

A Marxist case for intersectionality - United States: Black feminists or postmodernist traditions

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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.

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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 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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P.S.

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<https://socialistworker.org/2017/08/01/a-marxist-case-for-intersectionality>