

**Replace ‘Deference Politics’ by
‘Constructive Politics’**

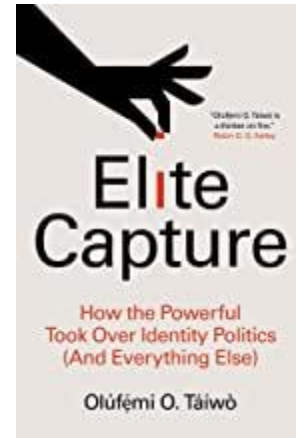
a review of

Elite Capture:

**How the Powerful Took Over Identity
Politics**

(And Everything Else)

By Olufemi Taiwo (2022)



This marvelous and readable little book takes a deep dive into today’s identity politics and dares to say “The Emperor Has No Clothes”. Taiwo, though raised in the US and well-schooled in racial identity, comes from a Nigerian family and brings a welcome African point of view, steeped in the history of liberation– both US and post-colonial Africa.

Taiwo notes, contrary to the proverb, that emotional trauma or pain is often a poor teacher, whether born of oppression or not: Its “suffering is partial, short-sighted, and self-absorbed”. That is, “oppression is not a prep school”. Automatically deferring to identity victims is asking them “to shoulder burdens alone that we ought to share collectively”...instead of “lifting of lifting them onto a pedestal in order to hide below them” (p 120).

“Deference politics” is the doctrine, associated with Critical Theory, that individuals from groups identified as oppressive (European or “white”) must defer to selected individuals from groups identified as victimized (black or other people of color). For example, “white allies” must hold themselves “accountable to” designated people of color in all relevant organizational decision making, deferring to the “lived experience” of those individuals, especially experiences identified as harmful or oppressive. “The cunning of trauma politics is that it turns actual people and struggles ... into matters of injury..., not by their aspirations or sheer humanity” (p 120).

An even bigger objection by Taiwo to deference politics is that those “designated people of color” who are “in the room” of conferencing and decision making, are rarely representative members of their identity groups. Instead they are elite members (by education, status, etc) who tend to represent their own or class interests more than majority interests. This is especially true when those elite members are not elected or otherwise held accountable by a formal democratic process.

Hence the book title “Elite Capture”. These elites use tactics like “performing symbolic identity politics to pacify protesters without enacting material reforms” (p 5), also efforts to “rebrand existing institutions” without carefully engineered change. He also quotes a Marxist that identity politics “is 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” (p 6).

In contrast, Taiwo’s “constructive politics” is far more demanding, asking us to become “planners, designers, and builders” of both infrastructure and institutions and “to be accountable to those who are not yet in the room” (p 118). Many would include future generations in that room, not just those who struggle today, and using the best methods of social science to get an unbiased representation of the majority.

In addition to this wakeup call to activists who think they’ve found the “truth”, Taiwo narrates some lesser-known but illuminating history to illustrate “constructive politics”. For the US he tells us about Edward F. Frazier and his controversial 1957 book “Black Bourgeoisie” about class in black politics. Then about educational reformer Carter G. Woodson and the psychology of elite capture.

From Africa we learn fascinating history about notable activists and intellectuals like Amilcar Cabral (Guinea-Bissau, a former Portuguese colony on the mid-coast of West Africa) and Lílíca Boal (Cape Verde, islands off the coast just north of Guinea- Bissau, also a former

Portuguese colony). Both colonies were important to the Atlantic slave trade. Both of these leaders played important roles in colonial liberation (finally in 1974 for Guinea-Bissau and in 1975 for Cape Verde), illustrating constructive politics.

Taiwo summarizes his thesis: “To opt for deference, instead of interdependence, may soothe short term psychological wounds. But it does so at a steep cost; it may undermine the goals that motivated the project – and it entrenches a politics that does not serve those fighting for freedom over privilege, for collective liberation over mere parochial advantage” (p 82).