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BOOK REVIEW

Ashley J Bohrer

Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism

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Reviewed by Christian Lotz

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In *Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism* its author, Ashley J. Bohrer, presents a *tour de force*, offering and contributing to a wide-ranging debate that has occupied left academic and activist audiences for some time now. Indeed, intersectionality, once a catchword, has become one of the major lenses through which scholars in social theory, political science, gender and sexuality studies, critical race theory and philosophy reflect on our contemporary situation not only nationally, but also globally. Reflections and theories about identity, the intersection of identities in the context of oppression, exploitation and difference are so vast that one needs to be a specialist to oversee the entire debate. In this vein, Bohrer's book achieves the impossible, insofar as it considers a vast amount of contemporary literature on Marxism, intersectionality and the relation between the two. Bohrer calls this approach the "maximalist" approach.' (Bohrer and Souvlis 2020) For a reader who is not familiar with the entire scope of the debate, such as this reviewer, the book is very enlightening and provides a helpful guide for understanding how these two sides of the contemporary left can be brought together.

The complexity of the debate is unfolded in seven chapters that are divided by three sections within which Bohrer reconstructs the shared histories of Marxism and intersectionality (section I), presents detailed analyses of the debates and clashes between both groups of scholars (section II) and opens up extended ways of engagement with both (section III). Readers who are somewhat familiar with the history of intersectionality can safely jump over the introductory chapter (called chapter zero) in which Bohrer outlines nineteenth and twentieth century precursors to the contemporary debate. Via short summaries Bohrer presents the positions of main authors, such as Claudia Jones and W.E.B. Du Bois, main approaches, such as standpoint theory, the Jeopardy Approach and Latinx Feminism, a short history of political activism, and authors who directly influenced contemporary discussions, such as the Combahee River Collective, Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis. The next four chapters discuss definitions, postulates and specific aspects of intersectionality, and reconstruct Marxist critiques of intersectionality as well as intersectional critiques of Marxism. These chapters are very well organized, and the main points are forcefully presented. Bohrer argues that both critiques have their shortcomings and are largely based on either reductive readings or basic misunderstandings. The last chapters deal with specific issues that are of importance for further developments and seen from a philosophical point of view, they are central to this work, as the author focuses (1.) on the relation between exploitation and oppression, (2.) on the concepts of dialects and contradiction, as well as (3.) on difference, solidarity, and coalition building.

Though the concept of capitalism is announced in the title of the book, it is not always clearly developed or framed in the author's treatment, which may be due to the absence of an engagement with (contemporary) political economy or a theory of society. On the one hand, Bohrer argues that 'intersectional histories refuse to name a singular cause for the multi-dimensional, contradictory, internally variant, and historically-dependent relations between the various forces in matrices of domination' (114), while on the other hand, stating that 'capitalism plays an important structural role, even if it does not play a unilateral or universal role' (Ibid). What exactly is meant by 'structural role' remains unclear to such an extent that – despite the awkward tendency to reduce 'Marxism' to the topics of class and exploitation – it is not always clear in which sense agents are constituted within capitalist social organization. Bohrer therefore often speaks of capitalism as a 'factor' among others and, as a consequence, it is challenging to understand the concerns and claims of the text within the critical context of a larger theory of society in which exploitation and oppression are related in specific ways to social totality. Agents understood as the outcome of intersecting identities are the clear focus of Bohrer's reflections, but the reader wonders how these subjectivities are constituted in relation to social totality, especially since the author does not really offer a theory that explains the most fundamental concept of intersectionality, namely, the concept of identity (with the exception of pp. 252-3). Definitions such as 'identity as multi-pronged, group based, historically constituted, and heterogeneous' (93) do not help much in the effort to genuinely grasp the concept *philosophically*. Given the lack of a material social theory and political economy, as well as the focus on agents and their identities, concepts that are important for a theory of subjectivity under conditions of capital accumulation, such as technologies, state apparatuses and knowledge as a direct productive force, one wonders whether the book's real intellectual horizon is a theory of justice based on 'deep interpretations of all systems of oppression' (224). It is admirable how Bohrer tries to be sensitive to and to recognize an almost infinite list of differences and identifications. However, the discussions overall seem to be more in line with a philosophy of recognition rather than a materialist theory of society for which not only a critique of political economy would be needed, but so, too, would a sober analysis of *habitus* as well as ideological and disciplinary state apparatuses. For example, the author's worry about 'sexist norms, heterosexist understandings of femininity and gendered (and racialized) social reproductive labor' (210) seen 'through the matrix of domination' (118) seems to be a worry about injustices encountered in the form of *norms*; i.e. norms that regulate identifications that agents are forced to take on in capitalism. How these norms are habituated or constituted – aside from repeated references to the multiplicity of oppressive practices – is not clear. The 'devaluation of black and brown lives' (210) or the predominant 'European heterosexist and white supremacist form of thinking' (219) could be more properly addressed by a theory of recognitional justice, at least as long as these misrecognitions and matrixes of dominations are not connected to a materialist theory of society or theory of subjectivity.

In addition, Bohrer's tendency to focus on domination via oppression and exploitation leads to the rejection of the argument that we need to make a distinction between the logic of capital and 'capitalism' as the term that refers somehow to the whole. Though I agree with Bohrer's attempt to push exploitation and oppression on even ground, I still would argue that capital ultimately constitutes social reality and the totality of capitalism, especially if we mean by the latter a form of social organization that is globally based on the same principles. The point is precisely that the basic categories of political economy are the same everywhere, even if they get actualized and develop differently in different cultural and national contexts. While we find a myriad of combinatory identities and identity positions through a variety of exploitative and oppressive practices, we only find *one* social reality constituted as a totality that establishes the realm in which these practices can take place. As Marx puts it in *Capital*, capital 'announces an epoch' by which he means the unity of *one* social formation. Bohrer's argument that the separation of capital and capitalism presupposes a separation of history and logic (188) fails, since it is undeniable that history and logic go hand in hand empirically, even if, *in theory*, we nevertheless make this distinction. To be sure, making this theoretical distinction permits us to synchronize all empirical elements as belonging to *one social formation* and *social whole*, and while it is true that in synchronizing these elements, we see that capital cannot be disconnected from exploitation and oppression especially inasmuch as capital is a *real* dynamic, this does not mean that we do not need to draw a sharp distinction between practices of oppression and the logic of capital; for value/capital is the *social form* that all entities take on, including agents whose productive capacities capital mobilizes for its own purposes via particular identities. Whereas a theory of society can give us constitutive categories, intersectionality can help us understand how agents must live through the contradictions of capital experience and react in many varied and nuanced ways within this whole. It is certain that 'capitalism takes a variety of shapes and forms, responds to a variety of conditions, and encounters a wide variety of constraints and resistances' (213) and that 'an adequate theory of capital requires rapt attention to the multiplicity of formations that constitute it' (203). Just as it is self-explanatory that capitalism cannot 'explain or cause' (163) all forms of agency, so is it the case that a single theory cannot make sense of all 'choices, actions, thoughts, opportunities, and sacrifices made by people' (163). However, this 'dizzying set of capitalist arrangements' (145) presupposes that the referent of 'capitalism' refers to *one* 'X' that takes a variety of shapes; i.e. it ideally presupposes *one* theory; this assumes, though, that we do not want to fall back onto nominalist strategies, historicist relativism or empty pluralizations that do not help us to grasp the reality, such as when Bohrer claims that '[s]ocial antagonisms should always be figured as pluri-vocal, multiplicitous, and, what is more, unpredictable and contingent' (213), that social contradictions should allow for a 'plethora of outcomes, arrangements, and compromises' (214), or that there are not singular causes for 'the multi-dimensional, contradictory, internally variant, and historically-dependent relations between various forces in matrices of domination' (114). Indeed, this is dizzying!

In this vein, the author's attempt to lump together a variety of authors under an identity labeled 'Marxism', especially if we take into account the theoretical range and global presence of Marxism, is problematic, to say the least. Moreover, Bohrer seems to have an 'activist' understanding of Marxism and although movements are understood as the major source of theory, and theorizing may be understood as a form of praxis, praxis is nevertheless understood as something external to theory. In this connection let us be reminded that Capital was not written for the laboring class (who would need to be addressed in different kinds of publications); rather, it was written against the ruling class and their classical economist and philosophy representatives with the goal of positioning Marxist theory and philosophy *within* the theoretical and philosophical discourse of Marx's time. The hope was that, in turn, this would also lead to a reflection that theorizing cannot take place in some kind of neutral space. As a consequence, theory as praxis means that theory must be carried out as a critique of ideology and not as a form of activism. Similarly, the goal of contemporary Marxist theory and philosophy should be seen in the attempt to establish itself as a position that can demonstrate its own superiority over other positions in the fields of epistemology, ontology and ethics. As a result of Bohrer's 'practacist' approach to theory, it is difficult to understand where the author stands in this field, insofar as it is not clear *against* which theory Bohrer's 'intersectional Marxism' is directed, unless, perhaps, it is intended to position itself against certain forms of thinking based on specific *identities*, such as liberal feminists or white binary males.

Finally, though the book is extremely strong in its precise, clear and far-reaching reconstruction of authors and debates, its basic theoretical concepts remain vague because essential philosophical questions are not properly engaged. For example, what is identity?, what is a category (which is still presupposed for terms such as 'intra-categorical' or 'inter-categorical')?, and what is subjectivity? – these are but a few of the foundational philosophical questions that need to be addressed for the important considerations of this text to be fully analyzed. Indeed, the idea that overlapping identities *constitute* subjectivities remains weak, as long as we do not embed it within phenomenological or ontological frameworks. A statement such as intersectionality is an 'ontological approach that accounts for complex subjectivity' (90) remains empty without these antecedent or complementary philosophical considerations.

In addition, one could – and perhaps should – argue that it is philosophically problematic to identify who one is with what one is. Furthermore, even the last echo of what was once a universalist vision of a classless society as a society of human individuals evaporates in the author's desire to recognize infinite chains of difference that fixate human beings in what they are rather than what they *could* be. Put with Sartre, the idea of a self that can be observed under the intersectional magnifying glass is itself bad faith, insofar as one could argue that an individual always transcends *all* identities. In the end a theory of social subjects that is constructed on the basis of identities is modeled after neoliberal desires since as agents seem to live in an abstract universe of identifications rather than in factories, schools, ghettos, camps, farms, homes, on ships or in political institutions.

In closing, on the one hand, the book reaches a level of complexity and inclusivity that we rarely see in a field in which many authors are desperately trying to defend their intellectual territory, but on the other hand – and here's the paradox – it comes dangerously close to losing any focus on the very particular systematic issues that need more theoretical or argumentative treatment. The reader should not get these critical remarks wrong: despite the reviewers' quibbles, Bohrer's book is an impeccable achievement in terms of clarity and complexity that should be read by everyone interested in the relation between Marxism and intersectional theorizing.

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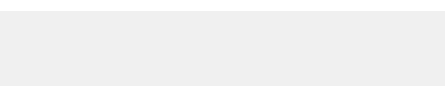


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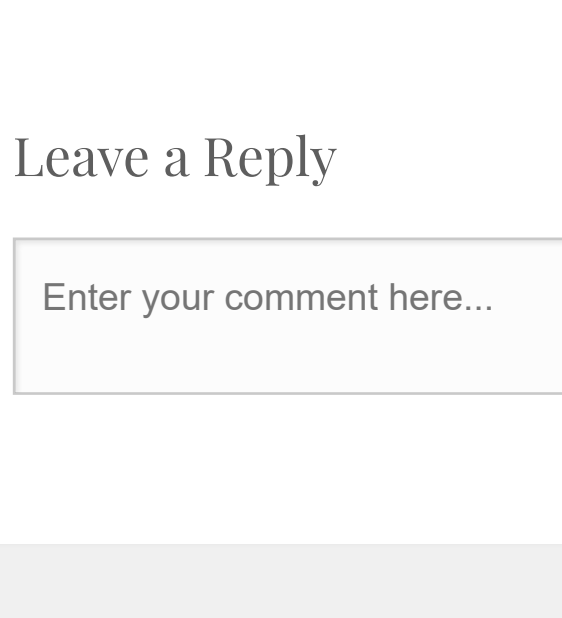
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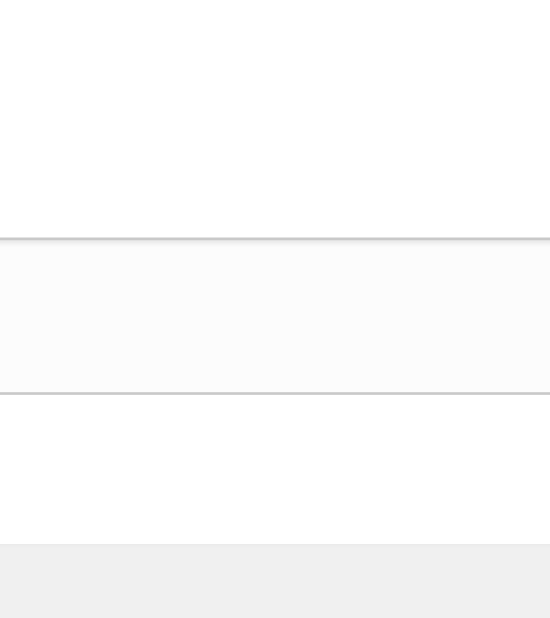
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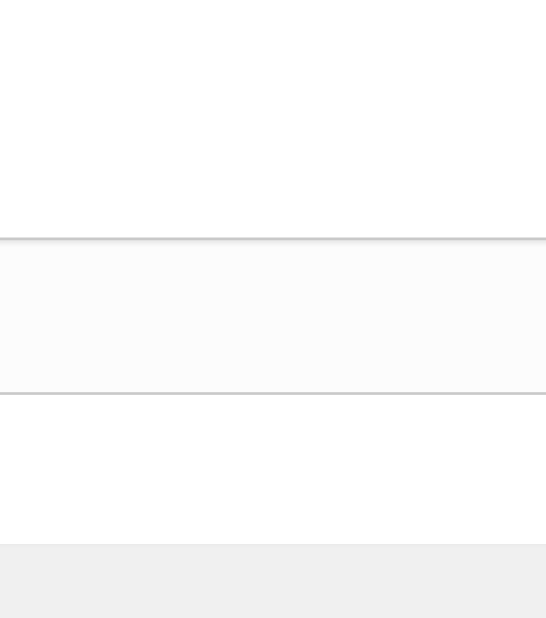
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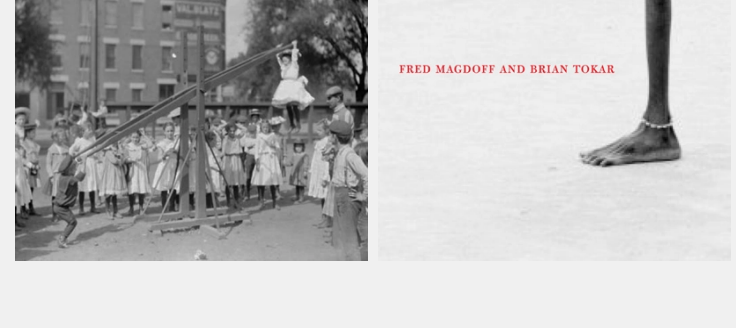
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Cultural Marxism and intersectionality

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Keywords

Cultural Marxism, intersectionality, neoliberalism, Nuit Debout, race

The evening following the massacre in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, I attended a commemoration event in Paris organized at the Place de la République by Nuit Debout (the French version of the Occupy Movement). It took a long time before the mass shooting was addressed. We first had to declare our solidarity with the Palestinian people in the occupied territories, to condemn police brutality against undocumented migrants, to support a strike against welfare state retrenchment, and so on. Then, finally, someone made direct mention of the 49 gay men killed by Omar Mateen.

Many LGBT people left the event frustrated: why can't we just commemorate the killing of these gay men? Wasn't the event organized so that we – as LGBTs – could share *our* grief, instead of sharing in the sorrows of others? Are all these topics related anyway? Why would that be the case? Are we facing the same overarching enemy (probably neoliberalism, as many of the speakers, even those discussing cultural topics, argued)?

I often think back to this evening when I encounter right-wing attacks on cultural Marxism, so popular among the Alt-right these days. These radical right-wingers often claim – as if unearthing a conspiracy – that a small left-wing elite is undermining the core values of western societies, imposing their ideas on gender, sexuality, national identity, race, Islam, and other issues. Some perceive a coherent left-wing agenda that should be stopped before it destroys 'western civilization' (their analyses come close to Oswald Spengler's *Die Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918). They are wrong, of course; the left in most western countries is in crisis, far from influential, let alone dominant. In hindsight, I was relieved that they were

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not at Place de la République that evening, when it seemed that these themes were indeed all connected – so strongly connected that one could not speak about gay rights without mentioning multiple other forms of oppression.

Nuit Debout has, like most other recent influential social movements, a totalizing tendency, as if topics are necessarily related, as if — there actually is something like cultural Marxism. Today's movements increasingly mobilize under the banner of global social justice. Occupy and Anonymous have become all-encompassing brands linking and mixing numerous struggles. Even though the radical right lives in a fantasy world, some activists on the left seem to live up to their worst nightmares.

These developments within social movements correspond to analyses of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991, 1992), the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, sexuality, and so on. As Audre Lorde put it: 'We don't live single issues lives.' I readily acknowledge that intersectional analysis has been enlightening in many fields. It has shown how black women – as quintessential intersectional subjects (Nash, 2008) – are not just discriminated against as women, but based on race and sexuality as well (Collins, 2004). Many struggles have successfully been understood as deeply intersectional; as an analytical tool, it has made various forms of marginalization and discrimination visible in their entanglement. Particularly when the specificity of the intersections is fleshed out (for example by Baumann and Gingrich in their *Grammars of Identity/Alterity*, 2004), it provided new insights into the lived practices of subaltern peoples.

But over time, intersectionality lost some of its empirical rigor. As has been pointed out by new generations of scholars, the interesting question is not whether identities are multi-dimensionally intersected (they often are), but how the very categories come into being and get connected (*enacted*). Similar criticisms have been voiced by scholars who favor a break from understanding differences as stable and pre-existing (Brubaker, 2004; Haraway, 1997; Valentine, 2007), who show how precarious some of these links indeed are.

As the readers of *Sexualities* know, homosexuality is in many places and times understood as a form of gender deviance. In such situations, it makes sense to analyze discrimination against gays and lesbians in relation to gender and its inequalities. But homosexuality has recently 'emancipated' itself: in the perspective of many LGBTs as well as their straight allies, it is no longer a form of gender deviance. This is not to say that gays are now always and everywhere discriminated against on the sole basis of being a sexual minority. For instance, some African leaders have recently claimed that homosexuality is un-African, linking (homo)sexuality to race, which makes it necessary to analyze how these categories get produced in their entanglement. And clearly the impossibility of being 'Muslim gay' begs for an intersectional analysis of religion and sexuality (Rahman, 2010).

But the point remains: attitudes towards homosexuality in many countries have become more and more disentangled from (among other things) political preference, religion, age and geography (city versus rural areas).

Given these developments, I would welcome informed naiveté: Is sexuality linked to gender? When? Why? By whom? Under what specific conditions? Instead of all-encompassing analyses, my plea is for parsimony: not to deny that sometimes some sexual differences are enacted in entanglement with religion, or class, or race, but not to assume that all these categories are pertinent, let alone *necessarily* interrelated, connected. Deconstruction then means opting for minimalism; we don't start from the assumption that everything is complex or complicated. We dissect instead of intersect.

This is not only a better *scholarly* agenda, but a better *political* one as well. The all-encompassing strategy of recent social movements – perhaps out of the intention to include as many people as possible – eventually asks too much: the greatest common denominator is too small, and only attracts people for whom all struggles are connected, intersected. But those who want to struggle, for example for sexual liberation, do not necessarily support the Palestinian cause. Support for gay and lesbian causes now comes from across the political spectrum in many countries. Why not welcome new allies (within limits) and broaden the support for specific causes?

Subjects such as sexuality attract most support when treated as single issues. A single-issue movement is not 'missing' something, but opens up the space for various people to support its cause. Those who claim that various struggles *are* interrelated often mean that they *should* be interrelated; that people who care for LGBTs should care for racial justice as well, and vice versa. Although I think that there might be good normative reasons to link certain struggles, I wonder whether minority groups should specifically care for each other. Why? For reasons of history? For reasons of effective mobilization? Is a rainbow coalition always the most effective? The fact that forms of discrimination were historically entangled does not guarantee successful partnering in the future.

Except if we assume that there is one overarching cleavage, pertinent to all forms of social struggle. Marxists and others might claim that neoliberalism is such an encompassing context. But what space does this leave for others who don't identify as Marxists, let alone as cultural Marxists...?

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SHARON SMITH

A MARXIST CASE FOR INTERSECTIONALITY

August 1, 2017

Sharon Smith, author of *Women and Socialism: Class, Race and Capital*, explains the roots of the concept of intersectionality and how it can help advance Marxist theory.



MANY ACTIVISTS who have heard the term “intersectionality” being debated on the left have found it difficult to define it--and for a very understandable reason: Different people explain it differently and therefore are often talking at cross-purposes.

For this reason--along with the fact that it is a seven-syllable word--intersectionality can appear to be an abstraction with only a vague relationship to material reality. It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss the concept out of hand.

There are two quite distinct interpretations of intersectionality: one developed by Black feminists and the other by those from the “post-structural” wing of postmodernism. I want to try to make the differences clear in this article, and explain why the Black feminist tradition advances the project of building a unified movement to fight all forms of oppression, which is central to the socialist project--while post-structuralism does not.



A Concept, Not a Theory

I want to start by making a few things clear.



First, intersectionality is a concept, not a theory. It is a description of how different forms of oppression--racism, sexism, LGBTQ oppression and all other forms--interact with each other and become fused into a single experience.

So Black women, for example, are not “doubly oppressed”--that is, oppressed by the separate experiences of racism, as it also affects Black men, on top of sexism, as it also affects white women--but racism affects the way Black women are oppressed as women and also as Black people.

Intersectionality is another way of describing “simultaneity of oppression,” “overlapping oppressions,” “interlocking oppressions” or any number of other terms that Black feminists used to describe the intersection of race, class and gender.

As Black feminist and scholar Barbara Smith argued in 1983 in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*: “The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality and, I believe, one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought.”

Because intersectionality is a concept (a description of the experience of multiple oppressions, without explaining their causes) rather than a theory (which does attempt to explain the root causes of oppressions), it can be applied *alongside* different theories of oppression--theories informed by Marxism or postmodernism, but also separatism, etc.

Because Marxism and postmodernism are often antithetical, their specific uses of the concept of intersectionality can be very different and in very different and contrary ways.

Marxism explains all forms of oppression as rooted in class society, while theories stemming from postmodernism reject that idea as “essentialist” and “reductionist.” This is why a number of Marxists have been dismissive or hostile to the concept of “intersectionality,” without distinguishing between its competing theoretical foundations: Black feminism or postmodernism/post-structuralism.



The Black Feminist Tradition

It is important to understand that the concept of intersectionality was first developed by Black feminists, not postmodernists.

Black feminism has a long and complex history, based on the recognition that the system of chattel slavery and, since then, modern racism and racial segregation have caused Black women to suffer in ways that are never experienced by white women.

In 1851, Sojourner Truth gave her famous speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio. That speech was aimed at emphasizing to white middle-class suffragists that Truth’s oppression as a former Black slave had nothing in common with that experienced by white middle-class women.

Truth contrasted her own oppression as a Black woman, suffering physical brutality and degradation, unending hours of forced and unpaid labor, and giving birth to babies only to watch them forced into slavery.

For over a century before Black legal scholar and feminist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in 1989, the same concept was usually described as “interlocking oppressions,” “simultaneous oppressions” and other similar terms.

Black feminism also contains a strong emphasis on the class differences that exist between women, because the vast majority of the Black population in the U.S. has always been a part of the working class, and disproportionately living in poverty, due to the economic consequences of racism.

Crenshaw’s 1989 essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” which introduced the term intersectionality, pays homage to Sojourner Truth’s speech.

“When Sojourner Truth rose to speak,” Crenshaw writes, “many white women urged that she be silenced, fearing that she would divert attention from women’s suffrage to [the abolition of slavery].” Crenshaw goes on to ask in the modern context: “When feminist theory and politics that claim to reflect women’s experiences and women’s aspirations do not include or speak to Black women, Black women must ask, ‘Ain’t we women?’”



Left-wing Black Feminism

It is also important to recognize that Black feminism has always contained a left-wing analysis, including an overlap between some Black feminists and the Communist Party in the mid- to late 20th century. Communist Party leaders Claudia Jones and Angela Davis, for example, both developed the concept of Black women’s oppression as the interlocking experience of race, gender and class.

In 1949, Claudia Jones wrote a pathbreaking essay called, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” in which she argued: “Negro women--as workers, as Negroes, and as women--are the most oppressed strata of the whole population.”

In that essay, Jones emphasizes sexual assault as a *racial* issue for Black women:

None so dramatizes the oppressed status of Negro womanhood as does the case of Rosa Lee Ingram, widowed mother of 14 children--two of them dead--who faces life imprisonment in a Georgia jail for the ‘crime’ of defending herself from the indecent advances of a ‘white supremacist.’...It exposes the hypocritical alibi of the lynchers of Negro manhood who have historically hidden behind the skirts of white women when they try to cover up their foul crimes with the ‘chivalry’ of ‘protecting white womanhood.’

This theme--that sexual assault is not simply a women’s issue, but also a racial issue in U.S. society--was later pursued and expanded by Angela Davis, whose long-standing commitment to fighting against all forms of exploitation and oppression, including the racist injustice system, is well known.

In 1981, Davis wrote in *Women, Race and Class* that rape “has had a toxic racial component in the United States since the time of slavery as a key weapon in maintaining the system of white supremacy.” She describes rape as “a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women’s will to resist and, in the process, to demoralize their men.”

The institutionalized rape of Black women survived the abolition of slavery and took on its modern form, according to Davis: “Group rape, perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist organizations of the post-Civil War period, became an un-camouflaged political weapon in the drive to thwart the movement for Black equality.”

The caricature of the Black male sexual predator’s never-ending desire to rape virtuous white Southern belles had an “inseparable companion,” Davis writes: “the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous...Viewed as ‘loose women’ and whores, Black women’s cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy.”

Yet in the 1970s, many white feminists--perhaps most famously, Susan Brownmiller in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, described rape as exclusively a struggle between men and women.

This political framework led Brownmiller to reach openly racist conclusions in her account of the 1955 lynching of Emmett TILL--the 14-year-old visiting family in Jim Crow Mississippi who was abducted, tortured and shot for the “crime” of allegedly whistling at a married white woman.

Despite TILL’s lynching, Brownmiller describes TILL and his killer as sharing power over a “white woman”--using stereotypes that Davis called “the resuscitation of the old racist myth of the Black rapist.”

There are many other ways in which the experience of women's oppression differs between women of different races and classes.

The mainstream feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s demanded abortion on the basis of women's right to end unwanted pregnancy. This is, of course, a crucial right for all women--without which women cannot hope to be the equals of men.

At the same time, however, the mainstream movement focused almost exclusively on abortion, when the history of reproductive rights made the issue far more complicated for Black women and other women of color--who have been the historic targets of racist sterilization abuse.



The Combahee River Collective

The crucial lesson in these examples is that there can be no such thing as a simple 'women's issue' in a capitalist system founded on the enslavement of Africans, in which racism remains embedded in its foundation and all its institutions. Nearly every so-called 'women's' issue has a racial component.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there was a strong movement among left-wing Black feminists--best illustrated by the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black lesbian feminists based in Boston. They identified themselves as 'Marxists,' as they argued in their definitive statement in 1977:

We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources.

We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation...Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.

That is a very reasonable point of view that seems like common sense to most people on the left today. The Combahee River Collective did not stand for separatism, as some Marxists have mistakenly concluded.

Barbara Smith, one of the founding members of the Combahee River Collective, argued in an interview in the 1984 book *This Bridge Called My Back*, for a strategy of 'coalition building' rather than 'racial separatism.' She said that 'any kind of separatism is a dead end...There is no way that one oppressed group is going to topple a system by itself. Forming principled coalitions around specific issues is very important.'

It is important to challenge the idea held by many critics--some Marxists among them--that the Black feminist concept of intersectionality is just about the *experience* of racism, sexism and other forms of oppression on an individual level.

The Black feminist tradition has always been tied to collective struggle against oppression--against slavery, segregation, racism, police brutality, poverty, sterilization abuse, the systematic rape of Black women and the systematic lynching of Black men.

Maybe the most important lesson we can learn from the Combahee River Collective is that when we build the next mass movement for women's liberation--hopefully soon--it must be based not on the needs of the least oppressed, but rather on the needs of those who are the *most oppressed*--which is really the heart of what solidarity is all about.

But intersectionality is a concept for understanding *oppression*, *not exploitation*. Many Black feminists acknowledge the systemic roots of racism and sexism, but place far less emphasis than Marxists on the *connection* between the system of exploitation and oppression.

Marxism is necessary because it provides a framework for understanding the relationship between oppression and exploitation and also identifies the agency for creating the material and social conditions that will make it possible to end both oppression and exploitation: the working class.

Workers not only have the power to shut down the system, but also to replace it with a socialist society, based on collective ownership of the means of production. Although other groups in society suffer oppression, only the working class possesses this collective power.

So the concept of intersectionality needs Marxist theory to realize the kind of unified movement that is capable of ending all forms of oppression. At the same time, Marxism can only benefit from integrating left-wing Black feminism into our own politics and practice.



The Postmodern Rejection of "Totality"

So far, what I tried to show is how the concept of intersectionality, or interlocking oppressions, was rooted in the Black feminist tradition over a long period of time--and that this concept has also been compatible with Marxism.

Now I want to turn to postmodernism, and contrast the postmodernist interpretation of intersectionality with the longer-standing Black feminist concept.

To be clear: there is no question that postmodernism has advanced the struggle against all forms of oppression, including the oppression experienced by trans people, those with disabilities or who face age discrimination, and many other forms of oppression that were neglected before postmodernist theories began to flourish in the 1980s and 1990s.

British literary theorist Terry Eagleton described postmodernism's 'single most enduring achievement' as 'the fact that it has helped to place questions of sexuality, gender and ethnicity so firmly on the political agenda that it is impossible to imagine them being erased without an almighty struggle.'

At the same time, however, postmodernism also arose as a *blanket rejection* of political generalization, and categories of social structures and material realities, referred to as "truths," "totalities," and "universalities"--in the name of espousing 'anti-essentialism.' (To be sure, such a blanket rejection of political generalization is itself a political generalization--which is an inherent contradiction of postmodernist thought!)

Postmodernists place an overriding emphasis on the limited, partial, subjective character of people's individual experiences--rejecting the strategy of collective struggle against institutions of oppression and exploitation to instead focus on individual and cultural relations as centers of struggle.

It isn't a coincidence that postmodernism flourished in the world of academia in the aftermath of the decline of the class and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s--and the rise of the ruling class's neoliberal onslaught.

Some of the academics involved in the ascendancy of postmodernism were veteran 1960s radicals who had lost faith in the possibility for revolution. They were joined by a new generation of radicals too young to have experienced the tumult of the 1960s, but were influenced by the pessimism of the period. In this context, Marxism was widely disparaged as 'reductionist' and 'essentialist' by academics calling themselves postmodernists, post-structuralists and post-Marxists.

Within the broad theoretical category of postmodernism, post-Marxism provided a new theoretical framework beginning in the 1980s. Two post-Marxist theorists, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, published the book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* in 1985.

Laclau and Mouffe explain their theory as a negation of socialist 'totality': 'There are not, for example, necessary links between anti-sexism and anti-capitalism, and a unity between the two can only be the result of a hegemonic articulation. It follows that it is only possible to construct this articulation on the basis of separate struggles...This requires the autonomization of the spheres of struggle.'

This is an argument for the separation of struggles. Such 'free-floating' struggles should thus be conducted entirely within what Marxists describe as the superstructure of society, with no relationship to its economic base.

Moreover, Laclau and Mouffe's concept of the 'autonomization of the spheres of struggle' is not only that each struggle is limited to combating only a particular form of subordination within a particular social domain, but that *it does not even need to involve more than one other person besides yourself*. They stated this explicitly: 'Many of these forms of resistance are made manifest not in the form of collective struggles, but through an increasingly armed individualism.'

These passages show clearly how the emphasis shifted away from solidarity between movements, and also from collective struggle to individual, interpersonal struggle. In this way, interpersonal relationships became the key sites of struggle, based on subjective perceptions of which individual is in a position of 'dominance' and which is in a position of 'subordination' in any particular situation.

In 1985, queer theorist Jeffrey Escoffier summarized: 'The politics of identity must also be a politics of difference...The politics of difference affirms limited, partial being.'

Post-structuralists appropriated terms such as 'identity politics' and 'difference' that originated in 1970s-era Black feminism.

When the Combahee River Collective referred to the need for identity politics, for example, they were describing *the group identity* of Black women; when they emphasized the importance of recognizing 'differences' among women, they were referring to Black women's collective invisibility within predominantly white, middle-class feminism at the time.

But there is a world of difference between *social identity*--identifying as part of a social group--and *individual* identity. The post-structural conception of 'identity' is based on that of individuals, while 'difference' likewise can refer to any characteristic that sets an individual apart from others, whether it is related to oppression or is simply non-normative.

It is worth noting that Black feminist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, writing in the 1990s, took issue with the 'version of anti-essentialism, embodying what might be called the vulgarized social construction thesis, [which] is that since all categories are socially constructed, there is no such thing as, say, 'Blacks' or 'women,' and thus it makes little sense to continue reproducing those categories by organizing around them.'

By contrast, she argued, 'A beginning response to these questions requires that we first recognize that the organized identity groups in which we find ourselves are in fact coalitions, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed.'

She concluded, 'At this point in history, a strong case can be made that the most critical resistance strategy for disempowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location rather than to vacate and destroy it.'



“Individual” vs. “Social” Identity

This is how the concept of intersectionality, first developed within the Black feminist tradition, emerged much more recently in the context of postmodernism.

Although Black feminism and some currents of postmodernist theory share some common assumptions and common language, these are overshadowed by key differences that make them two distinct approaches to combatting oppression. Thus the concept of intersectionality has two different political foundations—one informed primarily by Black feminism and the other by postmodernism.

More recent evolution of the post-structuralist approach to identity politics and intersectionality, which has a strong influence over today’s generation of activists, places an enormous emphasis on changing individual behavior as the most effective way to combat oppression.

This has given rise to the idea of individuals “calling out” interpersonal acts of perceived oppression as a crucial political act. More generally, intersectionality in postmodern terms, even among those who have no idea what postmodernism is.

As Marxist scholar Kevin Anderson recently argued:

In the late twentieth century, a theoretical discourse of intersectionality became almost hegemonic in many sectors of radical intellectual life. In this discourse, which concerned social issues and movements around race, gender, class, sexuality and other forms of oppression, it was often said we should avoid any kind of class reductionism or essentialism in which gender and race are subsumed under the category of class. At most, it was said, movements around race, gender, sexuality, or class can intersect with each other, but cannot easily coalesce into a single movement against the power structure and the capitalist system that, according to Marxists, stands behind it. Thus, the actual intersectionality of these social movements—as opposed to their separateness—was usually seen as rather limited, both as reality and as possibility. Saying otherwise ran the danger of falling into the abyss of reductionism or essentialism.

I agree with Anderson on this point, but I also think it is clear that he is critiquing the postmodern approach to intersectionality, not Black feminism.

I believe it is a mistake for Marxists to lose sight of the value of the Black feminist tradition—including the concept of intersectionality, both in its contribution to combatting the oppression of women of color, working-class women and the ways in which it can help to advance Marxist theory and practice.

Marxists appreciate the contributions of left-wing Black nationalists, including Malcolm X and Franz Fanon, along with the socialism of the Black Panther Party, and have attempted to incorporate aspects of their contributions into our own political tradition. The examples above provide ample evidence for why we should likewise incorporate the lessons that Black feminists have to offer Marxism.

The role of racial segregation in the United States has effectively prevented the development of a unified women’s movement that fails to recognize the many implications of the historic racial divide. No movement can claim to speak for *all* women unless it speaks for women who also face the consequences of racism, which places women of color overwhelmingly in the ranks of the working class and the poor.

Race and class must be central to the project of women’s liberation—not only in theory, but in practice—if it is to be meaningful to those women who are the most oppressed by the system.



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Organizing a workplace campaign

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