

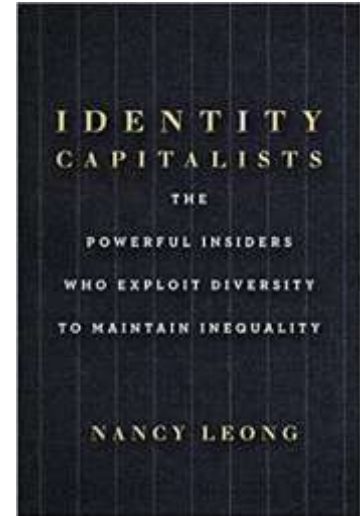
**“Should be Re-Titled ‘Exploitation of Identity’”**

a review by Dick Burkhardt of

# **Identity Capitalism:**

## **The Powerful Insiders Who Exploit Diversity to Maintain Inequality**

By Nancy Leong (2021)



This book has a very bad title. It has little to do with “capitalism” as commonly known - the economic system of the West. It’s closer to the concept of “capitalizing” on something of perceived value for personal gain, whether social or economic. Just think about the intricacies of identity politics, especially schemers both within and outside an identity group. Leong’s opening example is about an institution which exploits its handful of people of color by inserting them into publicity photos to create a false appearance of diversity. I’ve seen this myself - think “virtue signaling” - yet surely she could have led with something more consequential and dramatic. I was also bothered by the fact that she identifies as Asian American but doesn’t look it and seems to have taken advantage of her multiracial heritage – exploitation of identity from the inside.

Leong calls the “people of color” the “outgroup” with “white people” being the “ingroup”, where normally the ingroup exploits the identity of the outgroup. Yet I found this terminology all too reminiscent of the “victimhood culture” terminology of “oppressor” and “victim”, which transforms the wide variety of situations in the real world into destructive binary thinking.

In addition, Leong is deeply embedded in fashionable perspectives on race and misses the elephant in the room – how the huge “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” (DEI) industry has diverted attention from corporate-led escalating inequality, using divide-and-conquer tactics based on racial identity. I just read an article on how this “woke capitalism” continues to undermine multiracial solidarity among working people, with “white” people being taught to identify as racists and blame themselves, not the capitalism that exploits the vulnerable of all races.

In fact, the “white” working class has lost more ground economically over the last 40 years than any other group, despite the purported privilege of “whiteness” (they had more to lose). Not surprisingly, corporate DEI programs have a long record of failure (“Why Diversity Programs Fail” by Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, Harvard Business Review).

However, Leong does capture some of the big exploitations of identity from the past, such as with slavery and women’s suffrage. Then the slave owners would sometimes exploit caricatures of slaves to portray them as happy, willing participants who benefited from slavery. Opponents of women’s right to vote would cite certain women, usually affluent women, who were happy to let their husbands vote for them, portraying these women as representative. Here we’re actually seeing exploitation of manipulated identities. This continues today, often in the form of lingering stereotypes of many minorities, even new stereotypes in response to current events. But the

Critical Race Theory stereotypes of “whiteness” show that not just minorities will be targeted when a larger divide-and-conquer purpose is served.

Leong emphasizes that exploitation of identity does not just serve interests of wealth and power, but also what many have called “social capital”, though social capital, of course, facilitates both power and income. Historically, immigrants often sought “white identity” for these purposes. Today some seek black or tribal identity due to the benefits of affirmative action, diversity hiring preferences, or tribal membership. This, of course, signals that historically “disadvantaged” are no longer so disadvantaged, complicating the “ingroup” / “outgroup” terminology. Leong does not deal in a balanced way with these phenomena, getting bogged down in identity politics without noting that most immigrants just want to assimilate into mainstream culture, if too old themselves, then certainly their children. This has proved true in the US even with many groups that have strong cultural traditions, such as ethnic Jews, because of the perceived benefits and opportunities.

Leong is more centered when she describes “identity entrepreneurs”, who are actually just exploiters of identity who seek monetary capital directly, not just social capital. She includes those who some would regard as “sell-outs” to their identity group as well as outsiders who after a quick buck. For a liberal group, the former would include those who are happy to be “token” representatives of their group in return for a good paycheck, while the latter typically try to capitalize on a particular hot trend or fashion, such as in “black” music, or a popular movement, such as “environmentalists” focused on climate and ecology. But not surprisingly, DEI training is not featured here, with DiAngelo being the prime example of an identity entrepreneur, with her focus on elite white guilt.

One of Leong’s major complaints about “identity law” is that the standard lists for non-discriminatory practices (religion, race, gender, ethnicity, etc.) do not include variations in personal styles (hair, garments, symbols, etc.). Such styles are very important to certain religious groups and very controversial (the Muslim hijab, etc.) but it’s not clear how to handle these, or what they have to do with exploiting identity, except on a case-by-case basis. The issue of “cultural appropriation” is also fraught with difficulty, as identities could be manipulated then mocked or ridiculed or sold for profit, or they could be honored and freely shared. The example of the “Washington Redskins” was brought up, where some were inclined to the latter view (including the original owners) while others toward the former view (natives who remembered it as a pejorative from the era of westward conquest). “Blackface” brought up a similar dichotomy – reflecting different historical memories. All this points to less finger pointing and more dialogue and mutual education across all issues of identity.

At the end of the book, Leong lists 4 principles to rectify wrongs of identity: honesty, apology, education, and authenticity. I would suggest that honesty and education come first and apology last, after the issues have been thoroughly cleared up. I should also note that she is often talking about official apologies, along with some kind of compensation to indicate authenticity. A prime example was the US government apology and reparations to Japanese Americans after their internment and loss of property during World War II. A similar coordinated apology and reparations has never been given to descendants of slaves.



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