

# Elite Capture

“Worth sitting with and absorbing. While critically examining what happens when elites hijack our critiques and terminologies for their own interests, *Elite Capture* acutely reminds us that building power globally means we think and build outside of our internal confines. That is when we have the greatest possibility at world-making.”

—Ibram X. Kendi, National Book Award-winning author of *How to Be an Antiracist*

“I was waiting for this book without realising I was waiting for this book.”

—Ruth Wilson Gilmore, author of *Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition*

“Olúfémí O. Táíwò is a thinker on fire. He not only calls out empire for shrouding its bloodied hands in the cloth of magical thinking but calls on all of us to do the same. Elite capture, after all, is about turning oppression and its cure into a neoliberal commodity exchange where identities become capitalism’s latest currency rather than the grounds for revolutionary transformation. The lesson is clear: only when we think for ourselves and act with each other, together in deep, dynamic, and difficult solidarity, can we begin to remake the world.”

—Robin D. G. Kelley, author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*

“An indispensable and urgent set of analyses, interventions, and alternatives to ‘identity politics,’ ‘centering,’ and much more. The book offers a sober assessment of the state of our racial politics and a powerful path on how to build the world that we deserve.”

—Derecka Purnell, author of *Becoming Abolitionists*

“With global breadth, clarity and precision, Olúfémí O. Táíwò dissects the causes and consequences of elite capture and charts an alternative constructive politics for our time. The result is an erudite

yet accessible book that draws widely on the rich traditions of black and anticolonial political thought.”

—Adom Getachew, author of *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*

“Among the churn of books on ‘wokeness’ and ‘political correctness,’ philosopher Olúfémí O. Táíwò’s *Elite Capture* clearly stands out. With calm, clarity, erudition, and authority, Táíwò walks the reader through the morass, deftly explicating the distinction between substantive and worthy critique and weaponized backlash. Understanding the culture wars is essential to US politics right now, and no one has done it better than Táíwò in this book.”

—Jason Stanley, author of *How Fascism Works*

“Olúfémí O. Táíwò is one of the great social theorists of our generation. *Elite Capture* is a brilliant, devastating book. Táíwò deploys his characteristic blend of philosophical rigor, sociological insight, and political clarity to reset the debate on identity politics. Táíwò shows how the structure of racial capitalism, not misguided activism, is today’s prime threat to egalitarian, anti-racist politics. And Táíwò’s suggested path forward, a constructive and materialist politics at the radical edge of the possible, is exactly what we need to escape these desperate times. Anyone concerned with dismantling inequalities, and building a better world, needs to read this book.”

—Daniel Aldana Cohen, co-author of *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal*

“Táíwò’s book is an insightful and fascinating look at how it is that elites capture and subvert efforts to better society. Anyone who wants to understand and improve upon the activist movements shaking our world needs to read this book.”

Liam Kofi Bright, Assistant Professor at the  
London School of Economics

“This book, building on one of the most lucid, powerful, and important essays I can recall reading in recent years, is, in a word, brilliant. Read it—and read it twice. Every sentence contains multitudes.”

Daniel Denvir, host of The Dig

# Elite Capture

How the Powerful  
Took Over Identity Politics  
(and Everything Else)

Olúfémí O. Táíwò

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# Introduction

*“There is no racism, no tribalism; we are not struggling merely so that we may have a flag, an anthem and ministers. We are not going to install ourselves in the Governors’ palace, that is not our objective. . . . We are struggling to liberate our people not only from colonialism but also from any form of exploitation.*

*We want no one to exploit our people any more, neither whites nor blacks.”*

—Amílcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*<sup>1</sup>

The beginning of the pandemic lockdowns in the spring of 2020 announced lulls in much of business as usual: public transportation, interstate travel, nightlife, community programming, libraries, barbershops. Even playgrounds went silent. But it did not stop police murders around the globe.

In some cases, the lockdowns even set the killings into motion: on March 31, four days after Kenya’s curfew began, Kenyan police officers enforced the order by storming a neighborhood and beating people indiscriminately, eventually opening fire with live ammunition.<sup>2</sup> One of these bullets struck and killed Yasin Hussein Moyo, a thirteen-year-old

looking down onto the fracas from his apartment balcony. On May 19, twenty-one-year-old Anderson Arboleda was chased by two police officers in Puerto Tejada, Colombia, for breaking pandemic curfew. He was beaten and pepper-sprayed so severely that he died the next morning.<sup>3</sup>

In other cases, the pandemic simply failed to sufficiently disrupt the normal patterns of police violence: on May 18, three police officers entered a home in Rio de Janeiro's Complexo do Salgueiro favela where six cousins were playing together.<sup>4</sup> They opened fire, shooting fourteen-year-old João Pedro Matos Pinto in the back. A relative drove him to a police helicopter in a desperate attempt to get him medical care. The family knew neither his whereabouts nor his medical condition until seventeen hours later—when they found his body at the coroner. By Rio de Janeiro police's own estimates, they killed an average of six people per day in early 2020; if these killings followed the pattern of the past decade, more than three quarters of the dead were Black men.<sup>5</sup> For a sense of scale: there were nearly twice as many police killings in the single Brazilian state of Rio de Janeiro in 2019 as there were across the entire United States in that same year.<sup>6</sup>

In the United States, a spate of police killings whose victims included Breonna Taylor (March 13), George Floyd (May 25), and Tony McDade (May 27) launched a volume of protest unprecedented in US history: by some estimates, as many as twenty-six million people in the country participated in one form or another, a figure that would represent nearly 8 percent of the entire US population.<sup>7</sup> The protests were not only large, but combative. Across the country, luxury malls and

retail stores were sacked and pillaged. In Minneapolis, police fled the Third Precinct for their lives as rebels smashed windshields with projectiles and set the building on fire.

The protests were global in scope. In June 2020, demonstrators took to the streets in cities across the world, including Rio, Seoul, London, Sydney, and Monrovia.<sup>8</sup> This global solidarity undoubtedly owes itself to the steadfast international organizing work of Black Lives Matter chapters, the umbrella Movement for Black Lives, and a number of other organizations around the world working in partnership and solidarity with them. But it also is rooted in the global nature of the intersecting dynamics of racism and policing. These problems are among the many legacies of our immediate past that shape our lives today.

In Nigeria, the energy crested a few months later, in October 2020, when protestors took to the streets to call for the abolition of the country's Special Anti-robbery Squad (SARS), a secretive police force that has been responsible for waves of extrajudicial torture, sexual assault, and murder of Nigerians. The #EndSARS protestors were met with bitter resistance—and live ammunition—from the Nigerian government, including during the infamous Lekki Toll Gate massacre. Amnesty International put the death toll at twelve.<sup>9</sup> It is important to understand that the #EndSARS protesters were not merely sympathetic to, or influenced by, other protests earlier in the year, but were fighting on their own front in the same struggle.

Nigeria's Special Anti-robbery Squad, US police forces, and many other repressive bodies use similar ideological

structures and strategies of violence because they are similar kinds of institutions, created to achieve similar aims. Most of these forces have their roots in the colonial era of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when national-level institutions functioned like franchises under the global racial empire's logo, each territorial army, colonial government, and national stock exchange linked together in a powerful cartel. While individual security forces were dedicated to different national interests under the global racial empire, the cartel as a whole served the interests of the same elites, making sure wealth and advantage flowed south to north, Black to white. That system has never been dismantled. So, while "empire" is no longer a popular term in global politics, we're still basically living it: nakedly imperial structures live on in forms like France's management of currencies of many of its former African colonies, and seemingly neutral international corporations and institutions bully the poorer peoples and countries of the world in "neocolonial" fashion.<sup>10</sup>

So, despite differences in local context, when people around the world rose up against the police terror and violence to which they have been subjected for hundreds of years, it was immediately clear that something global was at stake. The response from governing elites was equally immediate: the World Bank established a "Task Force on Racism," and the United Nations, under pressure from the entire African Union bloc of fifty-four countries, agreed to launch a yearlong inquiry into anti-Black racism.<sup>11</sup>

Two strategic trends in the response quickly became clear: the elites' tactic of performing symbolic identity politics to

pacify protestors without enacting material reforms; and their efforts to rebrand (not replace) existing institutions, also using elements of identity politics.

In a stunningly clear summary of the first trend, the mayor of Washington, DC, had “Black Lives Matter” painted on streets near the White House, atop which protestors continued to be brutalized. The following year, the Central Intelligence Agency rolled out the second strategy, producing a dozen “Humans of CIA” recruitment videos reaching out to multiple identity groups, including queer and Indigenous people. Journalist Roberto Lovato cautioned readers about the resonance of this moment in an aptly titled article, “The Age of Intersectional Empire Is Upon Us”: “In the vast world that lives outside of progressive circles, there are millions of people who have emotional reactions to Army and Marine recruitment ads featuring proud Black and Latinx soldiers.”<sup>12</sup>

Formal political task forces, encouraging murals, and inspirational commercials are serviceable carrots. But there’s also, of course, the stick. By June 2021, twenty-five state legislatures had introduced legislation to ban the teaching of “critical race theory,” as part of a culture war backed by think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and Manhattan Institute, alongside well-connected individuals such as Mark Meadows (a former White House chief of staff in the Trump administration).<sup>13</sup> In the United Kingdom, the British government formed a Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, which released a report exonerating the government of the institutional racism alleged by Black Lives Matter protestors.<sup>14</sup> Where co-optation fails, regular old repression will do.

So what, then, are we to make of identity politics? Some expressions of identity politics are twisted to rebrand old imperial projects, while others are actively banned by the powers that be. Is it itself an innocuously different version of left politics, separated from more orthodox left politics mainly by “failures of communication” as philosopher Ashley Bohrer suggests?<sup>15</sup> Or, more ominously, is identity politics “an essential tool utilized by the bourgeoisie to maintain its class domination over the working class by keeping workers divided along racial and gender lines,” as Dominic Gustavo alleges at the *World Socialist Web Site*?<sup>16</sup> Or is identity politics, as embodied in critical race theory, a dangerous ideology and threat to the established order that the powers that be aim to stamp out?

### **The Combahee River Collective (and Why Identity Politics Isn't What You Think It Is)**

The term “identity politics” was first popularized by the 1977 manifesto of the Combahee River Collective, an organization of queer, Black feminist socialists, and it was supposed to be about fostering solidarity and collaboration.

American studies scholar Duchess Harris recounts the collective’s origin story as follows: in 1961, President John F. Kennedy convened a Commission on the Status of Women. It was split into four consultative bodies, one of which was the Consultation on Negro Women. This event inspired sequels, and the third National Conference of Commissions on

the Status of Women birthed the meeting that founded the National Organization for Women, which founders hoped would serve as an “NAACP for women.” However, NOW failed to live up to this promise to treat race seriously—and Black nationalist organizations failed equally to address gender.<sup>17</sup> As a result, in 1973, activists formed the National Black Feminist Organization.<sup>18</sup>

In 1974, the young activist Barbara Smith met Demita Frazier after she began organizing an NBFO chapter in Boston. The pair agreed with many NBFO goals but also wanted an organization that would discuss “radical economics” more freely and that would guarantee a voice for lesbians. And so, from a meeting of four, began the Combahee River Collective. From 1977 to 1980, they held seven retreats with fellow activists, which were attended by like-minded Boston veteran activists, and even the famed writer Audre Lorde.

The experiences that united these activists—the consistent sidelining and devaluation of their political priorities within different political organizations—were foundational to the stance they developed, which they christened “identity politics.”

“We, as black women, we actually had a right to create political priorities and agendas and actions and solutions based in our experiences,” Smith later explained—a political agenda based in their full experiences and interests, rather than positioning them as white women’s tokens or as Black men’s secretaries, and one that incorporated the full complexity of their values, rather than a degraded and misshapen caricature of them. As Princeton professor Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor puts it, “One could not expect Black women to be wholly active

in political movements that neither represented nor advanced their interests”; therefore, the identity politics they developed served as “*entry points* for Black women to engage in politics,” rather than a whole cloth withdrawal from problematic organizations and movements.<sup>19</sup>

As such, they were in favor of diverse coalitional organizing, an approach that Smith later saw exemplified by the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign’s grassroots approach and its focus on social issues that people of many identities face, especially “basic needs of food, housing and healthcare.”<sup>20</sup> Beverly Smith, another of the group’s founders, recalls the immediate political effect of the group’s statement among groups in the Boston left: “[W]e also drew many women of color or who were not Black to us. We had connections with Latinas. We had connections with Asian women. . . . And they drew us too. Because it wasn’t just like one way. When we’d find out about things that were happening, we would get ourselves there as well.”<sup>21</sup> The collective’s principled stance on identity politics functioned as a principle of unity, rather than division.

But, in the decades since the founding of the Combahee River Collective, instead of forging alliances across difference, some have chosen to close ranks—especially on social media—around ever-narrower conceptions of group interests. Smith says, diplomatically, that many of today’s common uses of the concept are “very different than what we intended.”<sup>22</sup> Asad Haider puts it more starkly in his book *Mistaken Identity*, where he acknowledges the radical history of the concept while nevertheless describing identity politics as “the ideology that emerged to appropriate this emancipatory legacy in

service of the advancement of political and economic elites.”<sup>23</sup> While agreeing with these points, I also agree with political theorist Marie Moran and philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff who have both argued effectively that ideological explanations that tie troubling political developments to the ideas supposedly built into identity politics tend to miss the mark: many criticisms target ideas that aren’t essential to identity-based movements or that misconstrue their basic goals entirely.<sup>24</sup>

The idea of “elite capture” helps reconcile these two points with each other. It is true that recent developments in the meaning and use of identity politics have not stopped police murders or emptied prisons. Identity politics has, however, equipped people, organizations, and institutions with a new vocabulary to describe their politics and aesthetic—even if the substance of those political decisions are irrelevant or even counter to the interests of the marginalized people whose identities are being deployed. But that is a feature of how identity politics is being used, rather than what identity politics is at its core. It is this “elite capture”—not identity politics itself—that stands between us and a transformative, nonsectarian, coalitional politics.

### Elite Capture: The Bigger Problem

The concept of elite capture originated in the study of developing countries to describe the way socially advantaged people tend to gain control over financial benefits, especially foreign aid, meant for others. But the concept has also been

applied more generally to describe how political projects can be hijacked in principle or in effect by the well positioned and resourced. And yet, the idea also helps to explain how public resources such as knowledge, attention, and values become distorted and distributed by power structures.

Elite capture accounts for many of the common objections leveled against identity politics, including that it requires uncritical support for political figures based on their identities without regard for their politics and that it often reflects social preoccupations that are “really for rich white people.” One commentator, Saagar Enjeti, criticized “the identity politics obsessed elite wing of the Democratic party,” alleging that “the people who populate our newsrooms” and “populate the professional managerial class . . . have far too much of an impact on our contemporary political discourse.”<sup>25</sup> Despite having identified the problem with mainstream popular uses of identity politics today—the outsize impact of well-positioned people on our political discourse—Enjeti nevertheless seems to think this is a special problem of one wing of one political party. In fact, the underlying dynamics are as old as politics itself and are not confined to a particular politics of social identity.

Elite capture is not a conspiracy. It’s bigger than cynical appropriations, opportunism, or the moral successes or failures of any individual or group. It is a kind of system behavior—a phenomenon articulated at the population level, an observable (predictable) pattern of actions involving individuals, groups, and subgroups, each of whom may be pursuing any number of different goals from their own narrow point of view. Elite capture is not limited to the scope of their intentions. The constant