

‘Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism’ by Ashley J Bohrer reviewed by Christian Lotz

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In *Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism* its author, Ashley J. Bohrer, presents a *tour de force*, offering and contributing to a wide-ranging debate that has occupied left academic and activist audiences for some time now. Indeed, intersectionality, once a catchword, has become one of the major lenses through which scholars in social theory, political science, gender and sexuality studies, critical race theory and philosophy reflect on our contemporary situation not only nationally, but also globally. Reflections and theories about identity, the intersection of identities in the context of oppression, exploitation and difference are so vast that one needs to be a specialist to oversee the entire debate. In this vein, Bohrer’s book achieves the impossible, insofar as it considers a vast amount of contemporary literature on Marxism, intersectionality and the relation between the two. Bohrer calls this approach the “‘maximalist’ approach.” (Bohrer and Souvlis 2020) For a reader who is not familiar with the entire scope of the debate, such as this reviewer, the book is very enlightening and provides a helpful guide for understanding how these two sides of the contemporary left can be brought together.

The complexity of the debate is unfolded in seven chapters that are divided by three sections within which Bohrer reconstructs the shared histories of Marxism and intersectionality (section I), presents detailed analyses of the debates and

clashes between both groups of scholars (section II) and opens up extended ways of engagement with both (section III). Readers who are somewhat familiar with the history of intersectionality can safely jump over the introductory chapter (called chapter zero) in which Bohrer outlines nineteenth and twentieth century precursors to the contemporary debate. Via short summaries Bohrer presents the positions of main authors, such as Claudia Jones and W.E.B. Du Bois, main approaches, such as standpoint theory, the Jeopardy Approach and Latinix Feminism, a short history of political activism, and authors who directly influenced contemporary discussions, such as the Combahee River Collective, Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis. The next four chapters discuss definitions, postulates and specific aspects of intersectionality, and reconstruct Marxist critiques of intersectionality as well as intersectional critiques of Marxism. These chapters are very well organized, and the main points are forcefully presented. Bohrer argues that both critiques have their shortcomings and are largely based on either reductive readings or basic misunderstandings. The last chapters deal with specific issues that are of importance for further developments and seen from a philosophical point of view, they are central to this work, as the author focuses (1.) on the relation between exploitation and oppression, (2.) on the concepts of dialects and contradiction, as well as (3.) on difference, solidarity, and coalition building.

Though the concept of capitalism is announced in the title of the book, it is not always clearly developed or framed in the author's treatment, which may be due to the absence of an engagement with (contemporary) political economy or a theory of society. On the one hand, Bohrer argues that 'intersectional histories refuse to name a singular cause for the multi-dimensional, contradictory, internally variant, and historically-dependent relations between the various forces in matrices of domination' (114), while on the other hand, stating that 'capitalism plays an important structural role, even if it does not play a unilateral or universal role' (Ibid). What exactly is meant by 'structural role' remains

unclear to such an extent that – despite the awkward tendency to reduce ‘Marxism’ to the topics of class and exploitation – it is not always clear in which sense agents are constituted within capitalist social organization. Bohrer therefore often speaks of capitalism as a ‘factor’ among others and, as a consequence, it is challenging to understand the concerns and claims of the text within the critical context of a larger theory of society *in which* exploitation and oppression are related in specific ways to social totality. Agents understood as the outcome of intersecting identities are the clear focus of Bohrer’s reflections, but the reader wonders how these subjectivities are constituted in relation to social totality, especially since the author does not really offer a theory that explains the most fundamental concept of intersectionality, namely, the concept of identity (with the exception of pp. 252-3). Definitions such as ‘identity as multi-pronged, group based, historically constituted, and heterogenous’ (93) do not help much in the effort to genuinely grasp the concept *philosophically*. Given the lack of a material social theory and political economy, as well as the focus on agents and their identities, concepts that are important for a theory of subjectivity under conditions of capital accumulation, such as technologies, state apparatuses and knowledge as a direct productive force, one wonders whether the book’s real intellectual horizon is a theory of justice based on ‘deep interpretations of all systems of oppression’ (224). It is admirable how Bohrer tries to be sensitive to and to recognize an almost infinite list of differences and identifications. However, the discussions overall seem to be more in line with a philosophy of recognition rather than a materialist theory of society for which not only a critique of political economy would be needed, but so, too, would a sober analysis of *habitus* as well as ideological and disciplinary state apparatuses. For example, the author’s worry about ‘sexist norms, heterosexist understandings of femininity and gendered (and racialized) social reproductive labor’ (210) seen ‘through the matrix of domination’ (118) seems to be a worry about injustices encountered in the form of *norms*; i.e. norms that regulate identifications that agents are forced to take on in capitalism. How these norms are habituated or

constituted – aside from repeated references to the multiplicity of oppressive practices – is not clear. The ‘devaluation of black and brown lives’ (210) or the predominant ‘European heterosexist and white supremacist form of thinking’ (219) could be more properly addressed by a theory of recognitional justice, at least as long as these misrecognitions and matrixes of dominations are not connected to a materialist theory of society or theory of subjectivity.

In addition, Bohrer’s tendency to focus on domination via oppression and exploitation leads to the rejection of the argument that we need to make a distinction between the logic of capital and ‘capitalism’ as the term that refers somehow to the whole. Though I agree with Bohrer’s attempt to push exploitation and oppression on even ground, I still would argue that capital ultimately constitutes social reality and the totality *of* capitalism, especially if we mean by the latter a form of social organization that is globally based on the *same* principles. The point is precisely that the basic categories of political economy are the same everywhere, even if they get actualized and develop differently in different cultural and national contexts. While we find a myriad of combinatory identities and identity positions through a variety of exploitative and oppressive practices, we only find *one* social reality constituted as a totality that establishes the realm in which these practices can take place. As Marx puts it in *Capital*, capital ‘announces an epoch’ by which he means the unity of *one* social formation. Bohrer’s argument that the separation of capital and capitalism presupposes a separation of history and logic (188) fails, since it is undeniable that history and logic go hand in hand empirically, even if, *in theory*, we nevertheless make this distinction. To be sure, making this theoretical distinction permits us to synchronize all empirical elements as belonging to *one social formation and social whole*, and while it is true that in synchronizing these elements, we see that capital cannot be disconnected from exploitation and oppression especially inasmuch as capital is a *real* dynamic, this does not mean that we do not need to draw a sharp distinction between practices of oppression

and the logic of capital; for value/capital is the *social form* that all entities take on, including agents whose productive capacities capital mobilizes for its own purposes via particular identities. Whereas a theory of society can give us constitutive categories, intersectionality can help us understand how agents must live through the contradictions of capital experience and react in many varied and nuanced ways within this whole. It is certain that ‘capitalism takes a variety of shapes and forms, responds to a variety of conditions, and encounters a wide variety of constraints and resistances’ (213) and that ‘an adequate theory of capital requires rapt attention to the multiplicity of formations that constitute it’ (203). Just as it is self-explanatory that capitalism cannot ‘explain or cause’ (163) all forms of agency, so is it the case that a single theory cannot make sense of all ‘choices, actions, thoughts, opportunities, and sacrifices made by people’ (163). However, this ‘dizzying set of capitalist arrangements’ (145) presupposes that the referent of ‘capitalism’ refers to *one* ‘X’ that takes a variety of shapes; i.e. it ideally presupposes *one* theory; this assumes, though, that we do not want to fall back onto nominalist strategies, historicist relativism or empty pluralizations that do not help us to grasp the reality, such as when Bohrer claims that ‘[s]ocial antagonisms should always be figured as pluri-vocal, multiplicitous, and, what is more, unpredictable and contingent’ (213), that social contradictions should allow for a ‘plethora of outcomes, arrangements, and compromises’ (214), or that there are not singular causes for ‘the multi-dimensional, contradictory, internally variant, and historically-dependent relations between various forces in matrices of domination’ (114). Indeed, this *is* dizzying!

In this vein, the author’s attempt to lump together a variety of authors under an identity labeled ‘Marxism’, especially if we take into account the theoretical range and global presence of Marxism, is problematic, to say the least. Moreover, Bohrer seems to have an ‘activist’ understanding of Marxism and although movements are understood as the major source of theory, and theorizing may be understood as a form of praxis, praxis is nevertheless understood as something

external to theory. In this connection let us be reminded that *Capital* was not written for the laboring class (who would need to be addressed in different kinds of publications); rather, it was written against the ruling class and their classical economist and philosophy representatives with the goal of positioning Marxist theory and philosophy *within* the theoretical and philosophical discourse of Marx's time. The hope was that, in turn, this would also lead to a reflection that theorizing cannot take place in some kind of neutral space. As a consequence, theory as praxis means that theory must be carried out as a critique of ideology and not as a form of activism. Similarly, the goal of contemporary Marxist theory and philosophy should be seen in the attempt to establish itself as a position that can demonstrate its own superiority over other positions in the fields of epistemology, ontology and ethics. As a result of Bohrer's 'practicing' approach to theory, it is difficult to understand where the author stands in this field, insofar as it is not clear *against which theory* Bohrer's 'intersectional Marxism' is directed, unless, perhaps, it is intended to position itself against certain forms of thinking based on specific *identities*, such as liberal feminists or white binary males.

Finally, though the book is extremely strong in its precise, clear and far-reaching reconstruction of authors and debates, its basic theoretical concepts remain vague because essential philosophical questions are not properly engaged. For example, what is identity?, what is a category (which is still presupposed for terms such as 'intra-categorical' or 'inter-categorical')?, and what is subjectivity? – these are but a few of the foundational philosophical questions that need to be addressed for the important considerations of this text to be fully analyzed. Indeed, the idea that overlapping identities *constitute* subjectivities remains weak, as long as we do not embed it within phenomenological or ontological frameworks. A statement such as intersectionality is an 'ontological approach that accounts for complex subjectivity' (90) remains empty without these antecedent or complementary philosophical considerations.

In addition, one could – and perhaps should – argue that it is philosophically problematic to identify *who* one is with *what* one is. Furthermore, even the last echo of what was once a universalist vision of a classless society as a society of human individuals evaporates in the author's desire to recognize infinite chains of difference that fixate human beings in what they *are* rather than what they *could be*. Put with Sartre, the idea of a self that can be observed under the intersectional magnifying glass is itself bad faith, insofar as one could argue that an individual always transcends *all* identities. In the end a theory of social subjects that is constructed on the basis of identities is modeled after neoliberal desires since as agents seem to live in an abstract universe of identifications rather than in factories, schools, ghettos, camps, farms, homes, on ships or in political institutions.

In closing, on the one hand, the book reaches a level of complexity and inclusivity that we rarely see in a field in which many authors are desperately trying to defend their intellectual territory, but on the other hand – and here's the paradox – it comes dangerously close to losing any focus on the very particular systematic issues that need more theoretical or argumentative treatment. The reader should not get these critical remarks wrong: despite the reviewers' quibbles, Bohrer's book is an impeccable achievement in terms of clarity and complexity that should be read by everyone interested in the relation between Marxism and intersectional theorizing.

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