there are novel dynamics and unusual and unpredictable political alliances being created on the Left and the Right.

Reconstructing an Anti-Racist Feminist Left

Stephen: I mean, that really leads us into our final question. One of the things that the book does very powerfully and trenchantly is it offers a very detailed and thorough critique of these identitarian movements. And how they're inserted into what was previously a historic form of universalist, socialist feminist, anti-racist politics. The book fully analyses way identitarianism has captured the NGO and corporate sector. This brings us back to the question of the Left. One of the things that readers of your book might be asking would be what are those tendencies on which new hope and the kinds of visions you refer to can be built? Your book refers to the work of Ella Baker, the work of CLR James, but the arguments for an alternative aren't fleshed out within the book. I just wonder if you could offer readers some kind of sense of the materials from which the kind of universalist left needs to rebuild itself from.

Chetan: It's much easier to consider what the problems are, and this is the focus of the book. But there are some strands there which I'm happy

to outline. There are some absolutely critical priorities for the Left: the rise of the fascisms that we're seeing, and in particular the kind of techno-populist fascism in the US, means that opposition to the Far Right has to be a central focus of activity for the Left. This factor now affects everything of importance for the Left, including opposing the genocide against Palestinians. In enacting this politics, the Left, in the UK for example, must think globally and be attuned to the detailed manifestations of fascism across the globe. It's absolutely critical that the Left organize to fight what is very clearly an alliance of the far-right across states and movements that is self-reproducing and acting in concert, well-resourced, and containing both political party and violent street-level vigilante forms.

And alongside that other key priorities are the climate emergency, increasing poverty, and violence against women and the equality of women and girls. These are areas of critical work, often emergency work. It’s also the case that people on the Left working in those situations are besieged from multiple directions and often facing severe demoralization. Given that new fascism is now a long-term feature of our political landscapes, what is the kind of Left needed to move forward that is able to work on multiple fronts in a state of siege and refuse to let internal identitarian follies derail or distract it. And were talking about a divided and fragmented Left having to deal with major issues that require international responses. The Left is very good at reacting and organising its reactions through mass demonstrations and protests. Beyond these necessary protests, issues like the climate emergency, billionaire-fuelled social media fascism, the international far-right, inequality and poverty, the global movements of people because of war or poverty, require dealing with international institutions, science, technocratic approaches, things the Left is less good at doing.

Those are the kinds of challenges the Left is facing. And one argument perhaps may be that they're so insurmountable, and so the left is turning inwards and into identitarian politics; identity politics is a lot easier to do than addressing poverty. It's easier to deal with symbolic minority rights than it is to deal with the climate emergency we're in. At the same time, technocratic solutions involve states, bureaucracies, legislative frameworks which, in the sphere of rights, are thoroughly discredited or have failed. Yet, institutional infrastructures are necessary for any complex society let alone for relations between them. So, what are the alternative democratic international institutional frameworks the Left

can propose? What, in other words, is the Left for? For example, beyond slogans, what would a democratic one-state solution look like? What form would it take? What would its constitution be?

In terms of social movements and organisation, and in the context of the extent of social media disinformation we have today and the way social media has transformed political communication and political authority, there is a need to rethink social movement organisation. And I think that that means the left has to rethink its orientation towards political communication as a result of social media. This doesn't mean engaging in disinformation or crude populism as the Right does. The work of people like CLR James and Ella Baker offers important ideas in how they understand the power of ordinary people to change things and the way they urge activists to look at where people are at, not where you want them to be. Both James and Baker urged activists to listen to and learn from people, and in the context of what needs to be a reconstructive period for the left, this is very important. It is not the university-educated activists and NGOs that are important, and it is not what credentialed activists think that is important, but instead what the people they speak for think, what they want. That may not always be pleasant to hear. This means that, yes, you have to engage with and work with and listen to ordinary people who hold views you consider to be racist, misogynistic, homophobic if you are to persuade them with your arguments. And because activists, who are largely middle-class, have access to information and resources that can guide and inform, their role here becomes important. But they can’t substitute for the people.

I think the Left needs to rethink organization. The horizontal forms of organisation developed as an alternative to centralist forms have failed repeatedly over the last two decades. They have certainly mobilised huge numbers of people, but faced with the repression which has often followed, they have not been able to continue. We need to think beyond the opposition between centralised forms of organisation and decentralized horizontal forms of organization, and the often-interminable meetings that result which are only meaningful for university-educated activists and NGO workers. Relatedly, the left really needs to let go of a lot of the ideas embedded within particularly younger university-educated activists, stereotypically those who want to queer and decolonize everything or who prioritise identitarianism within every issue however unrelated or irrelevant it may be.

I've had conversations where people have said: 'Well, it shouldn't be the job of black or Asian people to oppose fascism or racism, they're vulnerable and shouldn't be at the forefront'. Why not? There's a language of vulnerability and a language of therapy on the left which is hindering in terms of effective activism. When the far-right instigated riots occurred in 2024 across the UK, in my university, there were calls from colleagues to offer emotional support for black and minority students. For a university, this might be legitimate. But we are immediately in the realm of psychotherapy rather than politics, and this is fundamentally different to antiracist, antifascist orientations I am used to. I argued that 'No, you have to be out, you have to be defiant, you have to be visible in the streets. You can't let the fascists make you hide'. So, this is also a difference from the past.

A key aspect of anti-fascist mobilisations of the 1970s-80s was that you cannot show fear to fascists, not least because once you do, they will harass and attack you even more. So, there are many areas within the organization of Left activism that we need to be honest about in terms of how effective they are. In particular, the policing of language as part of the effort to be inclusive -these are self-defeating forms of organizing. And this connects to our earlier discussion about identitarianism and the way it has so powerfully degraded the organisational culture of the Left. Get involved in a political campaign because of the atrocities, injustice or inequality that you see, not because of who you are. This means a radical reorientation away from the impoverished models which identitarianism has left us with.

Stephen and Rashmi: Thanks for setting out your thoughts and ideas for us today, Chetan.

Chetan: Thanks to you both and to *Feminist Dissent* for giving the space to do that.

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