

I AM A WOMAN AND A HUMAN

*A Marxist-Feminist Critique of
Intersectionality Theory*

Unity and Struggle

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Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Capital Vol. I*.

Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*.

Barbara Smith, *The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*.

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins."

I Am a Woman and a Human: A Marxist-Feminist Critique of Intersectionality Theory

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<http://documentthesilence.wordpress.com/statements-of-solidarity-from-women-of-color-organizations/>

Influential Texts.

Combahee River Collective, “Combahee River Collective Statement,”
<http://circuitous.org.scrap.com/combahee.html>

John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and the Gay Identity.”

Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, “The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community.”

Raya Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom*.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*.

Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*.

Leslie Feinberg, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*.

Loren Goldner, “Multiculturalism or World Culture? On a ‘Left-’ Wing Response to Contemporary Social Breakdown.”

Loren Goldner, “Remaking of the American Working Class: The Restructuring of Global Capital and the Recomposition of Class Terrain.”

Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

hooks, bell, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*

Selma James, *Sex, Race and Class: A Selma James Reader*.

Karl Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*.

cannot project the forms of struggle and their corresponding theories without the collective and mass activity of the class, but it is our job as revolutionaries to provide tools that help overthrow the present state of affairs. To do so, we must return to Marx and the historical materialist method. We can no longer rely on the ahistorical, bourgeois theories of the past to clarify the tasks of today. For feminists, this means struggling as women but also as humans.

Introduction.

In the United States, during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, a specific set of politics among the left reigns king. Today, you could go into any university, on any number of liberal-to-left blogs or news websites, and the words “identity” and “intersectionality” will jump out you as the hegemonic theory. But, like all theories, this corresponds to the activity of the working class in response to the current composition of capital. Theory is not some cloud that floats above the class, raining down thoughts and ideas, but, as Raya Dunayevskaya writes, “the actions of the proletariat create the possibility for the intellectual to work out theory” (*Marxism and Freedom*, 91). Therefore, in order to understand the dominant theories of our age, we must understand the real movement of the class. In this piece, I will look at the history of identity politics and intersectionality theory in effort to construct a Marxist critique of intersectionality theory, and a offer positive Marxist conception of feminism.

The Context for “Identity” and “Intersectionality Theory.”

In order to understand “identity” and “intersectionality theory,” we must have an understanding of the movement of capital (meaning the total social relations of production in this current mode of production) that led to their development in the 1960s and 1970s in the US. More specifically, since “intersectionality theory” primarily developed in response to second wave feminism, we must look at how gender relations under capitalism developed.

In the movement from feudalism to capitalism, the gendered division of labor, and therefore gender relations within the class began to take a new form that corresponded to the needs of capital. Some of these new relations included the following:

(1) The development of the wage. The wage is the capitalist form of coercion. As Maria Mies explains in her book, *Patriarchy and Accu-*

mulation on a World Scale, the wage replaced serf and slave ownership as the method to coerce alienated labor (meaning labor that the worker does for someone else). Under capitalism, those who produce (workers) do not own the means of production, so they must go to work for those who own the means of production (capitalists). Workers must therefore sell the only thing they own, their ability to labor, or their labor power, to the capitalist. This is key because workers are not paid for their sensuous living labor, the act of producing, but the ability to labor. The labor-labor power split gives rise to the appearance of an equal exchange of value; it appears as though the worker is paid for the amount of value she produces but in essence she is paid only for her ability to labor for a given period of time.

Furthermore, the working day itself is split into two parts: necessary labor time and surplus labor time. Necessary labor time is the time it takes the worker (on average) to produce enough value to buy all the commodities he needs to reproduce himself (everything from his dinner to his iPhone). Surplus labor time is the time the worker works beyond the necessary labor time. Since the going rate for labor power (again, our capacity to labor – not our actual living labor) is the value of all the commodities the worker needs to reproduce herself, surplus labor is value that goes straight into the capitalist’s pocket. For example, let’s say I work in a Furby factory. I get paid \$10 a day to work 10 hours, I produce 10 Furbies a day, and a Furby is worth \$10 each. The capitalist is only paying me for my ability to work 1 hour each day to produce enough value to reproduce myself (1 Furby = 1 hour’s labor = \$10). So my necessary labor time is 1 hour, and the surplus labor time I give to the capitalist is 9 hours (10-1). The wage obscures this fact. Recall that under capitalism, it appears as though we are paid the equivalent value of what we produce. But, in essence, we are paid only for our necessary labor time, or the minimum amount we need to reproduce ourselves. This was different under feudalism when it was very clear how much time humans spent working for themselves, and how much time they spent working for someone else. For example, a serf might spend five hours a week tilling the land to produce food for

ments; however, contradictions and antagonisms within the class cannot be overcome in isolation, and individual expressions of patriarchy are impossible to overcome without a broader struggle for the emancipation of our labor. We will never free ourselves of machismo within the movement without abolishing gender itself, and therefore alienated labor itself.

A truly revolutionary feminist struggle will collectively take up issues that put the particular and the form of appearance in conversation with the universal and the essence. Elsewhere, I have offered the following as examples of areas that would do that work:

- Grassroots clinic defense takeovers and/or nonprofit worker committees that build solidarity across worker-“client” lines.
- Neighborhood groups engaged in tenant struggles with the capacity to deal directly with violence against women in the community.
- Parent, teacher, and student alliances that struggle against school closures/privatization and for transforming schools to more accurately reflect the needs of children and parents, for example on-site childcare, directly democratic classrooms and districts, smaller class sizes, etc.
- Sex worker collectives that protect women from abusive Johns and other community members, and build democratically women- and queer-run brothels with safe working conditions.
- Workplace organizations in feminized workplaces like nonprofits, the service industry, pink collar manufacturing, etc., or worker centers that specialize in feminized workplaces and take up issues and challenges specific to women.

There are many, many others that I cannot theorize. As noted, we

have experienced this in organizing spaces where someone argues that there are not enough women of color, disabled individuals, trans*folks, etc., present for a campaign to move forward. A contemporary example of this is the critique of Slut Walk for being too white and therefore a white supremacist or socially invalid movement. Another example is groups and individuals who argue that all movements should be completely subordinated to queer people of color leadership, regardless of how reactionary their politics are. Again, while intersectionality theorists have rightly identified an objective problem, these divisions and antagonisms within the class must be addressed materially through struggle. Simply reducing this struggle to mere quantity, equality of distribution, or “representation,” reinforces identity as a static, naturalized category.



On the other hand, identity politics can take the form of individualized struggles against heteropatriarchy, racism, etc., within the class. According to Barbara Smith, a majority of Combahee River Collective’s work was around teaching white women to stop being racist by holding anti-racism workshops (95). Today, we might see groups whose only form of struggle is to identify and smash gendered, machismo, male-chauvinist, misogynist, and patriarchal elements within the left. Another example is Tumblr users’ constant reminder to “check your privilege.” Again, it is important to address and correct these ele-

the feudal lord, and the rest of her time was her own. The development of the wage is key because it enforced a gendered division of labor.

(2) A separation of production and reproduction. Along with commodity production came a separation between production and reproduction. To be clear, “reproduction” does not solely refer to baby making. It also includes meeting the many various needs we have under capitalism, from cooking food and cleaning the home, to listening to a partner vent about their shitty day and holding their hand, to caring for the young, sick, elderly and disabled members of society.

As capitalism developed, generally speaking, productive (value-producing) labor corresponded to the wage, and reproductive labor was unwaged (or extremely low waged), since in appearance it produced no surplus value for the capitalist. This separation, characterized by the wage, took on a specific gendered form under capitalism. Women were largely excluded from productive sphere and therefore did not receive a wage for the reproductive work they did. This gave men a certain amount of power over women, and created antagonisms within the class based on a gendered division of labor. Silvia Federici, in *Caliban and the Witch*, calls this the “patriarchy of the wage” (97-100).

3) The contradictory development of the nuclear family.

With the development of capitalism and large-scale industry, the content of the nuclear family took a contradictory turn. On the one hand, as pointed out by theorists such as Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa in “The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community,” the nuclear family was strengthened by the gendered division of labor characterized by the wage. Women and children were excluded from the wage and relegated to reproductive work; men received a wage and were relegated to productive work. This meant that men needed women and children to reproduce them, and women and children needed men to bring in a wage to reproduce the family as a whole (of course this wage was sometimes supplemented by a woman’s low

wage earnings as a domestic or other paid reproductive worker). And so on the one hand, the development of capitalism strengthened the nuclear family.

On the other hand; however, capitalist relations also undermined the nuclear family. As James and Dalla Costa point out, the gendered division of labor is

“rooted in the framework of capitalist society itself: women at home and men in the factories and office, separated from the other the whole day ... Capital, while it elevates heterosexuality to a religion, at the same time in practice makes it impossible for men and women to be in touch with each other, physically or emotionally — it undermines heterosexuality as a sexual, economic, and social discipline” (James, *Sex, Race and Class*, 56).

(4) The development of “identity” and alienation. John D’Emilio runs with this concept of the contradictory development of the nuclear family, arguing that “gay identity” (and we can infer “female identity”) as a category developed through the family. He argues for a distinction between gay behavior and gay identity, stating,

“There was, quite simply, no ‘social space’ in the colonial system of production that allowed men and women to be gay. Survival was structured around participation in the nuclear family. There were certain homosexual acts — sodomy among men, ‘lewdness’ among women — in which individuals engaged, but family was so pervasive that colonial society lacked even the category of homosexual or lesbian to describe a person ... By the second half of the nineteenth century, this situation was noticeably changing as the capitalist system of free labor took hold. Only when individuals began to make their living through wage labor, instead of parts of an interdepen-

was impossible for me to live my blackness. Not yet white, no longer completely black, I was damned” (117), and, “When I opened my eyes yesterday I saw the sky in total revulsion. I tried to get up but the eviscerated silence surged toward me with paralyzed wings. Not responsible for my acts, at the crossroads between Nothingness and infinity, I began to weep” (119). Fanon points to the contradiction between the particular form of appearance (blackness) and the essence, the universal (humanness).

In the conclusion, as noted earlier, Fanon resolves this contradiction, arguing for further movement toward the universal, the total abolition of race. He writes,

“In no way does my basic vocation have to be drawn from the past of peoples of color. In no way do I have to dedicate myself to reviving a black civilization unjustly ignored. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to sing the past to the detriment of my present and my future” (201).

For Fanon then, and for Marx, the struggle for liberation must include both the particular and the universal, both the appearance and essence. We must build upon and push on both sides of these contradictions.

Some Practical Consequences.

Since identity politics, and therefore intersectionality theory, are a bourgeois politics, the possibilities for struggle are also bourgeois. Identity politics reproduces the appearance of an alienated individual under capitalism and so struggle takes the form of equality among groups at best, or individualized forms of struggle at worse.

On the one hand, abstract “sociological” groups or individuals struggle for an equal voice, equal “representation,” or equal resources. Many

social production always appears as the society itself, i.e. the human being itself in its social relations. Everything that has a fixed form, such as a product etc., appears as merely a moment, a vanishing moment, in this movement. The direct individuals, but individuals in a mutual relationship, which they equally reproduce and produce anew. The constant process of their own movement, in which they renew themselves even as they renew the world of wealth they create” (712).

To be a “woman” under capitalism means something very specific; it is even more specific for women in the US in 2013; it is even more specific for black lesbians in the US in 2013; it is even more specific for individual women. But, in a universal sense, to be a “woman” means to produce and reproduce a set of social relations through our labor, or self-activity. Taking a cue from Fanon, our method must argue: I am a woman and a human. We must recognize the particular in conversation with the totality; we must consider a moment, or a single expression of labor, in relationship to labor itself.

It is important to note that identity politics and intersectionality theorists are not wrong but they are incomplete. Patriarchal and racialized social relations are material, concrete and real. So are the contradictions between the particular and universal, and the appearance and essence. The solution must build upon these contradictions and push on them. Again, borrowing from Fanon, we can say “I am a woman and a human,” or “I am a black person and a person.” The key is to emphasize both sides of the contradiction. Embracing womanhood, organizing on the basis of blackness, and building a specifically queer politics is an essential aspect of our liberation. It is the material starting point of struggle. As noted earlier, Frantz Fanon describes this movement in “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*. However, at the end of the chapter, Fanon leaves the contradiction unresolved and leaves us searching for something more, stating, “Without a black past, without a black future, it

dent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity — an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on the attraction to one’s own sex” (“Capitalism and the Gay Identity,” 104-105).

D’Emilio’s understanding of “identity” is key for understanding identity politics and intersectionality theory; however, I would slightly change his framework. In distinguishing between “behavior,” and “identity,” D’Emilio is touching on what could be broadened out to the Marxist categories, “labor” and “alienation.” I digress in order to fill out this idea.



There were plenty of homosexual acts, many forms of gender expression, and some divisions based on skin color in pre-capitalist societies. But “identity” as an individualistic category is unique to capitalism.

For Marx, labor is an abstract category that defines human history. In his early texts, Marx refers to labor as self- or life-activity. In “Estranged Labour,” Marx writes,

“For in the first place labour, life-activity, productive life

itself, appears to man merely as a means of satisfying a need — the need to maintain the physical existence. Yet the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species — its species character — is contained in the character of its life activity; and free conscious activity is man's species character. Life itself appears only as a means to life" (76).

Life-activity, or labor, is an abstraction that transcends a specific form, or a specific mode of production (capitalism, feudalism, tribalism, etc.). However, labor can only be understood within the context of these forms; it is through these forms, the social organization of our labor, that humans engage in the ever-expanding process of satisfying our needs, introducing new needs, and developing new ways of fulfilling our needs. Labor encompasses everything from our jobs under capitalism to tilling the land under feudalism, to creating art and poetry, to having sex and raising children. Through labor and its many expressions, or forms, we engage with the world around us, changing the world and changing ourselves in the process.

Under capitalism, there is a separation between our labor and our conscious will. When Marx says "Life itself appears only as a means to of satisfying a need," he is pointing toward this contradiction. As noted above, under capitalism, labor is divorced from the means of production so we must work for those who own the means of production. We engage in the same form of labor all day every day, and we receive a wage for this activity in order to exchange to meet our needs. We produce value in order to exchange for the use-values we need to survive. So what appears under capitalism as a mere means to satisfy our needs (work), is in essence the activity of life itself (labor). Because of this schism between our labor and our conscious will, our labor under capitalism is alienated, meaning it is not used for our own enrichment, instead, we give it away to the capitalist. Our multi-sided labor becomes one-sided; our labor is reduced to work. In *The German Ideology*, Marx writes, "as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being,

ately needed; however, the Marxist method can provide some insight into the creation of a politics that overcomes the limitations of identity politics.

Marx offers a method that places the particular in conversation with the totality of social relations; the appearance connected to the essence. Consider his use of the concept of "moments." Marx uses this concept in *The German Ideology* to describe the development of human history. He describes the following three moments as the "primary social relations, or the basic aspects of human activity:" (1) the production of means to satisfy needs, (2) the development of new needs, and (3) reproduction of new people and therefore new needs and new means to satisfy new needs. What is key about this idea is that Marx distinguishes between a "moment" and a "stage." He writes, "These three aspects of social activity are not of course to be taken as three different stages, but just as three aspects, or, to make it clear to the Germans, three 'moments,' which have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first men, and which still assert themselves in history today" (48). The particulars of this specific argument are not relevant; what is key is Marx's use of "moments" juxtaposed to "stages." Marx makes this distinction to distinguish himself from a kind of determinism that sees the development of history in a static, linear fashion, versus a fluid and dialectical historical development. Throughout many of Marx's writings, he refers back to this term, "moments," to describe particular social relations in history, or, more precisely, particular expressions of labor. "Moments" also helps fill out Marx's idea of fluid modes of production. As noted earlier, for Marx, there is no pure feudalism or pure capitalism; all relations of production move and must be understood historically.

This concept is useful for understanding our various alienated existences under capitalism. For example, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes,

"When we consider bourgeois society in the long view and as a whole, then the final result of the process of

laid the foundation for early capitalism, which laid the foundation for industrial capitalism, etc. However, this similarity and overlap does not mean that particular, patriarchal relations transcend the mode of production. For example, under both feudalism and capitalism there are gendered relations within a nuclear family, though these relations took very different forms particular to the mode of production. As Silvia Federici describes, within the feudal family there was little differentiation between men and women. She writes,

“since work on the servile farm was organized on a subsistence basis, the sexual division of labor in it was less pronounced and less discriminating than the capitalist farm. ... Women worked in the fields, in addition to raising children, cooking, washing, spinning, and keeping an herb garden; their domestic activities were not devalued and did not involve different social relations from those of men, as they would later, in a money-economy, when housework would cease to be viewed as real work” (25).

A historical understanding of patriarchy needs to understand patriarchy from within a set of social relations based on the form of labor. In other words, we cannot understand the form of appearance, “womanhood,” apart from the essence, a universal human.

A Marxist Conception of Feminism.

At this point, I should make myself very clear and state that the limitations of identity politics and intersectionality theory are a product of their time. There was no revolution in the US in 1968. The advances of Black Power, women’s liberation, gay liberation, and the movements themselves, have been absorbed into capital. Since the 1970s, academia has had a stronghold on theory. A nonexistent class struggle leaves a vacuum of theoretical production and academic intellectuals have had nothing to draw on except for the identity politics of the past. A new politics that corresponds to a new form of struggle is desper-

each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood” (53). We are not fully enriched human beings, engaging in all forms of labor we wish to engage in, we are relegated into one form of labor in order to exchange to meet our needs. We are call center workers, hair stylists, nurses, teachers, etc. This one-sidedness, as the precondition for meeting our needs, is unique to the capitalist mode of production.

In applying Marx’s categories to D’Emilio’s explanation of homosexuality, we could say that homosexual behaviors are an expression of labor, or self-activity, and homosexual identity is a one-sided, alienated form of labor unique to capitalism. It distinguishes the difference between a person who consciously engages in homosexual acts, and one who is defined by one form of labor: a homosexual. Women and people of color experience something similar in the development of capital; a shift from engaging in certain types of labor to engaging in feminized, or racialized forms of labor. To put it another way, under capitalism, we are forced into a box: we are a bus driver, or a hair stylist, or a woman. These different forms of labor, or different expressions of our life-activity (the way in which we interact with the world around us) limit our ability to be multi-sided human beings.

If we understand “identity” in this way, we will struggle for a society that does not limit us as “bus drivers,” “women,” or “queers,” but a society that allows everyone to freely use their multi-sided life activity in whatever ways they want. In other words, we will struggle for a society that completely abolishes, or transcends, “identities.” I will explain more on this later.

What is Intersectionality Theory and How Did it Develop?

The term “intersectionality” did not become commonplace until the

early 1980s. According to most feminist historians, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw was the first to coin the term, in a series of articles written between roughly 1989 and 1991 (for example, see “Mapping the Margins”). Intersectionality theory was then popularized by many critical race and gender theorists.

Despite where the term was coined, intersectionality theory has its roots in the 1960s and 70s class struggle movements in the US and Europe (roughly speaking). This period was generally characterized by autonomous struggles based on the gendered and racialized division of labor. Black folks were the vanguard of this form of struggle, developing and leading many types of organizations from revolutionary parties like the Black Panther Party, to majority black workplace organizations like the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. These forms of struggle influenced other groups, such as white women, latinos, gays and lesbians, to form similar organizations along race, gender and sexuality lines (while there were multi-ethnic projects in this time period, and many contradictions within these organizations themselves, it can be said that in this specific time and place, there was a general tendency to organize along these lines). This was due to the gendered and racialized division of labor; black folks were relegated to certain neighborhoods and certain forms of labor, the value of a black person’s labor was less than a white person’s, and a socially constructed skin color hierarchy and corresponding antagonisms within the class was fully developed and materially enforced. To be black meant to be objectified, relegated into one form of labor: producing and reproducing blackness. Black Power was therefore the struggle against the alienation and one-sidedness of blackness, a struggle to liberate labor, releasing its multi-sidedness, unifying labor with its conscious will.

Similarly, women organized in response to the gendered division of labor in effort to break free from the alienation of “womanhood.” For example, women struggled for reproductive and sexual freedom in effort to gain control over the means of production (their bodies). Maria Mies describes how women’s bodies are their means of produc-

“Friedan was a principal shaper of contemporary feminist thought. Significantly, the one-dimensional perspective on women’s reality presented in her book became a marked feature of the contemporary feminist movement. Like Friedan before them, white women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women’s reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group. Nor are they aware of the extent to which their perspectives reflect race and class biases...” (3).

hooks is correct to say that basing an entire politics on one particular experience, or a set of particular differences, is problematic. However, intersectionality theory replicates this problem by simply adding particular moments, or determinant points; hooks goes on to argue for race and class inclusion in a feminist analysis. Similarly, theories of an “interlocking matrix of oppressions,” simply create a list of naturalized identities, abstracted from their material and historical context. This methodology is just as ahistorical and antisocial as Betty Friedan’s.

Again, patriarchy and white supremacy are not objects or “institutions” that exist throughout history; they are particular expressions of our labor, our life-activity, that are conditioned by (and in turn, condition) our mode of production. In *Capital*, Marx describes labor as the “metabolism” between humans and the external world; patriarchy and white supremacy, as products of our labor, are also the conditions in which we labor. We are constantly interacting with the world, changing the world and changing ourselves through our “metabolic” labor. So patriarchy and white supremacy, like all social relations of labor, change and transform.

Patriarchy under capitalism takes a specific form that is different from gendered relations under feudalism, or tribalism, etc. There will be overlap and similarities in how patriarchy is expressed under different modes of production. After all, the objective conditions of feudalism

filling out the other side of the contradiction "...and I am a human." If the starting and ending point is one-sided, there is no possibility for abolishing racialized and gendered social relations. For supporters of identity politics (despite claiming otherwise), womanhood, a form of appearance within society, is reduced to a natural, static "identity." Social relations such as "womanhood," or simply gender, become static objects, or "institutions." Society is therefore organized into individuals, or sociological groups with natural characteristics. Therefore, the only possibility for struggle under identity politics is based on equal distribution or individualism (I will discuss this further below). This is a bourgeois ideology in that it replicates the alienated individual invented and defended by bourgeois theorists and scientists (and materially enforced) since capitalism's birth.

Furthermore, this individualism is characteristic of the current social moment. As left communist theorist Loren Goldner has theorized, capitalism has been in perpetual crisis for the last 40 years, which has been absorbed in appearance through neoliberal strategies (among others). Over time, capital is forced to invest in machines over workers in order to keep up with the competitive production process. As a result, workers are expelled from the production process. We can see this most clearly in a place like Detroit, where automation combined with deindustrialization left hundreds of thousands jobless. The effects of this contradiction of capitalism is that workers are forced into precarious working situations, jumping from gig to gig in order to make enough money to reproduce themselves. Goldner refers to this condition as the "atomized individual worker." As Goldner has written elsewhere, this increased individualism leads to a politics of difference, where women, queers, people of color, etc., have nothing in common with one another.

Intersectionality theorists correctly identified and critiqued this problem with identity politics. For example, bell hooks, in a polemic against liberal feminist Betty Friedan, writes,

tion under capitalism, stating, "The first means of production with which human beings act upon nature is their own body," and later, she writes, "women can experience their whole body, not only their hands or their heads. Out of their body they produce new children as well as the first food for these children" (*Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, 52 and 53). Since women's use of their bodies is a unique form of alienated labor for women under capitalism, it is historically the site of struggle for liberation.

However, there was also a tendency within second wave feminism that sought to reproduce capitalist relations, arguing for "equal wages for equal work." Both of these tendencies were acting in response to the gendered social relations under capital, and both shared a methodology of identity politics, arguing that women could unite on the basis of a shared "woman" experience, or "womanhood."

From this development, intersectionality theory took hold. As the autonomous struggles of the 60s and 70s began to recede, groups like the Combahee River Collective responded to the material divisions within the movement. They argued that the objectively white second wave feminist movement excluded women of color by assuming the white woman's experience could be extended to women of color, and that white women were adequate spokespeople for women of color. In contrast, they argued that a revolutionary praxis must be informed by the experience of black lesbian women, stating,

"This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy

of liberation than ourselves” (“Combahee River Collective Statement”).

What developed in practice through the Combahee River Collective’s specific set of identity politics (a black, lesbian, working class-based politics) was solidified theoretically with the development of intersectionality theory. The intersectionality theorists who emerged in the late 70s and early 80s rightly expressed antagonisms within the class, arguing that one cannot discuss gender without discussing race, class, sexuality, disability, age, etc.

Patricia Hill Collins describes intersectionality theory as an “analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of a social organization, which shape Black women’s experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black Women” (*Black Feminist Thought*, 299). Using this definition and the prominent intersectionality theorists’ writings, I have identified four core components of the theory: (1) a politics of difference, (2) a critique of women’s organizations and people of color organizations, (3) the need to develop the most oppressed as leaders and take the leadership from them, and (4) the need for a politics that takes all oppressions into account.

(1) A politics of difference. Intersectionality theorists argue that our various identities, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, etc., necessarily differentiate us from people who do not have those identities. So a ruling class, gay, black man will have a different experience, and therefore, a different politics, than a straight, white, working class woman. On the other hand, people with shared identities, such as being black or lesbian, will have a shared experience that organically unites the individuals. Some of these shared identities are more likely to unite some people than others. As Collins explains,

“On the one hand, all African-American women face similar challenges that result from living in a society that

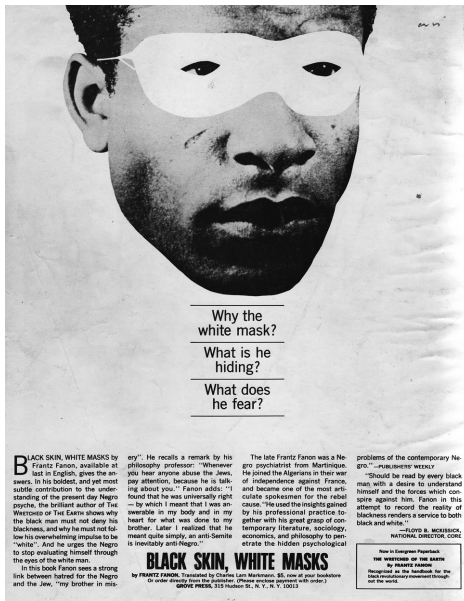
alienated individuals (a bus driver, a hair stylist, a woman, etc.), though in essence we are multi-sided individuals capable of many forms of labor. Identity politics bolsters one side of this contradiction, arguing for collective struggle on the basis of “womanhood,” or “blackness,” or “black lesbianism,” etc. To borrow from Fanon, identity politics states, “I am a black man,” “I am a woman,” or “I am a black lesbian,” etc. This is a key first step. As he writes in his critical chapter, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man:” “I finally made up my mind to shout my blackness” (101), “On the other side of the white world there lies a magical black culture. Negro sculpture! I began to blush with pride. Was this our salvation?” (102), and

“So here we have the Negro rehabilitated, ‘standing at the helm,’ governing the world with his intuition, rediscovered, reappropriated, in demand, accepted; and it’s not a Negro, oh, no, but the Negro, alerting the prolific antennae of the world, standing in the spotlight of the world, spraying the world with his poetical power, ‘porous to the every breath in the world.’ I embrace the world! I am the world! The white man has never understood this magical substitution. The white man wants the world; he wants it for himself. He discovers he is the predestined master of the world. He enslaves it. His relationship with the world is one of appropriation. But there are values that can be served only with my sauce. As a magician I stole from the white man a ‘certain world,’ lost to him and his kind. When that happened the white man must have felt an aftershock he was unable to identify, being unused to such reactions” (106-107).

For several pages, Fanon argues that black people must embrace blackness, and struggle on the basis of being black, in order to negate white supremacist social relations. But to stop there reproduces our one-sided existence and the forms of appearance of capitalism. Identity politics argues, “I am a black man,” or “I am a woman,” without

can be equated with alienated labor; it is a one-sided expression of our total potential as human beings.

Frantz Fanon discusses something similar in the conclusion to *Black Skin White Masks*. He writes, “The black man, however sincere, is a slave to the past. But I am a man, and in this sense the Peloponnesian War is as much mine as the invention of the compass” (200, 2008). On the one hand, Fanon points to a particular, one-sided expression: blackness. On the other hand, he points toward the multi-sides of a potentially universal human. Fanon is at once both of these things: a black man, and a man (or, more generally, a human); a particular and a universal. Under capitalism, we are both the alienated worker and labor itself, except the universal has not been actualized concretely.



The identity politics of the 60s and 70s conflates a particular moment, or a determinant point, in the relations of capitalism with the potential universal. Furthermore, it reproduces the schism between appearance and essence. Under capitalism there is a contradiction between the particular and the universal; appearance and essence. We appear to be

historically and routinely derogates women of African descent. Despite the fact that U.S. Black women face common challenges, this neither means that individual African-American women have all had the same experiences nor that we agree on the significance of our varying experiences. Thus, on the other hand, despite the common challenges confronting U.S. Black women as a group, diverse responses to these core themes characterize U.S. Black women’s group knowledge or standpoint. Despite differences of age, sexual orientation, social class, region, and religion, U.S. Black women encounter societal practices that restrict us to inferior housing, neighborhoods, schools, jobs, and public treatment and hide this differential consideration behind an array of common beliefs about Black women’s intelligence, work habits, and sexuality. These common challenges in turn result in recurring patterns of experiences for individual group members” (25).

This is a cornerstone of intersectionality theory: some individuals or groups are differentiated from other individuals or groups based on their experiences. This can be cut along many different identity lines.

(2) Critiques of women’s organizations and people of color organizations. Women of color were marginalized in the 1960s and 70s women’s, Black Power, Chicanismo, and other people of color-led organizations. Most intersectionality theorists attribute this to a unique experience women of color (and particularly Black women) have around race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression. For example, Collins argues that women of color have abstained from joining white feminist organizations on the grounds that they have been “racist and overly concerned with White, middle-class women’s issues” (5). Similarly, Collins argues that black studies is traditionally based on a “male-defined ethos,” and contains a “predominantly masculinist bias” (7), despite historically joining and feeling marginalized in Afri-

can American organizations. Again, this is an objective and historical situation that intersectionality theorists attribute to difference along identity lines (5).



(3) The need to develop the most oppressed as leaders, and take leadership from them. Following this analysis, intersectionality theorists argue that the experience of being an oppressed person places individuals in a uniquely privileged position for struggle. In other words, if you have experienced the multiple, identity-based oppressions, you are the vanguard of the struggle against it. bell hooks writes,

“As a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression. At the same time, we are the same group that has not been socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor in that we are allowed no institutional “other” that we can exploit or oppress ... Black women with no institutionalized “other” that we may discriminate against, exploit, or oppress, often have a lived experience

that directly challenges the prevailing classist, sexist, and racist social structure and its concomitant ideology. This lived experience may shape our consciousness in such a way that our world view differs from those who have a degree of privilege (however relative within the existing system). It is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony” (*Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, 16).

This point justifies the need to develop queer, women, and people of color as movement leaders, and allows intersectionality theorists to explain why historically the most oppressed tend to be the most militant.

(4) The need for a politics that takes all oppressions into account. Finally, all intersectionality theorists argue the need to analyze every form of oppression, using the terms, “interlocking system of oppressions,” “matrix of domination,” or some variation thereof. The idea is that it is impossible to view one identity or category of oppression without looking at all the others. As Barbara Smith simply puts, “the major ‘isms’ ... are intimately intertwined” (*The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*, 112); they cannot be separated.

While intersectionality theory seems to overcome the limitations of identity politics, it falls short. The next section will show how intersectionality theory is, in fact, a bourgeois ideology.

A Marxist Critique of Identity Politics and Intersectionality Theory.

Identity politics is rooted in a one-sided expression of capitalism, and is therefore not a revolutionary politics. As noted earlier, “identity”