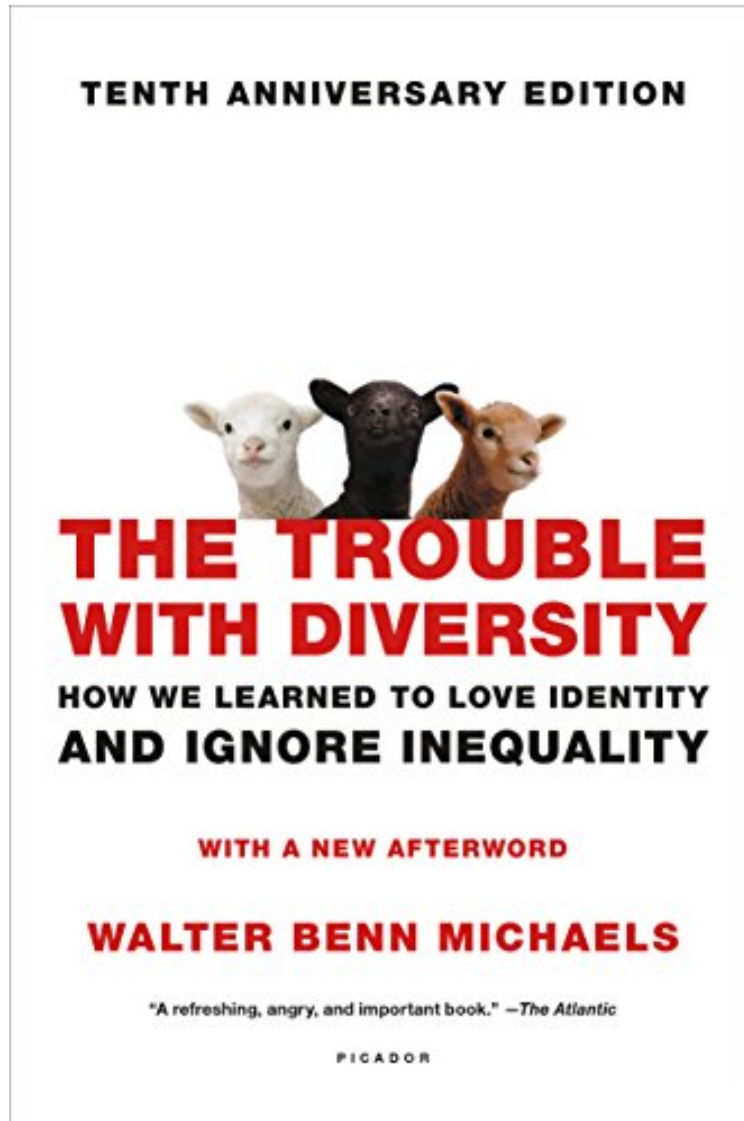


The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality

Walter Benn Michaels

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Walter Benn Michaels : The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A much needed analysis By Drew Hunkins In general, a middle class young black girl has an easier go of it than a poor young white boy. Class inequality is indeed the overriding determinant of one's ultimate position in life, it always has been. Those who argue that this is myopic or reductionist

are typically the type who built lucrative academic or media careers intellectualizing and pontificating on every nuance under the sun except class and class struggle. This is something the American media are especially adept at doing. The obscene class inequality that manifests itself today should be of paramount concern. No amount of sophistry and intellectualizing can negate or wash over the harsh disadvantages the poor and struggling working class of all colors are forced to deal with from birth to the grave. Quite simply Michaels delivers with this searing class analysis that fills up the pages of *Trouble with Diversity*. Blacks as a demographic cohort experience the sting of class disadvantage and class struggle because many of them are mired in the lower economic strata due to historical racism, redlining, economic exploitation, pitiful wages, white flight, rent gouging landlords, insecure jobs, and un and underemployment. These are the primary reasons blacks find themselves in the lower rungs of the economic ladder. As Michaels offers in the book, policies that target inequality and wages would do much to lift all boats, including struggling whites as well as blacks. Feel good diversity rhetoric, identity programs and seminars don't really get to the root of what's troubling the American socio-economic reality. Only a full throttle attack on the top one percent will deliver the goods. The *Trouble with Diversity* fully understands this and provides myriad passages proving the point. What CEO doesn't find it easier to lose a little white male privilege in the boardroom and sing hosannas to diversity in lieu of raising worker pay to a living wage and providing decent benefits? As the *Trouble with Diversity* addresses, the majority of those in poverty are white, which demonstrates the difficulty of rising above the class position one is born into. Massive poverty is a seemingly intractable problem endemic to American capitalism. This social reality indirectly addresses why diversity and identity politics are an ultimate dead end. As Michaels so accurately points out, without undercutting the crux of class power, certain activist elements will succeed only in ensuring that the top one percent is 10% black, 50% women, a certain percentage Latino, a certain percentage gay, a certain percentage lesbian, a certain percentage transsexual, a certain percentage bisexual, a certain percentage transvestite, etc. The *Trouble with Diversity* is a work that's being proven correct now more than ever. Of course Marxists and other left intellectuals have written and studied all this before Michaels, but Michaels' book is a well written cogent synthesis for any movement building.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Fascinating Expose;. By Richard B. Schwartz WBM summarizes his book succinctly in its closing lines: "When it comes to economic inequality, we should stop finding ways to ignore it, we should concentrate not on respecting the illusions of cultural difference but on reducing the reality of economic difference" (p. 200). In other words, we should focus on the essentials and not be distracted by the illusory elements of identity politics, particularly when those elements are complicit in the effort to perpetuate the economic system which generates economic inequality. One example: affirmative action changes the "complexion" of a university's student body, but it does not increase the number of the poor there, a number which remains pitifully small. At the same time, the putatively progressive admission standards distract us from these economic realities. We look around and see a rainbow of people; this makes us feel "just"; however, those people are nearly all upper-middle class. The same is true in the corporate board room; we add some black or female faces and take pride in our virtue; meanwhile we perpetuate a system in which the CEO continues to make 600x more than the average worker. The illusion of "opportunity", respect, and so on masks the fact that the real distance between rich and poor continues to widen. The book is courageous in demonstrating the nudity of the identity politics emperors and empresses, but in all fairness we knew much of this already. Cornel West and Skip Gates, e.g., have famously noted the fact that affirmative action in the universities has principally benefited the progeny of already-successful professionals, not the struggling young men and women in the inner city. Thomas Sowell has made the point as well and noted (decades ago) that black students were very successful at ivy league schools before the days of the diversity industry. The vast majority of the book is devoted to exposing the distractions and illusions. There is very little consideration of the socialist alternative which, WBM argues, should be our real focus. He mentions unionization and the raising of the minimum wage without talking about the side effects which these practices sometimes entail. Nor does he mention the role played by federal regulations in hamstringing the small businesses which serve an important role in job creation. He does mention two propositions which he supports: the elimination/outlawing of private education and making college free. There are some problems with each of these. He knows, e.g., that the first is not going to occur for a multiplicity of straightforward reasons, not the least of which is the fact that our elites are generally the beneficiaries of private education and it is a defining characteristic of elites to promote elitism. "Freer" college did, of course, exist in the California system once upon a time as well as in the British system. There is no reason why we couldn't have "free collegers" in the way that we have "free K-12", i.e., education paid by taxpayers. What WBM does not discuss in this regard is the systematic reduction in expectations that we have seen in higher education since the matriculation of the GI Bill generation. We need "free collegers", presumably, because this will lead to greater job opportunities and because the new jobs require such an education. The fact is that many good jobs were once available to people with a grammar school education and a few years of high school; however, the expectations were much higher then and students simply knew more. Now 60% go to college; half fail to graduate; only half of the graduates find employment commensurate with their "education". Free college (which we already have, more or less, through the community college

system) would exacerbate the current credential creep and require individuals to have masters's degrees (or multiple masters's degrees) for entry-level positions that were once held by high school graduates. Meanwhile, the failure of vast numbers of students to perform at grade level hamstring the colleges which must divert scant resources to remedial education. In the PISA test administered to industrialized democracies our performance is pathetic. Our highest position (in reading) is 19th; we fall far lower in math and science skills. We all want our fellow citizens to be successful and we all want to reduce the grotesqueries of income disparity, but unless and until we raise our expectations and reduce the focus on self-esteem (valorizing self-respect and a sense of achievement instead of a delusory sense of identity-driven entitlement) we will continue to be surpassed by other nations in the global economy. The book is essentially an expose; of the illusions created by identity politics and in that effort it succeeds very nicely. The arguments are persuasive; the evidence that is adduced is incisive and apt. This is not a book about socialism; it is a book that is designed to persuade us that we have overlooked the opportunities offered by socialism. Those opportunities, of course, could be debated. I see little interest in immigration to Venezuela, e.g. and one sees rightward movement in Scandinavia, though Scandinavia is not purely socialist and is, at any rate, a special case for various demographic reasons. The book is heavily influenced by Stanley Fish (as WBM acknowledges). The rhetoric is designed to capitalize on the putatively counterintuitive and to offer some gentle discomfort to those on multiple positions across the political spectrum. It is well-written and interesting throughout. It is far more significant than, e.g., Mark Lilla's recent book, *The Once and Future Liberal*, which argues that identity politics is keeping the democrats from winning elections and keeping their eyes off the electoral prizes. This book gives us a look at identity politics that is far more serious and searching. Highly recommended.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Economics That Really Counts, Not Identity By Dick_Burkhart

Michaels skewers the excesses of identity politics, saying that economics comes first. As a friend of mine said: "I did not need people's respect or sympathy when I was on the ropes; I needed employment and money." Although he often oversimplifies, his intricate logic leads to great one-liners that make valid points. Examples: "The gap between rich and poor may be growing on a daily basis, but when it comes to difference, we prefer fighting racism to fighting poverty." (p. 77) "What the right wants is culture wars instead of class wars because as long as the wars are about identity instead of money, it doesn't matter who wins." (p. 109) "What CEO doesn't find it easier to respect his employees' culture than to pay them a decent wage?" (p. 105) Michaels takes on Race, Education, Culture, Gender, Domestic Violence, Reparations, Globalization, Religion, and more. His point is that economic inequality is far more important to most people than identity (race, gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.). Identity has mostly served to distract us from focusing on the system of free market capitalism which has engineered the extreme inequality we now have in the US and all the social dysfunction and discord that implies (read the "The Spirit Level" by Wilkinson and Pickett). Of course, identity does "intersect" with economic class, but not in any uniform way. I've long noticed that the US concept of race is based almost entirely on the African American experience, but class plays out much differently in other racial / ethnic contexts, such as European American, Asian American, and Latino American. The escalating inequality of the last 40 years has hit working class and lower middle class the hardest, regardless of identity. Meanwhile the black middle class has expanded, along with middle class jobs for women, with white men taking the biggest hit statistically. Michaels doesn't get into all of the statistics, but the way he distinguishes race and other issues from economic class opens the door to a far more direct attack on injustice. Just imagine if our politics and economics were to become highly egalitarian (in the economic sense) and were structured to stay that way. The issue of race, as we know it, would simply melt away over several generations precisely because it was created to maintain economic disparities which would no longer exist. In fact the extraordinary period of World War II through the mid 70s was the time of greatest economic equality and growth of the middle class in US history, so the civil rights movement and the war on poverty of the 1960s were good examples of how good economics can lead to real progress on seemingly intractable social issues. And it was the gradual abandonment of the structures that had preserved economic equality that has led to our present predicament. One last quote (p. 189): "While the debate over whether American should be Christian is a step in the right direction, a debate over whether America should continue to worship at the altar of the free market would be better still."

A brilliant assault on our obsession with every difference except the one that really matters—the difference between rich and poor. If there's one thing Americans agree on, it's the value of diversity. Our corporations vie for slots in the Diversity Top 50, our universities brag about minority recruiting, and every month is Somebody's History Month. But in this provocative new book, Walter Benn Michaels argues that our enthusiastic celebration of "difference" masks our neglect of America's vast and growing economic divide. Affirmative action in schools has not made them more open, it's just guaranteed that the rich kids come in the appropriate colors. Diversity training in the workplace has not raised anybody's salary (except maybe the diversity trainers') but it has guaranteed that when your job is outsourced, your culture will be treated with respect. With lacerating prose and exhilarating wit, Michaels takes on the many manifestations of our devotion to diversity, from companies apologizing for slavery, to a college president explaining why there aren't more women math professors, to the codes of conduct in the new "humane

corporations." Looking at the books we read, the TV shows we watch, and the lawsuits we bring, Michaels shows that diversity has become everyone's sacred cow precisely because it offers a false vision of social justice, one that conveniently costs us nothing. *The Trouble with Diversity* urges us to start thinking about real justice, about equality instead of diversity. Attacking both the right and the left, it will be the most controversial political book of the year.

From *The New Yorker* In this cogent jeremiad, which is certain to be controversial, Michaels diagnoses America's love of diversity as one of our greatest problems. Not only does it reinforce ideas of racial essentialism that it claims to repudiate; it obscures the crevasse between rich and poor. Michaels, a scholar of American literature, suggests that the growth of economic inequality over the past few decades is the result of a deeply ingrained and unchallenged class structure. Scrutinizing current events and religion, he argues that our fixation with the "phantasm" of race promotes identity over ideology, and he rejects the idea that meritocracy prevails in America's elite universities. A believer in the power of progressive politics, he calls for a debate in which class, rather than identity, would be at the fore.

Copyright © 2006 Click here to subscribe to *The New Yorker* "This is a different line, and there's a touch of genius about it." *The Economist.com* "Cogent... certain to be controversial." *The New Yorker* "Eloquent" *The Chicago Tribune* "Rarely have I found myself more in agreement with a book's conclusion. To focus so obsessively on questions of diversity is, as Michaels rightly asserts, to opt for a politics of symbolism over a politics of results." *Slate* "Bracing... the greatest virtue of *The Trouble With Diversity* is the tenacity and precision with which Michaels dissects out muddled ideas about race and inequality." *The Nation* About the Author Walter Benn Michaels is a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "One of the most influential Americanists of his generation" (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*), he is the author of *Our America* and has contributed to *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Boston Globe*, and *n+1*. He lives in Chicago.