

# Why Identity Politics Has Proven So Useful to Elites

& What to do about it

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2023

a review of

*Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* by Olúfemi Táíwò. Haymarket Books, 2022

Although most readers may not think of ourselves as elites, one of the great gifts of the Black feminists who developed the concept of identity politics was to demonstrate how status and power are relative, and move simultaneously in different directions across multiple aspects of a person's identity.

As the author of *Elite Capture*, Olúfemi Táíwò puts it, "A privileged person in an absolute sense (a person belonging to, say, the half of the world that has secure access to 'basic needs') may nevertheless experience themselves consistently on the low end of the power dynamics of their immediate social world." Táíwò engages the complexity and relativity of identity politics directly, and focuses on how those of us who hope to make more than cosmetic changes in the world can avoid falling into traps that have been laid for us by contemporary discourse around identity.

*Elite Capture* is a very accessible book of philosophy; a fairly quick read, particularly as philosophical essays go. Its 125 pages are aimed primarily at activists and activist academics, "for those who want a different, and better, world system, than we have now," but "it is not a how-to guide."

The author elaborates their concept of *Elite Capture* through a series of analogies and historical examples. The concept of *Elite Capture* is grounded in the work of the global Black radical tradition, and is similar to the idea of cooptation of radical ideas or critiques, but is a broader idea, one that explains a systemic process (importantly, not one driven by a conspiracy or a specific plan).

*Elite Capture* explains why and how certain ideas, identity politics chief among them, end up being mobilized to benefit elites in general or within group elites. At the risk of oversimplifying a very helpful and compelling explanation, this occurs because 1) elites already control most of our social world(s), and 2) they are simply acting in their own interest by using partial or politically empty versions of these ideas and amplifying them.

What is key to Táíwò's explanation, and somewhat new, is the way this applies across the board to privileged groups within a broader population who are not necessarily acting in a concerted counterrevolutionary way so much as they are simply acting in the way that benefits them the most. Yet, because these people already have a disproportionate share of the social world—they control more financial resources, more traditional media, more social media, etc.—their seizure of a particular idea or political tactic resonates louder than more political challenging or revolutionary versions.

The second half of the book is a vision for practicing movement and radical politics in the context of *Elite Capture*. The third chapter describes what can go wrong (or rather, what is going wrong) with what Táíwò very aptly calls "deference politics" in a context of *Elite Capture*.

This has extremely useful points, such as the way that we tend to view diversity in very narrow terms. Táíwò comments that people are usually not calling anyone in a refugee camp to ask their opinion, and that it likely mat-

ters more whether someone is committed and acting in a position of tangible solidarity than whether they come from a particular identity group.

One of the useful ideas of the book is how deference politics combines with *Elite Capture*. If within say, a movement organization or a university committee, the tendency is to pass the mic to a person of color to speak on a particular issue, then it ignores the fact that the person of color in that space is an elite of sorts, on some relative, intersectional axis: a person who has the time, resources, abilities, access to have arrived in that space.

For all sorts of reasons, it doesn't make sense to ask this person to de facto become a representative of their identity group, irrespective of their particular political analysis. Instead, Táíwò argues, it's better to spend this same amount of effort—the effort that goes into deference—in creating access for more people, masses of people, to more spaces of power.

One of the book's major strengths is its focus on anticolonialism, and throughout, Táíwò draws on historical examples of anticolonial struggles. It also has one of the most useful explanations of the very concept of “social structure”—an idea I have struggled to explain clearly at the introductory university level! For these ideas alone, the book is well worth the read.

Readers may not fully agree with the book's political organizing vision, which is not an anarchist one, but may find much of interest in the other sections. One idea that is in accordance with most anarchist practice is their strong emphasis on coalitional politics. Most anarchists are not involved in exclusively anarchist struggles, but rather engage in a variety of movement formations to build constructive alternatives, exactly as suggested in this text.

The concept of *Elite Capture* and the suggestions on rejecting deference politics have much to offer, since we are all living in a politics currently dominated by these issues.

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Fifth Estate #414, Fall 2023

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