

Book Review

Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory

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As its title indicates, Patricia Hill Collins' *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* intervenes into significant conversations about intersectionality as a theoretical framework for looking at social problems in the global west. The term 'critical' in the title could take the reader on two different interpretive paths. On one hand, it announces that intersectionality is part of the field of noteworthy contemporary social theory. On the other hand, it signals intersectionality's belonging with strands of social theorising which have had co-constitutive genealogies with social movements, thus mutually shaping each other's analytical terms and political agendas.

Collins' scholarship has been crucial to the study of oppression as an interlocking system of power relations, which she termed the 'matrix of domination' in her seminal 1990 work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Throughout her work, she has consistently foregrounded the relevance of knowledge production in the study of social issues, calling attention to differential lines of access to epistemic privilege, particularly with regard to black women's knowledge, experiences, and politics.

Intersectional modalities of social analysis are rooted in the work of civil rights activists such as Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells, and later on to black lesbian feminists like Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and the Combahee River Collective. By asking how, when, and toward what ends categories of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, nation, and citizenship are deployed, intersectional analyses unearth complex structures of social, economic, and political inequality and power which shape experiences of multiple, interdependent, and simultaneous oppression. Collins' volume is an analytical tour de force of remarkable depth which astutely demonstrates that intersectionality must remain connected to resistive knowledge production projects and social justice movements.

In arguing for intersectionality's place within the field of critical social theories, Collins engages with vast and varied sources in an effort to map and elucidate its critical theoretical possibilities, objectives, modes of analysis, and context-specific practices. Her theoretical work and secondary analysis reach across social theories and socio-political practices, and in doing so, she foregrounds important dialogues that are crucial to theorising through social action, and most importantly, to bringing about social change.

The analytical category of intersectionality was coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to account theoretically and methodologically for violence experienced by women of colour and migrant women at the confluence of USA race and gender regimes. It soon crossed the disciplinary boundaries of legal studies into all the disciplines and inter-disciplinary areas clustered into the larger field of social studies. Over the course of the past three decades, intersectional analysis has become the preferred framework of inquiry into inequalities structured by race, class, and gender violence. Its influence is also evidenced by the expansion of its geographical

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deployment across the globe to illuminate structural violences experienced by different kinds of marginalised groups.

This book is more than a mere investigation of the theoretical or methodological aspects of intersectionality. In fact, Collins argues that the containment of intersectionality within academic research could ossify its productive openness. In the light of the countless and harrowing instances in which social theories have been co-opted by systems of domination, Collins calls for explicit and sustained processes of self-reflection regarding the interrelations between intersectionality's 'own critical analyses and social actions' (2019: 4). Collins' double project of simultaneously mapping the language of intersectionality while keeping it open as an analytical framework is brilliantly rendered by the formal aspects of her writing; multiple lines of questioning intersperse with her rigorous exegesis. Her numerous questions disrupt the reader from passively receiving her terms and conclusions, interpolating them into the dialogical engagement that keeps intersectionality open toward complexity through ongoing connections with other resistive knowledges.

Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory is organised into four parts, each consisting of two chapters. The first part, 'Framing the Issues,' provides an introduction to the terminological registers of intersectionality as they are employed across the heterogeneous fields of the social sciences, philosophy, and the humanities. In the opening chapter, 'Intersectionality as Critical Inquiry,' Collins unpacks the meanings of terms such as 'theoretical,' 'critical,' and 'social' in the contexts that employ intersectionality as an analytical metaphor, a heuristic mode of inquiry, or a paradigmatic framing. Chapter 2, 'What's Critical about Critical Social Theory,' pursues the proposition that intersectionality is not only 'a social theory in the making' but, most significantly, a social theory that is interwoven with social change. Collins foregrounds the knowledge production and social transformation projects of three schools or disciplines of critical analysis—the Frankfurt School, British Cultural Studies, and Francophone social theorisation.

More specifically, she looks at 'reflexive accountability' in Max Horkheimer's formulation of critical theory under 20th century European fascism, Stuart Hall's idea of 'articulation,' and Frantz Fanon's theorisation of liberation within contexts of racism, colonialism, and anti-colonial struggle at a time when the francophone theoretical field was dominated by existentialist ideas of freedom, individual consciousness, and agency. Collins' examination of these three strands reconstructs invaluable connections between intersectionality and the historical use of theorising in struggles against fascism, colonialisation, and racial inequality. Each individual project of social transformation has shaped our current understandings of transformative knowledge and could inform the self-reflexive practice intended to prevent the co-optation of intersectionality by projects that contribute to the 'unequal participation in knowledge production' (2019: 81).

Part 2, 'How Power Matters—Intersectionality and Intellectual Resistance,' examines intersectionality's links, commonalities, and discontinuities with projects of intellectual resistance spurred by 'people who are subordinated within domestic and global expressions of racism, sexism, capitalism, colonialism, and similar systems of political domination and economic exploitation' (2019:10). Chapter 3, 'Intersectionality and Resistant Knowledge Projects,' stages a conversation between critical race studies, feminism, and decolonialism—three knowledge projects that render visible and foster resistance to the power structures that shape and legitimise the dominant questions of contemporary social theory; the author reveals that the practitioners of these three strains of critical theory ground knowledge production on strong ties with their research constituencies. The insights collected from their research participants are mobilised not only toward generating knowledge but also toward 'fostering social change' (2019: 118). Epistemic resistance unsettles structures of power that uphold inequalities within and outside academia.

Chapter 4, 'Intersectionality and Epistemic Resistance,' the normalisation of inequality within academia and publishing—the differential valorisation of social theorists themselves, who bear the marks of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, and ability (2019, 131). By revisiting Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional work—spanning legal, academic, public engagement, publishing, institution-building, and local and global activist contexts—Collins foregrounds the importance of intersectional theorising in an expanded field that transcends academia. She calls attention to the epistemic violence of testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering, which suppress and elide the ideas of subordinated epistemic agents.

In the particular case of intersectionality, the author calls attention to the elision of the epistemic agency of 'the Black people, women, colonised subjects, poor people, stateless people, and similarly subordinated people whose social action created it' (2019: 152). Collins warns against the pursuit of 'intersectionality's academic respectability' by alliance with agents of epistemic power who are ultimately invested in devaluing resistant knowledge. She identifies dialogical methodology as the better strategy for stimulating intersectionality's theoretical development. Collins argues that dialogical engagement with multiple 'interpretive communities,' 'critical theories,' and 'resistant knowledge projects' is bound to set in motion internal dialogues and self-reflexivity *vis-à-vis* its own 'constructs, premises and practices' (2019: 153-154).

Part 3, 'Theorising Intersectionality: Social Action as a Way of Knowing,' explores how social action and experience are invaluable modalities of knowing and theorising within but also outside spaces of resistant

knowledge traditions. Chapter 5, 'Intersectionality, Experience, and Community,' stages a dialogue between Black feminist thought and American pragmatism. At the centre of her examination Collins places the constructs of 'experience,' 'community,' and 'social action.' Through her critical intersectional rethinking of these terms, she illuminates the hidden vectors of gender, race, indigeneity, and nationalism that shape lives across the scales of the individual, the family, various kinds of collectivities, the nation, and beyond. Through the lenses of 'experience' and 'social action,' social worlds are rendered more complex than a mere 'constellations of individuals' (2019: 14). The different angles provided by various instantiations of Black feminist thought (Ida B. Wells-Barnett's Anti-Lynching Campaign, Black women's engagement with solidarity politics, and their contemporary engagement with Black Lives Matter) and American pragmatism (John Dewey's philosophy of experimentalism, community, participatory democracy, dialogue, and creative social action) lead Collins to identify 'experience' and 'community' as vital components of methodologies that further position social action as a robust way of knowing.

Chapter 6, 'Intersectionality and the Question of Freedom,' continues Collins' explorations of the question of liberation—a topic previously introduced through her reading of Fanon and existentialist philosophy. Black people's freedom constitutes life-long social justice pursuit for Collins. Here, Collins stages a conversation between the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Pauli Murray. Collins' engagement with Murray is notable for the archival excavation of a less circulated thinker. By placing side by side these two differently located thinkers of oppression and freedom, Collins exposes two different modalities of subjectification and analytical-category formation, which have significant theoretical implications for intersectionality.

Within the framework of existentialism, De Beauvoir's thinking builds an argument for women's oppression that relies on recurrent analogies among age (childhood), class, gender and race. Rather than exposing differences in location, experience, privilege, social action, and politics among women, Collins argues that De Beauvoir's comparative thinking suppresses intersectional thinking and ultimately restrains the agency of existential freedom. On the other side, Collins positions Murray within the framework of visionary pragmatism of Black women's social thought and community work. Unlike De Beauvoir's masterful yet decontextualised presentation of women's oppression, Murray's engagements with different systems of power (more precisely, race, class, nation, gender, and sexuality) is thoroughly context specific and primarily driven by her commitment to advancing the social justice agendas of 'the African American community, [...] the labor movement, the women's movement, the social justice actions of religious organisations, and broader initiatives in support of American democracy writ large' (2019: 26). The fact that Murray's critical thinking is embedded in the particulars of activism sharpened her understanding of relational differences, the terms of coalition building, and the conditions of flexible solidarities. Ultimately, Collins' inclusion of Murray in the genealogy of critical social theory is in itself an act of institutional change.

Part 4, 'Sharpening Intersectionality's Critical Edge,' opens with chapter 7, 'Relationality within Intersectionality,' which analyses three modalities of relational thinking: additive frameworks, approaches that foreground processes of articulation, and analytics of co-formation. Each analytical framework is approached genealogically and critically appraised through specific case studies (such as revisitations of Beauvoir and Murray alongside Marxist social theory for additive models; Murray's creation of the term 'Jane Crow' or French feminist Colette Guillaumin's construct of 'sexage' for relational thinking through articulation; and the metaphors of borderlands, jazz, and the spider's web in the case of co-formation). In each case, Collins points out the framework's specific contributions to our current understanding and practice of intersectional social theorising.

For me, Collins' commitment to positioning intersectionality as a continuously evolving field is visible in her strategic side-stepping of a critical stance in relation to additive frameworks. Additive approaches to oppression are often criticised for combining distinctive systems of oppression in ways that fail to capture their interlocking functioning. Collins stresses that additive frameworks have been essential in shaping categorical innovation by challenging the 'logic of segregation' and dominant Western beliefs in 'classification, objectivity, linearity, and empiricism.' (2019: 228). Thus, challenging the logic of separate categories may become a recurrent battle as we cross disciplinary boundaries, travel across geographical space, and commit to new political causes.

The last chapter of the volume, 'Intersectionality without Social Justice,' examines the deployment of race, gender, disability as relational formations within the logic of eugenics. Attending to different historical contexts, Collins interrogates categories of difference that have grounded the political visions and social engineering programs pursued by eugenic policies. She unpacks the combinations of difference categories that gave salience to dis/ability in order to justify the exclusion of racialised or gendered individuals from citizenship, education, work, and housing. Collins places intersectional analysis (which is generally perceived to be social justice focused) in juxtaposition with eugenics (a prominent case of social injustice) in order to highlight the malleability that 'constitutes intersectionality's promise and danger' (2019: 285). She ultimately compels readers to consider the implications of engaging in intersectional analysis without deep consideration of the 'ethical commitments [that] influence our inquiry and practice' (2019: 219). For me, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* is a book that cannot be missed by scholars, activists, and students of all disciplines.

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