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Enough with the Caricatures: Now is the Time for Solidarity

Janneke Toonders

In *Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism* Ashley J. Bohrer argues that the “work of changing this world will have to be done in conversation with both of these theories” (27). The book is a monograph dedicated to bringing Marxism and intersectionality into a – long overdue and very welcome – conversation. Bohrer’s personal motivation stems from her dissatisfaction with how these traditions usually approach one another; for, although both are theories on “the structure of injustice in the world” (19), they tend to approach each other with derision, resulting in caricaturist (mis)understandings. The book aims to “move beyond this intra-left stalemate” (14), since a more active engagement between Marxism and intersectionality could create the basis for a “theoretical coalition between perspectives” (23).

The main objective of the book is to understand how gender, race, sexuality, and class are constituted under capitalism. Capitalism, in this sense, is understood as “the grammar” of the world, insofar as it produces and maintains a whole range of oppressive and exploitive practices (14). These practices are particularly structured by the connections between race, class, gender, and sexuality. To be clear, Bohrer does not argue that phenomena such as colonization, racism, or heteropatriarchy can be fully accounted for in an analysis of capitalism. Nevertheless, she contends that such an analysis is needed for challenging, and hopefully uprooting, contemporary systems of exploitation and oppression.

Importantly, Bohrer does not believe in the rigid distinction between academia and activism. Marxism and intersectionality are two intellectual projects that are dedicated to causing a radical intervention in the world (21). Noteworthy is the consideration of the history of activism that is present in both Marxism and intersectionality throughout the book. Thus, while the book is mainly a theoretical exploration of the two traditions, a deliberate effort is made to consider actual struggles and movements. Bohrer’s appeal to activism is also reflected in her own account of a possible shared future of the two traditions. Ultimately, the book works towards a “coalitional politics” (253) grounded in a particular understanding of solidarity that will be able to mobilize a true transformational power.

The desired theoretical coalition is built up in three stages: “Histories”, “Debates”, and “Possibilities”. Since Bohrer must first demonstrate how the two traditions can be drawn together, the first two parts of the book are mainly devoted to providing a survey of both perspectives’ thinkers and their theoretical positions. It is important to keep in mind that Bohrer treats both Marxism and intersectionality as internally heterogeneous traditions. According to her this allows for a much broader scope, one which includes thinkers who have contributed to, are in dialogue with, and have been influenced by, either Marxism or intersectionality.

The first chapter especially – cleverly called “Chapter Zero” – lays the groundwork for the book by giving a broad overview of different thinkers who had affiliations with both traditions. In doing so Bohrer wants to demonstrate in what sense there

is a certain historical and theoretical overlap. The main focus of the first chapter lies on the period between the 1920s and the 1980s, where critical thinkers came into contact through shared struggles (41). Bohrer traces the connections between the two traditions in early twentieth century activism, where there was a “massive upsurge in black participation in socialist, communist and Marxist organizations in the United States” (42), to the late twentieth century, where new approaches such as the jeopardy approach and standpoint theory were developed. Additionally, Bohrer considers the precursors of intersectionality, since this was only fully developed during the 1980s. The positions of thinkers such as Claudia Jones, W. E. B. Du Bois, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and many more, testify to a certain common ground between the two traditions.

Subsequently, the second chapter explores the full-blown theories of intersectionality, by discussing several “positions shared by most if not all intersectional theorists” despite “internal debates” (85). After discussing five definitions of intersectionality (respectively offered by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Leslie McCall, Patricia Hill Collins, Ange Marie Hancock, and Vivian May), Bohrer reconstructs “six postulates” that serve as broad principles on which nearly all intersectional thinkers agree (84, 91). These postulates are also central to Bohrer’s own argument. Insights such as the “inseparability of oppressions” (i.e. viewing oppressions as “mutually constitutive”; 91), or the claim that “oppressions cannot be ranked” (i.e. the “rejection of primacy”; 92) are crucial for the arguments she makes later on.

Demonstrating that Marxism and intersectionality are not “two completely exogenous traditions” (78) allows Bohrer to engage more specifically with why and how these traditions diverge in contemporary debates. After all, despite their somewhat shared history there have been numerous debates between the two traditions. Chapters three through five elaborate on these debates, and how they have been dominated by mutual misunderstanding. Bohrer attempts to show how these misunderstandings are grounded in certain caricatures rather than in accurate comprehension. She thoroughly engages with the Marxist critiques of intersectionality which rely on the arguments that the latter is a form of identity politics, that it is postmodern, and that it is liberal. This is followed by her discussion on intersectionality’s critiques of Marxism, according to which Marxism is class reductionist, essentially Eurocentric, and homogenizing of the proletariat.

Surely these caricatures may be true for some Marxists and for some intersectional thinkers, and as such, Bohrer’s point is not that these caricatures are completely unfounded. Rather, she believes that the “best versions” of these two traditions have a certain affinity, while the caricatures are much closer to the worst versions (20). These caricatures – as exacerbated tendencies existing within both traditions – should therefore be taken as a warning; in this sense, Bohrer argues, their mutual misunderstanding could actually be quite informative.

While continuing to engage extensively with other thinkers, Bohrer explicates her argument in the book’s third part. The general aim of this last part is to map new possibilities for theory (academia) as well as for the organization of movements (activism) by shifting beyond the supposed stalemate. In order to do this, Bohrer begins by examining

the relation between oppression and exploitation for fully understanding the system of contemporary capitalism. This is followed by a discussion of the method of dialectics as a way of reading capitalism's mechanisms and operations. Finally, in the last chapter, the question of organization and the notion of solidarity is revisited.

In the sixth chapter, Bohrer rethinks the relation between exploitation and oppression. On the one hand, structures of exploitation are usually understood as the systematic taking advantage of workers' labor and their products. On the other hand, structures of oppression are seen as forms of systematic subjugation based on race, gender, sexuality and so on. Generally – though there are certainly exceptions – Marxists have seen oppression as a consequence of exploitation, while intersectional thinkers have viewed exploitation as a form of oppression (187, 193). Inspired by intersectionality's rejection of hierarchizing oppressions, Bohrer proposes to render exploitation and oppression as "equiprimordial" (196). From this perspective, capitalism is a system which has both as its constitutive logics: "they are equally fundamental, equally deep-rooted, and equally anchoring of the contemporary world" (198–199). Hence, no analysis of a phenomenon will ever be complete without taking into account the interplay between oppression and exploitation.

To demonstrate why we should understand oppression and exploitation as equiprimordial, Bohrer offers the historical example of chattel slavery. Without doubt, an analysis of chattel slavery must take into account the exploitation of the enslaved's labor; this analysis cannot be complete, however, without also considering the racist ideologies that were equally fundamental in sustaining slavery. Chattel slavery was racialized exploitation, but the capitalist profit motive cannot fully account for the structures of racial oppression. Furthermore, the logics of oppression and exploitation distinctive of chattel slavery were also permeated with gender and sexuality. Hence, Bohrer asserts: "neither exploitation nor oppression can separately capture the phenomenon" (200). An equiprimordial analysis can do justice to the multiple yet related shapes of oppression and exploitation under chattel slavery (without reducing one to the other). Considering both oppression and exploitation as co-constitutive logics of capitalism (in all its historical formations), Bohrer thus paves the way for a non-reductive approach.

The following chapter elaborates on how we can understand capitalism's complexity, since its logics produce all sorts of real contradictions. For example, it "produces *both* enormous wealth *and* abject poverty at one and the same time" (original emphasis; 209). According to Bohrer it is the dialectic method that is capable of navigating us through capitalism's muddled waters. First, however, dialectics is critically reconsidered in order to arrive at the "dialectics of difference" (225). Bohrer wants to get rid of two misconceptions concerning the nature of difference. According to her, both the liberal tendency to entirely erase difference, and the neoliberal notion to render us all completely unique, are dangerous. Such one-sided approaches are incapable of recognizing how capitalism differentiates and homogenizes us at one and the same time. A dialectic of difference, however, can grasp how capitalism is "bringing us simultaneously, sometimes painfully, closer together and farther apart" (226).

Capitalism's tendency of concurrent homogenization and differentiation is, according to Bohrer, a crucial piece in the puzzle of organizing "political relationships

of coalition” (232). The last chapter – “Solidarity in the House of Difference” – turns towards the question of solidarity, and how it can recognize both difference and relation. The title is a reference to Lorde’s assertion that connection and alliance is found in the “house of difference” (2018, 268). While elaborating on Lorde’s claim, Bohrer writes: “we do not have to bridge our difference; we already live together in the house of difference” (254). In the final chapter, Bohrer starts by discussing the orthodox Marxist idea that solidarity ultimately relies on a notion of “commensurability” (233). From this perspective, however, solidarity is thought to be an articulation of a shared condition or a unity. The issue with this is that a coalition would only become possible at the very lowest level of commonality. As a result, moments of difference or non-unity are either thought to be secondary or completely irrelevant.

One of intersectionality’s substantial insights is that “solidarity does not have to be based in commensurability” (249). Indeed, the non-commensurability of positions is often central to intersectional thinking. As an example, Bohrer briefly elaborates on Crenshaw’s (1989) discussion of the momentous case of *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* from 1976. After they were fired, five black women accused the automobile company of specifically discriminating against black women. However, because not all women (i.e. white women) had been fired, nor all black people (i.e. black men), the claim was rejected. Hence, the court did not recognize the particular ways in which black women were marginalized, and instead assumed that the “black women’s position is essentially *commensurable* with black men and/or white women” (original emphasis; 250).

Not all experiences of oppression and exploitation are similar, shared, or equally affecting everyone. The problem with a mobilization strategy that assumes a certain minimum level of commonality, Bohrer claims, is that it can only recognize “the ways oppression and exploitation affect all of ‘us’” (259). Understanding solidarity as an expression of shared situation then quickly becomes what she calls a “politics of the lowest common denominator” (251). Instead of a politics that only requires action when ‘everyone’ is affected, Bohrer proposes a “coalitional politics” (253) where solidarity is constructed through both difference and relation. Arguably, one would not need to form a coalition at all if everybody already shared the same position. The value of a coalition lies in its capacity to relate to one another, *despite* certain differences that may exist between communities. A relational solidarity is therefore capable of truly mobilizing a transformational power:

Capitalism thus links us together, in a tie that binds us, often painfully, in relation to one another. This moment of relation is the true ground of solidarity. [...] Solidarity is thus the name for affirming the differences that exploitation and oppression produce within and between us; it is also the name for recognizing that every time I fight against anyone’s oppression or exploitation, I fight against my own, I fight against everyone’s (259).

With this plea Bohrer concludes her inspiring book. To stand in solidarity means to recognize that there are different experiences of oppression and exploitation, of silencing and marginalization. It is the realization that we are all affected by capitalist structures of domination, but in particular and distinct ways. Solidarity, Bohrer writes, is about “mobilizing

the transformational power of differential communities” (260). Understanding that various groups and communities have different strengths can help us gain a more complex and complete understanding of what might be possible. By putting Marxism and intersectionality into a conversation Bohrer begins a dialogue that might offer a deeper understanding of capitalism’s structures of oppression and exploitation. In doing so she charts a creative and exciting path for an anti-capitalist politics.

Marxism and Intersectionality provides an insightful and varied overview of texts, concepts, and thinkers. Even though the reader is exposed to a sometimes overwhelming amount of information, the book is incredibly easy to follow. Bohrer harnesses insights from ‘both sides’ at every step of the way. She is therefore, while making her own arguments, in dialogue with a tremendous range of thinkers and their positions. In general I believe that Bohrer accurately examines the two traditions, and successfully undermines a number of caricatures, which certainly invites further discussion. In doing so the book succeeds in clearing a path that begins to move beyond the stalemate. Since Bohrer is not interested in constructing an “uber-theory” (23), the relationship between Marxism and intersectionality is one of (theoretical) coalition too.

The book makes an interesting case for why these two traditions should further engage with each other, and hopefully this will be the start of a much longer and stimulating conversation. The book is especially interesting for those academics and activists who are concerned with thinking and articulating new opportunities for an anti-capitalist politics. For those who are already well-acquainted with Marxist theory or with intersectional thinking, or with both, the content of some sections in the first and second part might already be familiar; the third part, however, is unquestionably appealing to anyone who wants to unsettle the structures of domination.

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Biography

Janneke Toonders is enrolled in the Research Master in Philosophy at the Radboud University in Nijmegen. She specializes in social and political philosophy, with a focus on topics such as post-Marxism, (symbolic) political representation and solidarity.