

“INTERSECTIONALITY,” SOCIALIST FEMINISM, AND CONTEMPORARY ACTIVISM¹

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When I first read the term intersectionality, I put it into the category of similarly crafted terms --functionality, institutionality, positionality, performativity, governmentality, spatiality—that I see as abstruse humanities academic jargon. Younger scholars may consider them customary shorthand, but to an older scholar like me, they are troubling. This is, first, because I come from the era in which feminist/women’s/gender/LBTQ studies were connected to a largescale, radical social movement. I worried that terms like these operated to make academics ever more isolated, speaking only to each other. I feared that this vocabulary signaled, and contributed to, removing scholarly work from the sphere of advocates and activists. It is a language, I thought, that says “keep out.”

Second, as to intersectionality in particular, I thought, how is that different from the core premise of two centuries of socialist feminism: that multiple forms of domination interact and fuse? Since I came up in the strong socialist feminism of the 1970s, I was reacting to the ahistorical tendencies among progressive intellectual currents in the US, our American tendency to reinvent rather than building on older analyses.

Well, I was wrong, at least in part. Defying my jaded sensibility, intersectionality has come to signal both a new militance and a challenge to single-issue, single-factor analyses. True, the basic concept, that multiple forms of domination interact and even fuse into new forms, has a long history in Left feminism and anti-racist, anti-nationalist, and anti-colonial discourse. But it has morphed into something newly activist, with a large democratic outreach. An abstract term became an activist slogan. At the same time the concept has drifted toward emphasizing some aspects of domination while occluding others, especially economic inequality; and toward a pluralist, empiricist understanding of diversity that excludes matters of power.

In what follows I trace the antecedents of intersectionality in second-wave feminism, notably its socialist feminist stream, and then examine the work it is doing in early 2016.

¹ The germ of this essay was a paper on socialist feminism written for the 2014 Berkshire Women’s History Conference. I have taken one part of the original essay—an attempt to summarize the gist of the socialist feminist theory that was developed in the US in the late 1960s and 1970s—for use here. Then I got considerable help, for which I am most grateful, from Tracey Deutsch, Susan Stanford Friedman, Allen Hunter, and anonymous readers for *Gender and History*.

The socialist feminist tradition of intersectionality

The term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. When she invented it in 1989, she was speaking as a black feminist legal scholar, and all the four parts of that position are relevant here. Behind her insights lay, of course, the activist context of the civil rights and women’s movements of the 1955-1980 period. Behind her insights also lay the particular experience of black feminists criticizing the “sisterhood” claims of the dominantly white women’s liberation movement of the 1970s. Crenshaw is of the generation of legal scholars who developed, first, critical race theory² and then challenged it, in turn, with feminism, or what we might call critical sex/gender theory.

Crenshaw’s specific motivation grew from legal advocacy. She meant intersectionality as a critique of the limitations of a legal regime in which sex discrimination and race discrimination were two separate wrongs. Crenshaw, Patricia Williams, Mari Matsuda and other feminist legal scholars of color were seeking intellectual tools with which to force the law to respond adequately to cases where both race and gender discrimination were involved.³ Their writings were activist: even if not practicing litigators, they were immersed in feminist and civil rights lawyering discussions. Crenshaw cited a particular case, *DeGraffenreid v General Motors*, in which African American women were denied access to the better jobs. Federal courts dismissed the complaint because it fit neither race discrimination (because black men were not barred from better jobs) nor sex discrimination (because white women were not barred from better jobs.)⁴

² Critical race theory (CRT) began as a theoretical development in US law schools in the 1980s, which in turn was reacting to the hierarchicalism and race-blindness of critical legal studies. CRT also criticized early civil-rights scholarship that sought a race-blind legal system, with its focus on attacking legal discrimination without a deeper critique of structural race inequality. CRT focused on how law, lawyering, and courts helped produce and reproduce racism through their acceptance of an allegedly race-blind legal system.

³ Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of A Law Professor* (Harvard U Press, 1992); Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Race, Reform and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Anti-Discrimination Law,” 101 Harv. L. Rev. 1331 (1988); Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Intersectionality: The Double Bind of Race and Gender,” *Perspectives Magazine*, 2004, p.2 , on line at http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publishing/perspectives_magazine/women_perspectives_Spring2004CrenshawPSP.authcheckdam.pdf

⁴ The case can be found at [http://www.leagle.com/decision/1976555413FSupp142_1520.xml/DEGRAFFENREID%20v.%20GENERAL%20MOTORS%20ASSEMBLY%20DIV.,%20ETC.](http://www.leagle.com/decision/1976555413FSupp142_1520.xml/DEGRAFFENREID%20v.%20GENERAL%20MOTORS%20ASSEMBLY%20DIV.,%20ETC.;); Crenshaw

The legal idiocy of the *DeGraffenreid* decision also points to the limits of identity politics, and that too is part of Crenshaw's critique. Defining intersectionality as a critique of identity politics, she criticizes "the dominance of a particular orientation that disaggregates social problems into discrete challenges facing specific groups."⁵

Critical race theory and intersectionality may also have been influenced by the history of earlier Left, black Left, and feminist Left analysis of multiple forms of domination. The resemblances seem evident, but we know that social movements often rise in ignorance of what has gone before. Neglecting earlier social theory is practically a constant in social movements, which so often reinvent rather than recover and improve older ideas. When "second wave" feminism began, for example, most of us who participated had not learned from 19th-century women's rights advocates; we had not read the works of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Despite wearing T-shirts that turned Emma Goldman into a trendy heroine, we were largely ignorant of the legacy of anarchist, socialist, and communist feminists such as Josephine Conger-Kaneko of the Socialist Party or Mary Inman of the Communist Party. We were equally uninformed about America's social-democratic feminist legacy, from the Progressive through the New Deal eras. Similarly, many civil rights activists were unaware of the contributions of historic black and Latina/o intellectuals and activists, from A. Philip Randolph to Angelo Herndon, from Emma Tenayuca to Luisa Moreno. This was a loss, because many of them grasped and acted on the interconnection of the inequalities of class, race and sex. (It wasn't only our fault; we had no teachers.)

Ignorance of earlier traditions has always had some advantages for social movements. Starting anew allows activists to reject old paths that might have narrowed the universe of discourse, constricted ideas about what was possible. Younger feminists and anti-racist activists were free to invent new ways of organizing and to explore modes of domination that were previously regarded as "natural" or even "trivial. But we lost the opportunity to learn from our elders about how to theorize injustice and inequality, or how to strategize and operate in the American political structure.

sites it often, recently in African American Policy Forum, "A Primer on Intersectionality," which can be found at <http://www.aapf.org/publications/>

⁵ This critique of "single-axis" or "silo-oriented" analysis, however, is not the same as the complaints about identity politics made by, say, Todd Gitlin. That earlier critique was saturated with annoyance at feminists and other groups that formed autonomous organizations because they found their interests buried or marginalized when they tried to fit into white and male-dominated formations. Crenshaw was most definitely not criticizing the existence of separate black women's organizations.

Still, the women's liberation movement that leapt into history in the late 1960s was fully conscious of the more recent struggles from which it grew. Its mother was, of course, the civil rights movement. Many women's liberation founders been participants in that movement, and all were inspired and intellectually influenced by its ideas and practices. As a result, very few feminists of that era were unconscious of the virulence and institutionalization of American racism. Likewise the anti-Vietnam war movement educated a generation of women to question the righteousness of US foreign policy and the truthfulness of government. The women's liberation movement took its very name from anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa. So few second-wave feminists saw sexism as the only or even the main injustice.

Within women's liberation, the socialist feminist stream promoted ideas that closely resembled today's intersectionality. Organizationally, the largest groups with a socialist feminist identity were the Chicago Women's Liberation Union and Boston's Bread and Roses, and numerous similar groups developed in other cities. What was then called socialist feminism could today, in hindsight, be equally accurately labeled New-Left feminism. "New" because it rejected the authoritarianism of the Old Left, but also because it rejected the Marxian notion that class was the root of all other oppressions. Moreover, third-world (the term of the time) struggles, like those in Cuba, Vietnam and South Africa, helped socialist feminists escape the Cold War binary—i.e., positing the alternatives as communism or capitalism. For the most part, socialist feminists did not try to define what socialism was. We did not even try to imagine how it might work. In fact, the word "socialist" was irrelevant to much of this New Left feminism; many within this stream chose, on grounds of both honesty and strategy, not to use the word. In large part "socialist" at the time signified, simply, a feminism that recognized many vectors of domination, all of which should be challenged.⁶

⁶ This commitment to intersectionality was central to how the socialist feminism of the 1970s differed from Marxist feminism. The latter defended a politics in which class exploitation was the one privileged basis of analysis and injustice. Marxist feminism was the ideology of sectarian Marxist-Leninist groups, often calling themselves parties, that used the women's movement as recruiting ground. They included, prominently, the Socialist Workers Party, the Communist Party, the Progressive Labor Party, the International Socialists and several other smaller groupings. They retained the faith that the oppression of women was mainly a product of class society, and that Marxism or Marxism-Leninism contained a theory adequate to understand male dominance (and all forms of domination), and they focused pretty exclusively on anti-capitalist strategies. Socialist feminists, by contrast, had concluded that capitalism and class were by no means the only roots of male dominance—nor of racism--which both preceded and succeeded capitalism; and that male dominance showed great flexibility in its success in adapting itself to varied forms of social organization.

That analysis was promoted particularly influentially by feminists of color. Here I need to correct a myth about the women's liberation movement--that it consisted exclusively of white, educated, middle-class, young women. The women's liberation movement was mainly white and middle class, but to mark it as exclusively that serves to obliterate influential African American feminist groupings, actions, and writings. Feminist critiques were already simmering in the civil rights movement and soon the spirit of black power led many African Americans to organize separately. Many feminists of color organized their own groups. As historian Sara Evans has argued, "It simply will not do to erase the theoretical and strategic feminist voices of women such as Pat Robinson, Francis Beal, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Florynce Kennedy, Alice Walker, Elizabeth Martinez, Paula Gunn Allen and Shirley Lim."⁷ And many more. Nor should we neglect the history of the organizations they created, such as the National Welfare Rights Organization, Third World Women's Alliance, Black Women Organized for Action, the National Black Feminist Organization, the Combahee River Collective—in addition to the traditional black women's organizations such as the National Council of Negro Women (formerly the National Association of Colored Women) and the activist sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha. While black feminism was the largest influence, other women of color—Chicanas, Puerto Ricans, Asian Americans and Native Americans--also built separate organizations.⁸

These groups were articulating the concept of intersectionality in many different words and phrases. African American feminist Fran Beal of the Third World Women's Alliance coined the phrase "double jeopardy" in 1969,⁹ referring to the costs of being both black and female. Others soon began to use "triple jeopardy" to add in other inequalities. A decade later Combahee River Collective argued that "the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives."¹⁰

⁷ Evans, "Women's liberation: Seeing the Revolution Clearly," *Feminist Studies* 41 #1, 2015, p. 144.

⁸ Linda Gordon, "The Women's Liberation Movement," in *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements* (NY: Norton, 2014), pp. 95-96.

⁹ Fran Beal, "Black Women's Manifesto; Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," from a Third World Women's Alliance pamphlet, 1969, now available at <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/196.html>

¹⁰ This statement is available at <http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>

Yet another myth about the women's liberation movement--that it "broke off" from the New Left—needs correcting, especially in considering its intersectional orientation. The alleged split simply did not happen—certainly not with socialist feminists, and rarely among 1970s feminists in general. The myth of a break-up misidentifies arguments as divorces, and anger as separation or even fratricide. Socialist feminists raged at the arrogance and sexism of many New Left men—some of them our boyfriends—but nevertheless considered them comrades. In fact, it was common in the late 1960s and 1970s to refer to the entire aggregate of New Left movements as, simply, "the movement."¹¹ From this sense of being a part of a whole world of radical social movements came a suspicion of attempts to rank forms of oppression as worse or less bad than others. This position led, at best, to a healthy humility and to a refusal to discount others' claims of injustice; at worst, it meant giving equal weight to some hyperbolic claims of personal offense.

Correcting the myth of feminist/New Left break-up is vital to understanding the socialist feminist version of today's intersectionality. Because of its immersion in a broad New Left, socialist feminism never conceived of male dominance, or patriarchy, as the most important or most basic form of injustice and oppression. Socialist feminism considered women's inequality inextricable from class, race, gendered, sexual, militarist and environmental structures of injustice, soon adding in disability and various forms of sex and gender queerness. This holistic analysis derived from the multiplicity of progressive movements that surrounded us. In other words, this version of intersectionality was not only a theoretical stance, but also a perspective on activism.

Moreover, refusing to judge or rank injustices comparatively allowed for freedom, even spontaneity, in developing projects and coalitions. One marker of the socialist feminist groups was an absence of theoretical PC-ness and splitting along sectarian theoretical lines. A thousand flowers and weeds bloomed. Socialist feminist groups were decentralized. Sub-groups launched and ran different projects, and no one seemed interested in evaluating whether, for example, workplace organizing was more or less important than reproductive rights organizing. Autonomous projects and groups did not hinder but instead helped in creating coalitions, because no individual or group had to suppress their identities in order to cooperate. True, the

¹¹ At the same time the myth of the feminist/New Left divorce derives from conceiving the New Left as a homogeneous episode, centered around SDS and the young white men who led it. In addition, the myth implicitly excludes civil rights from the New Left and treats feminism as exclusively white, a matter I will deal with below. This story of a feminist-New Left split narrows, impoverishes, and bleaches the New Left. And it replicates the white student movement's political priorities: for example, it ranks critique of the university/military/industrial complex as more basic and consequential than, say, critique of structural racism.

socialist feminist groups often focused on working-class and anti-racist concerns, but they did not reject projects with narrower constituencies. This intersectional orientation functioned, at best, to reinforce a healthy humility toward diverse priorities. (Do I need to say that the “best” was not always attained?)

Socialist feminist insistence on multiple forms of injustice applied also to the question of agency. It rejected the search for the one key group--the working class, women, the Third World—that could or should lead the way to that transformation. No single campaign automatically took precedence. Socialist feminists marched against the war, against nuclear power, for the Black Panthers and the Young Lords, for Earth Day, for gay rights, for welfare recipients, and more.

These influences, combined with small-group consciousness raising, produced several new analyses related to this early version of intersectionality. For example, socialist feminists expanded the Marxist notion of exploitation to include other structures in which some benefited from the labor of others, as, for example, in household and child-raising labor. Men could be beneficiaries of these services but so, too, could prosperous women who hired poorer women to do the work. As care work assumed an ever larger proportion of jobs, in a context of a shrinking welfare state, this was by no means an abstruse theory but central to later organizing projects. Socialist feminists also learned from “radical feminists”¹²—those who argued that male dominance was the primary form of injustice—the importance of sexual and personal abuses, such as rape and harassment, the suppression of female sexuality, the costs of compulsory motherhood. Socialist feminists expanded the radical-feminist analysis to examine how these forms of oppression affected poor women and women of color disproportionately. Socialist feminists learned from black feminists to challenge talk of normative or “proper” family construction and sought to honor all household forms. They supported, for example, the black-led National Welfare Rights Organization. (Two decades later it was socialist feminists who lobbied, unsuccessfully, against the Clinton administration’s repeal of Aid to Families with Dependent Children, leaving the US as the only wealthy country not to guarantee aid to poor children.) In the early development of an environmental movement, the socialist feminist analysis insisted that pollution was created not by any single force but by many: a macho master-over-nature attitude, consumer capitalism dependent on enticing people to buy ever more goods and disposable goods, corporate profiteering, imperialism, and racist politics that sought to protect only upscale neighborhoods.

Within the socialist feminist perspective were hints of a challenge to the concept of gender, but they were unfortunately often ignored. For the young college graduates who formed the majority in the women's liberation movement, discovering femaleness as a political subjectivity was so thrilling that it often made them

¹² Note that “radical feminism” in the UK meant something different.

oblivious to less privileged constructions of gender. The intense bonding among second-wave feminists, promoted by consciousness-raising as an intimate process, sometimes led to romantic assertions of universal sisterhood. Acknowledging multiple forms of oppression did not always create understanding that gender itself took different forms. Moreover, many people slipped from using gender as an analytic concept into conceiving gender as an identity. In fact, we have learned since, there is no such thing as “pure” gender. No one person ever had a “pure” gender identity; everyone’s gender included class, race, religion, body, ethnicity, etc. But the theory of the 1970s often fell into a universalizing rhetoric.

Intersectionality in the universities

The intersectionality concept transmogrified as feminism entered the universities and colleges. Begun in the 1970s, these programs arose from the agitation of scholars shaped by the movement, and were often initiated and pushed into existence by bottom-up pressure from students. Soon the programs were institutionalized. Women’s studies provided more jobs for some of the rapidly increasing number of young women earning PhDs in the humanities and social science fields such as anthropology and sociology. Women’s studies drew big enrollments and its faculty won respect in their disciplines. But in the 1990s, activism ebbed while women’s/gender studies programs did not.

As women’s studies grew, its faculty expanded to include a generation of humanities scholars trained in postmodern, post-structuralist theoretical approaches. Many worked in areas dominated by “theory,” and theory increasingly came to mean postmodern, linguistic, ontological and/or epistemological theory rather than social theory. Feminist thought gained considerable sophistication from these scholars. They contributed major insights that helped build today’s understanding of intersectionality: Feminist scholars exposed the delusion of generalizing about women, especially generalizing from the experience of privileged western urban women. They challenged essentialist binaries and emphasized the fluidity of identities and subjects. They showed that gender, in its fluidity, helped organize all sorts of cultural forms. They increasingly conceived of their topics not as embodied women but as concepts, among which gender was prominent.

Some women’s-studies scholars resisted the turn toward gender. Some thus objected to the development of a men’s-studies field. Some objected to the postmodern view that experience was inevitably constructed within language, such that non-linguistic experience was denied. Some worried that the postmodern turn constructed a closed field of discourse, such that there were no sources outside a closed discursive field for theorizing subversive agency or resistance. And some lamented the increasing distance between scholarly and activist feminism. They saw postmodern theorizing as deflecting the focus from women as political subjects who could mobilize for social change. But much of this criticism arose from a non-intersectional view, in which they clung to the hope that women as a whole,

united by common experiences, could join in political action. That view was not only naïve but also potentially oppressive, in its adherence, however unconscious, to the gender norms of dominant groups.

It should not be surprising that in this era of reduced activism, postmodern feminist theory also grew more pessimistic. Some of this change was beneficial, as the New Left period had underestimated the difficulties of attaining sex/gender justice. I doubt that postmodernism's intellectual influence was the source of this political pessimism. But there was certainly a fit between postmodernism and pessimism about feminist coalition-building: The postmodern denial of the stability of subjects made it difficult to see how groups of women could join in collective strategies on behalf of women as a general group.¹³ As transgender people "came out" in larger numbers, the very notion of "women" lost specificity. This problem was a figment of the theory, not of the theorists. Many postmodern feminists were activists within their universities or scholarly societies. Feminist scholars often led in struggles against racism in academia. But like all scholars, they tended to see academia as their home and the sphere in which they made a contribution as feminists. (I include myself here.)

As intersectionality became a buzzword, it could be used as a prescription for a diversity that did nothing to change the fundamental distribution of power.¹⁴ Diversity today often refers to a kind of representation akin to tokenism. Moreover, intersectionality sometimes signals a kind of pluralism, in which identities are represented as equivalents on a field of competing interest groups. The concept reminds me at times of an earlier concept much used by feminists, "difference," of which I was equally critical.¹⁵

Moreover, intersectionality understood as diversity often rests on essentialist assumptions. This happens in two ways. First, intersectionality identifies individual bodies as representing perspectives, assuming, for instance, that a female body will defend women's interests, a black body will defend the interests of blacks, a transgendered body the interests of transgendered people. (As I write, feminists divide between supporting Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton, a divide based in part on the different weight they place on having a female as president.) Second, as Jennifer Nash argues, this focus on representing various categories of people presupposes innate homogeneity within each category, another essentialist

¹³ One example: Increasing concern with "post-coloniality" in postmodern theory has served to de-emphasize the struggles of women in the global south.

¹⁴ Sirma Bilge, "Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality from Feminism Intersectionality Studies," *Du Bois Review* 10 #2, 2013.

¹⁵ "On Difference," an essay on feminist theory, *Genders*, Spring, 1991.

assumption. Thus efforts to bring representatives of different races or sex/gender identities may assume that each person represents her or his race, sexual preference, etc.¹⁶ Nash argues, as did the late José Muñoz, to resist the pull of “identitarian models of relationality.”¹⁷

Many of my students, influenced by women’s/gender studies, seem to understand intersectionality as representing human beings of different types and/or identities. Thus a group including members of various races and sexes is intersectional. I understand how this misunderstanding can arise, because it is partly true. And it indicates the difficulty in teaching and learning theory, which carries the risk of teaching slogans. But it is important to conceive of, say, gender and disability and whiteness as abstractions, none of which actually exists in an individual; they are useful abstractions in describing social institutions and practices, but in an individual these qualities fuse and form complex identities. They never actually exist separately.

Perhaps intersectionality needs to homogenize categories to some degree, suggesting that, say, African American women have some common interests. If these categories are to avoid essentialism, they have to rest on experience. Moreover, the categories must also reflect that common interests can be constructed, or discovered, through group experience. But the metaphor of intersection as often used suggests that only African American women can understand their oppression, that only the disabled can understand disability, etc. This claim appears in some recent criticism of white women’s appropriation of intersectionality talk, suggesting that if whites talk this way they are denying women of color the authority to define their own experiences. Sociologist Sirma Bilge, for example, denounces the “whitening of intersectionality.”¹⁸ There is some truth in the premise that experience provides greater understanding than study, but surely one would not want to claim that it is impossible for those without a given experience to learn from those who have the experience. As many people of color

¹⁶ In a recent speak-out by students of color at NYU, I was shocked to hear how often these students faced professors who called on them to represent their group. Instructors would turn to a black student and ask, what do African Americans think about this? Or to a student in hijab and ask, what do Muslims think?

¹⁷ Jennifer Nash, “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality,” *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* II #2, 2013, pp. 4-5. The quotation is from José Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” *Signs* 31 #3, 2006, p. 677.

¹⁸ For example, see Sirma Bilge, “Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality from Feminism Intersectionality Studies,” *Du Bois Review* 10 #2, 2013, p. 412.

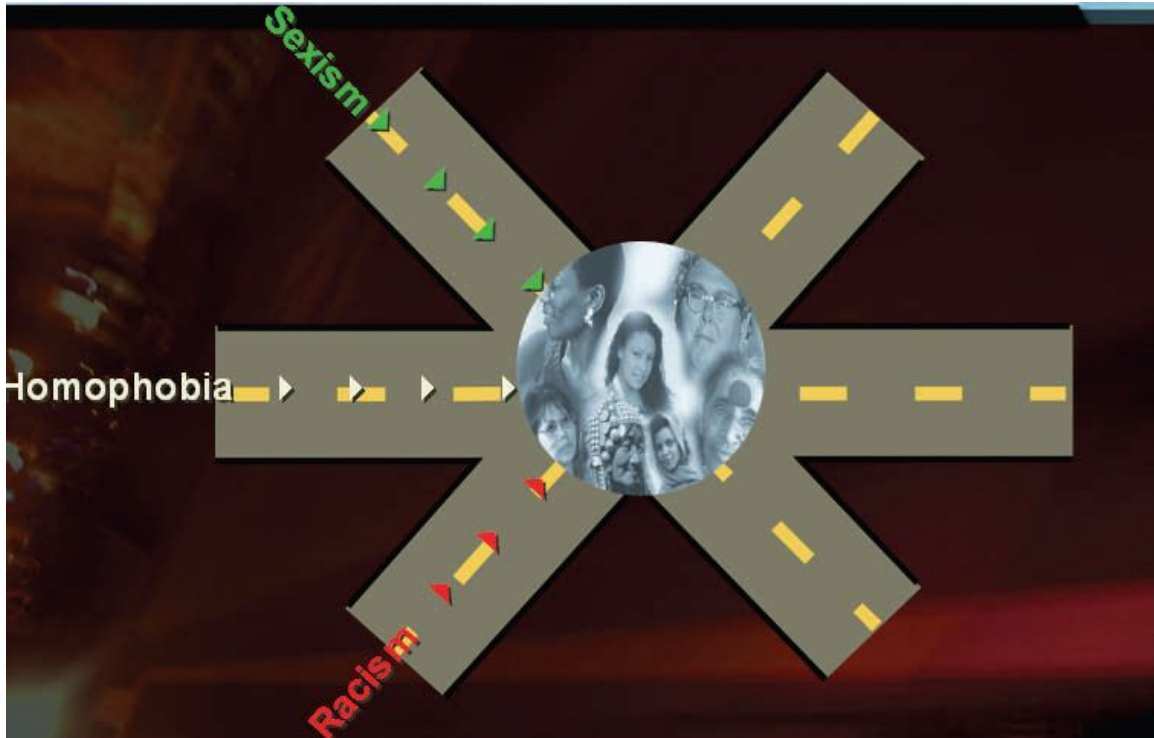
have had to point out to whites, deferring to any and every person of color on the subject of race was just another form of racism.

Recently sociologist Leslie McCall has responded to this problem, suggesting that one could avoid attributing sameness within categories by deploying the categories only provisionally and relationally. In other words, she writes, intersectionality should concern itself with “relationships among social groups and, importantly, how they are changing, rather than with the definition or representation of such groups per se ... on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories ...”¹⁹ This is a promising call for a more supple and historical use of social categories, and one that does not remove unequal power from relationships.

This critique of identity politics also points to a problem with intersectionality as a visual and spatial metaphor. An intersection is a crossing of lines or planes, with each one understood as distinct. Thus if we imagine gender and whiteness intersecting, each may be understood as a distinct aspect of a person. Note this image from “A Primer on Intersectionality:”²⁰

¹⁹ Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs* 30 #3, spring 2005, pp. 1785-2786.

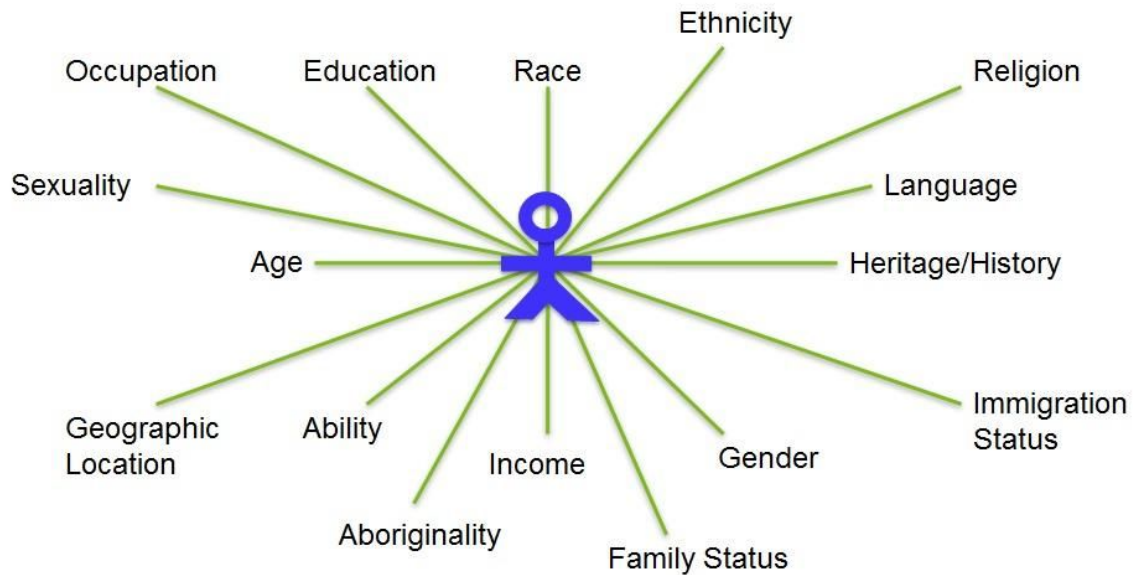
²⁰ African American Policy Forum, “A Primer on Intersectionality,” p. 4.



This visual representation treats various forms of prejudice as separate attitudes, separate paths that intersect. It also denies the fusion of these attitudes, and especially their structural instantiation, such that many who may be free of sexist or racist or homophobic attitudes nevertheless profit from institutionalized sexism, racism and homophobia. Moreover, the image of crossing paths has sometimes been understood to negate the possibility of challenges to power that unite dissenters who travel different paths—precisely the opposite of intersectionality’s positive meaning.²¹

Furthermore, if one tried to use this image as a model, and to specify every social category or prejudice as a path--gender, race, religion, class, disability, family experience, etc.--the intersection would become so crowded with criss-crossing paths that each individual would live at her own, individual intersection. Consider this image:

²¹ For an example of this reading of the term, see Kevin B. Anderson, “Karl Marx and Intersectionality,” in *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture*, 15 #1, winter 2016, available at <http://logosjournal.com/2015/anderson-marx/>



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Such specificity would make strategizing collective activism impossible.

The intersectionality concept also began to focus on some social positions more than others. Of particular concern in reducing the potential of intersectionality as a concept is the neglect of class inequality. One example: A SUNY-Albany School of Social Work syllabus contains a “module” on intersectionality that lists gender, age, ethnic group or race and career identities as the influences to be considered.²³ This neglect of class or economic inequality—and I am aware that these two are by no means identical-- is a common and over-determined phenomenon. Identifying classes in the Marxian sense is difficult if not impossible today, in the US in particular, as deindustrialization and union-busting have decimated a working class and forced so many workers into a precariat of casual, impermanent jobs. Meanwhile the unemployed constitute an ever larger proportion of our population, and they are disproportionately also young people, people of color, and prisoners. Even if we toss out the concept of class and refer instead to economic stratification, people’s cultural identities do not map neatly onto these various economic strata. Postmodern theories of intersectionality may neglect class because it is harder to represent economic positions as linguistically constructed and fluid, given the rarity of economic mobility in the US. More recently the silence about economic inequality has been supported by the power of the Black Lives Matter protests, and

²² <http://www.zettaelliott.com/intersectionality-positionality/>

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http://www.albany.edu/ssw/efc/pdf/Module%202_1_Intersectionality%20Activity%20Final.pdf

the immediacy of police brutality and killings, disproportionately inflicted on black Americans.²⁴ The fact that upscale men and women of color—such as Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, tennis star James Blake, and Princeton professor Imani Perry—are also vulnerable to abuse by police demonstrates, of course, that racism may be more “visible” than economic exploitation. Nevertheless, surely economic injustice is a principal problem of most black Americans.²⁵

Intersectionality and activism

In the last few years something surprising happened: The term intersectionality became part of a new youth internet vernacular. Intersectionality is now part of the lingua franca of social media. Obviously feminist websites discuss it approvingly, but respectable nonfeminist websites also employ it as a category and buzzword, also approvingly. Huffington Post uses the term as a category of articles in its archive. So does Tumblr. The *International Business Times* uses it in a headline over an article on feminism.²⁶ The Khan Academy of Medicine has a powerpoint posted on YouTube that explains it.²⁷ There’s an Intersectionality Vegan website.²⁸ Everyoneisgay.com calls it a “lovely little word.”²⁹ The Simon Fraser University Institute for Intersectionality Research features a faculty member who studies intersectionality in cooking.³⁰ There are intersectional fashion blogs.³¹ An on-line “High Priestess” posts a sexy semi-nude photo of herself with the announcement that she is

“Seeking:

²⁴ Here again we see the lack of historical consciousness, as the new movements rarely identify with the older struggles against police brutality.

²⁵ And white Americans too: the economic losses suffered by whites feed dangerous racist populisms throughout the “West.”

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<http://www.ibtimes.com/feminism-2014-hobby-lobby-gamergate-intersectionality-1763627>

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2kUpKP18z8>

²⁸ <http://www.intersectionalvegan.com/>

²⁹ <http://everyoneisgay.com/intersectionality-in-activism/>

³⁰ https://www.sfu.ca/iirp/affiliates_regional.html

³¹

<http://morningsidereview.org/essay/fashions-latest-trend-pushing-the-boundaries-of-beauty-with-intersectional-identities/>

- intersectionality
- a love for shared cooking
- anal-retentive levels of clean
- misandry if possible”³²

Celebrity talk websites speak intersectionality fluently. YouTube vlogger comedian Akilah Hughes explains it on Boing Boing.³³ XOJane criticizes Madonna because she spoke up for feminism but didn’t mention intersectionality.³⁴ The on-line magazine Sinuous defends Beyoncé in the name of intersectionality from allegations that her way of dressing is too sexual.³⁵ MTV star Franchesca Ramsey uses the term on the website MarySue.³⁶

Because intersectionality talk is so widespread, it can be the subject of jokes. From the Urban Dictionary: 1. A term used in feminist discourse to mean "I may drag all my issues into every discussion". 2. A methodology of making any issue too complex to be resolved, thus keeping academic theorists in a job.³⁷ A different on-line dictionary calls it a “Concept used to describe ways in which shitty social constructs like -isms & -phobias are interconnected (intersectional! geddit?) and not magically separate issues.”³⁸

It is also the butt of attacks, ranging from polite to threatening. Some are expressions of anti-political-correctness backlash: *New Statesman* deputy editor Helen Lewis writes, “Intersectionality! Boo! Are you scared yet?... In the last year or so, it feels like intersectionality has become a subject that it is [sic] too painful to talk about online, too mired in grievance and counter-grievance. And that serves no one: when an issue becomes toxic like this, the only people willing to talk about it are the dogmatists at either end of the spectrum, and the attention-seekers.”³⁹ At the North American Animal Liberation website, which promotes violence against people that

³² <https://twitter.com/YeoshinLourdes/status/511706126996762624>

³³ <http://boingboing.net/2015/04/09/explaining-intersectionality-a.html>

³⁴ <http://www.xojane.com/issues/madonna-feminism-intersectionality>

³⁵ <http://www.sinuousmag.com/2013/05/beyonce-feminism-4th-wave/>

³⁶ <http://www.themarysue.com/franchesca-ramsey-intersectionality/>

³⁷ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=intersectionality>

³⁸ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=intersectionality>

³⁹ <http://www.newstatesman.com/helen-lewis/2014/02/uses-and-abuses-intersectionality>

abuse animals—“Big AG [agriculture], vivisectionists, hunters, trappers, circus employees, breeders, and even the purveyors of the products of animal suffering”—one of the enemies is “Intersectional Animal Liberation.”⁴⁰ Several posts call intersectionality an anti-Zionist plot.⁴¹ Defending Israeli policy, David Bernstein, President and CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, writes that “We may not be able to discredit intersectionality with Israel across the board, but we can limit its reach.”⁴² *The Times of Israel* headlines that it is the “bastardization of black feminist theory,” i.e., intersectionality, that has produced campus protests against Israeli policy.⁴³

Like so much web traffic, intersectionality evokes the shouting, bullying, rageful posts found on many Right-wing blogs and social media sites. An angry writer who calls herself “Sophia a Gnostic Goddess of Wisdom” denounces intersectionality with a photo of a woman’s head being attacked with an icepick, beside the caption “This is your brain on Cultural Marxist Queer Feminist Theory.”⁴⁴ Lord Frontbottom calls it “Cultural Marxist bullshit mainly espoused by self-loathing white leftist nutjobs and noisy minorities who live in the west and enjoy all it's benefits, whilst bashing everything it stands for. Best ignored. *Intersectionality is why I'm a useless twat and a failure in life and it's all your fault.*”⁴⁵ The editor of Reductress.com, who calls himself an “intersectional men’s rights advocate,” informs us that “men have shorter lifespans than women because their wombs give preferential treatment to girl babies.” He is intersectional because he welcomes men of every class and race.⁴⁶ Other on line definitions include:

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<https://animalliberationpressoffice.org/NAALPO/2015/10/02/the-absurdities-of-pacifism-and-intersectional-activism-in-animal-liberation/>

41 <https://twitter.com/drmmartin>; <http://www.thecollegefix.com/post/25511/>

42

<http://www.jta.org/2016/01/04/news-opinion/united-states/op-ed-the-anti-israel-trend-you-ve-never-heard-of>;
<http://forward.com/opinion/328585/bds-and-the-rising-danger-of-intersectionality/>

43

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/bastardization-of-black-feminist-theory-propels-israel-bashing-on-campus/>

44 <https://twitter.com/hiddentara/status/679546105277845504>

45 <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=intersectionality>

46 <http://reductress.com/post/actually-im-an-intersectional-mens-rights-activist/>

“Hating anyone who has privilege. (Men, Straight people, White people, Cis people)”
“The act of spreading hate by calling it equality.”
“Extremist ideology that is the polar opposite of racism. (But don't call it reverse racism, because then you're worse than a racist)”⁴⁷

Some criticism is ill-informed but understandable nevertheless. A poor white man associates it with being told that he has white privilege: “So when that feminist told me I had `white privilege, I told her that my white skin didn't do shit ...Have you ever spent a frigid northern-Illinois winter without heat or running water? I have. At 12 years old were you making ramen noodles in a coffee maker with water you fetched from a public bathroom? I was. Have you ever lived in a camper year-round and used a random relative's apartment as your mailing address? We did.”⁴⁸ A few raise serious, critical questions. A Columbia University student blogger, himself a man of color, reverses the standard anti-identity-politics critique of intersectionality, arguing that when multiple interest groups have combined, they water down their demands to lowest-common-denominator goals.⁴⁹ Jess Martin on Feminist Current worries that some intersectionality talk is just a new way to say that my feminism is better than yours.⁵⁰

Many define intersectionality as placing more people of color, or women, or feminists of color into key positions. Managers and personnel officers regularly use intersectionality talk. One black TV star notes that when employers claim that they can't find qualified people of color, they are making a “meager attempt at intersectionality.”⁵¹

The concept is commonly narrowed to refer to African American feminists, or in the negative to white racism, a narrowing that parallels some scholarly usage. This usage can take on an anti-highbrow slant: The “Rogue Feminist” argues that white women should not use the term at all because whites don't experience “it”: “once whiteness gets their grasp on something they love that Black people have created, they have to make it more and more inaccessible to Black people while also

⁴⁷ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=intersectionality>

⁴⁸

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gina-crosleycorcoran/explaining-white-privilege-to-a-broke-white-person_b_5269255.html

⁴⁹ <http://aeternalus.com/school/when-intersectionality-hurts-effective-activism/>

⁵⁰

<http://www.feministcurrent.com/2015/07/24/fff-millennials-co-opting-intersectionality-the-new-way-to-say-my-feminism-is-better-than-yours/>

⁵¹ <http://www.themarysue.com/franchesca-ramsey-intersectionality/>

whitening it to be no longer noticeable as a Black creation.”⁵² Others associate intersectionality exclusively with women. Ava Vidal cites, “The view that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity.”⁵³ Or exclusively with black women: “10 Things White Feminists Should Know To Better Understand Intersectionality,” headlines another blog.⁵⁴ One woman complains, “I see white feminists throwing around the word intersectionality all the time to gain brownie points but when it comes to putting that into practice, they have no idea what to do.” She says that white feminists should only use the term if they have permission from the inventor of the term or black feminists in general to do so.⁵⁵ Intersectionality is commonly a mode of attacking white feminists in particular, such as when Franchesca Ramsay, MYV star, comments that “white feminists have a tendency to separate the idea of “woman” and the idea of “of color” as if “women of color” aren’t a thing, completely missing the entire point of intersectionality.”⁵⁶ The on-line Jewish magazine *Tablet* attributes Israel’s discrimination against non-European Jews to a failure of intersectionality.⁵⁷

After race, the two categories most often included in the calls for intersectionality are sexual queerness and disability, usually along with non-whiteness. Stephanie D. Johnson, also known as Najma, is a “deaf-blind black panqueer” community educator

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<http://theroguefeminist.tumblr.com/post/69108181677/if-youre-white-dont-call-yourself-an>

53

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10572435/Intersectional-feminism.-What-at-the-hell-is-it-And-why-you-should-care.html>. The author does not indicate what textbook she refers to.

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<http://empathyeducates.org/10-things-white-feminists-should-know-to-better-understand-intersectionality/>

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<http://timemachineyeah.tumblr.com/post/72697038500/can-we-white-feminists-call-ourselves>

56 <http://www.themarysue.com/franchesca-ramsey-intersectionality/>

57

<http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/197169/an-intersectional-failure-how-both-israels-backers-and-critics-write-mizrahi-jews-out-of-the-story>

who explains different examples and situations where intersectionality exists.⁵⁸ Even the authors of *Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsberg* write that intersectionality is “a part of feminism that's crucial for women of color, lesbian women and women with disabilities -- basically anyone who's not white and straight ...”⁵⁹

Despite these reductionist understandings, however, something important is happening here: intersectionality has become part of the vocabulary of young activists. “Black Lives Matter” protests are dense with intersectionality-talk. The movement “upholds a mission to be explicitly intersectional, leading to a movement that mobilizes for *all* black lives and advocates for an array of racial injustice issues that affect those in the community.”⁶⁰ The women who disrupted Bernie Sanders’s campaign speech in Seattle were “practicing intersectionality.”⁶¹ Moreover, because of its association with feminism, intersectionality talk signals black women’s leadership in the movement. These young women are often disproportionately gay, transgender, or otherwise queer. Two key leaders in Ferguson, Alexis Templeton and Brittany Ferrell captured media attention when they married each other. “When people say ‘leaderless,’ ” says Ashley Farmer, a postdoctoral fellow in Duke University’s history department, “they are often just not seeing the women who are spearheading it.”⁶²

Although intersectionality talk appears most frequently in African American activism, some groups use the label to authorize a broader reach. Millennial Activists United and Black Youth Project 100 are building ties with Latina/o groups. BAJI, Black Alliance for Just Immigration, explains why it seeks to build an intersectional movement by quoting from Audre Lorde: “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single issue lives.” BAJI also reverses the call, explaining “Why the Migrant Rights Movement Must Show Up for Black Lives.”⁶³ Speaking for the Farmworker Advocacy Network, Justin Flores asserts “the

⁵⁸ <http://intersectionalsouls.weebly.com/what-is-intersectionality.html>

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http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/ruth-bader-ginsburg-intersectionality_us_563128fae4b00aa54a4c728b

⁶⁰ <http://www.dailydot.com/politics/black-lives-matter-queer-trans-issues/>

⁶¹

<https://usilive.org/opinions/challenging-white-supremacy-and-practicing-intersectionality/>

⁶² http://inthesetimes.com/article/17551/the_women_behind_blacklivesmatter

⁶³ <http://www.blackalliance.org/buildingintersectionalmovements/>

intersectionality of farmworker and fast-food worker issues.”⁶⁴ Katie Hinchey refers to the rising protests as “The Creation of an Intersectional Movement,” and writes “It’s bigger than racism, too.”⁶⁵

Intersectionality is a mantra for other causes as well. In the fast food workers’ fight for a \$15/hour minimum wage, Philly15now calls for “\$15 an hour and intersectionality,” and cites the “intersectionality of discrimination.”⁶⁶ A spokesperson for the climate justice movement headlines, “Intersectionality Isn’t Just A Win-Win; It’s The Only Way Out.”⁶⁷ “We need to be viruses of intersectionality,” writes someone from the St. Louis Schools Project.⁶⁸ At the World News Trust, Mickey Z blogs about “Black Lives Matter, Veganism, and Intersectionality.”⁶⁹ The Intersectional Souls Project, a movement of black deaf youth, declares that “The Deaf (DDBDDHH, BIPOC, LGBTQIA⁷⁰) community is a perfect example of a blend of intersectional souls.”⁷¹ Last year’s Power Shift youth climate conference featured a workshop called “Why the Climate Movement Must Be Intersectional.” That approach, using intersectionality to reach beyond single-issue

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<http://www.ncfan.org/blog/2014/11/19/fight-for-15-and-the-farmworker-movement.html#.VUf6nmbuydM>

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<https://serendip.brynmawr.edu/oneworld/identity-matters-being-belonging-becoming/allblacklivesmatter-creation-intersectional-movement>

66 <http://philly15now.org/tag/fight-for-15/> and http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ian-reifowitz/check-out-the-emerging-co_b_7055884.html

67

<https://www.popularresistance.org/intersectionality-isnt-just-a-win-win-its-the-only-way-out/>

68

<http://stlouisschoolsproject.blogspot.com/2015/04/ferguson-and-fight-for-15-washington.html>

69 <http://worldnewstrust.com/blacklivesmatter-veganism-intersectionality-mickey-z>

70 DDBDDHH refers to Deaf, Deaf-Blind, Deaf-Disabled, Hard of Hearing. BIPOC refers to Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Color.

71 <http://intersectionalsouls.weebly.com/>

activism characterizes National Nurses United, who lobbied to stop Keystone XL; “Undocuqueers”—undocumented, LGBTQ immigrants—who lobbied for citizenship rights for same-sex couples; the Cowboy Indian Alliance, representing white western ranches and Native Americans, joined forces against Keystone; Forward Together, an Asian-American group, produced an LBGT guide to the Affordable Care Act.⁷²

References to activist uses of intersectionality could be multiplied by an evening’s web-surfing, but I hope these few serve to mark an unusual development: an academic term has become the motto for a new uptick in activism. Kristen Moe describes this journey as “The Evolution of “Intersectionality: From A Theory to A Way to Fight Back.”⁷³ When intersectionality is an activist slogan, there is of course less rigorous examination of what it means. Instead it is a signal, even a signature.⁷⁴ In activist parlance, it announces that the user speaks from the position of the subordinated—people of color, feminists of color, people of non-standard sexualities. It may also herald a desire to build coalitions among many groups who suffer injustice.

Intersectionality discourse has brought some issues to light but failed to do the same for others. For example, despite female leadership in Black Lives Matter, injuries to women receive far less attention than those on men in reporting and awareness of police abuses. Even with a powerfully evocative slogan, Say Her Name, introduced by the African American Policy Forum in the spring of 2015, murders of black women are known only to a fraction of those who are familiar with Black Lives Matter. The now almost iconic names of those killed by police are male. By contrast, many fewer even recognize the names Alberta Spruill, Rekia Boyd, Shantel Davis, Shelley Frey, Kayla Moore, Kyam Livingston, Miriam Carely, Michelle Cusseaux, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Yvette Smith, and Tanisha Anderson. As Black Lives Matter leader Marsha Chatelain writes in *Dissent*, “Even if women are not the majority of the victims of homicide, the way they are profiled and targeted by police is incredibly gendered,” and goes on to discuss sexual harassment by police, notably the rapes committed by police officer Daniel Holtzclaw. These crimes are not typically thought of as part of the Black Lives Matter issues.

⁷² <http://www3.alternet.org/activism/evolution-intersectionality-theory-way-fight-back>
<http://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/cowboys-and-indians-camp-together-to-build-alliance-against-keystone-xl>

⁷³ <http://www3.alternet.org/activism/evolution-intersectionality-theory-way-fight-back>

⁷⁴ As a signal, this reminds me of why “Occupy” did not need a specific program; its message was perfectly clear.

In another limitation of intersectionality discourse, black feminist posts on the internet still express hostility primarily to white feminism as opposed to mainstream and Right-wing racism. It is as if white feminists bore the greatest responsibility for disrespect and injustice toward women of color, which is not the case. Those more responsible—politicians, governments, employers, religious leaders, for example—are rarely mentioned. In fact white feminists are the least racist category of whites. Moreover, these criticisms serve to erase the work of white feminists who have devoted themselves to anti-racist activism.

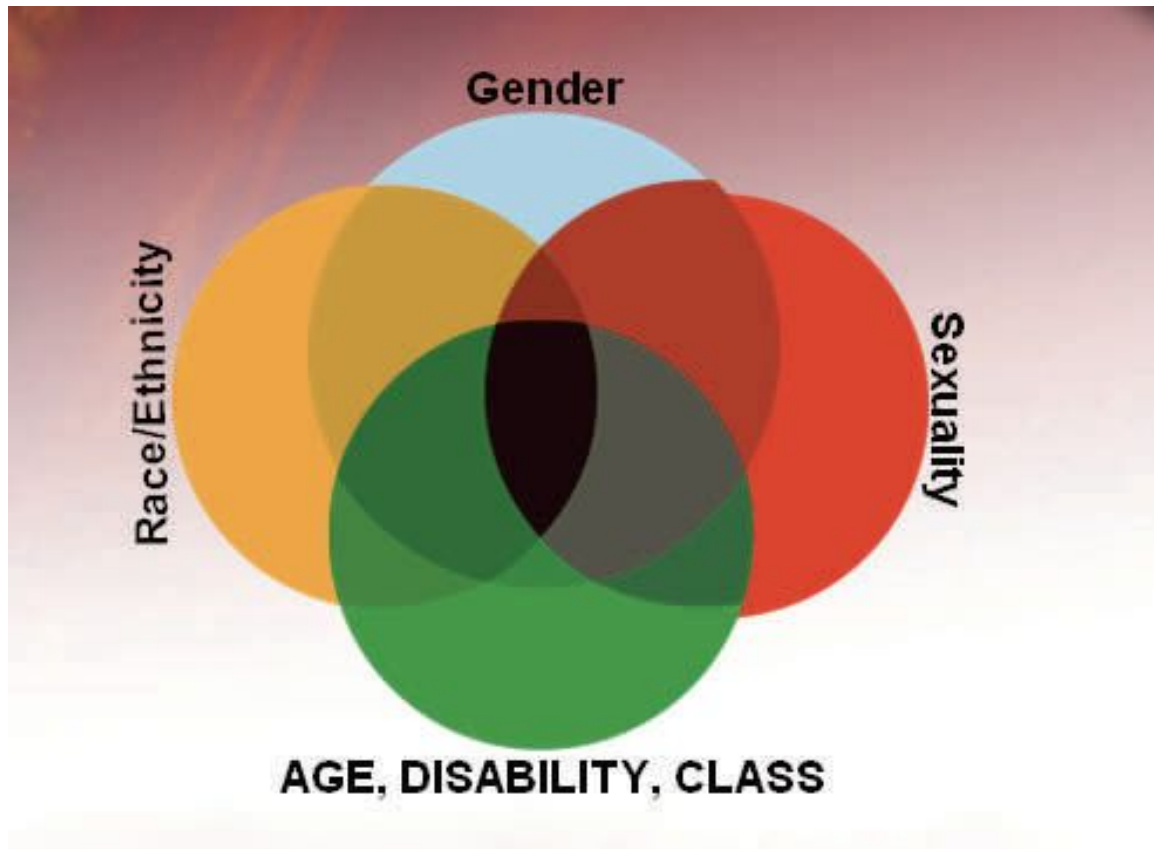
Meanwhile, class analyses are almost completely absent in both academic and popular intersectionality talk. It is as if inequalities of wealth are beyond the scope of critique. An example: “While White women fight for the right to work, minority women beg for the right to *not*.”⁷⁵ Here the author not only assumes that all white women and no black women have access to enjoyable jobs, but she also denies the existence of differences within her two categories. Few of the core activist/intersectionality websites that I have discovered—whether predominantly black or predominantly female or both--discuss the base problems of low-income people, such as the prohibition on federal funding for abortion, the high cost of decent child care, the lack of paid family and sick leave, unemployment, prison conditions, school defunding, prescription medicine costs, low minimum wages and wage theft. As I write, the Bernie Sanders campaign themes suggest that race and class have become an either/or issue for reform, with whites focusing on economic inequality and blacks on police brutality, verbal expressions of racism, and social exclusions.

This chart from the “Primer on Intersectionality” illustrates the demotion of class or economic inequality:⁷⁶

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<http://empathyeducates.org/10-things-white-feminists-should-know-to-better-understand-intersectionality/>

⁷⁶ African American Policy Forum, “A Primer on Intersectionality,” p. 3.



The absence of class-based protest is, of course, a marker of the times, not a creation of intersectionality talk. Even the recent Occupy movement, with its condemnations of Wall Street's "greed" as the source of injustice, had no class analysis. After all, no examination of actual economic inequality could describe the US as divided between a 1 percent and a 99 percent, an analysis that lumps migrant farmworkers, undocumented home care workers and fast food servers into the same category as physicians and tenured college professors.

Nor has intersectionality discourse expanded much into a global perspective. A few writers discuss the intersection between domestic and global injustice in relation to Israeli treatment of Palestinians.⁷⁷ But thus far I see few other connections articulated on the internet.

In the light of these limitations, it could be argued that the intersectionality concept has accommodated to, even helped secure, a neoliberal version of feminism, a feminism that does not challenge unequal power within nations and among nations. That is a charge that I do not wish to consider at this time. But it is worth noting that the causes listed above, with the exception of reproductive rights, are all cheap: they are not directly economically redistributive. Nor, with the exception of the fight

⁷⁷ Students for Justice in Palestine and the student network of Jewish Voice for Peace do this: <https://www.facebook.com/events/875180379193187/>

against rape, do they redistribute power fundamentally. Whether intersectionality as concept or slogan could gain traction in those directions is uncertain. Whether it will lead only to tokenism and diverse “representation” or to real power is likewise uncertain.

Still, whatever its limitations, activist intersectionality consciousness has developed beyond the ideas of 1960s/70s New Left socialist feminism. Intersectionality today calls for recognizing and respecting a broader array of identities and causes, bringing together blacks, Latina/os, feminists, queers, lesbians and gays. Intersectionality consciousness has left the 1990s world of academic jargon and joined that of vernacular understandings. Among scholars, intersectionality has delegitimated some of the white and elite assumptions about women and gender—notably, rejecting universalizing claims--that characterized some 1970s feminist work. Intersectionality has worked in tandem with postmodern insistence on fluidity and variety, to the extent that studying gender becomes a study of indeterminacy, a definite step forward. Moreover, to the extent that many activists are themselves college students, there has been cross-fertilization between academics and activists.

But among us academics, intersectionality has remained an abstract discursive trope more than a premise for investigation. Even as we recognize diversity, and the double or triple or otherwise multiplied “jeopardy” and micro-aggressions that the subaltern experience, we need to examine how these jeopardies work in practice, in culture, in the economy, in politics. That was, after all, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s original contribution—an unpacking of the assumptions that produced law. I would hope that scholars could continue to de-sloganize intersectionality and use it as a guide to research questions.