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The dumb prof considers intersectionality in the Age of Trump

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I

Introduction: the dumb prof takes on intersectionality

Among decent, intelligent, and respectable human beings in the United States and around the world, the occupation of Donald Trump of the American presidency is the shock that never ends. Much of this has to do with how vulgar the man is. The *New York Times* has religiously kept a list of the 329 (and counting) ‘people, places, and things’ that Trump has insulted since his time as a presidential candidate.[1] This list includes a diverse range of news media, nation-states, international organizations, and governmental agencies, as well as women, peoples-of-color, indigenous people, and LGBTIQ+ persons. This translates for most into misogyny, racism, homophobia, and transphobia.

The activist-academic terms *intersectionality* and *identity politics* have in turn entered into our popular vocabulary as words that might describe how all of these aggrieved groups might resist the Trump Administration. This resistance, it is claimed, is necessary because these various groups have not only been insulted by Trump’s rhetoric, but have also been oppressed by draconian policies either passed during Trump’s first 100 days or spoken of by way of rumor.

In this primer, I will try to introduce what we mean when we say *intersectionality* and *identity politics* in this political moment and what problems the usage of these terms might be generating for the movements of resistance. In so doing, I will indulge in what my students and I call the *dumb prof routine*, which refers to two simultaneous phenomena: 1) I am really too dumb as a university professor to know what these words mean right off the bat, so I am defining them, as well as other terms, mostly for my own convenience, and 2) I am dumb enough to think that intellectual inquiry like the kind that we do in academic circles can actually be a part of saving the world.

There are three parts to this primer because dumb academic work always seems to come in threes:

- First, I’ll talk about what *intersectionality* and *identity politics* are and why some people think that they are useful words for understanding resistance in the age of Trump.
- Second, I will introduce some of the problems with intersectional language for really building a coalition that can build a new world – maybe even a *socialist* one – that is much more livable than the one that Trump says he is building. In particular, I want to address the way in which our current social way of operating has our society talking about class in ways that seem to be structured more through the way people talk and feel instead of how much material capital they have actually accumulated. This, I claim, has resulted in the strange contemporary political formations of the Trump Era, namely the *fragmentation of the Left* and the *deploring of the vulgar*, both of which feed into what are called *far-right movements* at a contemporary global scale.
- Third, I will ask some dumb prof questions about what we can do once we acknowledge some of the problems we have in intersectional struggle. The real reason all of this is dumb, even for an academic, is that it is quite unoriginal and probably obvious to everyone reading this

except for me, but perhaps through dumb questions we might overcome some of the impasses in our various movements and *move* forward with political potency.

Intersectionality and Identity Politics: some definitions

At face value, *intersectionality* and *identity politics* might seem simple enough. ‘Women,’ ‘peoples-of-color,’ ‘indigenous people,’ and ‘LGBTIQ+ persons’ are supposed to be examples of groups with *identities*, recognizable labels that encapsulate their experiences. To *identify* is to say that this label *represents* and *recognizes* a group of people as having similar experiences. Each of these groups experiences the world in different ways that are often spoken of as *embodied*, in the sense that the way that their bodies are physically presented to the world affords them a certain kind of encounter with the institutional realities of our contemporary political economy and socio-cultural milieu. The structural slant of an institution toward one group over another is often referred to as *privilege*, while the extreme (but conventional) way of referring to those who are slighted by a system is *hate*, although the word is technically *oppression* (institutionally taking away one’s ability to act without constraint).

Here are some examples:

- Women might find some institutions that they interact with – their workplaces, government agencies, voluntary associations they might be expected to join, societal expectations of motherhood, judicial burdens for rape victims to prove that they had actually been sexually assaulted – to be *misogynistic* (hating of women, thus oppressing them) and *patriarchal* (privileging the bodily realities of men). Because of this, there have long been *feminist* movements attempting to either reform, restructure, or dismantle male-privileged institutions so that women in their embodied realities can thrive in their everyday lives.
- Peoples-of-color who can trace their ancestry to regions of the world that have been historically colonized by Europeans also experience *racism* (an oppressive and ‘hateful’ hierarchy of races in which they find themselves at the bottom) and *white privilege* (a structural slant of economic benefits to people with white skin when in competition with peoples-of-color) in the United States. Movements that try to dismantle racism are often referred to as *anti-racist* movements and range the gamut from attempts to obtain ‘civil rights’ for peoples of color (such as the right to vote and to not live in segregated areas) to more revolutionary movements to form self-determining communities (such as the Black Panthers).
- Indigenous people refer to the historic expropriation of their lands by new people occupying them as *settler colonialism* (the privileging of the colonizer settling on their lands) while sometimes referring as what is happening to themselves as *cultural genocide* (an oppressive attempt to kill them off at least culturally so that they can be assimilated, alongside actual massacres and physical brutalization). Indigenous movements may advocate for the recognition of indigenous rights within a society as well as sovereignty over their ancestral lands.
- LGBTQ+ persons may experience the world as structured for *heteronormative* realities (a privileging of people who are straight and gender conforming through policy and practice) while also encountering hateful and oppressive speech that is termed *homophobic* (hostile toward gay and lesbian people) and *transphobic* (hostile toward transgender people). Some LGBTQ+ movements attempt to normalize the experiences of sexual minorities (such as the one for same-sex marriage), while others take on the more radical task of ‘queering’ society altogether.

When each of these groups becomes aware of their embodied struggles with privilege and hate in institutional structures, their *identities* are said to have become *politicized* – hence the term *identity politics*. When these groups realize that these embodied struggles are all connected, not least because

some people might identify as being part of more than one of these groups, their coming together is termed an *intersectional* struggle.

Intersectionality thus refers to the basic belief that all of these groups claiming to be oppressed in the experience of their identities should be struggling against institutional oppression together. By most accounts, this way of thinking about becoming aware of how one is oppressed through one's identity and the way that these identities might intersect in multiple avenues of oppression comes from a document called the Combahee River Collective Statement in the 1970s, in which black feminist lesbian activist-academics articulated how they were multiply oppressed as black people by a society structured by white supremacy, as women in both a patriarchal society *and* by civil rights and black power movements run mostly by men, and as lesbians in a social order that assumed that everyone was heteronormative.[2]

Intersectionality has been seen as a sort of silver bullet solution to what is being called 'oppression' in the Trump era. The claim is that seeing that our struggles are all connected will begin to right the wrongs that Trump and his goons are inflicting on us. It is important to realize that the oppression claimed by those engaging in this resistance is very real: Trump's rhetoric has emboldened far-right nationalists, white supremacist organizations, the paramilitary police, and customs and immigration officials to act in ways that endanger the lives of peoples-of-color, women, indigenous people, and LGBTQ+ persons, although whether they are always acting directly on Trump's orders is a different question altogether.

Trump's rhetoric has also amplified geopolitical tensions, most obviously in the global proxy war being waged in Syria and on the Korean Peninsula, but also with allies such as Canada, Australia, and the European Union. The oppression from both examples is very real in a bodily sense, because there is a very real sense that if Trump keeps tweeting and talking, we could all be dead soon.

But the question I want to ask is: *what exactly are we intersectionally resisting?* This is the first of many dumb questions in this essay, one that can only be asked by someone as dumb as me to work, live, and breathe the ivory tower air of academia. The answer here should be obvious: we are resisting Trump, his presidential administration, and the Republican Party that put him there that now occupies the majority of the two houses of Congress, the majority of the Supreme Court, and the majority of governorships and state legislatures. To put it in the bluntest of terms, *intersectionality* is supposed to be a term from the Left because it is part of the Left's larger project to restructure unequal institutions into ones that accommodate all persons and their bodies. This means that the enemy is supposed to be the Right, the nefarious politicians and their cronies who are fighting to keep the institutions of the world unequal and oppress persons whose bodies do not conform to their institutional norms.

But if the Spring and Autumn military master of the Wu Kingdom, Sun Zi, counsels us in *The Art of War* to 'know your enemy and know yourself' so that in 'one hundred battles you will not be defeated,' is this assessment of the 'enemy' actually correct? Is it really the Right that we are resisting? What has Donald Trump actually done as president? What are the institutions that are doing the intersectional oppressing that need to be dismantled? These questions, I think, raise some problems with the way that intersectional struggle is being conceptualized in this present moment.

Intersectional Problems: the fragmentation of the Left and the deploring of everyday life

I might really be just another dumb prof, but it seems to me that much of what we are resisting is Trump's *vulgarity* and the effects of his rhetoric in mobilizing people not so much through policy, but by sheer rhetorical influence. What this means is that the realities of political economy (the way that a system of production and consumption is structured and regulated) are important, but they do not *explain* this present moment. In fact, there are often contradictions between how people talk and feel

(what we might call *discourse*) and how much money and resources they actually have (what we might call *material reality*).

To posit that *intersectionality* is a silver bullet against all the people that Trump has vilified seems to me, then, to be trying to put a square peg in a round hole, because the contradictions between discourse and material reality make it hard to see clearly how oppression is working at an institutional level. Granted, it is true that we must act because Trump's rhetoric leads to real physical oppression in the forms of deportation, refusal of immigrant entry, police brutality, hate crimes, and the like. But even if we all get united and even revive the grand coalition of the Left in an inspiring way, we still may not understand the oppression with which we are dealing.

In this sense, one of the problems at present is that the inspiration of intersectionality, encapsulated by protests like the Women's March and the March for Science, has (quite like the Trump Administration itself) been big on show and small on achievements. This is not for lack of motivation or good ideas; the real problem is that activists with a commitment to intersectional thinking and acting seem to have run into several quandaries that have resulted in some infighting among those who share a commitment to opposing everything for which Trump stands.

First, there seems to be a lack of agreement of who the 'enemy' really is. Everyone seems to know that Trump is a symptom of far-right nationalist developments around the world in Russia, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Brazil, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, and arguably the People's Republic of China, but no one seems to agree on how these movements achieve their influence.

Second, some have accused politicians like Hillary Clinton for co-opting the politics of identity in order to create what Slavoj Žižek called the 'impossible alliance' that she formed among so many ideological positions (in a colorful statement, Žižek has compared Bernie Sanders's endorsement of Clinton to 'Occupy Wall Street endorsing Lehman Brothers').[3] Some claim that Clinton's attempt to mobilize various social groups according to their 'identities' ended up categorizing different groups of people with labels that failed to represent them while Trump's usage of the same strategy with the 'white working class' actually worked (although it is debatable whether Trump's base is really the 'white working class' or middle-to-upper-class people who fancy themselves to have the vulgar rhetorical sensibilities of an imaginary white working-class that may not actually exist).[4]

Third, the debate about identity politics has erupted into an all-out fight on the Left between those who insist that old-fashioned Marxists just don't get it about 'identity' and 'intersectionality' whereas others facetiously point out that these debates about terms, while seeming to be in alliance with a host of aggrieved groups, are symptomatic of 'movements that are entirely based around English majors and web designers' and 'not reaching the majority of the American population no matter what their skin color is.'[5]

These three examples of infighting among intersectional activists boil down, at least in my dumb prof reading, into two central problems with the inspirational vision of intersectionality at the present moment. First, *intersectionality* only describes the fact that people with different experiences of oppression are coming together, but it does not really say very much about what the actual goal of their coming together is or how they might resolve their differing visions for what they are trying to do. This has resulted in a kind of infighting that is sometimes referred to as the *fragmentation of the Left*.

Second, the question that one might raise about intersectionality is whether it is really intersectional enough to include people who might have voted for Trump because they claim to have experienced some kind of oppression too. Such people may be broadly characterized as the 'Right,' but chances

are that they might not identify as such and are simply trying to survive in an apolitical way in their everyday lives that have been devastated by forces that they do not understand. We might call this the *deploring of the vulgar*, a problem with the Left that I suggest provides some of the fodder that sustains global far-right movements, of which Trump is a part.

Intersectional Problems I: The fragmentation of the Left

The first problem with the grand vision of intersectional struggle is that no one is really sure what the ‘Left’ really is at this moment, except that it is opposed to whatever Trump represents. Broadly speaking, it is no secret that the ultimate plan of whatever the Left is concerns the advancement of a grand project that will ultimately undo not only everything for which Trump and his minions have worked, but also all the ideologies, policies, systems, and people that worked together to bring Trump into power. Sometimes, the shorthand that most people on the Left use for this configuration of institutions is *capitalism*, the economic system in which class advancement is based on the accumulation of material objects and symbols of value called *capital* so that it is impossible to obtain food, water, shelter, clothing, and the legal guarantee of rights without it. The fancy word some people use to describe the current capitalist order is *neoliberalism*, an ideology that is said to have come into vogue by its critics in the late 1970s and early 1980s in which a state that used to provide some kind of welfare for its citizens (what was called a *welfare state* or a *Keynesian political economy*, named for the economist John Maynard Keynes) is restructured so that individuals should be taking personal responsibility for their own economic wellbeing.[6]

What is said to relate neoliberalism to Donald Trump is that he and the real estate corporation that he ran, the Trump Organization, benefitted from the rollbacks of the welfare state because part of neoliberal economic policy is to cut taxes for the wealthy in the hopes that their wealth creation will trickle down through a market-based society as companies create jobs, engage in philanthropic funding, and enable all persons to be equal-opportunity consumers. In this way, a charitable reading of a neoliberal government ideology is that the state should go out of its way to help the wealthy and their corporate entities as part of its philosophy to create widespread prosperity. What is particularly intriguing about the neoliberalism of the Trump Administration is that the government is no longer simply the middleman between these wealthy corporations and their financiers on Wall Street. Trump himself as well as several of his cabinet members such as Rex Tillerson, Betsy DeVos, and Wilbur Ross and his White House staff such as Jared Kushner, Ivanka Trump, and Steve Bannon are private businesspersons and philanthropists with no government experience attempting to run the Executive Branch themselves.[7]

The positions that have been taken on the Left regarding neoliberal capitalism run the gamut from *reform* to *revolution*. For some whose basic philosophy is to *reform* the neoliberal order, capitalism is a flawed system because it is not working the way that it should in providing broad-based prosperity, so what activists should focus on are policies that might change it from within in order to make wealth accumulation work for everyone. This was, broadly speaking, the position of the Hillary Clinton campaign and her backers at the Democratic National Convention. For others, the problem is capitalism itself, so for them, there needs to be something of a *revolution* to dismantle the institutions that encourage people to exist for the purpose of wealth accumulation so that a socialist system can be built to actively redistribute wealth equitably. To some extent, Bernie Sanders is sympathetic with a mild form of this view. Historically, this kind of new system has been called *socialism*, imbuing the state with redistributive powers to equalize a situation of wealth inequality that produces a hierarchy of classes from the multiply-disadvantaged poor (people who experience the deepest levels of basic deprivation of food, water, shelter, clothing, and the legal guarantee of their human rights because multiple factors like race, gender, sexuality, disability, immigration status, and age pile on to keep them disadvantaged) to the one-percent-of-one-percent plutocracy (rule by the rich).

Both of these approaches can be found in what is being called the intersectional struggle against Trump. For some, the problem is not so much with the structures that brought Trump into power, but simply the fact that Trump uses terribly offensive rhetoric that should be softened before it gets more people killed. For others, the structures that brought Trump into power are turning into a zombie kind of neoliberalism where the state itself is being possessed by private capitalists themselves, and so the whole system needs to be taken apart and replaced. It would be inspiring to think that these two ideal visions of the future without Trump – what might be called two *ideologies* – can be brought together to form a grand resistance to Trump, a grand intersectionality, if you will. But the truth is that they prescribe two fundamentally different futures, and the competition between the two has produced quite a bit of infighting among the Trump resistance.

Much of this infighting has to do with the place of *identity politics* in intersectional struggle. Some think that the real problem of the Trump Administration is that its use of rhetoric may keep people from fulfilling their economic potential, so they use the language of identity politics to highlight the way that certain groups are being excluded from the capitalist system. For these people, trying to create a socialist system is impractical and even comes from a position of privilege where some can afford to play the long game without immediate material consequences. Moreover, the various groups claiming to be part of an identity-based intersectional struggle often quite validly repeat the claims of the Combahee River Collective Statement when they find that most who claim to be socialists are straight white men who are blind to the way that they might unintentionally create collectives that exclude women, peoples of color, indigenous people, and LGBTQ+ people.

On the other hand, those who want to create a new socialist order might think that those engaging with identity politics are only dealing with symptoms and not the root causes of the problem. This usually leads into a debate about who is more radical than the other, often with those engaging in identity politics claiming the high moral ground by accusing socialists of being white privileged straight males, and those engaging in socialist activism arguing that the identity politics people simply want to maintain a middle-class fantasy world with different kinds of bodies. Because both sides usually talk about the good that their future will bring into the world, both have sometimes accused the other of engaging in *masturbatory politics*, the kind of public assertion that makes one feel good about one's politics at the moment but really brings about no real engaged action.

Whatever one's position on the morality and sexual health benefits of masturbation, this infighting among intersectional activists might be referred to as the *fragmentation of the Left*, a coalition that has too many visions of an ideal future and so is paralyzed because it cannot bring any of them into reality. In this way, the Left can be said to have become impotent in the face of the Trump Administration's zombie neoliberal agenda of cutting the government as the middleman between the private corporate world and the regulatory state. This new incarnation of the neoliberal order theoretically broadens the government's power to adjudicate between the entrepreneurially successful and those who do not deserve to live until they take responsibility for their lives.[8] However, the infighting of the Trump Administration and its inability to fill some of its government's key positions makes this reality difficult to bring fully into existence as well.[9] That the Left was not able to stop Trump from getting elected despite the incompetence of his campaign and does not seem to be able to successfully counter a Trump Administration that is so politically impotent suggests that this malaise, paralysis, and fragmentation on the side of the Left is a very real problem.

Intersectional Problems II: the deploring of the vulgar as fodder for the far right

The second problem with intersectionality is that in order to form the grand coalition for resistance against whatever Trump stands for, the Left has to convince many who see themselves as oppressed but only some of whom fall under the classical coalitional terms of intersectionality that they should

join the resistance. Oftentimes, some on the Left portray some of these unconvinced people as ‘on the Right,’ and even as part of the global new order of far-right nationalist movements taking over parts of the European Union, Russia, Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

If one might indulge an example of Hillary Clinton as at least posing as part of the Left (the *reform* segment of it, at least), ‘half of Trump’s supporters’ were labeled a ‘basket of deplorables,’ the ‘racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic – you name it. And unfortunately, there are people like that, and he has lifted them up.’[10] The term for this often-subconscious tendency on the Left to position intersectional struggle as morally superior to those who share Trump’s vulgar attitudes toward women, people of color, indigenous people, and LGBTQ+ persons might be called the *deploring of the vulgar*. It positions these disrespectful and unrespectable attitudes toward nonwhite, non-patriarchal, and non-heteronormative persons as morally reprehensible. The word *vulgar*, however, also comes from the Latin for *common speech*, so it might also refer to how *ordinary people* talk, with all of their casual racism and sexism that perhaps used to be spoken behind closed doors but is now, in the words of Jesus, shouted from the rooftops.[11] To deplore the vulgar thus also sets up a class dynamic: ordinary people are vulgar, but those who think intersectionally hold to a moral high ground.

What this suggests is that at this present political moment, talking about class really is *all talk* and no material. Someone might have enough financial capital to be considered upper middle to upper class, but be considered vulgar (like Trump), whereas someone might not have much money but might talk in a high moral language (like me).

It might be fair to say, then, that those who have been labeled deplorably vulgar are not very interested in holding the moral high ground. Instead, what is appealing about Trump is precisely the rhetoric and the vulgar image of power that he projects. In a perverse twist to the game of identity politics, they identify with him. Like Trump, they do not really care about the fine nuances of institutions, policies, or even politics. All that they might feel is that there is something off about America that need to be made great again, and here is someone as vulgar as them who might make it happen. Privileged as this position might seem, they themselves might be experiencing oppressive realities too, such as unemployment, deportation, refusal of entry, police brutality, and wealth inequality just like everyone else.

In a real sense, most people both in the United States and around the world have experienced not only the neoliberal rollback of the welfare state, but also the restructuring of their economies from an *industrial economy* to a *service economy* in which working-class production jobs are not run through factories that require mass employment, but through services that employees might offer based on their abilities to pitch their business skills. Part of this has to do with the restructuring of a *global economy* that economic geographers describe as having a new *core* that outsources its manufacturing jobs to a new colonial *periphery* where objects of value can be produced at less cost. This outsourcing has resulted in the gutting of factory jobs in the core, followed by a kind of mass *structural unemployment* because these workers cannot be re-employed in the same sector. Meanwhile, for those who are employed in the core, the resultant *gig economy* features the increasing tendency of employees or self-employed persons to move rapidly between short-term service to short-term service.

The problems that are associated with this new, contemporary economic geography are often referred to as the symptoms of a *postindustrial economy*. Sometimes, these developments are imagined to exist in an uneven geography within the United States where the *urban core* has become the hub of service economies to which people seeking employment must migrate, especially if they are from *rural* areas that might be considered the service economy’s *periphery*. However, it must be noted that the

outsourcing of the manufacturing economy and the restructuring of a service economy is not neatly divided between the urban and the rural. In fact, it can be felt throughout the core in processes like the gentrification of historically working-class urban neighborhoods, the emergence of property bubbles in cities, the exacerbation of income inequality between those in the managerial classes and those in the service professions, and the increasing precariousness of contract labor.[12] Because these economic changes have happened at the scale of the global economy, the word that has often been used since the 1970s to describe these processes is *globalization*.

There are various ways in which people will respond to these economic changes. Some who feel dispossessed by these structural economic changes might end up thinking in the terms of intersectional struggle and the politics of identity if they feel like that kind of thing resonates with them. However, others may not resonate with such identitarian claims. Both responses, however, set up a class structure based mostly around talking and feeling and not the material reality of postindustrial economic restructuring, which is in fact a common experience for most people. It makes service workers out of most who seek some kind of employment and makes life in the material sense precarious for mostly everyone except the very rich.

Those for whom intersectional identity politics does not resonate might just want something to change and someone to blame for all the violence they feel has been perpetrated on their own lives and that they hear about from viewing their television sets or social media: Muslims whom they associate with ‘terrorism,’ African Americans they associate with ‘crime,’ Latinx peoples they associate with eroding the ‘rule of law,’ Asian Americans they associate with a hi-tech ‘conspiracy’ to destroy Western values, and LGBTQ+ people they associate with ‘declining morality.’

Implicitly, this means that what would make such people feel safe is to conserve the public sphere as the domain of white heteronormative men and the integrity of a private sphere where the model citizen is a white heteronormative woman. This kind of exclusionary, ideological nativism is generally the symptom of what have been labeled *far-right movements*, political ideologies and networks that premise the nation’s security on keeping people considered ‘foreign’ excluded from their society. What is *vulgar* about such movements is the casual, ordinary way they label who is a foreigner to be excluded, premising their direct way of speaking as peeling back the layers of political correctness and saying the truth of who belongs and who does not. In this way, one might say that what have been called *far-right movements* around the world are probably held together more by this general orientation toward vulgar speech about ‘foreigners’ than by a coherent ideology.

In fact, as some scholars of far-right movements in Europe have said, ‘the “far right” is practically never used by those who belong to it,’ but is often ‘used by political adversaries of the “far right” to disqualify and stigmatize all forms of partisan nationalism by reducing them to the historical experiments of Italian Fascism, German National Socialism, and national variations more or less close to them from the first half of the twentieth century.’[13] In other words, far-right movements often remind its observers of organized apparatuses to exclude foreigners such as fascism, Nazism, and the Ku Klux Klan, although sometimes the more contemporary movements lack the bureaucratic know-how to do much more than to talk big.

What is crucial to understand is that the usage of the word ‘right’ in *far-right* does not necessarily mean that these people are to the right of the official Right on the United States’s political spectrum. This can be seen in the emergence on social media and the blogosphere of a loose network styling themselves as the *alt-right*, literally posing a completely alternative world to the political Right because they believe that the current configuration called the Right in the Republican Party does not take seriously the need to preserve Western civilizational values.[14]

Using provocatively vulgar sexual language, some alt-right writers refer to those on the official Right as *cuckservatives*, conservatives who participate in *cuckolding* (sexually cheating on) the Right because they promote neoliberal market-based values, as well as *libtards*, conservatives who are really liberals in disguise and promoted ‘retarded’ liberal policies. Finding an online hub in the publication *Breitbart*, the alt-right claimed victory when *Breitbart*’s editor Steve Bannon became Donald Trump’s Chief Strategist and orchestrated some of the more vulgar policies of Trump’s first 100 days, namely the attempts to ban certain non-citizens (visitors, visa-holders, and permanent residents) from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen (and Iraq, in one previous attempt) to the United States. Both of these immigration bans were premised on the alt-right’s ideological claims that the presence of too many immigrants would lead to the evisceration of Western ‘Judeo-Christian’ civilizational values, first through the possibility of terrorism and second through the expansion of hi-tech enterprises and corporations that they think to be amoral.

The term they use disparagingly for what they see as the global configuration of capitalism destroying Western civilization is *globalism*, and they call those who subscribe to this ideology *globalists*, but the vulgarity of their political bent can be seen from their interest in the provocative acts of banning migrants and scapegoating Muslims before the hypothetical day that they act on their ultimate agenda to tackle the structural problems of globalization. The unsuccessful roll-out of these policies through executive orders signed by Trump, as well as the subsequent sidelining of Bannon in the Trump Administration by other factions in the current White House and Congress, suggests that the alt-right’s civilizational ideology is really more of an appeal to vulgar bluster about civilization than it is an organized bureaucratic and coercive force with which to be reckoned.

But the rhetorical success of the alt-right is partly owed to their claim that their ideologies were not being included in the platforms of mainstream conservatism. Since the late 1950s, mainstream conservatism has found its institutional home in the Republican Party, which activist intellectuals such as William F. Buckley, Russell Kirk, and Barry Goldwater reconfigured into an ideological home for a *conservative movement* that stood for an intellectually respectable belief in traditional moral values and religious rhetoric that would empower individual citizens to participate to their fullest potential in the liberal market.[15] This definition of conservatism initially excluded two groups of people who also claimed to be conservative and who have come to make their way into the conservative movement to the chagrin of the conservative establishment.

First, Buckley (among others) deplored the objectivist philosophies of the novelist Ayn Rand, finding her celebration of the individual creative builder without constraints from any institution to be amoral, but this has not stopped some contemporary conservatives such as Alan Greenspan, Ron and Rand Paul, and Paul Ryan from espousing Rand’s philosophies. Second, mainstream conservatives made every effort early on to publicly dissociate themselves from avowed white supremacists, especially the Ku Klux Klan, leaving little room indeed for the vulgar alt-right arguments for Western civilizational supremacy. Instead, the claims of mainstream conservatives often tied morality to the market, emphasizing the creative freedom of the individual who had a self-conscious sense of moral restraint and discipline to be an ideal economic manager, producer, and consumer.[16] Far from being vulgar, mainstream conservatism has prided itself on its intellectual respectability, which means that what is possibly the most distinguishing factor of the alt-right in relation to the political Right is its vulgarity.

From this brief intellectual history of the conservative movement, it is possible to say that the deploring of the vulgar has happened in both movement conservatism as well as in the language of intersectional activism on the Left about those they frame as on the far right. In this way, the real political fault lines may not actually be between the Right and the Left at the level of experience; they

are between the respectable and the vulgar – or to put it more provocatively, between the *establishment* and *ordinary people*.

At a very broad ideological level, the *establishment* here thus refers to those who tie their moral sensibilities to a kind of class respectability that they might attribute to their personal marketability, both in terms of the advancement of their careers as well as the popularity of their messages due to their clean image; these people can be both Republicans and Democrats, on the political Right or Left. *Ordinary people*, on the other hand, are those who claim to be left out of the establishment because their vulgarity sometimes leads them to make amoral, unrespectable, and unmarketable statements and actions. But because these claims often give them appeal to non-establishment audiences, their vulgarity might be a channel for a new *populism*, a broad-based appeal to those feeling left out by the market establishment and wanting a sort of ideological security as a result. In this way, it does not matter that Donald Trump has been a real estate mogul who has benefitted from his establishment links; his vulgar statements, actions, and image – he is, after all, widely reviled as an orange cheetoh with a spray tan and small bodily organs – might make him appealing in non-establishment settings as well.

These new political lines – *establishment* versus the *vulgar* – pose a problem for activists who attempt to claim the moral high ground with intersectional struggle because their appeal to a kind of superiority makes them more easily positioned with the establishment than with ordinary people, however they might protest that they are operating outside of what they think is an ‘establishment.’ What this means, in short, is that intersectionality might still be experienced as exclusionary because whatever side of the Left on which one ends up – the *reformer* left-liberal camp or the socialist *revolutionary* Left – both are read as far too morally respectable for ordinary people to join.

For intersectionality to be truly intersectional, the Left would have to stop reading the vulgar expressions of ordinary people as deplorable. Given their own experience of oppression, those who claim to be ordinary people often chafe at terms like *white privilege*, *misogyny*, *patriarchy*, *homophobia*, *transphobia*, and *settler colonialism* because they might feel that their own oppression by structural unemployment, the decline of moral integrity, and the postindustrial devastation of the working class is not being recognized. Instead, intersectional activism would technically have to understand these expressions of vulgarity as symptoms of oppression that technically need to be included in intersectional struggle. Strategically, such inclusion is very important because it would deflate Trump’s ability to use vulgar rhetoric to mobilize these very people, but it would reconfigure the debates about respectability in current intersectional struggles on the Left, which could lead to more infighting.

Some Dumb Prof Questions About What Is to Be Done: expanding the intersections

The question, as Lenin put it in his pamphlet published at the turn of the twentieth century, is *what is to be done?* For Lenin, the unacceptable situation of class inequality between the peasants and the aristocracy needed a quick solution – the peasant classes needed to become aware of their exploitation, so propaganda needed to be published to agitate them into action. In the current situation, however, the problem is not a lack of awareness about class experiences, but a hyper-consciousness of the chasm between the establishment and the vulgar classes – a class structure that is not solely based on how much wealth one has accumulated (if such were the case, Trump could not be identified with ordinary people), but on the public performance of marketable moral discipline versus vulgar deplorability. In such a situation, propaganda and agitation would only exacerbate the problem, while calling for mutual respect and tolerance smacks of the language of the establishment.

What, then, is to be done?

I am but a dumb prof who has spent more time in my pajamas studying than out in the trenches doing activist work, so I do not feel like I have the right to answer this question definitively. However, I am also reminded of what the black liberation theologian Cornel West said in a talk that he gave at the mother of all academic institutions in the United States, Harvard University, about how academics who spend their time teaching and studying are not as disconnected from everyday life as everyone says that they are:

I think there's a danger, my dear brother, in ever dividing the world into different spaces where there's an ivory tower over here and there's streets here, you see. When you slowly walk out this building here, there's Oxford Street. That's a street. There's some decent folk, some lukewarm folk, and probably some gangsters who are probably gonna be walking down that street. We go to Dorchester, Roxbury, what you got? You got some decent folk, some lukewarm folk, and some gangsters walking down those streets. The world consists of a whole lotta different streets! Some streets are more economically privileged than others – then we say, oh, you got Harvard, Oxford Street is more economically privileged, but don't ever think that the same issues of white supremacy and male supremacy and class power and privilege are not operating at Harvard Law School that's operating in the streets of Dorchester. They have very different contexts of operation, but the world is constituted in such a way that it's just all these streets, so the ivory tower suggests that it's somehow above the streets. No, no, no: there's street life at Harvard! And it flips the other way, flips the other way, that there's enlightenment on the streets of Dorchester. That's why we need one another! You see what I mean?[17]

In other words, I am well aware that I am in no position to tell anyone what to do. But because I understand my day job as a professor is to ask some really dumb questions about anything to which I set my mind, and because this Donald Trump presidency and the attempts at intersectional resistance toward it have become intellectual obsessions of mine, I am going to conclude with some really dumb questions based on my limited understanding of what is going on in our present political moment:

- Could a shift away from the original Combahee River Collective Statement's articulation of identity politics and intersectionality be helpful for understanding the real intersections that are making trouble for the Left? While it is true that women, peoples of color, indigenous peoples, and LGBTQ+ peoples experience multiple forms of oppression, to what extent has it already become the new common sense among activists to see our struggles as interconnected? What might an inquiry into the intersections on the Left between the reformers and the revolutionaries (and perhaps others with different ideological imaginations) open up for future intersections?
- What accounts for the attempts to position intersectional activism for the oppressed as taking a moral high ground when the entire fact of oppression should suggest instead a downward alliance with the vulgar?
- Because the so-called 'establishment' connects morality with the market, is there a way to disconnect morality from the market and thus from the rhetoric of marketability? Is there a vulgar way to talk about morality?
- Could there be a way of taking Trump's rhetoric from him for a kind of intersectional struggle? For example, while 'Make America Great Again' smacks of a kind of white nativism, the Left also has its own narrative about the rise and fall of the greatness of America when activists of an older generation talk about the Civil Rights, Black Power, feminist, LGBTQ+, United Farm Workers, indigenous sovereignty, and Asian American movements of the 'Long Sixties' and how they were eventually co-opted by the end of the 1970s. As George Lipsitz attempts to recount the story of America as a history of social movements, to 'make America great again' might be to recount some of this history, along with the labor activism of the 1930s as well as the attempts at reviving a Left since the 1980s, in order to revitalize struggles for social justice.[18]

- Might the language of morality encourage some in these intersectional struggles to be explicit about their participation in and exploration of religious communities, including theologically orthodox and conservative ones, as sites that give spiritual power for this kind of activism? For example, part of the power of the 2013-4 protests at Maidan Square in Kyiv came from the participation of clergy from the various Orthodox, Greek and Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim mosques, synagogues, churches, and communities in Ukraine, most of which were not known at the time for being either theologically or politically 'progressive.' Similarly, the Rev. William Barber II has described his social justice movements as a 'moral movement,' with its 'Moral Mondays' meetings. Might it also be possible to describe Black Lives Matter as a 'pro-life movement' that might use the icon of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa (the classic symbol of anti-Communist, pro-life Catholic solidarity, just as the Virgin of Guadalupe has been used for Latinx struggles) as its banner or resistance to the Trump Administration as part of a 'consistent ethic of life,' as the New Pro-Life Movement has done?
- While much of the debate on the Left has been about an economic ideology called *neoliberalism* that has been said to have restructured much of our political economy, why has there been so much talk about the rhetoric of neoliberalism and not much hard economic analysis? Perhaps intersectional struggles will need to advance hard, boring, technical accounts of political economy alongside its inspirational rhetoric.

In short, I wonder as a dumb prof whether the Trump Era might be a moment when activists committed to an intersectional framework take seriously the *experience* of class inequality, religious marginality, and the meaning of morality. In so doing, the intersections of intersectionality might be expanded beyond the politics of identity and encompass an actual analysis of the dynamic ways that ordinary people vulgarly encounter the structures of contemporary political economies, civil societies, and private everyday lives. By doing this, the struggles of the Left might cease to be just rhetoric, and that would make our new activism rather potent against a president and his cronies who are really just all talk but quite politically impotent already.

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