

Against Zero-Sum Logic: A Response to Walter Benn Michaels

Michael Rothberg

In “*Plots Against America: Neo-Liberalism and Anti-Racism*,” Walter Benn Michaels brings together three significant problematics that converge with my own concerns: namely, the Holocaust and Holocaust memory; comparative accounts of social difference and identity; and the critique of capitalism. About these issues, Michaels makes three central claims. First, he suggests that discussion of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism occupies a disproportionate place in the landscape of American culture. Second, he argues that class should be thought of as fundamentally different from social identities such as racial and gendered identity. And third, he renders the accusation that in abandoning class analysis for cultural analysis, contemporary criticism and theory are complicit with a neoliberal logic in which “we are allowed to do what we can afford to do.” There are important aspects of this discussion with which I agree, but I will also articulate some strong disagreements with the logic that unites Michaels’s claims. In presenting my response in terms of disagreements, readers will recognize that I agree with the claim in Michaels’s recent book *The Shape of the Signifier* (2004) that one of the most dismal effects of postmodernism—which he calls posthistoricism—is the replacement of ideological disagreement with identitarian differences, that is, the replacement of what we believe by who we are. In the name of politicizing identity, posthistoricism actually depoliticizes difference. Michaels’s recent work has the great virtue of forcing us to think harder about questions of identity under global capitalism. This response aims to repoliticize questions of difference from a perspective that is indebted neither to “posthistoricism” nor to Michaels’s version of class analysis.

Let me first take up the question of the Holocaust through a response to Michaels’s mobilization of Roth and Spiegelman in this article. I refer to Michaels’s mobilization rather than his reading or interpretation because I’m not sure that the genre of this essay is best

described as literary criticism. He argues in this section of the essay that Roth evokes the threat of imaginary anti-Semitism in such a way that it displaces outrage over real American racism and that Roth's and Spiegelman's evocations of the Holocaust amount to "another kind of Holocaust denial," because they distract from genocides closer to home.¹ Although I agree with Michaels that the presence of a national museum dedicated to the Holocaust on the Mall in Washington makes for an odd and somewhat troubling version of American history, I argue that memory and representation don't actually obey the same logic of scarcity as real estate development.

The Plot Against America and *Maus* are extremely self-reflexive works that should be understood as engaging both implicitly and explicitly with questions of representation, including especially the representation of ethnicity and race. This meta-literary quality of the two works is also common to most of the authors' other works. To begin with *Maus*, it is certainly true that Spiegelman's allegorical, animal motif deliberately comes uncomfortably close to the racial system and stereotypes of the Nazi era, especially when he imports it provocatively into the American context. But it is also true that much of the work of *Maus* consists in putting into question the adequacy of those codes for an understanding of the situation of the Holocaust survivor's son; Art Spiegelman marks this clearly in the second volume of *Maus*, in which Art's already anthropomorphic mouse body morphs into a more human form, complete with a mouse mask. But even before he introduces his self-portrait as the man in the mouse mask and, thus, in conventional postmodern form draws attention to the artifice of his representational codes, Spiegelman goes to great lengths to differentiate the life and experiences of Vladek, the survivor, from those of his Swedish-born but fully American son. In fact, I would argue that the major theme of *Maus* is precisely this disjuncture between the generations—a disjuncture with which Spiegelman is able both to register the transmission of certain legacies of the Nazi genocide across the generations and to mark his very distanced, uncomprehending relationship to his father's story. Because it draws attention to the ambivalent disjuncture and distance between the generations and between Europe and the US, Spiegelman's *Maus* is not simply a reflection of the "Americanizing of the Holocaust," as Michaels states; rather, it offers a critical engagement in the form of a literary text with that process of Americanization.²

The disjuncture between European catastrophe and American security is, if anything, even more pronounced in the works of Philip Roth. If one would want to argue, as Michaels does, that *The Plot Against America* is complicit in exaggerating the importance of anti-Semitism in American history, one would have to suggest that it was

a major overturning of Roth's entire oeuvre—an oeuvre that can be understood as dedicated in large part to demystifying the pieties of Jewish-American culture. Already in the title story of his first book, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), Roth brilliantly and somewhat cruelly satirizes the whitening of the American-Jewish community. *Goodbye, Columbus* suggests the shifting racialization of American Jews through the story of the encounter between Neil Klugman, a young man from an older Jewish community in Newark, and Brenda Patimkin, daughter of an athletic, fresh-fruit-and-vegetable-eating Jewish family of upper-middle-class suburbanites, complete with a black maid and tennis whites. Roth turns explicitly to the Holocaust in *The Ghost Writer*, a novel published a year after the 1978 *Holocaust* television miniseries inaugurated the prime-time Americanization of the Holocaust. Roth's aims are clearly satirical. The novel tells the story of what happens when Roth's alter ego Nathan Zuckerman publishes a short story airing his family's dirty laundry. According to his parents and an esteemed local judge, that story will only confirm the Christian public's anti-Semitic preconceptions about the venality of the Jews. When the pompous judge asks Nathan, "Can you honestly say that there is anything in your short story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels?," the following exchange between Nathan and his mother ensues:

"The Big Three, Mama! Streicher, Goebbels, and your son! What about the judge's humility? Where's his modesty?"

"He only meant that what happened to the Jews—"

"In Europe—not in Newark! We are not the wretched of Belsen! We were not the victims of that crime!" (*Zuckerman Bound* 64)

Nathan ends by descending into the very ethnic paranoia of his elders, fantasizing that a young woman he has met is actually Anne Frank and that marrying her will resolve all the problems with his family. He imagines his mother's response: "'Married? But so fast? Nathan, is she Jewish?' 'Yes, she is.' 'But who is she?' 'Anne Frank' " (*Zuckerman Bound* 95). In drawing a sharp line between Europe and the US while simultaneously mocking the cultural value of a Holocaust icon, *The Ghost Writer* offers a prescient critique of the sentimentalization and instrumentalization of the Holocaust in American culture.

Before we return to the question of what it would mean for Roth to represent the Jews of Newark as if they actually were the

wretched of Belsen, let me adduce one more example, from 1993's *Operation Shylock*. In this long and complex novel, published in the same year as the opening of *Schindler's List* and the US Holocaust Museum, Roth once again ridicules the notion that American Jews can accumulate capital based on the suffering of their European coreligionists. In the course of the novel, Roth interpolates sections from his actual interview with the Israeli survivor-novelist Aharon Appelfeld. Far from accruing cultural capital through his association with Appelfeld, Roth explicitly distances himself from the survivor: "Hiding as a child from his murderers in the Ukrainian woods while I was still on a Newark playground playing fly-catcher's-up had clearly made him less of a stranger than I to life in its more immoderate manifestations" (*Operation Shylock* 111). My point is that accusing Roth of hyping anti-Semitism or the Holocaust seems to run directly counter to his project which, as articulated in *Operation Shylock* in relation to Appelfeld, involves demonstrating "the all but incompatible orientations that shape our very different lives and very different books and that result from *antithetical* twentieth-century Jewish biographies" (*Operation Shylock* 201).³

Understanding the invocation of anti-Semitism in the alternative history of *The Plot Against America* will involve, I believe, factoring in the antithetical relationship that Roth has always posited between the Jews of Newark and the Jews of Warsaw, Berlin, and Prague. Instead of offering a reading of *The Plot Against America* here, I will merely point out that the social and political messages of this novel are much more difficult to decode than Michaels seems to imply in his essay. Decoding those messages would involve first grappling with the novel's odd referential structure. Not only is this a counterfactual, alternative history—and, therefore, hardly reducible to realist presuppositions—but the novel also has a deliberately paradoxical and tantalizing relationship to contemporary political conditions. That is, in the novel, President Charles Lindbergh's know-nothing populism and folksy Americanism have reminded more than a few readers of a certain American president closer to home, yet the central conflict of the novel—whether to engage in war on foreign soil—has precisely the opposite valence as it does today, with Bush's interventionism contrasted to Lindbergh's pro-fascist isolationism. Such provocative historical reversals—common to many of Roth's works—frustrate attempts to draw too straight a line between the novel and any given political context. To my mind, the novel's evocation of anti-Semitism gone wild might be read less as a literal commentary on the social position of Jews—either now or in the past—than as an indirect indictment of the contemporary Christianization of American public life.

Michaels's readings of *The Plot Against America* and *Maus* and, more generally, of the place of the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and anti-racism in neoliberal America seem to obey a zero-sum logic that I have elsewhere called competitive memory.⁴ As we've seen, Michaels states quite directly that remembering the Holocaust—or, in this case, creating literary works that in very different ways invoke the Holocaust—is “in fact another kind of Holocaust denial,” because it entails *not* remembering slavery or the genocide of Native Americans. This widespread understanding of memory is actually shared both by critics of the Holocaust's place in American life and by proponents of Holocaust memory. Members of both groups seem to agree that invoking one history blots out another—or, as Michaels puts it à propos of *The Plot Against America*, “Why should we be outraged by what didn't happen rather than outraged by what did?” But is this really the way that memory and sympathy—not to mention fiction—work? Do we really only remember one thing at a time, friends and not enemies, white and not black? Michaels's version of competitive memory—speaking about the Holocaust is a form of Holocaust denial—functions something like what Foucault calls the repressive hypothesis. As is well known, Foucault argues that the notion of sexual prohibition in the Victorian age should not be made “into the basic and constitutive element” in a history of sexuality because “negative elements” were “only component parts” within a larger incitement and dissemination of discourses on sexuality (12). Similarly, I would argue, the negative elements of the competitive memory hypothesis are only component parts of a larger dissemination of memory discourses. Memory is productive and multidirectional; it is not privative.

A similar zero-sum logic of competition lies behind Michaels's approach to the other two large areas I mentioned earlier—social identity and the critique of capitalism. I fully subscribe to one of the central arguments of Michaels's essay: the importance of the analytic distinction between class and other social identities. As Michaels argues, the significance of poverty, unlike race, gender, and sexuality, is not its status as an identity category but rather its location in the class system, that is, in “structures of inequality.” I also agree with Michaels, following Adolph Reed, that, at least to a degree, “Culture has swallowed or displaced class as an analytical category of American political debate.” Finally, I think Michaels makes a provocative intervention in connecting the cultural turn in the humanities to the politics of neoliberalism, both of which have a tendency to reify certain economic relations and rationalities.

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among culture, politics, and economics. Why do we need to turn an analytic distinction between class and, say, race and gender into a normative valuation of one over the other? Michaels's definition of class difference—"more or less money," as he writes in *The Shape of the Signifier* (180)—is insufficient for understanding the embeddedness of economics within culture and politics. It also misses the essence of a Marxist critique of capitalism, which does not concern amounts of money but relations of production and exploitation. Michaels never defines neoliberalism or explains why that concept (as opposed to simply capitalism) is important to his analysis. In addition, he seems to mistake neoliberalism's ideological self-understanding for its actual practice. Although neoliberal ideology vaunts the neutrality and autonomy of economic reason, it is better understood, following Wendy Brown, as a constructivist political rationality. Consequently, neoliberal practice depends on and operates within cultural and political spheres; it both mobilizes racialized and gendered logics and impacts racialized and gendered subjects in highly differentiated ways.⁵ In opposition to neoliberalism, then, we need to mobilize a critique that doesn't only distinguish race, gender, and class analytically but also conjoins them.

In the late 1990s, a debate took place, primarily among feminists, about the distinction between what the initiating figure Nancy Fraser called the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition. Michaels doesn't to my knowledge ever refer to this debate, but he obliquely recognizes similar debates in some of the terminology of his essay and recent book. Fraser had sought, using a hybrid Marxian-Weberian model, to provide a multidimensional map of class and status attuned to the different kinds of difference represented by race, gender, sexuality, and economic class. Although the traumas associated with some forms of social identity demand a culturalist recognition, other forms of oppression require systemic redistribution. Race and gender tend to fall somewhere in the middle, according to Fraser, because they involve cultural attributes and tend toward economically embedded structural positions. Fraser was soon criticized by Iris Marion Young and Judith Butler for simplifying the map of the social and reifying the distinction between recognition and redistribution.⁶ Instead of adjudicating between these positions here, the point I'd like to make is that both sides of the debate were attempting to do what Michaels seems to think is impossible: to develop a theoretical framework that simultaneously acknowledges the analytic distinctions between class and social identities and recognizes the ineluctable intermingling and intersectionality of those categories in practice.

The theoretical project taken up by Fraser and others is important for at least two reasons relevant to Michaels's essay. First,

attention to the overlapping logics of identity and class would allow us better to understand the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. In his analysis of the application of the epithet “rich Jew” to Leo Frank, Michaels comes dangerously close to minimizing racism. But the inseparability of the two terms shows quite convincingly the limits of Michaels’s analysis: “rich Jew” is a single unit that can only be understood by considering the intersection of identity and class. Michaels’s attempt to calculate the salience of anti-Semitism by comparing wages and numbers of lynched bodies shows his debt to a neoliberal economic rationality. But as a site where multiple, frequently irrational discourses intersect (not just race and class, but also, minimally, religion, gender, and sexuality), anti-Semitism possesses a significance beyond anything statistics can illuminate. Second, and more generally, understanding the intersections of class and social identity is politically essential. It is possible (and potentially desirable) to provide a theoretical model of capitalism that ignores questions of identity—after all, that’s what Marx did in *Capital*, a text that remains essential. However, it is *politically* impossible—at least in the US—to avoid race if one wants to transform society toward greater economic justice (as Michaels claims to want). Because, historically, capitalism’s development has been inseparable in many parts of the world from racialized logics, it is on historical ground divided by race and class (among other things) that one must work to overcome economic inequality.

To my mind, the logical formalism of Michaels’s argument is closer to the zero-sum logic of neoliberalism than is anti-racist multiculturalism (however, easily the latter may be susceptible to co-optation). By logical formalism, I mean Michaels’s tendency to disembed elements of literary works from their representational matrices, as we saw with Roth and Spiegelman, and to abstract social categories from material and discursive complexities, as we see in his argument about class versus race. Of course, to analyze a text or social issue, one must always disembed and abstract, but the argument must also acknowledge this analytical violence and factor it in to the analysis. Lacking that kind of dialectical self-reflexivity, the argument tends to reify difference and thus translate incommensurate levels of analysis into a single logical code: the zero-sum logic of calculation and competition that characterizes neoliberal ideology.

Notes

1. Michaels’s argument is somewhat slippery, because he shifts his critique of Roth in the final paragraphs of his essay from an indictment of a supposed Jewish particularism to that of supposed anti-racist universalism. I doubt that either of

these accounts adequately describes Roth's take on identity and racism, hence the peculiarity of describing Roth either in terms of a hyperbolic evocation of anti-Semitism or as the proponent of a liberal anti-racism. A more complete discussion of Roth and race would, among other things, need to consider his novel *The Human Stain*, which seems, as Brett Kaplan convincingly argues, to walk a fine line between a classical liberal defense of individualism and neoconservative critiques of liberal identity politics. See Brett Ashley Kaplan, "Reading Race and the Conundrums of Reconciliation in Philip Roth's *the Human Stain*," in *Turning up the Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels*, ed. Jay L. Halio and Ben Siegel (2005), 172–93.

2. See Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986) and *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (1991). Michaels includes a longer discussion of *Maus* in *The Shape of the Signifier*. For an extended reading of *Maus* that draws attention to its critical engagement with the commodification of Holocaust memory, see Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (2000), 202–19.

3. On Roth and the Holocaust, see Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism*, 187–202.

4. For a version of the argument against competition as a model of the workings of collective memory, see Michael Rothberg, "The Work of Testimony in the Age of Decolonization: *Chronicle of a Summer*, Cinema Verité, and the Emergence of the Holocaust Survivor," in *PMLA* 119.5 (2004): 1231–46. This argument is expanded and refined in my current book project, *Decolonizing Holocaust Memory*, where I argue that intercultural memory is better understood as multidirectional. For a pertinent example of multidirectional memory that takes up the black-Jewish question in a US context, see Michael Rothberg, "W.E.B. Du Bois in Warsaw: Holocaust Memory and the Color Line, 1949–1952," in *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001): 169–89.

5. For arguments about the crucial cultural politics of neoliberalism—its gendered, racialized, and sexualized logics—see *Western Welfare in Decline: Globalization and Women's Poverty*, ed. Catherine Kingfisher (2002) and Lisa Duggan's *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (2003), among others. For an argument that neoliberalism is best understood as a political rationality and constructivist project, see Wendy Brown, "Neo-Liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," in *Theory & Event* 7.1 (2003). Brown does not, however, consider race as the most significant factor in US neoliberalism. But her focus on the overlaps and tensions between neoliberalism and neoconservatism—a focus that addresses the crucial political question of the Bush II years—raises questions about gender and race that Michaels's narrow focus on class will not be able to address. In this context, it's important to remember that race is not simply a matter of black and white (as Michaels seems to assume)—a fact that is especially pertinent post-9/11. The shortcomings of Michaels's argument are similar to those of Thomas Frank, who understands cultural politics only as a stick with which to beat liberals but does not draw the obvious inference: the need to fashion an anti-capitalist cultural politics. Both Michaels and Frank seem to think of cultural politics as a realm of false consciousness that can be stripped away to reveal the truth of economic interests. See Thomas Frank, "What's the Matter with Liberals? The Election of 2004," *The New York Review of Books*, 12 May 2005: 46–51.

6. For the basic documents from this lively debate, see Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Postsocialist' Age," *New*

Left Review 212 (1995): 68–91; Iris Marion Young, “Unruly Categories: A Critique of Nancy Fraser’s Dual Systems Theory,” *New Left Review* 222 (1997): 147–60; Judith Butler, “Merely Cultural,” *Social Text* 53–54 (1998): 265–77. See also Fraser’s responses to her critics: Nancy Fraser, “Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler,” *Social Text* 53–54 (1998): 279–89 and Nancy Fraser, “A Rejoinder to Iris Young,” *New Left Review* 223 (1997): 126–30.

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