

An Assessment of the Impact of Identity Politics on Contemporary Western Left-Wing Movements

Chen Yuntao

Source: Marxism Research, no. 1 (2025)

Introduction

Since the advent of the post-industrial era, some Western leftists, confronted with the historical predicament of the working class's exhausted revolutionary momentum, have drawn inspiration from liberal values such as multiculturalism and begun to treat identity politics as a strategy for overcoming the crisis of the left-wing movement. Under their guidance and through their efforts, identity politics has now developed into an important force within contemporary Western left-wing movements. Yet, in its subsequent development, this identity politics—absorbed in the rights of difference, cultural equality, and fragmented struggles—has in fact damaged the political ideals of the Left. It has not only seriously weakened the Left itself; it has also created a cultural and social structure favorable to the expansion of finance capital.

Especially after the outbreak of the 2008 international financial crisis, Western left-wing movements, once symbols of criticism and progress, have increasingly been viewed by Western publics as a conservative force obstructing social equality under the influence of identity politics. Meanwhile, right-wing populist forces represented by Donald Trump have brazenly appeared in the guise of being “anti-establishment” and “anti-elite,” winning substantial popular support. What happened to the Western Left? How should we understand it? There is an urgent need to reexamine, from the Marxist standpoint and through Marxist methods, the practical consequences of Western left-wing movements dominated by identity politics, and to analyze in depth identity politics' actual effects on those movements and the deeper causes behind them. This is important for understanding and assessing the future direction of Western left-wing movements, and for reflecting on how world socialism might better revive in the twenty-first century.

I. Identity as Politics: A Typical Strategy of Contemporary Western Left-Wing Movements

As a strategy adopted by the Western Left in the post-industrial era to break through its predicament, identity politics primarily constructs political discourse and carries out political mobilization around the issue of “identity,” while taking the pluralistic and equal treatment of disadvantaged groups' demands as its goal. Under the leadership and utilization of certain left-wing groups, identity politics has now become a “powerful weapon” in the contemporary Western Left's struggle to narrow economic inequality

between classes. In general, Western left-wing movements shaped by identity politics display the following characteristic features.

1. From the working class alone to multiple identities

First, they no longer treat the working class as the sole subject opposing capitalism, but instead incorporate the diverse identities oppressed within capitalist society into the subject of political movements.

Because the rise in material living standards and welfare benefits during the post-industrial era weakened the working class's revolutionary character, some Western left-wing theorists began to deny the foundational role of the category of "class" in anti-capitalist movements and concluded that the working class in capitalist countries had been incorporated into the system. In their view, on the one hand, the antagonism between workers and capitalists does not arise within capitalist relations of production, but between "relations of production and the identities of social actors, including workers." This means that the antagonism between labor and capital becomes real only when workers regard capitalism as a social relation that negates their identity, obstructs the realization of their potential, and prevents them from constructing an ideal society; only then do workers acquire revolutionary consciousness. Yet the working class in the post-industrial era has evidently ceased to regard capitalist relations of production as antagonistic because of its relatively favorable living conditions. This necessarily leads to its loss of status as the revolutionary subject.

On the other hand, contemporary capitalist oppression has long exceeded the boundaries of any particular class: it "affects not only workers but many people in other fields as well." In such a society, "diversity and difference have dissolved all the old certainties and universals," and the formerly unified class has "been shattered." At the same time, differentiated and plural identities emerge in the cracks of class. Since groups with different identities each possess particular interests and forms of struggle, political struggle inevitably develops in a pluralistic direction. Thus, in a modern capitalist society whose conflicts are increasingly complex and diverse, the category of "class" has not disappeared altogether, but has become one among the plurality of identities. Class struggle is therefore merely one form of identity politics and has "become increasingly unimportant in the contemporary world."

On the basis of this understanding, these leftists conceive of modern society as a complex field filled with diverse political struggles, "in which a large number of different subjects must be recognized and accepted." They believe that if identities founded on cultural, value-based, or ideological identification—such as Black people, women, and sexual minorities (LGBTQ+)—are granted the status of revolutionary subjects, it will be possible to overcome the limits of the category of "class," unite all those across parties and classes who suffer systematic oppression under capitalism, and thereby achieve more effective political mobilization.

For example, the Occupy Wall Street movement that erupted in the United States in 2011 used the cross-class identity of "ordinary people as the 99 percent" as the basis of

mobilization. Its participants included not only workers but also university teachers and students, media professionals, engineers, and various marginalized minorities; the identity placed in conflict with them was that of the “financial oligarchs as the 1 percent.” Likewise, the Global Climate Strikes that spread across Western countries in September 2019, although composed mainly of high-school and university students, attempted to broaden their mobilization through the more expansive identity of “Everyone,” and successfully attracted some companies to join the strike. This shows that the “identity” based on cultural identification has comprehensively replaced “class,” based on economic relations, as the principal basis on which these leftists conduct political mobilization. They no longer emphasize class conflict between workers and capitalists, but focus more on conflict between a particular identity, understood as the bearer of a group’s interests, and other bearers of interests.

2. From economic emancipation to cultural liberation

Second, they no longer emphasize transforming capitalist relations of production and achieving people’s economic emancipation. Instead, they pursue liberation in everyday life and self-consciousness through cultural critique.

As, in post-industrial capitalist society, conflict increasingly shifts from class conflict over material interests to identity conflict over equality and recognition, inequalities of race, gender, and sexual orientation have displaced class inequality as the issues of greatest public concern. Some leftists have consequently begun to question the decisive role of the economic base in social structure. They tend to believe that conflict in advanced capitalist society no longer concerns the sphere of production, where surplus value is appropriated, but has shifted to everyday life and consumption outside the workplace.

In their view, the unfair treatment experienced by members of advanced capitalist societies does not originate in particular economic relations and political institutions, but in the discrimination and harm inflicted by “the gaze of the other” in everyday life. Against this background, the principal goal of resisting capitalist oppression must shift from achieving economic equality to achieving pluralistic equality in culture and identity. The cultural sphere, which bears the gaze of the other and has consequently become highly politicized, becomes the “terrain of struggle” on which marginalized people resist capitalist oppression.

The African American cultural renaissance of the 1950s, launched in the pursuit of equal rights, is an example. Its participants hoped to rebuild Black cultural and racial characteristics by changing symbolic terms used for Black people and displaying racially distinctive clothing and hairstyles. By emphasizing Black racial culture and identity, they hoped to demand equal status and cultural recognition from the mainstream, thereby resisting the systematic oppression of capitalist society.

Today, under the influence of postmodernism, identity politics further confines human liberation to contingency, subjective consciousness, individual uniqueness, and identity affirmation. It entrusts the critique of capitalism and human emancipation to freedom of self-consciousness, sensibility, and aesthetic consciousness, and to the aestheticization of

technology, politics, and life. It pursues only the liberation of individual personality and desire in everyday life. Thus the goals of contemporary Western left-wing identity politics are no longer limited to safeguarding workers' material interests and achieving economic emancipation. They now pursue recognition of differentiated identities, respect for particular cultural values, and liberation in the realms of individuality, desire, sensibility, and aesthetics.

3. From unified class action to individualized struggle

Third, they no longer emphasize traditional party politics and unified class action. Starting from the differences among individual identities and from personal goals, they advocate individuals fighting the capitalist world alone.

The historical transformation of the working class from revolutionary subject into social marginal group has also deeply affected some leftists' conception of social revolution. In their view, the character of social revolution in the post-industrial era has fundamentally changed: it has shifted from a necessary movement within the historical process to a purely contingent construction. The purpose of revolution is no longer a profound expression of historical mission and historical laws, but a focus, in the absence of long-term planning, on immediate and particular contingent goals. The inner driving force of revolution has correspondingly shifted from class will and collective action to the individual's continuous and consistent cultural and psychological negation and subversion of the existing order.

This change in the conception of revolution has in turn produced a change in the conception of practice. These leftists have shifted their focus from capitalism's systematic oppression to the living conditions of individual subjects. In this way, the comprehensive, organized, and supposedly necessary movement aimed at class struggle and the redistribution of wealth has been abandoned and replaced by isolated individuals fighting the entire capitalist world alone.

This form of political struggle also takes individualism to an extreme. It insists on examining capitalist society's power structure from the perspective of differentiated and individualized identities, assigning every participant a distinctiveness and difference from other subjects. This is why influential identity-political movements such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too display an obvious anarchist tendency. These movements have no unified leadership, clear program, or tightly organized political structure; from beginning to end, they fight separately within capitalist society through a decentralized mode of action.

Participants continually attempt to establish and strengthen the status of identity differences, using multicultural power at the micro level to resist overarching power structures and pursue equal rights in cultural identification or value choice. In this process, horizontal organizational structures rather than vertical systems of authority have become the most distinctive feature of these political movements.

II. Contrary to Its Aim: The Practical Predicament of Contemporary Left-Wing Identity Politics

Although identity politics appeared to offer hope of reviving Western left-wing movements in decline and at one point advanced the Left's struggle against capitalist oppression, the practical consequences and current trajectory of contemporary Western left-wing movements show that identity politics has not truly led the Western Left out of its historical predicament. On the contrary, in the twenty-first century—an era of recurring capitalist crises in which economic issues have returned to the center of political movements—it has further deepened the Left's practical difficulties. This result is plainly contrary to the aim of reviving the left-wing movement.

1. Identity equality and the disguised legitimization of capitalism

First, the identity-politics-led Left one-sidedly emphasizes equality and diversity of identity or culture while ignoring the class inequality that objectively exists in capitalist society. This amounts to indirectly recognizing the legitimacy of capitalist rule.

From the perspective of identity politics, capitalist society may contain various inequalities, but as long as plural identities are treated equally, and as long as different identity groups have some degree of representation and voice within existing institutions, such a society can be considered “faultless.” The resistance to capitalism expressed by this politics is therefore detached from class relations.

At the same time, as the bourgeoisie continually embraces diversity, multiculturalism, and women's rights in order to display a supposedly modern and progressive goodwill, the “new social movements”—antiracism, feminism, multiculturalism, and equality for sexual minorities—have begun to form an alliance with the “high-end elites” of Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood. Within this alliance, progressive forces and cognitive capitalism—especially finance capital—enter into a conspiracy, and “the former gives the latter greater power of appeal.” This elitism, decorated with equality and diversity, not only dissolves the revolutionary spirit of the Left; it also swaps its political ideal of “going beyond neoliberalism” for “working for neoliberalism.”

In this context, identifying with left-wing values or participating in left-wing movements becomes, for some people, an opportunistic means of gaining fame within the capitalist system and achieving upward class mobility. Left-wing politics, once a radical politics that advanced social equality by creating difference and emphasizing recognition, is reduced entirely to a form of “performative politics” unrelated to resistance to capitalist oppression and possessing only an abstract aesthetic significance.

A successful example of a marginalized person entering the cultural elite is the Black American writer Ta-Nehisi Coates. As Cornel West aptly criticized, Coates is representative of the American neoliberal camp. The secret of his rise to fame lies in skillfully exploiting the crocodile tears of neoliberals unwilling to share power or surrender privilege in order to gain institutional prestige. His narrow racial tribalism

and short-sighted neoliberal political outlook do not touch Wall Street's greed, the many crimes of the American empire, or the Black elite's indifference to poverty.

More seriously, this increasingly degraded left-wing discourse is now being used by the ruling capitalist elite to reduce complex socioeconomic problems to differences among ethnic groups and turn them into a political tool for deceiving voters. The US Democratic Party, which is especially adept at this, provides an example. Soon after the Floyd incident in 2020, Democratic politicians such as Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi staged the spectacle of kneeling in order to win Black voters' support. During the 2024 US presidential election, former President Barack Obama, while campaigning for the Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris, used identity-political rhetoric to subject voters to naked moral pressure. He urged Black voters to vote for Harris because she was a Black woman "like you," and criticized Black men who did not support her: "You just don't want to have a woman as president."

Clearly, these political manipulations by Democratic politicians evade the class roots of racial inequality and cannot change the predicament of disadvantaged groups. Regrettably, the contemporary US Left has done nothing about this; instead, it has willingly acted politically as the "tail" of the Democratic donkey. As Mark Lilla has criticized, although identity politics can make American society more inclusive and bring greater attention to marginalized groups, its reverse logic has degraded American politics into "pseudo-politics" that performs individuality. It conspires with neoliberalism and jointly creates a cultural atmosphere of sophisticated self-interest.

This also shows that the declassed form of struggle associated with identity politics has led Western left-wing movements onto a fragmented path of cultural reformism. It cannot exert any substantial impact on the capitalist system. Instead, it enables Western left-wing values and the logic of capital to reach a subtle consensus, and even distorts the developmental logic of contemporary Western left-wing movements into a manifestation of the logic of contemporary capitalist rule.

2. Victim politics and the obstruction of collective struggle

Second, the identity-politics-led Left repeatedly ignites conflicts of identity and opposition of values through a form of "victim politics," thereby obstructing the formation of a unified anti-capitalist force among the people.

Contemporary identity politics is deeply influenced by the principle that "the personal is political." It places particular emphasis on absorbing the unique experiences of victimization suffered by individual subjects in capitalist society and politicizing them. The construction of subjectivity increasingly depends on the "affective solidarity" formed among subjects through shared experiences of victimization. The result is that Western left-wing politics increasingly degenerates into "victim politics."

Yet the premise of mobilizing people by constructing a "victim identity" is that the group in question has indeed suffered oppression and been harmed to some extent. This form of mobilization essentially politicizes identity and constructs identification by intensifying one's own experience of pain, rather than eliminating the root causes of that

pain. Thus, although experiences of victimization are emphasized, the social roots of inequality are never substantially criticized.

At the same time, the emergence of “victim politics,” born from experiences of suffering, can deepen the separation between different groups. It no longer looks forward to equal rights and human emancipation, nor is it satisfied with receiving respect and recognition from mainstream society. Instead, it continually emphasizes the relationship between oppression and the oppressed separating marginalized groups from mainstream society, and hopes to establish an inverted “hierarchy of victimhood.” Under this system, the more victim identities one possesses, the more one can demand privilege by “playing the victim.”

The “victim complex,” therefore, is essentially the self-admiring logic of the bourgeois elite. It can only magnify the selfish individual rationality of civil society, restricting political movements to the social margins and placing them at risk of degenerating into narcissism, hedonism, aestheticism, or personal therapy. It ultimately turns Western left-wing movements into tools for particular groups to pursue narrow interests. Against this background, even as the necessity and importance of uniting the people into an anti-capitalist force become increasingly evident, identity-politics-led Western left-wing movements have become stumbling blocks in that historical process.

3. Group interests replacing the social whole

Third, the differentiated identity mechanism followed by identity politics, in practice, allows narrow group interests to replace the interests of society as a whole as the movement’s principal purpose. It thus pursues an alienated goal of struggle.

The identity mechanism is based on the differences among subjects. Once a subject becomes aware of a difference between itself and other groups, that difference can in turn stimulate identification with its own group, and this identification can provide momentum to identity-political movements. When differentiated identity identification takes the lead, the principle of individuality is pushed to an extreme. Every participant in an identity-political movement displays a distinctive self and a clear separation from others, thereby constructing a particular identity.

Yet this feeling of identity and belonging is in fact rooted in imagination and possesses subjective arbitrariness. The differences among identities are therefore neither fixed nor immutable. New identities are continually constructed by emphasizing these differences. This means that constructing a particular identity cannot counteract the fluidity of postmodern social values, nor can it restore intimate human ties in a postmodern setting of increasingly alienated interpersonal relations. Instead, identity changes frequently as the subject’s attention shifts.

More importantly, because different subjects in fact have plural interests, their identities necessarily change as their interests change. Subjects ultimately make the pursuit of a differentiated identity the movement’s goal in itself. Consequently, contemporary Western left-wing identity politics pays less attention to relations of power and institutional structures and places greater emphasis on freedom of difference in lifestyle.

It seems to regard every difference as possessing equal political importance; it “extremely emphasizes the importance of one particular identity while showing indifference to the social and political ethics that connect different identities.” In practice, it may even diminish the freedom of the majority in order to satisfy the freedom of a minority.

This helps explain why some identity-political movements today are not satisfied with being treated equally, but continually compel mainstream society to recognize the features that distinguish them, so that they can, when necessary, pursue narrow interests by “refining” their identities. Take Asian Americans in the United States. Within America’s existing racial system, this group often seeks to maximize the interests of its own small group. It no longer seeks to expand the common interests of all groups, but only to redistribute existing benefits in its own group’s favor. This further fractures an already fragile pan-ethnic identity.

The internal contradiction of identity politics’ differentiation mechanism has thus caused narrow group interests to replace the collective interest in resisting social injustice as the principal aim of participation in political movements. It produces an even more fragmented society of “identity tribalism,” which is a fatal blow to the Western Left’s hope of strengthening anti-capitalist forces by incorporating various identities.

4. The Left’s loss of popular resonance and the Right’s appropriation of its issues

Fourth, identity politics’ ideal of struggle, centered on cultural pluralism and equality, can no longer resonate with the public. This amounts to allowing right-wing forces to “steal” the Left’s own issues.

After the outbreak of the 2008 international financial crisis, the myth of sustained capitalist prosperity was punctured. The economic circumstances of lower- and middle-income whites, the mainstream groups in Western societies, deteriorated, and some became poorer than poor members of minority groups. In the United States, deteriorating economic conditions shattered the “American Dream” of upward mobility for mainstream whites, producing an identity crisis and racial resentment. This encouraged them to view unemployment and the distribution of wealth through racist “colored glasses,” gradually producing a form of “racialized economics.”

In their eyes, all marginalized minority groups that benefit from identity politics are “queue-jumpers” taking away their opportunities for advancement. Meanwhile, whites who work hard and genuinely bear the tax burden have become a “victimized group” in the waves of economic globalization and social diversity: they possess no sense of belonging and are not valued. Under these circumstances, the Left’s mobilization based solely on the identities and interests of marginalized groups, and its targeting of lower- and middle-income whites who are likewise harmed by the parasitic accumulation of finance capital, cannot eliminate capitalist inequality. Instead, it further intensifies conflict among working people of different races.

The Black organization Dallas Justice Now, for example, publicly demanded that whites promise not to send their children to universities ranked among the top fifty, but instead give those admissions places to people of color, supposedly to “make sacrifices” to correct historical racism. Such a practice, clearly exceeding the boundaries of affirmative action, deeply offended white people and could only intensify their hostility toward the Left.

This shows that in a crisis era in which finance capital seriously harms people’s material interests, the Western Left’s abandonment of resistance to capitalist oppression in favor of pursuing supposed equality or preferential treatment through identity politics has continually pushed ordinary white people—who should have been united—toward the mistaken direction of right-wing populism. This has instead weakened the Left itself.

III. “An Unconscious Tool”: Reflections on the Predicament of Left-Wing Identity Politics

As the preceding discussion shows, the contemporary Western Left’s use of identity politics to resist capitalist oppression is less an expansion of the forms of left-wing resistance than a deconstruction of those forms. This method of struggle does not solve the class problem through a new political form; it dissolves the problem. As a result, the fact that, within capitalist society, “one class exercises unlimited despotic rule over other classes” is completely screened out of identity politics’ field of vision.

This is not only a loss of sight of the real enemy and the correct direction; it is also a betrayal of the highly combative working class. This alone establishes the “left in form, right in substance” nature of identity politics. It also indicates that an obsession with identity politics can only lead the Left farther and farther in the wrong direction, until it ultimately becomes an “unconscious tool” for consolidating contemporary capitalist rule.

1. Denying class prevents the recognition of class inequality

First, the wholesale denial of the category of “class” prevents identity politics from seeing the class inequality concealed by the chaos of identity conflicts. Its left-wing movement therefore inevitably finds it difficult to unite its genuine friends and attack its genuine enemy.

As Adolph Reed Jr. has said: “Whenever racial difference is used as the lens through which American social inequality is viewed, the increasing inequality produced by the capitalist system and class rule in the United States is obscured.” Because identity politics rejects the Marxist category of class and the perspective of analyzing relations of production, it understands capitalism’s systematic oppression only through identity and culture—for example, by treating “white male supremacy” as the principal enemy.

It consequently fails to see the important economic fact that lower- and middle-income whites are also objects of capitalist oppression. Nor can it understand that the identity crisis and populist sentiment rising among white people since the beginning of the twenty-first century are, at the level of ideas, reflections of their increasingly

deteriorating material circumstances. Identity politics therefore always understands right-wing populism one-sidedly as a new resurgence of white racism, and mistakenly interprets the “economic/class contest” produced by the contemporary capitalist crisis as an “identity/cultural conflict.”

From identity politics’ perspective, society is not divided horizontally into the two classes of capitalists and proletarians, but vertically into numerous identities such as Black people, women, and sexual minorities. Once society is divided in this way, the bourgeois ruling elite can cleverly hide among the various identities and appear merely as one among many factors producing inequality. As long as the elite adopt a tolerant posture toward diverse identities, they can easily launder their image and even transform themselves into promoters of democratic progress.

The most direct consequence of this misjudgment is that the Western Left completely loses sight of capitalism as the working class’s genuine enemy. In reality, some leftists, while mobilizing marginalized groups to resist systematic oppression from mainstream society and correctly criticizing backward and reactionary ideologies such as white supremacy and racism, forget the reasonable interests of lower- and middle-income whites concealed behind those ideologies. They forget that these interests could be made into a banner for the most determined struggle against capitalism.

They consequently and continually direct their spearhead, which should be aimed at the financial oligarchs, against lower- and middle-income whites who are likewise oppressed within capitalist relations of production. In the end, they push lower- and middle-income whites—the basic revolutionary force that should be united—to the opposite side. This explains why, the more vigorously left-wing identity politics develops, the more Western people represented by lower- and middle-income whites tend to bind themselves to right-wing forces, leaving the Left besieged on all sides.

With many whites suffering economic hardship and increasingly weary of left-wing political discourse, if the Western Left continues to cling to identity politics’ one-sided model of dividing friends and enemies by skin color, it will be unable to grasp the forces of capital concealed behind identity conflict. Nor will it be able to activate the latent anti-capitalist potential among broad sections of lower- and middle-income whites. This introduces new uncertainty into the revival of contemporary Western left-wing movements.

2. Cultural struggle and the neglect of material interests

Second, identity politics’ excessive reliance on cultural struggle causes it to disregard people’s real demands for material interests. The left-wing movements it dominates therefore inevitably deviate from the correct direction of struggle and lose their power to inspire the public.

Because identity politics does not understand that all kinds of identity conflict are derivative of economic inequality in capitalist society, and does not understand that people’s real material interests often override their values and cultural identities as the deeper logic guiding political behavior, it treats the obvious economic fact that finance

capital harms the material interests of ordinary people with indifference. Instead, it one-sidedly exaggerates the role of cultural criticism in resisting capitalist oppression and even hopes to attract people to anti-capitalist struggle through empty values or particular identity affiliations.

Regrettably, “once thought leaves interest behind, it will certainly make a fool of itself.” The “unity in ideas” constructed through values cannot escape the entanglement of material interests. It cannot effectively respond to the real material concerns of ordinary people, especially lower- and middle-income whites. It also shifts the focus of struggle from eliminating economic inequality in capitalist society to pursuing false goals such as cultural diversity and equality.

This is why, in an era when people’s material interests are seriously harmed by finance capital, the Western Left remains unable to reverse its decline despite some leftists’ vigorous promotion of identity politics. Instead, it can only watch as popular movements are hijacked by the capitalist Right and directed toward the mistaken path of populism.

On the other hand, identity politics attempts to oppose capitalism while detached from real economic relations, through individual self-identification, a revolution in self-consciousness, criticism of everyday life, and the performance of unconventionality. In essence, this shifts the goal of struggle from eliminating capitalism to coexisting with it.

The reason is that these so-called cultural or ideological revolutions share the same theoretical premise as capitalist ideology: they posit a social subject detached from real relations of production, an isolated “individual” who achieves, only at an abstract level, a complete unity of bodily life, emotional will, and free individuality. Although this politics emphasizes the concreteness and comprehensiveness of the individual and the fullness and integrity of individual life, it forgets that the individual’s concreteness and historicity always exist within certain relations of production. It also overlooks the fact that economic emancipation is the true meaning of universal human emancipation.

Thus, when contemporary left-wing movements dominated by identity politics confront systematic capitalist oppression, they do not seek to liberate people from the constraints of capitalist relations of production. They pursue only criticism of self-consciousness and everyday life, and an abstract freedom and emancipation of individuality. Although such movements may appear radical, they are ultimately subjective struggles confined to the margins of society and political performances of merely aesthetic significance. They are fundamentally incapable of shaking the foundations of contemporary capitalist rule.

3. Fragmentation and the abandonment of organized politics

Third, the complete abandonment of revolutionary action based on class unity and of party politics causes identity politics’ form of struggle to become increasingly fragmented. The left-wing movements it dominates therefore cannot genuinely assemble a comprehensive force capable of shaking the capitalist system.

The contemporary Western social order is ruled by finance capital, which covertly penetrates economic, political, and social fields by manipulating the issuance of money,

debt structures, securities, and real-estate markets. This social reality not only determines that decentralized struggles organized around differentiated identity cannot shake finance capital's comprehensive rule over Western society; it also determines that the revolutionary subject can only be an alliance formed by the working class under conditions of large-scale socialized production.

Identity politics, however, which rejects unified class action, plainly cannot carry out this great mission of uniting the working class.

On the one hand, by focusing on individual living conditions, identity politics can more clearly reveal the alienation capital imposes on individuals, to some extent compensating for the inability of class politics' grand narrative to fully attend to individual circumstances. Yet this micro-narrative inevitably depicts modern society as a fragmented picture, thereby concealing finance capital's systematic domination of modern social life. Identity politics cannot see the class essence of social producers as associated workers, or the logic, strength, and hope of their collective action.

For this reason, identity politics merely pushes individual criticism to an extreme. By exaggerating the degree to which individuals are oppressed, it stimulates the "consciousness of oppression" of isolated individuals and mobilizes them, under the appeal of an illusory "victim identity," into fragmented movements that fight the entire capitalist world. In reality, however, these rebellious actions based on isolated individuals have never posed a substantial threat to the foundations of capitalist rule, contrary to identity politics' hopes.

What identity politics loses in its radical rhetoric is precisely the important fact that capital connects individuals into associated social laborers, and precisely the capacity and potential to transform the capitalist system that only united workers possess.

On the other hand, identity politics' strategy of replacing "class" with "identity" as the basis of political mobilization also exposes its fatal neglect of the decisive role of economic factors. In political mobilization, identity politics cannot understand that the fundamental reason for extreme inequality in capitalist society is not disagreement over values, but unfair distribution of material interests.

Nor can it see that the reason different subjects' identities exist in different forms, and continually change or subdivide, is that behind them all lie "special, narrow, and therefore mutually separated economic interests." This causes subjects mobilized through culture or identity to have enormous disagreements in the formation of their discourse, the defense of their culture and identity, the pursuit of their goals, and the means by which they implement them.

The identity mechanism in which the Left has placed such hopes can therefore construct, at most, an illusory unity at the level of ideas. Once confronted with material interests in reality, that unity immediately collapses. This shows that a political movement that denies class unity and ignores people's material interests cannot assemble the comprehensive force needed to transform the capitalist system, and is consequently doomed to failure.

Conclusion

To be sure, in the post-industrial Western society of declining left-wing spirit and weakened class politics, identity politics has successfully revealed new problems and contradictions in capitalist society with a sharp awareness of its historical moment. By turning politics into identity, it has also successfully mobilized marginalized minorities within Western countries to resist the established interests and discursive hegemony of mainstream groups, thereby advancing social equality under capitalism for a time. Its historical progressive significance is evident.

Yet by abandoning class politics and the demand to transform the economic base, this left-wing movement, which aims at the equalization of identities, still attempts—when people’s material interests are being violated by capital and unequal social relations urgently need to change—to replace “material interests” with “cultural rights,” and real “human economic emancipation” with abstract “self-consciousness emancipation.” It therefore inevitably becomes an “unconscious tool” that strengthens the power of capital.

What is particularly important to guard against is that, as identity politics has developed vigorously, Western people’s hostility toward the Left has increased in recent years, and more and more people have even begun to embrace right-wing forces. For a Left that hopes to revive anti-capitalist power by emphasizing identity or a shared set of values, this is undoubtedly a major blow.

Regrettably, just as Western politicians enjoy performing political correctness, many Western left-wing theorists continue to reflect on identity politics and the right-wing populism associated with it through academic criticism conducted under the roof of capitalist states. Although their theories may appear radical and righteous, so long as their reflections on identity politics do not aim to transform capitalist relations of production, and so long as they remain indifferent to the disastrous material consequences that the capitalist mode of production has inflicted on ordinary people—including lower- and middle-income whites—their theories remain discursive tools that indirectly defend contemporary capitalist rule. The new anti-capitalist movements in which they place their hopes will remain unable to escape capitalist co-optation.

In short, identity politics is a strategic choice made by the Western Left in the post-industrial era: it seeks equality but cannot break through the existing capitalist framework. It not only cannot realistically change the inequalities generated by economic inequality under capitalism, but continually leads the Western left-wing movement onto a road of no return away from socialist ideals and the interests of the working class. It is therefore incapable of leading contemporary Western left-wing movements out of their historical predicament.

By contrast, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era. This marks an unprecedented vitality for scientific socialism in twenty-first-century China. This historical process fully demonstrates that the key force capable of leading the world socialist movement out of

its historical predicament and advancing the revival of scientific socialism in the twenty-first century is China.

We therefore have a responsibility to remain unwavering on the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, fully build a strong socialist modern country, achieve the Second Centenary Goal, and contribute Chinese strength to the revival of world socialism through the superiority of the socialist system and the new achievements of socialist construction.

Translator's note: This translation prioritizes readable English while preserving the article's terminology and argumentative structure. "Identity politics," "class politics," "finance capital," "cultural equality," and "economic emancipation" are translated consistently throughout. The article's claims and political framing belong to the author and are not independently verified here.