

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Marxism, feminism, and “intersectionality”

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“Intersectionality” is a key feminist concept used to explicate a multiplicity of socially constructed differences. While the term itself emerged from Black feminist activism and scholarship in the 1970s, it references a problem that has been at the forefront of international feminist struggles for decades, that is, how should we understand the organization of human life along lines of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and so forth, and how should our political projects respond to this reality? Intersectionality is one response to this question. Nonetheless, it has become a hegemonic analytical and methodological tool among students and scholars with the conviction that it is a radical rupture with white/liberal feminism and denotes a political commitment to the most oppressed members of society. Our key purpose here is to articulate, concisely, how we approach this same theoretical and political problem from the standpoint of Marxist feminism. In this exploration, we employ a historical materialist dialectical approach to conceptualize race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and national origin, among others, as relations formed within the historical specificity of a capitalist mode of production without reifying class.

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This article is based on the theoretical framework fully developed in our coauthored book *Revolutionary Learning: Marxism, Feminism and Knowledge* by Shahrzad Mojab (ed.) (Pluto Press, 2017) and *Marxism and Feminism* (Zed Books, 2015).

The concept of intersectionality is rooted within Black Feminism. The term was first used by activists and scholars to articulate the experience of Black women in the United States as being formed through multiple, simultaneous forms of oppression. The work of Barbara Smith, Patria Hill Collins, and The Combahee River Collective are landmark texts in this effort (Taylor, 2017). The concept was then further expanded by African American feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to discuss the intersecting of race and gender with violence and poverty within the American criminal justice system. Patricia Hill Collins' (1992) work in Black feminism and her articulation of the "matrices of domination" also lent additional theorization to the concept. Over the last three decades, the term has gained theoretical and methodological traction in critical anti-racist education and feminist studies as well as cultural studies and beyond. However, as Aguilar reminds us, Crenshaw "did not consider intersectionality as she devised it to be a theory, much less a totalizing theory, or even a methodology, and certainly had no inkling of the controversies it would provoke or the voyage across disciplines and continents it was to make" (Aguilar, 2015, p. 208). Over the decades, the concept has undergone extensive expansion by feminist scholars, particularly those in postmodern and poststructural traditions and those theorizing identity and subjectivity specifically. It has been taken up as an analytical project of social difference, as a theory of oppression, as a mode of critical inquiry, and as a political project aimed at radical inclusion (Hancock, 2016). It is as popular in blogs on the Internet as it is in academic journals. It is used by activists, academics, educators, and, sometimes, even policy makers (such as Hillary Clinton in the 2016 U.S. election). At this point, its usage has prompted several recent texts that attempt to clarify what exactly the concept means and how it has developed (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Hancock, 2016).

Today it is common among students and scholars to claim "an intersectionality analysis" with the conviction that it is a radical rupture with white/liberal feminism and denotes a political commitment to the most oppressed members of society. We witness this claim quite often in our teaching and activism. For example, at a solidarity gathering in support of the riots of the dispossessed in Iran, a motion was put forward to ensure intersectionality was observed in all the actions. In this motion, intersectionality was seen as an act of solidarity and it signaled representation and recognition of a range of differences such as race, gender, sexuality, religion, language, region, class, disability, age, and more. Specifically, it implied an understanding of the ways in which these multiple forms of difference coalesce in lived experience. In this act of recognition, that is the claim for an intersectional analysis, and its attendant political action, naming differences is understood to mark and explain the historical, local, transnational, and structural conditions, which have (re)produced these differences (Bannerji, 1995).

We recognize that certain key critical feminist concepts such as "empowerment," "consciousness raising," and "equity," in addition to intersectionality, have been, and continually are, appropriated by liberal and other bourgeois interests for a differing agenda. However, it is important to ask why these concepts, which appear to have radical explanatory power, can be so easily coopted and put to use to (re)produce the conditions they were originally set to critique. Theorists of intersectionality, as well as activists, pushed white feminism toward issues of race, gender, and class. However, we contend that two interconnected processes have limited the potential of intersectionality to go beyond a representation/recognition analysis. First, the retreat from Marxism in the 1980s gradually weakened class analysis of *particular* class formations under capitalist patriarchy. Second, and relatedly, with the fading away of class, all other forms of social differences took central stage in feminist inquiry. But, we know that in actual experience of human life, social identities intersect all the time and all at once, not in a fragmented and episodic way that is proposed by some usages of intersectionality. Therefore, if we accept that we live in a perpetual intersecting mode, then we should ask how one

can form social identities that can become the subject of historical socialist feminist change? Put differently, what is to become of us after our gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and more intersect? What is being socially constituted by these identity lines crisscrossing and intersecting each other?

Our key purpose here is to articulate, concisely, how we approach this same theoretical and political problem from the standpoint of Marxist feminism. While we of course recognize the reality that intersectionality is meant to explain, we approach the explanation of this reality differently. We believe, following Bannerji (1995), that it is impossible to disarticulate these social relations from one another without objectifying the social and artificially separating relations of oppression from each other through a cultural logic that segments race and gender from capital and class. Again, we return to the problem of theorizing the social as something other than historically subjective human practice. To be clear, this is a radically different notion of difference and experience from the popular frameworks of intersectionality and positionality. While Sharon Smith (August 1, 2017) has recently published a Marxist perspective on the concept of intersectionality that places the problem at the feet of a postmodern/poststructural appropriation of the concept, thus hollowing it of any material analysis, we argue that the issue is based not only in a lack of class acknowledgment but in an ontological fragmentation. For that reason, simply adding class to the matrices of identity will not help Marxists to push further into a feminist and anti-racist analysis and will not help non-Marxist feminists to understand material relations in a social way. We contend that the forms of oppression that produce these differentiated social identities and experiences are also ontologically inseparable; only in our articulation of these experiences do they become epistemologically recognized as “intersections.” Furthermore, forms of social differentiation and oppression on the basis of race, gender, ability, nation, language, and more must be understood in their relationality to class as a social relation of exploitation, not merely another form of identity. To expand on our analysis, we will start first by articulating our understanding of a Marxist feminist theory of the social because we have three goals: to explain and understand the world around us, to produce transformative forms of knowledge and consciousness, and to generate revolutionary politics. To do this, we employ a notion of dialectical social relations that allows us to resolve many problems that preoccupy contemporary social theorists, such as essentialism, dualism, binaries, linear thinking, intersectionality, and relativism.

1 | THE DIALECTICS OF SOCIAL RELATIONS WITHIN CAPITALISM

To begin, we do not view social reality or “society” as a “thing,” “structure,” or “system” that exists outside of people and determines their activity or thought. Rather, we understand our social lives as a historically evolving form of social organization, by which we mean human activity and modes of consciousness. Because we understand the social world as complexes of actual, coordinated human activity, we use the term *social relations* to describe the social world. Social relations are both the point of departure for inquiry and the point of arrival. We cannot take ourselves out of them as we seek to understand them. Social relations are both forms of consciousness and practical, sensuous, human activity (not just what we think, but also what we do). These social relations are understood to exist in *historical materialist dialectical* relationships. Dialectical conceptualization in the historical materialist tradition, following primarily from Marx and Engels' (1968) approach to inquiry detailed in *The German Ideology*, means looking at the social world as sets of relations between multiple phenomena occurring simultaneously at both local/particular and global/universal levels over time. The dialectical relationships that make up our social world are constantly moving

and changing. This movement and change is primarily due to two dynamics: (a) the internal contradictions of these relations, and (b) the external conditions of other social phenomena. A dialectical relation is always a unity of two phenomena in contradiction, which can only be transformed through the negation of the relationship and the transformation of both elements of the relation. In other words, we approach our social world as consisting of mutually determining relations that comprise our everyday experience. Dialectical thinking allows us to understand experience through these dynamic webs of relations.

We can examine history as a series of different formations of social organization. By this we mean that we see, throughout history, human beings socially organizing themselves in particular arrangements in order to reproduce their material existence and life; these social organizations are not benign or neutral in any way. We call these forms of social organization *modes of production*, which are historically specific. A mode of production encompasses the entire complex of social life at a given time, including people as its productive force (how they work to produce their material existence and life) and the relations of production (how they organize themselves). Taken together, productive forces and relations of production constitute the conditions in which we work to produce and reproduce the human social world. It is in this way that Marx and Engels referred to this conceptualization as a “mode of life,” in distinction to the dominant, economist interpretation of the formulation (1968, p. 32). We use the concept of mode of production in tandem with the concept of social relations so that we can understand the social as a form of human organization that is complex, changing, and historical, which has developed particular modes of human relations and forms of consciousness over time. In this way, we understand capitalism as a mode of production that encompasses social relations such as particular arrangements of race, gender, and class. By capitalist mode of production, we are referring to a way of organizing the production and reproduction of life through the wage relation, under dependence on commodities, and the privatized accumulation of surplus value. In this mode of production, the extraction of surplus value from waged labor for the purpose of producing capital (wealth used to make more wealth) is the ultimate goal of social production. Capitalism hinges on the exploitation of labor power, which we understand as purposeful, conscious human activity and intervention in nature. We also believe, as historians such as Silvia Federici and Peter Linebaugh have elaborated, that social relations of race, gender, sexuality, class, and colonialism existed prior to the rise of capitalism, but in the emergence of capitalism these relations became integral aspects of the expansion and consolidation of the capitalist mode of production. The transformation of these relations into capitalist modes of patriarchy and racism is the result of this historical process. Thus, within the capitalist mode of production, we experience class as differentiated through relations of gender, race, ability, and sexuality.

To summarize, our understanding of the social world is a relational one that sees human social organization as material and cultural. The social world is something we participate in and reproduce through our own labor and consciousness. We use concepts such as social relations, dialectics, and mode of production to describe a social whole that is articulated and enacted through human agency. This is necessary because, in the absence of a theory of the social, various social scientists, including feminist traditions, have conferred upon social relations a status independent of the social whole, resulting in the fragmentation of social organization into components of gender, economy, race, religion, or state. This fragmentation does not allow us to see how these social forms exist in mutually determining relations. Thus, our understanding of the social must account for and explain the existence and functioning of these differentiations.

One of the persistent ethical problems in Marxist theorizing is the issue of social difference. For Marxist feminism, accounting for social differences such as gender, race, and sexuality is of the

utmost importance. A theory of difference and social relations in Marxist feminism addresses the question of why our social world is organized along the lines of “difference,” that is, race, gender, sexuality, and class. We draw from critical anti-racist and anti-colonial feminist scholarship that examines how these differences are constructed, how they develop historically, and how their meanings circulate. However, we depart from the study of language and representation, from how these “differences” arise as cultural phenomena, and focus on an explanation of how these “differences” organize social relations. To put it differently, we want to articulate the *operation* of difference as opposed solely to its meanings. In this way, a Marxist feminist understanding of difference is inextricable from the ontology outlined earlier.

Teresa Ebert (1996) has argued that early feminist theory from European and North American contexts provided no theoretical or experiential space for notions of “difference” based on race or class. Difference was conceived only in terms of gender and was framed as *difference-between* men and women. In this kind of feminism, difference-between conceives of male–female as particular/unique categories that are coherent and self-same (meaning they are internally identical). Ebert refers to these feminists as “modernist” feminists, who draw from the Enlightenment notion that all people are equal based on inherent human nature and rational consciousness. Modernist feminism can range from liberal to radical. In this mode of theorizing, difference is the result of an unjust system that oppresses women and excludes them as rational equals. In this paradigm, patriarchy is conceived as a cultural idea and mostly as interpersonal domination. Modernist feminism is reliant on an essentialist/universalized category of “woman.” Constructing “woman” as a universal category of sameness can only be done by overlooking socially and historically constructed differences and by ignoring the ways in which different groups of women have had to live within capitalist relations. This category of “women” cannot “situate women in history and society. As such, it eradicates real contradictions among women themselves and creates a myth (woman) and an abstraction, by isolating gender from all other social relations” (Bannerji, 1995, p. 68). According to Bannerji, gender is not theorized in connection to other social relations, so we cannot see how women participate either in race/class domination or in the reproduction of patriarchal relations.

Postmodern/poststructural feminists reject difference-between as establishing ontological and epistemological binaries of identity that are just as limiting as the universalizing effects of enlightenment identities. The main argument in this second type of feminism is that difference-between erases *difference-within* a group such as women. For difference-within feminists, difference does not equal identity because no identity is coherent. Identity is always divided by itself and its other. The subject in difference-within feminism is constantly divided against itself; thus, difference-within feminists emphasize diversity, particularity, and multiple/changing subject positions. The differences that exist are differences of signification and representation, which circulate in the realm of meaning. In this view, “male is thus not a clearly bounded identity different from female but is self-divided and traversed by its other, that is, by the female, which is its supplement, its difference on which it depends for its coherent meaning and full existence” (Ebert, 1996, p. 163). “Difference” in difference-within feminism sometimes seems to come from nowhere or, more often, from a theorization of oppression that is dialectically formed with relations of exploitation. Difference-within theorists struggle with the relationship between discourse and matter, particularly the material ground of capital. They are left unable to see that difference is not solely a matter of meaning or representation, but enters into a dialectical relationship with social and economic organization and with a materialism that is not objectified but created by humans within historical relations.

The politics that result from these positions, modernist *difference-between* and postmodernist *difference-within*, are very limited. Because modernism cannot resolve the contradiction between capitalism and discursive democracy, its politics are limited to the terrain of minimal redistribution, such as the welfare state, or multiculturalism as a politics of representation and recognition. Postmodern politics is solely limited to changing representation and signification, although this change could be a radical/transformational deconstruction. We agree with the critique that postmodern/poststructural politics are ultimately a safe haven for bourgeois tendencies. The critique of this philosophical position has already been made by Marx and Engels (1968), who argued, in their critique of the idealism of the Young Hegelians, that

this demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret reality in another way, i.e. to recognize it by means of another interpretation. The Young Hegelian ideologists, in spite of their allegedly 'world-shattering' statements, are the staunchest conservatives. The most recent of them have found the correct expression for their activity when they declare they are only fighting "*phrases*." They forget, however, that to these phrases they themselves are only opposing other phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are merely combating the phrases of this world (p. 30).

The political extension of theory that focuses on discursive deconstruction is limited to its opposite, the reconstruction of discourse alone with the assumption that a change in the description of reality will ultimately change the human activity that constitutes reality. This change in consciousness is not the same thing as a change in material social organization, as Marx (1968) asserts in the 11th thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways: the point is to *change it*" (p. 662).

Bannerji (1995) argues that there is a third direction in feminist thinking on notions of difference that is encapsulated within the idea of structuralist materialist feminism. This notion of difference sees race and gender as "effects" of capitalism, a sort of inventions of capitalism. This kind of Marxist feminism tries to fit women into already existing theories of labor and labor-capital contradictions, which inevitably runs into all kinds of theoretical problems. They often do not engage with issues of race or sexuality, except in relation to private-public sphere debates. The limitations of this structuralist position are not confined to theoretical inconsistencies; the result has been a fractured and divided political left in which Marxists have alienated feminist anti-racist, and queer activists and scholars from their fold. Bannerji (2005) locates this problem, and the theoretical problems of modernism and postmodernism, in the process of abstraction. The process of abstraction we are referring to means the artificial separation of life from its constituent relations, for example, the abstraction of the social from the material or the political from the economic. Because all of these varieties of feminist theory refrain from engaging with the social whole, they cannot contend with its complexities.

The task, then, is to theorize a dialectical historical materialist notion of difference. Marx and Engels accounted for the production and reproduction of life as the determining factor in history. This is not a fully developed idea in their work, but it allows us to depart from both economic determinism and reductionist, culturalist, or mechanical forms of feminism. "Difference" exists within a social whole, a mode of production that is a historically evolved form of social organization. This means that a mode of production includes all the social relations through which people produce their material well-being and reproduce themselves, and their material, social, and cultural world. The mode of production is an "integrated, constantly elaborating historical space" that breaks free from "the qualitative and ontological separation between civil society and the state, economy, and culture, the

political and the public sphere from the private and the familial” (Bannerji, 2005, p. 151). These differentiated social relations are concretized through specific social relations as well as forms of consciousness and concrete social practices. They both are meaningful (Bannerji uses the term “connotative”) and are actual social relations. Social relations cannot be disarticulated, or abstracted, from one another. Thus, a mode of production is constituted through this complex of concretized, differentiated social relations. As Bannerji argues, “viewed thus, ‘race’ is no more or less than a form of difference, creating a mode of production through practical and cultural acts of racialization. ‘Race’ is as such a difference and it cannot stand alone” (p. 152). The material is raced, sexed, and “differenced.” This means that “differences” are not transhistorical and in no way can labor be understood as “abstract.” What we mean by this is that social relations are differentiated in a way specific to a mode of production. Not only what gender and race *mean*, but also how they are *used to organize* social life, are particular to the dialectical relationships within the mode of capitalist production.

2 | CONCLUSION

The implication of the above framework is the requirement to overcome any conceptualization of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, national origin, and so forth, as separate and intersecting fields of social life or identity. Rather, the challenge is to conceptualize them as relations formed within the historical specificity of a capitalist mode of production. To think dialectically about social relations involves, as Paula Allman (2007) has argued, the rejecting categorical conceptualization or conceiving of phenomena as externally related. The initial experiential impulse embedded within intersectionality demonstrates discomfort with these ways of thinking as well; the language of simultaneity speaks to this. However, even thinking of these relations as happening at the same time does not take us far enough into understanding them as (a) mutually constitutive (that is being what they are through their relations to each other) and (b) historically specific.

To not engage in this mode of theorization also requires an overt move to reject the reification of class. Class is not another category of identity nor form of subjectivity; class is a process and relation of appropriation and exploitation. It is formed through relations of oppression based in social constructions of race, gender, sexuality, ability, culture, and origin as a means of concretizing, to use Bannerji's analysis (2005), forms of class relations. This means that a critique of intersectionality must also take us forward from thinking of intersecting forms of oppression into the dialectics of exploitation, dispossession, and oppression. This is a conceptualization that feminists and anti-racist thinkers have struggled to advance within Marxist circles. It references, as Fanon (1963) argued, the necessity of “stretching” dialectics.

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