

Jumping Claims

Dan S. Wang

A scenario involving a claim presupposes a dispute. The claim is advanced by a party in order to resolve the dispute with an overriding truth in its favor. A scenario in which there are contradictory claims but no entity with the authority to resolve the dispute is a pure conflict. Far from an abstraction, such conflicts may devolve into war. The fortunate are stalemated.

The word 'claim' descends from the Latin *calare*, to announce or call out. *Calare* itself comes from the Greek *καλεο*, to name or to call something by name. In the etymologically accumulated meaning of the word there is a relationship between making a claim and producing a truth, all of it possibly out of the aesthetic thin air of naming. Thus the claim, like the act of naming, is a human mediation of reality, a way of organizing perceived phenomena. Claims advanced by adversarial parties may reflect fundamentally incongruous versions of the same reality. In which case, only one can be right while all may be 'true.' This is the stuff of due process, to sort out competing claims without straightaway resorting to coercive force.

Then there are claims made by parties in reference to a dispute involving a common adversary. These are subtle differences of particularity within larger agreement. Complementary claims have the potential to positively bind parties, potentially producing enlarged formations unified by the shared general claim. In a political conflict at mass scale the multiple constituencies comprising the adversarial sides must gird themselves in unison, each of them making slightly different claims based on their priorities of interest. Theorizing difference-within-agreement then, particularly in the form of claims, is of a pressing concern in the Age of Trump. Like the classical fascists before them, Trump and his analogues tailor threats to target distinct groups, a strategy only blunted by an allied opposition.

Baggage, Claimed and Unclaimed

Does one belong? Or not? Might one belong at some times but not other times? And according to whom? Membership in an identity group exposes particular problems having to do with making claims. Entities of officialdom, say a state, a government, a tribal authority, or a licensing agency, are the

standard arbiters of membership. For example, holding a passport issued by a national government is a consensus definition of belonging. But the legitimacy of a government itself can be unsettled. Even the most official of authorities are neither permanent nor beyond contestation. This is to say nothing of the unofficial groups on which membership claims are made, as nearly all modern racial and ethnic groups are. Given the pace of migrations, displacements, the shifting of states and the continuous mixing of peoples over the last two centuries at least, membership claims are increasingly fraught, being neither totally fluid nor completely static. Adoption, renunciation, defection, naturalization, and intermarriage are some of the processes of metamorphosis always nibbling at the edges of group definition.

Then there is problem of who makes the claim. For some, a claim made on one's own behalf means little. Recent controversies regarding self-declared indigenous identity have given rise to the instant truism *it's not a matter of what you claim, but rather who claims you*. The point being, a social identity is collectively authored, not individually self-determined. Individual self-definition is meaningless without reciprocal recognition from the social body.

But does one have a choice? Can the external claim be declined? The radical writer and organizer Grace Lee Boggs spoke of her having been born female as a defining factor in her political evolution, wrote of the Black struggle as a key to the transformation of US society, and reflected on the roots-finding journey to China she made later in life. She was clearly aware of the power of identity-based social formations, the ways in which claiming and being claimed both shape individual experience and produce formations that can act politically. And yet she was conspicuously reticent in describing herself as Asian American, even as she was claimed by Asian American activists three generations younger than she. Now as often as not her life and work are presented in the context of Asian American figures. It seems that in the end the individual claim is subordinate to the collective claim.

Claims as Interpellation

Althusser theorized the hailing of a subject, what he called interpellation, as a function of state-mediated capital, effected by, in his words, the ideological state apparatuses. Though institutional by implication, those apparatuses ultimately touch the lives of people through frontline encounters with personified agents of the state. Those would be persons fulfilling the roles of,

for example, social worker, tax auditor, teacher, and, most notoriously, the police officer. Bringing the state to bear at the molecular level of interpersonal relations, agents of the state produce the subjects required of capital.

What about interpellation by non-state actors under the conditions of neoliberalism, by formations that manifest as networks of NGOs, university research centers, professional publications, and cultural organizations? In other words, the non-state ideological apparatuses, the apparatuses based on formations that exist partly officially, partly informally, and partly in the imagination? The apparatuses that express highly localized or narrowly defined ideological contexts, but in which ideology itself does not fade? It is well understood that the neoliberalized state has successfully transferred many of its control functions to non-state entities and converted the centralized discipline of the state into the distributed self-discipline of bodies and narratives belonging to individuals and small groups. Since corporations, government, and universities now valorize diversity as an aspiration reflective of capital's global reach, the claim of belonging, even when constructed out of once-oppositional social difference, performs the neoliberal interpellation.

Given that Althusser's concern was not interpellation as such, but rather the operations by which capital reproduces the conditions for its own existence, it makes sense to ask how does interpellation of an ethnic subject figure into the persistence of capital. Rey Chow speaks to this very point, observing first that the logics of capital are no longer defined by the Manichean scheme of working class and owning class. Twenty-first century capital, thoroughly global, techno-saturated, and imbued with divisions of labor that correspond to myriad social fault lines, is a biopolitical economy infinitely more complex than the political economy as Marx knew it. Chow's aggrieved 'protestant ethnic' – that is, the ethnic subject that protests, that produces its ethnicity through its protest – is the subjectivity that occupies individual points along some of the most acutely contested strands in the fabric of biopolitical capital.

The Protestant Ethnic is where the claims advanced by a party to a dispute meet with the claims made for identity, for belonging. Asian American consciousness arose in the dual material and symbolic struggle of 1968, making the relationship between the two a matter of historical necessity. As

the originary moment passes out of memory and the rising generations remain locked in the grip of biopolitical capital, we might wish to realign the two kinds of claims. Otherwise claiming rights to justice, to liberatory measures of all variety, might be seamlessly reshuffled by the same logic of capital that, as Chow describes, injects human rights discourse into international trade relations. Or turns Colin Kaepernick's political claims into a sneaker ad.

Instead of Claims, Demands

Claims are essentially assertions of validity, particularly so with respect to membership in identity formations. Such is the power in naming, to claim a variety of social existence in distinction to others, to declare "I am this, we are this, we are not that." A distinction is not, however, a guarantee of binding rights or concrete goods; to the contrary, history overflows with identity formations defined for the purpose of denying rights and resources.

There is an inherited strategic logic to the idea that a validated claim serves as a precondition to liberation. Derived from the insurgent nationalisms of five and six decades ago, the strategy has been overtaken by the workings of identity claims under the auspices of neoliberal capital. Returning to Chow above, in the twenty-first century the most reliable outcome of self-determination as exercised in the claim is the creation of novel markets. New critics of identity politics see more insidious effects. For one like Asad Haider, the fixation on the rights and obligations accorded to those whose membership has been validated versus those whose hasn't, produces farcical new authoritarian tendencies directed against its own social base. His proposed remedy is to return to a Marxist project of building class consciousness. I take this to mean shifting emphasis from claims to demands, a rechanneling of power that produces a new political situation rather than merely enlarging the existing one.

Demands originate from the unassailable individual subject, and, as such, present themselves as a potential social glue, strong but contingent, that binds individuals in new social formations built around the demands, not identities, that is to say, a class formation. In the process, a politics of demands exposes the priorities of identity politics as mere affirmations of the obvious.

Put another way, a validated claim may be the victor's cup, but the cup itself is empty. Libations remain withheld until demanded. Let us drink up.

Further

Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"

Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography*

James and Grace Lee Boggs, *Revolution and Evolution in Twentieth Century*

Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*