

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6511>



Book review

Bohrer's loving, fuming critique

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Monday 6 April 2020

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“Ashley Bohrer’s Marxism and Intersectionality is indispensable reading for socialists trying to understand how class, race and gender mesh.” *Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism* by Ashley J. Bohrer, Bielefeld (Germany): Transcript, 2019, distributed by Columbia University Press, \$45.00

For generations of socialists, the force that would create socialism was the labor movement, period. Beyond that there were “Questions” for workers to debate: the Woman Question, the National Question, the Negro Question, the Jewish Question. Only the rise of the civil rights movement, Black Power and the second wave of feminism changed these “Questions” for the left into major social actors it had to come to grips with.

From the 1970s on Marxist feminists and Black and Latinx Marxists were transforming revolutionary theory, in an attempt to do justice to these different social forces. By the 1980s, with unions in decline and the socialist left disintegrating, many radical theorists moved beyond Marxism altogether. In particular, African-American feminists like Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw theorized “intersectionality” in an ambitious, fresh approach to mapping the enmeshment of racism, gender and the workplace.

Today, however, a new generation of young socialists, inspired by the Bernie Sanders campaigns and the wave of teachers’ strikes, has been reviving a “class first” Marxism. Many of them share a knee-jerk rejection of “identity politics” – a phrase that can mean many different things. Generally (unlike earlier generations) they know they have to at least pay lip service to anti-racism, feminism and LGBTI rights. But often they haven’t engaged much with anti-racist, feminist or queer thought on the left, and especially not with intersectionality.

“Visibly fuming”

Ashley Bohrer, herself an activist on the left as well as a philosopher at Notre Dame, has little patience with the ignorance of many socialists. She describes sitting in one conference where leading white Marxist scholars claimed to demolish intersectionality in talks “riddled with errors, caricatures, and hubristic pronouncements,” while “many young people, people of color, and women,” ignored in the discussion, sat “visibly fuming.” (13)

Bohrer has read widely in the work of Marxist feminist and anti-racist thinkers as well as intersectionality theorists, and thought deeply about what they have to say. She is rightly frustrated at the facile dismissals of intersectionality by Marxists – and vice versa, because some intersectionality theorists dismiss Marxism as quickly and ignorantly as the other way around.

Examples drawn from activism lead Bohrer to insist on the usefulness of both Marxism and intersectionality. Her interest in them “was really born out of [her] work in activist communities,” from Occupy Chicago to Jews for Justice in Palestine to the International Women’s Strike. (9) “[A]rguments produced in the street ... often speak with more clarity and precision” than academic ones, she writes, (21) and both Marxism and intersectionality have deep roots on the streets.

What’s more, Bohrer points out that intersectionality theorists have honored ancestors who were themselves deeply influenced by Marxism. These include Black Communists ranging from Claudia Jones, a pioneering theorist of “super-exploitation” and “triple oppression” in the 1940s, to Angela Davis over the last six decades, who has recently

described her own work as intersectional. Black Socialist and later Communist W.E.B. Du Bois stressed the “simultaneous significance” of race, class, and gender. Elizabeth Martinez, at one time a Chicana full-timer for SNCC, in 1972 called capitalism, racism and sexism three “faces of the same enemy.” The Combahee River Collective’s renowned 1979 statement, a monument of Black feminist and anti-capitalist thought, was a precursor of Collins and Crenshaw. Audre Lorde and bell hooks have made many of the same connections.

Loving critique

Rather than “policing the boundaries” of theoretical traditions, Bohrer advocates “loving critique.” And she sees plenty to critique, on both sides of the Marxism/intersectionality debate. In fact, as intersectionality theory has been appropriated by gender studies departments, its initial focus on racism has blurred, and its always-uncertain grasp of class has loosened even more. (Palestinian Marxist Rafeef Ziadah pointed out at a recent panel on Bohrer’s book that today intersectionality is even glibly used as an alibi by human resources departments.) Among non-Marxist radicals claiming inspiration from intersectionality theory, Bohrer sees and rejects an obsession with “privilege checking,” which can reduce people and their arguments to mechanical reflections of their whiteness, maleness or straightness.

And Bohrer ruefully admits that some Marxists do claim to explain accumulation and crisis in completely gender- and race-blind ways – when reality is never gender- or race-blind – or in Eurocentric ways. Some Marxists have theorized capitalist history relying exclusively on examples from English agriculture and industry. Yet Marxist works like Eric Wolf’s *Europe and the People Without History* have shown how central wealth accumulated from African slavery and the plunder of the Americas and Asia was to the very beginnings of capitalism.

A difficult but productive read

Even Bohrer’s clear writing and gift for finding telling examples don’t always make *Marxism and Intersectionality* an easy read. The book gets particularly dense when she sets out to identify just what distinguishes intersectionality theory from earlier explorations of class, race and gender. Many readers, like me, may finish the book without fully committing to memory her five definitions and six postulates of intersectional thinking.

Still, the key points are there. They include the insistence that no one oppression is consistently experienced as more important than the others. And no one oppression unilaterally causes the others. Class exploitation and other forms of oppression are, in a term Bohrer coins, “equiprimordial.” Moreover, different oppressions have to be thought “simultaneously and in conjunction with one another.” (92) Each individual lives in several different social locations at once.

Racism was key to Eric Garner’s murder by the New York Police Department, for example, but class is important in understanding why the police went after Garner for selling cigarettes on the street while the far greater crimes of corporate criminals go unpunished. Similarly, while slavery had deep economic wellsprings, racism is essential to understanding what Orlando Patterson called the “social death” that Black slavery entailed in the Americas.

Another key insight of intersectionality is that every group is heterogeneous, cut across by the different realities of the people who make it up. Far from uncritically celebrating identities, Bohrer points out, intersectionality theory sees every identity as a complex coalition. As Linda MartÃn-Alcoff writes, for example, workers can make common cause across their differences, but only by working through their differences, not by ignoring them. Solidarity can never be

based purely on sameness or on a lowest common denominator. Bohrer therefore agrees with David Roediger, a Marxist pioneer of whiteness studies, that the left must reject a choice between class-wide projects like universal healthcare and race-specific demands like reparations.

Moreover, while racism and sexism serve the interests of capital overall, sometimes they even clash with the interests of capital. This happened when "ripe Californian crops lay rotting in the fields because levels of anti-immigrant policy have reached such heights that many undocumented people have stopped working to harvest them." (190) For reasons like these, Bohrer says, an "intersectional frame" is needed for "good, careful, deep class analysis." (112)

Coalition or synthesis?

This leads her to disagree with a number of other Marxists who have read intersectionality theory seriously and tried to respond to it. She criticizes the work of David McNally and Susan Ferguson, for example, who she says argue that intersectionality theory's useful insights can simply be "absorbed" into Marxist feminist "social reproduction theory." Bohrer discusses social reproduction theory positively and at length, but sees it as limited by its initial focus on "the situation of the working class housewife." She doubts that social reproduction theory, "developed to respond to white, working-class, heterosexual, married, cisgender, able-bodied" women, can "respond productively, sensitively, and profoundly to the situation of people who fit none of these social locations." (170n19) Here I think Bohrer underestimates the power of social reproduction theory. In fact Sara Farris' *In the Name of Women's Rights*, which Bohrer briefly mentions, uses social reproduction theory brilliantly to shine a spotlight on the oppression of immigrant women on the bottom rungs of the European labor market.

Bohrer is not entirely clear on how Marxism and intersectionality should be brought together. At one point she writes that one possible response to the issues between them is a synthesis of the two theoretical approaches. (118) More often, though, she disclaims any desire to unify "intersectionality and Marxism into one uber-theory," instead seeking to hold onto "the creative and dynamic tensions between them." (23)

Here Bohrer is not terribly convincing. In my view, merely having Marxism and intersectionality exist side by side, as two mutually respectful but detached traditions, would undermine some of the key contributions that Marxism should bring to the encounter. The Marxist feminist understanding of gendered capitalism as a coherent though contradictory mode of social production and reproduction makes it possible to understand our world order as a whole, in a way that intersectionality on its own does not. And the Marxist understanding of the capitalist mode as possessing an inherent dynamic that enables us to understand social change and transformation, not only (obviously) as products of struggle, but also as a potential grounded in objective reality.

I also have reservations when Bohrer approvingly cites intersectionality theorist Ange-Marie Hancock's description of "the relationship between the 'oppressed' and 'oppressor' as multivalent and contingent." (171) Bohrer herself stresses the need to analyze "the complicated and contradictory position of working class people as inhabiting both oppressed and oppressive positions within capitalism." (172) Her reminder that white/male/straight/cisgender workers can play oppressive roles is well taken and important. To my mind, it underscores Lenin's central argument that we need to build a working class movement that goes beyond narrow interest-group consciousness and becomes a tribune of all the oppressed.

Marxists can learn from the nuanced appreciation of the complexities of oppression that intersectionality has to offer, and Bohrer's book is a contribution to understanding these nuances and relations. But only a synthesis of the two traditions, founded on an unequivocal commitment to fight all oppressions, can equip us well to change the world.

24 March 2020

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