

UNITED AGAINST OPPRESSION

Ashley J. Bohrer, *Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag), 2019, 279 p.
ISBN 9783837641608

Intersectionality has been a part of the academic and activist scene since the late 1980s, becoming widely popular in the 2000s, yet still seems largely misunderstood by many on the left. As a theoretical framework that grew directly out of black feminism, its main concern is the interplay of different axes of oppression. To traditional Marxists, this sounds dangerously like identity politics and should therefore be rejected. To intersectional theorists and activists, on the other hand, traditional Marxism is a framework made by and for white men, which has nothing to offer them.

And yet, intersectionality and Marxism have much in common: both are committed to a unity of theory and practice, refusing to draw a clear boundary between theoretical work and activism. Both are deeply rooted in and have helped create and shape vast social movements. (21) And, above all, both hope to achieve social justice. That is why a coalition between them is possible – and necessary. To bring both traditions together in a “theoretical coalition” is the goal of Ashley Bohrer’s book. (23)

History and the Dialogue

Bohrer begins by defining intersectionality and tracing the history of what was to become known as the intersectional tradition. There is a significant overlap between it and the Marxist tradition: most of these early theorists of the position of black women in American society paid special attention to questions of class, exploitation, and labor. Many were self-identified socialists or communists, active in various organizations of the socialist movement. (41–43, 78)¹

¹ This overlap is hardly surprising – while it is true that the socialist movement has never been free from issues of racism, sexism, etc. within its ranks, it is equally true that it has always stood at the forefront of the struggle against various forms of oppression. Moreover, Marxism has always been an important theoretical tool for marginalized groups who wanted to understand and challenge their position.

The core principle of intersectional thinking, as defined by Bohrer, is that of the non-hierarchy of oppressions. Different systems of oppression are mutually constitutive, which means that a) they cannot be separated from each other, neither in practice nor conceptually, b) none of them is more important than the others, and c) none of them is unilaterally causing the others. Oppression needs to be thought and analyzed on multiple levels simultaneously: personal, family, structural. Questions of identity are central to intersectional thinking, but identities are group-based, located within, and shaped by, social structures. (91–95)

It is this focus on identity and individual experience above all that Marxists have criticized. On the practical level, it supposedly leads to fragmentation and makes coalition-building impossible. (103) On the theoretical level, intersectionality is associated with identity politics growing out of poststructuralism, which has been criticized by Marxists as “idealist” and unable to account for real-world power structures. (106) This critique, however, is based on a misinterpretation: not only does intersectionality conceive identity in direct relation to social structures, but a focus on solidarity and coalition-building has always been a key principle of intersectional politics. (104)

Among the most prominent intersectional critiques of Marxism is that of Eurocentrism and androcentrism. Can a theoretical framework that was created to analyze the situation of white male factory workers be sufficiently “stretched” to apply to other populations as well? (168) As a counterargument, Bohrer devotes a chapter to the many Marxist and Marxism-inspired thinkers who have successfully applied its theoretical tools to issues of race, gender, or sexuality – from Marxist feminists and the concept of reproductive labor to theorists of colonialism and their work on primitive accumulation. (123–157)

Bohrer does not however deny that this critique needs to be taken seriously. On a practical level, if working-class unity is the necessary condition for a successful anti-capitalist struggle, how come it is never the white male heterosexual workers who are expected to disregard their particular position in favor of the interests of the whole? On a theoretical level, what is it about the social position of the white male factory worker that supposedly makes it universalizable, while other positions are thought of as inherently particular? (168–170, 251)

One could argue that what gives the proletariat its key role in the anti-capitalist struggle has nothing to do with gender, race, or even type of work in a narrow sense, but derives rather from its position within the capitalist system, which depends on it for its functioning while simultaneously denying it a proper place in the social whole. While Marxism has long proven its usefulness far beyond its original context, it is also true that failing to account for the particular historical conditions in which it was born would be to ignore the key insight of historical materialism: human theories and philosophies are never independent of the material conditions of the world in which they were created. In this sense, this critique is at least partially well-founded.

Disagreements: Exploitation and Oppression

The relationship between exploitation and oppression is a key point of contention between Marxism and intersectionality. For Marxists, there is no doubt that oppression is highly useful to capital: by giving relative privileges to certain groups, it both redirects their frustrations and gives them a stake in the system, thus dividing the working class (175–176); it also creates groups whose vulnerability makes them especially easy to exploit (190).²

Most Marxists – though Bohrer also cites a minority who do not share this view (193–196) – agree that oppression is produced by exploitation. To some, this means that exploitation is what *defines* capitalism, while oppression is historically contingent. (187) Bohrer recognizes the usefulness of this position: it can account for the way in which capitalism can adapt to local conditions while its core logic remains unchanged. She however also notes that it seems somewhat arbitrary: since there has never been a capitalism without oppression, why exactly is exploitation fundamental to capitalism and oppression is not? (188)

In another version of this argument, oppression emerges from exploitation as an ideological tool that helps solidify practices of exploitation by providing a justification for it. While exploitation and oppression eventually become completely enmeshed, there is nevertheless a clear, causal relationship between them. For example, while slavery was motivated by economic reasons, it could not have functioned without racial oppression and the accompanying ideology.³ (189–190)

Intersectionality, on the other hand, understands exploitation as one among many forms of oppression, or, more precisely, the form that oppression takes in the world of work. (193) This arguably allows for a better analysis of those forms of oppression with no obvious link to the economic sphere. The issue with it, however, is that the unique explanatory power of the concept of exploitation as defined by Marxism is lost.⁴ (195)

Part of the problem is that the object of analysis is not the same. While Marxism is capable of producing an analysis of oppression (unlike what many of its critics believe, it does not in fact claim that the social sphere is unilaterally determined by the economic sphere and therefore irrelevant),⁵ its ultimate goal is explaining capitalism. The reverse is true for intersectionality: while most of the intersectional thinkers mentioned by

² Examples include women, people of color, or undocumented migrants.

³ Bohrer cites this example from Walter Rodney. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1982), pp. 223–235.

⁴ An analogy can be drawn between the attitude associated with intersectionality and common liberal accounts, which use the word “exploitation” to refer to harsh work conditions. The latter ignores the original meaning of the term, whose real power lies in unmasking the reality behind the supposedly “fair and free” nature of the contract between the worker and the capitalist, thus showing how *all* waged work is problematic under capitalism.

⁵ Bohrer herself makes this argument – see pp. 161–163.

Bohrer agree that capitalism plays an important role in the mechanism of oppression, it is oppression, and not capitalism, that is the object of their analysis.

Bohrer's solution to the problem is to posit oppression and exploitation as two distinct, equally important, and mutually reinforcing phenomena; essentially – though she does not say this – confining Marxism and intersectionality each to its own sphere, within which it has better explanatory power than the other. (200–203) This solution, however, does not change the fact that the key principles of the two analytical frameworks are incompatible with each other.

Convergences: Contradictions and Dialectics

What the two traditions share is what Bohrer refers to as the dialectics of difference. Central to both their theory and their practical politics is the idea that the world we live in is one of contradictions and irreducible differences. This sets them apart from other traditions, most notably liberalism, which believes that all humans are essentially the same and any fundamental differences can (and should) be overcome. (225–226)

In Marxism, according to Bohrer, dialectics is the name given to the contradictions created by capitalism and their non-resolution. (208) For example, capitalism produces both extreme wealth and extreme poverty. Under capitalism, a legal (or formal) freedom and equality are the conditions of the possibility of actual un-freedom and inequality. (209)

While a Hegelian understanding of dialectics is driven by a need for unity, an eventual synthesis of the two opposites, Marxism espouses what Adorno has called *negative dialectics*, which rejects this synthetic moment, believing that any analysis grounded in a desire for unity or sameness is inevitably reductive. Intersectionality takes this view even further: contradictions and differences are not just to be accepted but welcomed as a source of creativity. (216–217)

For intersectionality, dialectics is a way of understanding how different axes of oppression interplay to produce irreconcilable demands on individuals. (218–219) Intersectional dialectics also allows us to analyze how we can all be both oppressors and oppressed at the same time, even within the same axis of oppression (see, for example, internalized misogyny). (222–223) Finally, intersectionality sees difference as the condition of possibility of radical collective action: different experiences of oppression give people different knowledge, which is the necessary source of ideas for new, radical solutions. (225)

To both traditions, dialectics means seeing the world as inherently contradictory. It also means that the structural and the individual are both essential to analysis: the structure is what shapes the individual experience (though it does not unilaterally determine it); the individual experience can give us unique information about the structure because every individual occupies a unique location within it. (227–229)

Practical politics

The traditional Marxist approach, according to Bohrer, is to base solidarity and collective action on commensurability or shared experience. She takes the recent debates about racial justice to illustrate the problem with this approach: while white allies have an important part to play in the movement, their solidarity cannot be based on commensurability. On the contrary, emphasizing what we have in common drowns out the voices of the oppressed, leading to further marginalization of those who are already marginalized. (232-233)

Another problem with this approach is that commensurability is a product of capitalism and is therefore something a true anti-capitalist politics should seek to subvert. (234-235) The principle of commensurability was born from capital's need for commodity exchange. When capitalism produces differences, they are group-based ones, such as race or gender, with a push towards intra-group homogenization.⁶ (243-244) When it seemingly embraces differences, it does so only in order to neutralize them, to "domesticate" the radical impulses that might otherwise grow out of them.⁷

Anti-capitalist politics, then, should seek to preserve and protect the incommensurable as that which makes us human beings, rather than just workers, or wheels in the capitalist machine in general. (248) There is also a tactical argument to be made: we can only organize from the position of incommensurability. (254) We find ourselves at different locations within the matrix of oppressions, but all of us are shaped by it in equal measure. Even so-called "privilege" is a type of deformation, wherein people's ability to empathize with their fellow humans is taken away by a structure of violence.⁸ (257-258) From this perspective, intersectionality seems to offer a better approach to practical politics.

The Way Forward

At times, Bohrer seems to commit the same error she points out in others, that of misinterpreting what she critiques. After arguing at length that Marxism is not in fact guilty of the economic reductionism that it is often criticized for, she nevertheless seems to suggest that the reason it needs a coalition with intersectionality is to balance out its focus on the economic sphere.

Her claim that Marxists see class identity as key to the anti-capitalist struggle, while refusing all other identities because they supposedly hinder collective action, (253) is

⁶ Indeed, reducing a person to their race/gender/sexual orientation/disability, etc., is a common tool of oppression.

⁷ In contemporary neoliberal capitalism, this is exemplified by the discipline of "diversity management," which has been gaining popularity in multinational corporations. (245)

⁸ This, of course, does not mean that the experiences of privileged people are in any way comparable to those of the oppressed, or that those who are complicit in oppression should not be held responsible for their actions.

problematic at best. Class *consciousness*, as it is usually understood in Marxism, can hardly be equated with class *identity*, as used in intersectional theory. In a similar vein, many Marxists would likely disagree that they base their politics on shared experience rather than shared goals: experience is usually understood to be a subjective category, while traditional Marxism seeks to base its politics on objective social relations.

Whether the book accomplishes its stated goal, to forge a “theoretical coalition” between Marxism and intersectionality, is questionable – not least because it is not clear what exactly a “theoretical coalition” should entail. Bohrer is adamant her aim is neither to synthesize the two traditions, nor to find their lowest common denominator. While such an approach is a reasonable one, the result seems to be to say that both traditions have made valuable contributions and have more in common than most realize – a somewhat underwhelming conclusion to a 250-page book.

Bohrer admits in the introduction that this book is a very personal project for her. It seems clear that she is motivated above all by frustration with both Marxists and intersectional theorists who refuse to see any value in the other while having only a very superficial understanding of each other. In this sense, the book makes a significant contribution to resolving many of the contested issues between Marxism and intersectionality, revealing them as mere misunderstandings.

To help overcome misunderstandings between different strands of the left is certainly a worthy goal in itself. In the face of instability and the growing strength of right-wing populism, the unity of progressive forces is crucial – making Bohrer’s book an important and well-timed contribution. And while, as both intersectionality and Marxism would agree, theoretical work should not be neglected, unity is best achieved through collective action itself.

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