



**THE TROUBLE WITH DIVERSITY**  
**AN ARGUMENT BETWEEN WALTER BENN MICHAELS AND KATHA POLLITT**  
**SCOTT STOSSEL MODERATES**  
***THE ATLANTIC* DAY OF IDEAS**  
**South Court Auditorium**  
**November 18, 2006**  
**New York Public Library**  
**[WWW.NYPL.ORG/LIVE](http://WWW.NYPL.ORG/LIVE)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Good afternoon. My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library, now thankfully known as LIVE from the New York Public Library. As I have told some of you before, this used to be called PEP, Public Education Programs, but we changed it to LIVE, because PEP sounded a little bit like something you might take if you have some stomach ailments. I'm here today to welcome you to the Day of Ideas Festival, a celebration of *The Atlantic's* hundredth and fiftieth anniversary. We're celebrating *The Atlantic* at 150, and this evening, for those of you who have a lot of endurance, you should come back and hear a talk about Freud that Slavoj Zizek, a mad, mad, mad Slovenian philosopher will be giving, mad, but I mean it with great affection, and we will also have a conversation between George Prochnik and Wayne Koestenbaum. I love celebrating magazines, we have done it twice before, once for *Slate*, that has celebrated its tenth anniversary, the online magazine, and once for *Spy* magazine, though *Spy* magazine doesn't exist anymore, they were celebrating their twentieth anniversary. Wonderful to celebrate an anniversary of someone who is dead. In any event, it is a great pleasure to be here and a great pleasure to

conclude with this day of celebration the five city tour that *The Atlantic* has been having throughout America to celebrate their magazine. And if you think of it, in some ways what we do here is very kindred to what they do on the pages of the magazine. What we're trying to do jointly here is to bring *even* more to life, the life of the mind, the life of the page, the life of the page comes to life here in a conversation that you're going to witness in a few minutes.

I'd like to particularly thank a few people from *The Atlantic* that matter greatly to me. First of all and foremost, Deborah Cunningham and Paul O'Neil, with whom I've been working for the last few months. I don't know how I got into doing nine events in one day. I think it happened in Aspen, and I attribute it to the altitude. One dreams very strongly in altitude. And I also would like to thank the Chairman of *The Atlantic*, David Bradley, as well as the president, who's here with us today, John Galloway.

Now, I encourage all of you who are here for this session to stay for the next, which I will be moderating, or instigating as I say, a session on lust with Esther Perel, who wrote a book called *Mating in Captivity*. I leave it to your imagination to imagine what that might be. Now, how will this session be run? It will last as long as a psychoanalytical session, so about forty-five minutes. Then, *unlike* a psychoanalytical session, you will actually have time to ask a few questions, and I actually insist on the notion of question. In my experience—a decade of this—questions usually take about fifty-four seconds to articulate. So rather questions than statements. After that, at sixty minutes, we will ask all of those who are not staying for the next session to kindly move outside and perhaps purchase a book from one of the distinguished writers we have here, critics we have here today. Or, if you'd like, we would like to invite anyone who is here today to stay on for the next session on lust. How *could* you refuse? I don't know.

In any event, today, "The Trouble with Diversity," we have, arguing the case, Walter Benn Michaels, who is a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago, widely noted as one of the founders of the New Historicism, he's the author of *Our America* and *The Shape of the Signifier*. Katha Pollitt, who writes the "Subject to Debate" column, which appears weekly in *The Nation*. Pollitt has also written essays for such publications as the *New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic*, *Harper's*, and the *New York Times*. And Scott Stossel, the managing editor of *The Atlantic*, has been associated with the magazine since 1992. He joined the staff to help launch *The Atlantic* Online. And in '96 he joined

*The American Prospect*, where he served as associate editor, and now he is back with *The Atlantic*, so quite a peregrination. What I think and foresee for this evening—for this afternoon—I’m saying “evening” because I’m so used to doing them in the evening. What I foresee is a *real* argument, and I hope that there will be some irritation that will come from it. **(laughter)** When you read Katha Pollitt’s review of Walter Benn Michaels’s book, which you have a quotation of it on your flyer, you will see why possibly this will be argument. Now, I just would like to demonstrate very quickly how we are going to tell when forty-two minutes is up. **(music)** And then they will have three minutes after that. Thank you very much.

**(applause)**

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** Well, thank you, Paul, thank you Katha and Walter, and all of you for joining us tonight. We were talking just before we came on about having to—we’re following “Gluttony” and preceding “Lust,” so I hope you’re not too full, but we’re also hoping that this can sort of be like foreplay, and we can sort of build some anticipation for the next segment. They also asked me whether I wanted to sit between Katha and Walter, or to the side of them, and, as Paul says, hoping that there would be some conflict here, I decided it was best to sit *not* between them so I don’t get caught in the crossfire. But I thought the way to start out here was by drawing the battle lines, so to speak, as starkly as possible, and to have each of the two of you lay out your respective positions. So why don’t we begin by having Walter just sort of in five minutes or less lay out the thesis of your book, *The Trouble with Diversity*, and then let’s have Katha respond in a similar period of time with everything that’s wrong with that thesis.

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** Thank you. Actually, I do want to just say, thank both the New York Public Library and Scott and *The Atlantic Monthly* for doing this. My day job is Professor of American Literature and *The Atlantic Monthly* matters for that because William Dean Howells was an important figure, and as I was thinking about this, I realized, Howells was *The Atlantic Monthly*, right, but he was also sort of *Harper’s*.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** He went back and forth.

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** Yeah, and I think actually he edited *n+1*, of course, and that made the sort of serious difference in his career. I want to thank Katha, too, it's either—given the strength of her hostility to the book, it's either an act of extraordinary generosity that she's here, or else it is just exactly the *opposite* of an act of extraordinary generosity, and it might be hard to tell. I think I can say very quickly what the thesis is, and probably what the sort of bones of contention are. The book begins by noting two, I think important, and more or less uncontroversial, facts about American life in the last thirty years. One is that there has been a strong and in part successful, although I think we would mostly agree *insufficiently* successful, commitment to eradicating racism and celebrating diversity in our society. This doesn't mean that racism has by any means been eradicated, but it means that we are a very different society than we were, let's say forty years ago, before the beginnings of the civil rights movement, or before the beginning of the modern civil rights movement in that regard. There has also at the same time been a dramatic and increasingly noted increase in economic inequality in American life. And the question is: what is the relation between these two facts? And I think there is an important way in which they are disconnected and an important way in which they are connected.

And one of the ways in which they are disconnected is this: the drive to eliminate discrimination, as admirable as it is, has in my view nothing whatsoever to do with the project of producing economic equality, and what I mean by that is quite simple. Prejudice, discrimination, sexism, racism, all play an important role in determining *which* people are going to benefit in our society, and which people are *not* going to benefit—who's going to get rich and who's going to get poor. But it is not prejudice or discrimination that makes people rich and poor. It is capitalism, and particularly in its last thirty years in its neoliberal form, neoliberalism, that makes people rich and poor. So the first part of the argument is that there is an important logical disconnect between these two commitments, and that insofar as we think that in pursuing an antidiscriminatory, an antisexist, antiracist, agenda, we are *also* seeking to achieve economic equality—that is a mistake, we are *not* doing that.

And I give as sort of one example, just a very recent one, I was thinking about this last weekend, when I was thinking about this event, and I was struck by presumably all of you, or many of you, felt what I certainly felt. One of the most gratifying parts of the last election was the defeat of George Allen, a completely loathsome person, I could never understand how he got elected, but they were talking about him being President, he lost. And we all know who we have to thank for that; in part, we have to thank

the kid who wrote a column last week in the *Post* saying “I Am Macaca,” and then Frank Rich wrote a column in the *Times*, calling 2006 “The Year of the Macaca,” as a very quick version of this. If you know anything about this kid, Sidharth is his name, he is a second-generation Indian kid, comes from north—the Virginia suburbs, he was raised, and I am quoting Frank Rich here, by well-off parents, his father’s a mortgage broker. He went to a magnet public high school. He then went to the University of Virginia. He interned for a while for Joe Lieberman, and then he was working on this campaign. All of these things—he’s an admirable kid. You know, if he were my son, I’d be proud. Everything he’s done is admirable, maybe the Lieberman thing, you’d have some questions about that, **(laughter)** but everything else is completely okay. In his column, he says, and I hope he’s right, that he hopes his little contribution, although it’s a bigger contribution than most of *us* will ever make, certainly than I will, is to make America a more open society, and I hope that he *has* made America a more open society. And one of the ways that that’s been possible is of course because he himself, his very presence in this country, is a function of our commitments to antiracism, a function of the civil rights movement. If he’d come in under the—he could not have come here, his parents could not have come here, under the 1924 Immigration Act, which was explicitly racist, but of course they could come here under the 1965 Immigration Act, which is a product of the civil rights movement. So, yeah, here is the first thing about him. He testifies to a certain kind of openness in American society. Here is the second thing about him. He is one of the kids whom I call in this book “rich kids.” That is to say, he is part of a process—no fault of his own—which has been a commitment to diversity but what has been diversified is, in effect, the elite. If you have a growing economic gap and you have a smaller but richer elite and much larger group of everybody else, it is no doubt a slightly better world if that elite is a kind of more attractive elite, if it comes in many different races, and if it comes in different genders, and if it comes in different religions. It is not, however, any the less an elite because of that fact.

So the central argument of this book is that if you want to address the problem of the widening gap between the rich and poor, you are *not* addressing it when you try to make sure that both the rich on the one hand and the poor on the other come in the appropriate races and genders. The goal should be not to try and *diversify* the elite and thereby, of course, also diversify everybody else, the goal should be instead to try to reduce, minimize or perhaps eliminate altogether the difference *between* the elite and everybody else.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** Well, I have an obvious—as you’re speaking, I have an objection to that already formulating, but I’m going to leave it to Katha to articulate her own.

**KATHA POLLITT:** I want to thank the Library and *The Atlantic* also for inviting me to do this. And I want to just say that *if* what Walter Benn Michaels has just said was what I had taken from his book, I would probably not have written such a disagreeing kind of column, but in fact his book makes a *much* stronger case that I hope he’s backed away from, that I’ll get to in a minute. Let me just say, I want to just say that the areas where I agree with Michaels is that, of course, economic inequality is an essential problem, it’s a huge, it’s growing. I’m a socialist. You know, you’re never going to get me to say, “Oh no, economic inequality, who cares about that? Let’s just make sure that within every social class, race and gender have the privileges of that social class.” And I would say that economic inequality goes *way* beyond what you mostly discussed, which is *income*, it goes to basic *wealth*, it goes to our incredibly *decrepit* social services and the kinds of anxiety and panic, especially class anxiety, that that induces in people when they think, “Oh my God, you know, my health care, my old age, the public schools are terrible, etcetera, etcetera.” *All* these things are incredibly important, and you would never get me to say that they don’t matter. Another thing I’d like to say I agree with him about is that diversity, kind of a—even the word bothers me. *It is* often just a marketing device and a photo opportunity. You know, like if you look at the brochures from *any* college, you know that if they have two black students, they’re both going to be on the cover, and you know that in a school that’s trying to get more boys to apply there, they’re going to have some manly boy, you know, holding a football. And I would say that a lot of what we think of as “diversity” in our society is very superficial.

I *don’t* agree that fighting race and gender discrimination is a completed project. I think it’s interesting that the example that Michaels used of a person who proves how much better things is is not a black person. He’s not a black person. He’s an *Indian*. He’s a prosperous immigrant. That’s a very different kind of thing. And I think that because in the *bien passant* liberal academic world, racism and sexism are very impolite does not mean that in our society race and sex are not very, very important economic factors in the way our class society is structured. They *are*. I mean, you talk about affirmative action. We always talk about who gets to go to Harvard. Affirmative action is also about who gets a really good blue-collar job, who gets a government contract, who gets *all* the ability to participate in economic life, and I would say that if you go a little bit below the English departments of the Ivy League, you will find

that there is a *great* deal of prejudice, including in our publishing world, you know, which is something that Walter Mosley, and others, including me, you know, rediscover periodically. “Oh my goodness, how come there are no black people working at all these liberal magazines?” So I would say that race and gender discrimination are still live problems.

I would also say another thing, which is that Michaels actually makes a stronger case in his book than you just made now, and I’d like to hear what you have to say about that now. Which is, you don’t just say, “Look, here on the one hand, there’s this little problem, race and sex discrimination, but over here is the *big* problem, and we should talk more about this big problem than this little problem,” it’s that the attention paid to race and gender discrimination *masks* economic inequality, it makes it hard to see that the fact that kids at Harvard, the rich kids, can look out and see, you know, what, seven percent black faces, most of whom are not African Americans, they are prosperous members of the elites of black other countries. The fact that they can look out and see that makes *them* feel good that they’re there. That they didn’t take the place of someone who deserves to be there, and it masks the fact that most of the people who should be candidates for going to Harvard are too poor either to pay for it or to have the kinds of education and build up the kinds of cultural capital that would let them get in. Now, I just don’t see any evidence that these two facts are related in *that way*. I don’t see any evidence, and the book doesn’t present any *empirical* evidence, although it puts this forward as an idea, that the administration of *any* college is going to say, “I know how we’re going to get people to forget that you have to pay forty thousand dollars to go here and have a fabulous education, and probably it helps to go to private school: we’ll have some black people, you know, we’ll have some women.”

That’s not the way it works. Those gains that blacks and women made, through affirmative action and not through affirmative action, were won in tremendous social struggle and the *idea* that these are just things that the ruling class gives people—this is insane! If it weren’t for the—the civil rights movement was not a project of the ruling class, and in fact the civil rights project is in tough times today. By many, many indicators, black people are not *doing* well. For example, if you look at who’s in prison, that’s worse than it was in 1960. Because other things have happened, too, like the whole war on crime, and putting everybody in jail for drugs, and all that kind of thing. So you’ve got enormous race-related problems. We know, for example—and then I’ll stop—we know that every time they look and see “Hmm, are black and white people treated equally when they go to get a job, when they try to get an

apartment, when they go to get a mortgage, when they go to buy a car, when they're accused of a crime?" we find out, "Hey, no, the *black* person gets a *much* worse deal in every way." Well, this is racism. That's what racism *is*. So you know I just don't know how you can say, "Now we can stop paying so much attention to race." Whenever people stop paying attention to race, what the effect of that is going to be is *more* racism. And the same is true of "Let's not pay so much attention to women's rights." The effect of that is *less* women's rights. It's not *more* equality across the board, it's *less* equality across the board.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** Well, I'd like to get Walter to respond to that, but first, let's—one thing that makes this dispute so interesting is that you are both self-avowed creatures of the left, let's say, and—

**KATHA POLLITT:** I'd never call myself a "creature," that doesn't sound so nice. The Black Lagoon.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** You—one would expect that you espouse the same goals, if not the same means, and maybe not, and again, this is why it's so interesting that there's such stark disagreement here. So let me ask you to both to say how would you characterize your politics and your ideology? And particularly with you, one of the critiques you've gotten in a lot of the reviews of the book is that you are a kind of paleomarxist, that you see everything purely in terms of class. Now you're a socialist, and so that one would think that you would have some sympathy to this point of view. Where's the difference in terms of—

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** No, she's the one who *accused* me of being a paleomarxist. First of all, I'm really struck by the fact. In rooms like this, I'm often—"paleomarxist" would be the good news, fascist, sort of "racist fascist" would be the bad news. However on talk shows I am a raging communist. I find that on talk shows I do nothing but get phone calls from people who want to describe how despite the fact that I claim that class mobility is reduced in the U.S. they themselves have risen from the ranks, although the best one I ever got was a couple of weeks ago was by a guy who was proving to me there was class mobility, and the way he was proving it was by saying hey, look, he started out at Yale, he kind of flunked out, he's been sinking like a stone ever since, **(laughter)** and now he's at the bottom of the American class system, and who am I to say that people don't go up and down, you know? **(laughter)** But I do think there is a real important point here. I think there is a real difference. And the



difference can be in this way. Look, no one, including me, and including in this book, denies *either* that there is continuing racism or that in fact we can see the consequences of race. In, for example, *fundamental* facts, like the overrepresentation of African Americans in the bottom quintiles of American wealth and underrepresentation in the top. And in fact one of the arguments about the book is that the *only* racism that's ever really mattered in the U.S. and you know this perfectly well because you've read the book, is antiblack racism, and I sort of take the Malcolm X position on that, and perhaps we can talk about that later.

But it is a complete mistake, in my view, a mistake that I think Katha makes, but I think many others have made as well, to go from that imbrication of the fact that black people are the victims of racism and that their poverty is in part and indeed largely, let's say, a consequence of racism, to thinking that the battle against racism is going to make a fundamental difference for us. Indeed I think racializing poverty is a crucial problem and the person who made this point best for me was actually Tavis Smiley, whose radio show I was on last week, and who pointed out to me that he had heard a version of this argument before, in Martin Luther King's last book, in the last chapter of that last book, and what King says—I went back and looked at it, I guess I read it at the time, but I sort of forgot it, I would have put it in a footnote, I assure you, because it's good to have the Dr. Martin Luther King on your side in these debates, but what King said was, “Look, poverty, the largest number of poor people in the U.S. are white people. Their poverty is real. It is not the function of discrimination.” And an important point about there was not, well, let's start feeling sorry for the poor white people too, I've got no more sympathy for the poor—or less for the poor white or poor black or anybody else. It's *rather* that it's a mistake to think of *poverty* as such as a function of discrimination, and that if we did manage to achieve the utopia that no doubt we all desire with respect to discrimination, that is, end it altogether, end present racism, end the consequences of past racism, we would still have a society which is just as unequal as it is now.

So the point here is not to give up on antiracism, but the point—and this is a point I think Katha probably *deeply* disagrees and that many others have a problem with, is that if you are a neoliberal, that is, if you are someone who is committed to globalization, who's committed to making capitalism function as unrestrainedly and as efficiently as possible, you should also be on the side of the antidiscrimination left. Indeed, at one point I call the antidiscrimination left the sort of human resources version of the neoliberal right. Why? Because you don't want a world in which people are prevented

from rising to the top and making you vast money for your corporation just because they're gay or they're black or they're Indian or whatever. You want a world where the people who can make the money for you *are* making the money for you. There's a sense, then, in which that while it's completely important to pursue an antiracist agenda, the antiracist agenda is in no sense whatsoever an anticapitalist agenda and I think one of the problems with American liberalism is that we have signed on much more strongly, you know, to the *antiracist* agenda than we have to the *anticapitalist* agenda, and the goal would be to have a political campaign which was not celebrating what Rich called "The Year of the Macaca." In American political life every year is "The Year of the Macaca," every year is a year in which some form of prejudice will emerge one way or the other. In the old days, the year of the Macaca was, the racist always won. In the new days, thank God, they don't win so often or as much.

But what we want is a moment when you don't get to be a conservative just by saying, well I think affirmative action is reverse discrimination against white people. And you don't get to be on the left by saying "No, no, I'm for affirmative action, and George Allen is so a racist." But what you get to be a conservative is, is by defending the justice of economic inequality, by saying, "Yeah, it's true it's unequal, it's true it's getting more unequal, but it's a good thing," and what you get to be on the left is, you get to be a leftist by saying, "No, the fundamental issue here *is* economic inequality and it's not a good thing," and that's what we should be arguing about. So from my perspective the problem is that liberalism is increasingly less committed to arguing about that, which doesn't mean that people on the Left aren't for economic equality, but it *does* mean that liberalism has been more or less hijacked by an issue that has not not that *much* to do with economic inequality but in principle nothing *whatsoever* to do with economic inequality.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** I want Katha to respond, but the obvious objection to that—

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** There's an obvious objection? Oh my God!

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** Which has been presented in numerous reviews, why is it a zero-sum game? To the extent that we all agree that or many on the left would agree that economic inequality may be the preeminent, rectifying it is a preeminent goal, and yet there is a sense in which racism and sexism are bound up with it, too.

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** Let me just answer this one, and then—look, it’s not a zero-sum game in a logical sense. These things are not contradictory, right? But the point of the opening remarks, which, I’m not making this up, right? Is that during the period when we’ve been doing the work on racism—insufficient, but we’ve been doing that. We’ve gotten *more* and *more* unequal. It’s not like we’re spending a certain amount of time doing this, and a certain amount of time doing that, and there’s just we haven’t got enough time to make it all come out right, it’s that liberalism in general, and I don’t mean everybody on the left in this country, there are lots of people on the left who are working on this, but we know perfectly well they aren’t running for office, unless they’re working for the labor party in South Carolina. Liberalism in general has had a lot of success with *part* of this agenda, that is, let’s call it in general a civil rights agenda. Although I agree with Katha, it’s not an unqualified success, in some respects it’s being pushed back, and the black prison population’s a very real issue. It’s had a lot of success with that, and it’s increasingly ignored the other.

Now, you’re saying, is it a zero-sum game, are we required to ignore the other? No, we’re required to ignore the other, but the fact that we’re not required to doesn’t mean that we haven’t in fact been doing that and the evidence for that is the last forty years. We can do Gini coefficient numbers later if people like to play with numbers, but it’s not good news for economic equality.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** I think the Gini coefficient numbers would kill any appetite for the lust thing afterwards, so, but Katha—

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** It’s like counting backwards.

**KATHA POLLITT:** You know, it’s interesting that if you’re right and capital could just be saying, “Right. I would love to have all these very bright black and women working for me and making me a ton of money, therefore”—

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** Condoleeza Rice.

**KATHA POLLITT:** We'll get to her in a minute. "Therefore getting rid of racism and sexism is in my interest." It is so interesting that they have not done that. It is *so* interesting that black people and women are discriminated against at every job level. You make fun of women on Wall Street who, you know, decided not to put up with being treated in *incredibly* demeaning and sexist ways and won their lawsuit, won the, what is it, the Morgan Stanley lawsuit, but in fact, sure, if you can exploit somebody extra, because you can get away with it, why not do it? And because it makes the whites or the men, or whoever happy, great, go do it. This is true everywhere. So I would say, I mean, I would never say, and I don't think *anybody* would ever say that "Yes, if only blacks and women were not discriminated against, capitalism would be an egalitarian system." Capitalism *can't* be an egalitarian system, because it's based on exploitation. I mean, that's so simple.

I want to go back, though, and say I didn't call you a *paleomarxist*. I grew up with paleomarxists, that was my family, and this is something else. What I said is you were a "primitive Marxist."

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** Okay, sorry. I just couldn't deal with that one. **(laughter)**

**KATHA POLLITT:** But what I meant by that, but then I said you weren't primitive enough, and I want to get to that. What I meant by "primitive Marxist" is someone who thinks that there really is only one principle operating in society and that everything—like the mill in the sea that grinds out the salt—everything can be derived from one principle and I think that's a very simple way of looking at even an economic system, and I don't know any economics, but just take it from me, it's true. But what I meant by "not primitive enough" is that I want to draw your attention to the way—the slippage in the way you talk between these categories: the left, liberals, the Democratic Party, and "us." These things are really used interchangeably. They are very different. I would say that the left in America is about this big, it's about this big. And the liberals are different. Liberals are *not* people who are dedicated to the eradication of economic inequality in our society. They are people who believe in the rule of law, the Constitution, a society that isn't quite as horrible as the one we live in now in various ways, civil liberties. They're not socialists, they're not anticapitalists. Liberalism is a kind of procapitalist person. So the ACLU are liberals. They are not socialists. You can be very very conservative and be liberal, I mean conservative economically and be liberal in the sense that most people use it now.

Who “us” is, I don’t know. I would say that there are a lot of people in “us” who actually *aren’t* so interested in being feminist or being antiracist and that—I would say that in the—from what I’ve seen in the places where I’ve worked, you can be extremely, extremely committed to politics way over off to the left here, and racism and sexism still are like the add-ons. There’s still like, you get everything all set up and then you look for a woman. You get everything all set up and you look for a black person. That *never* works. That never, never works. I am, I have had an entire lifetime of being the *only* woman on the panel. And I’ll tell you just one funny story about that. Is that at a certain point, I decided I would only be on panels if there was another woman, and I tried that on with *Monthly Review*, a socialist and Marxist magazine, they said, “Well, we’ll get back to you,” and that was the last I heard from them, and that was about five years ago. So, that’s just a joke, that’s not the idea like, that’s where inequality is.

But so I would say that, you know, you really have to really kind of disaggregate all these things. And then you have to look at—of *course* it would be a better world if within each social class, there was no race and gender discrimination. Of *course* that would have *enormous* consequences for the people in those social classes. It would mean that women—that there would be child care, it would mean that marriage would be more equal because people would be more economically equal within it, it would mean that workplaces would be structured in an entirely different way, and that little extra bit of humiliation that goes along with knowing that you are discriminated against would not be there, and that’s not *just* an economic thing. So I would say that, you know, you can fight on several fronts at once. I feel that’s what we are called upon to do. I don’t think that we’re called upon to say, as the old left *always* did, you know, “oh, women, we’ll get to that later,” you know, or “black people, well, okay, but the real thing is, you know, organizing the factory, and being for the union that doesn’t have any black people in it,” etcetera. So I think you have to sort of look at who you’re addressing in a slightly different way, I think these things look a little different outside academia, where the “us” is just—

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** The “us” here is not the academic us. I mean, it absolutely is true, look, there’s a very small Socialist Party in the U.S. There is a party actually I belong to, the Labor Party in the U.S. Probably a lot of you know the work of Adolph Reed, who is a sort of close colleague of mine in this regard. The point here is to produce a kind of national political debate. I don’t imagine *The Trouble with Diversity* is going to do that, although I know Holt/Metropolitan would be very happy if it *did*. When I use sort of Democrats and liberals and left interchangeably, and Katha’s right to say the

book sort of does do that, it's not because I'm unaware of the conceptual distinctions one can make between liberalism and socialism, which are, after all, the heart of, like, any kind of political theory. It's because there are moments in American society when what it meant to be a liberal Democrat was to be above all *for* the end of, or the minimization of, economic inequality. Huey Long was one of those moments. He pushed Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the left with some success. Those moments have not been at the center of our politics for a long time and I think it's naïve to say that we can fight on many different fronts. Not because it's not true. Of course we *can* fight on many different fronts. But one way of thinking about fighting on many different fronts is you're fighting the same enemy, but on lots of different fronts, but in this case the many different fronts that we're supposed to be fighting on are actually fighting different enemies and that's part of the point of the book.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** But you actually say that sometimes—you argue more strongly than that and actually say that fighting on some of these fronts undermines the fight on other fronts.

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** I say it distracts from—

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** Let me throw out some of these more inflammatory—not to say inflammatory, provocative. At several points in the book, you say that commitment to diversity is a *reactionary* position, you say at one point that race-based affirmative action is “a kind of collective bribe that rich people pay themselves for ignoring economic inequality,” and at one point you say that the left, on these issues of diversity, is the “police force for the right” on race.

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** I actually don't want to back off from any of those, on the contrary. I'm sure I'm not unique in this regard, but when I do a presentations about this book, people regularly read large swatches aloud and then look at the audience like, “Huh!” but I'm just thinking, “Gee, yeah, I think that's right,” and I *still* think that's right. Part of the point here is that that's not, though about antiracism, that's about diversity. I completely stand by that. My son, to whom I passed on as much inequality as I could buy, just like we all do, is about to go to work for a law firm. There's this thing called *The American Lawyer*. *The American Lawyer* rates law firms, they have something called the “A List.” There are three fundamental criteria that get you on the A List. One is what they call “culture.” Culture means how hard do these kids have to work for their \$145,000 a year, in their first year job? It's

got a good culture, they don't have to work that hard. Bad culture they have to work really, really hard. The second thing is profits per lawyer. It's obvious why *that's* on the list, that's what the law firm's in the business to do. The third thing is diversity. These people totally *get* there is zero contradiction between the commitment to profits per lawyer and their commitment to diversity, and, in fact, it is the human relations—every one of these law firms has a human relations division, it is the diversity division, and what it does is make sure that all of the budding young lawyers making their \$145,000 a year come in the appropriate colors, and that they feel comfortable when they get there, and that they sort of celebrate the experience they're having. And so I do think it is absolutely *true* to say that what we mean by “diversity” today is largely a way of organizing a workforce so that it becomes a more efficient and therefore a more profit-producing workforce, so yeah, that's provocative, but it's true.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** Katha.

**KATHA POLLITT:** The reason there are those commitments to diversity is because there's civil rights law. It's not because capitalism or the law firm got this idea out of their head, let's exploit some more people and make some more money. If they didn't do that, people would bring—people: women, blacks, whoever was discriminated against—would bring lawsuits, that's what it's all about. If they took those laws away, we'd go back to where we were very, very quickly, because it *is* a stretch. It *is* a stretch for many white people to work with black people. It *is* a stretch for men to have to work with women as equals. They'd just as soon not do it. In fact, there are whole economics careers that are based on the rationale—why racial and gender discrimination is economically rational. So the idea that it's actually economically rational the other way is not so obvious to me.

Anyway, I just want to say another thing, which is something that you do that I really *envy* as a writer and I wish I could do this more, I'm going to start doing this more, is to make *myself* look like the only person who says something, when actually a lot of other people are saying it. For example, *The Nation* magazine, the magazine I work for, *constantly*, constantly puts forward what they call economic populism, which is exactly what you're talking about. And *they* are the people that I have this fight with about—racism and sexism. I have this with Eric Alterman all the time. *In These Times* is another magazine that obsesses about the labor movement in *exactly* the way you're talking about. *The American*

*Prospect*, where the first chapter of your book was published. Even the campaign of John Edwards, I mean the man did run for vice president, it's not some secret.

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** I quoted him.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** One thing you agree on. You like John Edwards, *you* like John Edwards.

**KATHA POLLITT:** Yeah, he's all right.

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** He's not exactly a socialist.

**KATHA POLLITT:** No, he's not exactly a socialist. Tom Frank, who you mention very briefly, but Tom Frank is a rock star. There cannot *be* a Democratic Party conference without Tom Frank being there to tell everybody how important economic inequality is, and if I could just refer to our last Election Day, the, you know, popular wisdom about that is that it was a big referendum about economic inequality having gone too far and all these supposedly conservative Democrats, like Webb, whom Macaca helped elect, even if they're conservative in certain ways, I mean the guy was Ronald Reagan's Secretary of the Navy, he was a Republican until quite recently, but, you know, he is an economic populist. He says, "I look around, I see too much poverty, I see things going the wrong way, I want us to step in and change it." And he won in Virginia. So, anyway, the point is, it's not like nobody thinks about economic inequality. It's just maybe, I do think that maybe they don't think about it enough in English departments, but they do think about it a lot in sociology departments, they think a lot about it in journalism school. I mean if you want to be an investigative reporter, this is definitely something that you would study. In the whole education, if you want to go into theory of education, our rotten, horrible, incredibly stratified public schools would be a *major* subject of interest. Other social sciences. The places where you wouldn't—you'd find the same thing but flipped, like it's *good*, would be economics and political theory, which tend to be fairly right-wing.

But, anyway, so I just don't see that nobody thinks about this. I think that people think about economic inequality all the time, and the reason there's so much of it, just to finish up, is not because we've all been *distracted* thinking about other things, because these things are not about what we're thinking,



these are about very deep trends in the economy. The reason there's more economic inequality now is because of the decline of unions, and I think Adolph Reed would agree with me about that. It doesn't matter what the intelligentsia thinks about how to put together race, class, and gender, because this is a *tiny* number of people. What matters is how people *are* or are *not* organized and positioned to make themselves economically more powerful, and we're at a point where people are not very well situated to do that because of structural features in our economy. And the Republican Party—I forgot that.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** At one point you say and I think you're kidding in your book. That the best hope for egalitarianism really is that poor college students should start stealing iPods from rich college students, and I think you're mainly kidding but it's getting at a larger point, which is, what are the goals of a progressive politics? You don't really make the leap from saying—if this notion that focus on diversity and race-based politics and race-based affirmative action sort of distracts from or masks the real underlying class issues. That raises another question I'd like to ask you, which is why are Americans afraid of class? But what *are* the policy implications? Does a progressive politics really come down to *just* redistribution of wealth?

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** Well, yeah. I would say that would be the basic thing, yeah, absolutely. And actually even the tone of voice in which you sort of asked that question sort of goes against a bit of what was just being said. I just don't think—okay, first of all, when you write on anything, people tend to say two things, more or less in the same breath. One is “that's ridiculous,” and the other is, “that's obvious,” and everybody—no one believes *that* and *everybody* believes that, and there's no doubt some truth in that and I should have for sure have given more credit to *The Nation*. But the thing—a way of framing it would be this, to go back to something you said before, about the woman on Wall Street, the Morgan Stanley case.

The Morgan Stanley case is a woman who sued for sexual discrimination and won. And the sexual discrimination took this form. When they were bringing clients, they would deal with the clients during the day and then the guys would, I'm quoting from the trial transcript here, “Dump her in the cab while they took the client off to a strip club.” Okay. And she sued and she won. There's another class-action suit, a much larger one, currently in place right now. And that is the Wal-Mart class-action suit. And that's again where women are suing because they are, just as the Morgan Stanley person was,

systematically underpaid at Wal-Mart. At Wal-Mart, women make \$20,500 a year. Men make, it looks like, \$21,600 a year. And it *obviously* is *true* that the women should make just as much as the men, nothing I'm saying goes against that, but one of the points I'm trying to make is that if you see the Wal-Mart problem as a sexual-discrimination problem, you've made a serious mistake because the real point is *no one* can live on that salary. If you then take it back to the Morgan Stanley example, the person who won the case, Allison Schieffelin, was making a lot less money than the men. The men made 1.6 million dollars a year. Allison Schieffelin made only 1.2 million dollars a year. After that case was adjudicated, she got a substantial settlement, and no doubt if she went back to work at Morgan Stanley, or whoever took her place will make 1.6 million.

I believe the women should be paid as much as the men, but the obvious point is, is that this is a way in which we *frame* a debate. We frame both these debates—about this woman on Wall Street, the women at Morgan Stanley, and the women of Wal-Mart, as if the issue here were sexual discrimination, when the issue is obviously *not* sexual discrimination. Doesn't mean that there is no sexual discrimination. It means that the *fundamental* issue here is these guys are making 1.6 million dollars a year and these guys are making 21,500 dollars a year, and *that's* where the injustice is. Now it's absolutely right—where we do all agree—is that the impoverished union movement has a lot to do with this. The question is though, *why* is it impoverished? It's not like unions just disappeared and it's not like there are, although the right wants us to believe there are, sort of these laws of economics, i.e., the neoliberal laws of economics that are driving the unions out of existence, it's that in fact the American left, or American liberalism, or “us,” or whoever you want to call it, has in fact been *much* more successful both in the world and in relation to itself at promoting a series of issues which don't have a lot to do with that problem. And when you start listing what counts as liberalism, that problem, economic inequality, appears as one of several, but—this is the primitive Marxist part—it's *not* one of several, it's foundational. Because just think for two seconds, if you *solve* that problem, just imagine it solved, a lot of the other problems would begin to look *much* less severe very quickly.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** That's probably true, but I'd like to hear Katha's response to that, particularly to the Morgan Stanley case, and let me add another element into the stew here, because you also say in the book that—you talk about domestic abuse—and you say that it's actually much more attributable to money, it's a money issue, rather than one of relation between the sexes, or—uh-oh.

(music)

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** I take back the domestic abuse part, that's obviously—

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** (laughs) Go ahead.

**KATHA POLLITT:** Just very quickly, I think you mischaracterize both those cases. Allison Schieffelin was fighting for herself and for three hundred other women. It was not just about who gets to a strip club, although I actually feel that that is kind of disgusting, but if you read a book like *In the Boom-Boom Room*, by I forget who, she really does make a very strong case about, it's really pretty disgusting and piggish on Wall Street and women really *are* quite discriminated against. Again, the Wal-Mart case is not just about pay, it's also about promotion and it's also about sexual harassment. So these are actually a little more complicated. If you have a workplace where, say, one reason the women were making so much less is that they didn't get to get any promotions, it looks a little—it's not really like the difference of a thousand dollars, let's not get all upset about that and fight for communism.

I want to say that the idea that the left paying attention—I just want to say this again—paying attention to race and sex is the reason why unions are in trouble is just really not factual. The reason unions are in trouble are, besides the fact that the union manufacturing jobs are now not being performed in America, is because there has been twenty years of Republican rule that has gutted labor law. The book to read about this is *Which Side are You On?* by Tom Geoghegan, who is a labor lawyer, who lays it all out just brilliantly, that you cannot win a union struggle now the way you could win before, and you know, unions aren't too popular among working people for a lot of reasons in certain places. Now they're getting *more* popular because people realize what it's like not to have them, but at crucial moments people weren't so interested. So, anyway, this is not the fault of, you know, intellectual leftists.

(music)

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** Yeah, but you know whose fault it is? It's the fault of the Reagan revolution, and the Reagan revolution is not unrelated to all these ideas. In other words, one of the things

that made Reagan powerful as a politician was precisely his ability to sort of manipulate the whole race/sex card, and he created this whole sense of the idea of the “liberal elite,” and that liberal elite is like the stereotype that we’re all living up to.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** Thirty-second response and then we have to move to questions.

**KATHA POLLITT:** Ronald Reagan ran as a racist. Ronald Reagan began his campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where those three civil rights people were murdered, and he said that he was for ethnic purity. It was a completely coded racial appeal, and he won on that. He did not win by saying, you know, “I’m for women, I’m for black people.”

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** Let’s open it up to some questions. I’m sure we’ve provoked—I *hope* we’ve provoked lots of—yes.

**Q:** Yes. It’s remarkable that, despite all of the horrendous revelations about that loathsome racist swine George Allen, that he only lost the election by seven thousand votes. Makes you think a lot of people actually rallied to his side the more they heard about his life history. Since both of you are very concerned obviously with the unequal distribution of wealth and income in this society, it surprises me that neither of you dealt with the issue of legacy, and in particular—with apologies to you, Katha, about sexism—but specifically on racism. Neither of you mentioned the overlooked issue of slave reparations, which is something that’s widely dismissed in society, and yet you know, clearly there are descendents of slave families, many generations removed, albeit, but who are still—have never been able to climb out of that poverty. And on the other side, many *beneficiaries* of a slave past, that still flourish today, including New York State, who built the Erie Canal with slave labor, Brown University, the Rockefeller family, the DuPonts, and you could go on and on, Union Pacific Railroad, on and on and on, so I’d like to hear your comments regarding reparations. And also, which is a distinctly capitalist notion, by the way, but also, would you disagree that, that even if you had no discrimination whatsoever today, no racist discrimination today, that without reparations to address these legacy issues, that you would still have very, very wide disparity of wealth in the society across racial lines, even without any discrimination whatsoever today?

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** Why don't you go first? Walter has a whole chapter on that in the book.

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** There is a whole chapter on that in the book and this is I think where I should say, go buy the book, Amazon has discounted it, like they're basically giving it away, **(laughter)** but the short answer would be something like this. I actually come out in favor of reparations in the book, although I think the principle of reparations is *completely* mistaken, and there's a lot about that in the book, I come out in favor of them, because even though it's true that you know, to the extent that we have wealthy African Americans in the country, they would benefit from it too, obviously for the reasons we all know, African Americans would then—a disproportionately large number of poor people would benefit from reparations, but the problem with reparations is the problem that you precisely described.

And here's an easy way to put it, just a little thought experiment. We have two kids. One of them is the kid of a descendent, grandchild of slaves, and descendent, child of someone who suffered under Jim Crow, and she is suffering from *structural* inequality. And here's another kid. The grandfather was the owner of slaves, and then the father just pissed away that great fortune the guy had made owning slaves. And this child's born just as poor as the other one. One of them is owed reparations, one of them, she was exploited, her ancestors. The other one, his ancestors were the *exploiters*. But surely the principle of justice here has nothing whatsoever to do with the history of lost property. In a society committed to equality of opportunity, *both* these kids, the grandchild of like, you know, Simon Legree, and the grandchild of Uncle Tom, *both* these kids are owed an equal opportunity, so I support reparations for practical reasons, although it's odd, because it's never going to happen practically, but in fact I think the principle's *completely* mistaken.

**Q:** How about Katha's response to that?

**KATHA POLLITT:** Well, I support reparations, I think, you know, one problem with the way people usually think of it, is they think an individual, black, African American, descendent of slaves would get this sum of money that would somehow equal you know, their suffering and then that allows everybody to get all upset about that and say, "Well, I wasn't even here when there was slavery, so why should I have to pay this particular person? We're all here now. Who cares about the past?" But I think that, you

know, *every* institution that serves black people is *totally* inferior, that's important, their schools are worse than the schools that even working-class whites go to, their hospitals are worse, everything is worse. I've said this before, they are still discriminated against. It's just a *myth* that this isn't happening now.

You just try to get—let's follow a black child and a white child, absolutely equal in terms of their income level, to get into a gifted-and-talented program in the New York City public schools, and ACORN actually brought a lawsuit because when the black family shows up they say, "Oh, we're all full," it's just like trying to rent an apartment. And when the white family shows up, they say, "Oh, your little child, of course," so you know, of course, at a certain point you have to talk about these things in terms of sociology, in terms of large social groupings, it can't all be just "individual this" and "individual that." So I support it, but it does seem to me a *big* political stretch, it just seems to me that we'd be living in a different America if reparations could be passed.

**Q:** I just want to go back to a basic question and that is I do believe in redistribution of wealth but I also think if we do not think of the other properties that divide poor people and rich people—that is, the property of whiteness, property of maleness, property of many other, those kind of properties—if we don't address them, then how can we go towards a proper redistribution of the economic property? That's my question.

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** The only thing I would say is just turn it around. I mean, is that, we all agree there are those differences, although the racial differences are—we don't actually scientifically don't so much agree about that, people—scientific consensus, insofar as there is one now, is that there is no such thing as a biology of race, and I do talk about that in the book, although we've hung on to race, because we like race for reasons we've sort of discussed. But you know I just would say, you want to flip that. It's not as if getting at the racial differences and the gender differences and the sexual differences has proven to be an effective way of addressing economic inequality. We've been *trying* to get at those a lot, and we have made a certain amount of progress doing it and while we're doing it the economic inequality has gotten worse. So it's not the case that we can sort of like start from that side and move to that side. And what I'm arguing is no, let's start from this side, let's start from the economic inequality issue.

I mean, imagine a world in which you had guaranteed minimum income, which is something that Martin Luther King was for and that Richard M. Nixon was for, hard as it is to believe. Imagine a world in which you did have universal health care. Imagine a world in which schools—public schools weren't based on property taxes. Imagine a world in which all those things were put into place. And then once those things were put into place, first of all, poor people, and especially black people, since they are disproportionately poor, would benefit from all those things, and then we can say, absolutely, we are going to eliminate other forms of discrimination, we want to eliminate all the things we've been talking about. No one is defending those. But we *love* putting those identity issues first, and that's actually the single thing this book is most polemicizing *against*, putting the identity issues first.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** Katha, do you have any—

**KATHA POLLITT:** Well, just to pick up on the last thing you talked about, about equal distribution of school funding. I mean, you know, here in New York City, we've had a huge lawsuit that's been going on for, I don't know, over a *decade*, with the state about exactly this, getting our fair share of money from the state for our public schools and you can see how hard that struggle is, and I can promise you that the reason that it's so hard is not just because, you know, there are ruling-class people who don't want this, it's all those upstate people, it's much more complicated than that. It would be wonderful. But I'll tell you something else, we would have to go much further than that. Even if the schools each got an equal amount of money, they would still be unequal schools, because poor kids and kids who don't speak English have much, much greater needs.

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** Well, we would agree on that.

**KATHA POLLITT:** Yeah, so we would have to have an enormous social movement, but it would have to have major—it would have to pay conscious attention to race and gender or there would be *none*.

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** There's a lot of disagreement here, but here's one moment of real agreement and a little bit of disagreement. We both agree that you have to go way deeper than the list I gave, and way deeper even than the list that Katha gave. We both agree you have to have a massive

social movement, but what I'm saying is, look, we've been talking about a certain set of issues for a long time now. We have *not* been generating a massive social movement. We've been generating this kind of like parody of a massive social movement. It may be the case that the right is right and nothing can change the laws of economics. But part of what I was saying if one's going to have, as it were, a practical program is, maybe we should *try* class as the way of generating a massive social movement, and one reason to try this is because there's *way* more poor people than there are rich people, they don't happen to be in this room, or at least you all don't *look* that poor, in any event. But there are *more* of them and instead of preaching to them about their racism and preaching to them about their sexism, all of which are bad things, and they should learn to be better just like *we* have learned to be better or are trying to learn to be better, we should start actually producing a movement which, if it was going to be a "mass" movement, would have to have some relation to the *actual* masses.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** The gentleman up there has been waiting.

**Q:** I just want to make a comment for the young man. This economic inequality that we have here is only matched by the one that we had during the Great Depression. At that time, we had these problems, but nobody blamed diversity for their causes.

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** They blamed capitalism.

**KATHA POLLITT:** Yeah, but can I say one tiny little thing? You know, an interesting thing about those programs to combat the Depression, is that they were organized in a very racist way. They were. For example, things were excluded that black people did, like domestic work and farm work done by people of color. There were programs that were limited to white people. You know, when after World War II, for example, they built a lot of housing, a lot of that housing was limited to white people. So, all I'm saying is a lot of things that look like we can all be in them together, actually, if you look at them closely, they are organized in a way that excludes on the basis of race.

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** Yeah, but surely the point is not to go back and do it *wrong* again. The whole point is that yeah, we get they did it wrong. Any scholar of the American Depression knows perfectly well that Roosevelt could only sell his programs, especially in the south, if he completely



racialized them—they were pure Jim Crow programs. But the whole point is not to say, “See, they used to be pure Jim Crow programs, so we can’t do it,” the whole point is to say, “Let’s not do the Jim Crow version, but let’s do the mass movement version.”

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** I’m afraid we only have time for one more question, there was someone over here.

**Q:** I have a question. It seems to me that the—one of the greatest arguments on behalf of Professor Michaels’s own argument is the sort of structure of the debate and the conversation, which sounds like a lot of people saying, “Yes, but” to the thesis of the book, which is, in other words, “Yes, well, maybe this is important, but you can’t forget about racism, but you know, let’s not forget about these other things, and these other things were also contributors to general inequality.” I’m not hearing Professor Michaels saying that they’re not contributors but what I am hearing is that the appeal to diversity has become a sufficient, an adequate synecdoche for a progressive politics that has come in many ways increasingly to ignore the sort of central basis of *class* in that and that the book’s argument is to really return, to focus on that, not to the *exclusion* of other things, but, in point of fact, in recognition that these other preoccupations have themselves come to divert attention from something that’s even more essential, and I’m just wondering if that’s something that you all—if I’m taking away something that you all would feel is accurate in terms of your own response to it?

**WALTER BENN MICHAELS:** My response is “Amen.” Completely. That’s exactly right.

**KATHA POLLITT:** Well, I think you’re getting the sort of Michaels Lite. I think that actually, if you read the book, it actually *does* say, “Pay less attention,” that the attention we pay to race and class, to race and sex, is *bad*, because it prevents attention to class, and that it’s a kind of ruling-class plot to get people to pay less attention to class, and I don’t accept that. I think there’s no evidence for it. At least there’s no evidence in the book.

**SCOTT STOSSEL:** Well, thank you all for coming, and thank you to Katha and Walter. **(applause)** If they haven’t sold out yet, the New York Public Library is selling right outside here, outside the auditorium, at a very deep discount, both Katha’s book, *Virginity or Death*, which is a collection of her

columns over the last few years, and the book we've been discussing this afternoon, which is *The Trouble with Diversity*, so thank you, and thank you Paul.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Thank you very much.

**(applause)**