

The Dual Subject of Intersectionality:

Between 'Lived Experience' and
'Categories of Oppression'

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that there is a dual subject at stake in contemporary invocations of intersectionality: on the one hand, a subject of 'lived experience', a subject that 'can be taken at its word', on the other hand a subject that is an effect of the intersection of various axes of oppression, that is a subject that is constituted through abstractions. In dialogue with a series of Marxist critiques of intersectionality, the article investigates how and why intersectionality has given rise to a 'subject of lived experience' in order to point to some of the weaknesses of this conception of subjectivity. Thereupon, I shall introduce a distinction between two concepts of intersectionality: intersectionality as a response to a problem and intersectionality as a theory of social identity in order to argue that many of the shortcomings of contemporary intersectionality theory seem to stem from the fact that they extend what was originally a response to a contextually specific problem and a metaphor to illustrate it into a general theory of social identity. This distinction, I argue, allows us to appreciate the initial critical gesture of intersectionality while remaining critical of some implications of intersectionality as a theory and methodology.

KEY WORDS

INTERSECTIONALITY, SOCIAL REPRODUCTION THEORY, MARXIST-FEMINISM,
BLACK FEMINISM, CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY, SUBJECTIVITY

INTRODUCTION

In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Oxford Philosopher Amia Srinivasan notes that her initial motivation behind writing her feminist bestseller *The Right to Sex* was “to point out a largely unremarked-upon tension between the commitment to consent-centric sex positivity and intersectionality” (Srinivasan, 2021b). Elaborating on this claim in an interview with the *Jacobin* podcast *The Dig*, Srinivasan explains that there is an interesting “if not contradiction” then at least a “very serious tension” within a lot of mainstream feminism between the “commitment to intersectionality,” which involves “taking seriously the way things like race and class inflect and shape people’s experiences of patriarchy,” and a tendency to abjure “a kind of political critique of sexual desire” which is, she claims, “a legacy of sex-positivity” (The Dig, 2022).

In the title essay of *The Right to Sex*, however, Srinivasan makes the seemingly opposite claim that “the case for pro-sex feminism has been buttressed by feminism’s turn towards intersectionality.” (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 81). She provides two reasons for this: first, that intersectionality has made feminists reluctant to make universal prescriptions on behalf of women, including universal sexual policies. Second, that intersectionality has “deepened feminist discomfort with thinking in terms of false consciousness,” that is to say, Srinivasan explains, “with the idea that women who have sex with and marry men have internalized the patriarchy. The important thing now, it is broadly thought, is to take women at their word” (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 82).

Though the heyday of intersectionality might be behind us, these statements by a prominent contemporary feminist philosopher reveal something about the important status that the concept still has in the feminist imaginary. Here, intersectionality appears as something to which feminism is spontaneously, automatically, and necessarily committed; intersectionality *demand*s things of feminists. Yet, if intersectionality has demands to make it seems to demand

(at least) two different, if not contradictory, things: to take seriously the way in which ‘people’s’ experience of patriarchy’ is *inflected* and *shaped* by ‘things like’ race and class which might involve some idea of ‘false consciousness’ understood as the internalization of oppressive structures such as patriarchy; and to take women at their word. That intersectionality is paradoxically thought to both buttress the case for consent-centric sex-positivity and to contradict pro-sex feminism suggests that the tension Srinivasan brings to the fore is not so much one between sex-positivity and the alleged demands of intersectionality as one, largely unremarked by the philosopher herself, that is internal to the concept of intersectionality.

I am introducing this article with these statements by Amia Srinivasan because they point to a series of questions essential to intersectionality as an intellectual and political project, yet largely undertheorized in contemporary intersectionality scholarship: in what ways does the reluctance to make universal prescriptions on behalf of women as a group entail a reluctance to submit ‘lived experience’, whether it is the experience of sexual desire, the experience of living under patriarchy or the experience of what might or might not be an emancipatory feminist practice, to political critique? What does the claim that experiences of patriarchy are ‘shaped and inflected’ by ‘things’ like race and class entail? What kind of ‘things’ are race and class? And what other ‘things’ shape and inflect experience? What does it mean that experience is shaped and inflected by ‘things’?

In this article, I explore the hypothesis that the tension between two different, if not contradictory, demands of intersectionality points to a dual subject at stake in the contemporary use of the concept: on the one hand, a subject of ‘lived experience’, a subject that, to refer back to Srinivasan, ‘can be taken at its word’, on the other hand a subject that is an effect of the intersection of various axes of oppression, that is a subject that is constituted through abstractions. To unfold this argument, I shall first explore how and why intersectionality seems to have given rise to this ‘subject of lived experience’ in dialogue with a series

of Marxist critiques of intersectionality. Thereupon, I shall introduce a distinction between two concepts of intersectionality: an early concept of *intersectionality as a response to a problem* and a more contemporary concept of *intersectionality as a theory of social identity*, in order to argue that many of the shortcomings of contemporary intersectionality theory seem to stem from the fact that what was originally meant as a response to a contextually specific problem and a metaphor to visualise it has been extended into a general theory of social identity. This distinction, I argue, allows us to appreciate the initial critical gesture of intersectionality while remaining critical of some implications of contemporary articulations of intersectionality as a theory and methodology.

INTERSECTIONALITY'S REPROACH TO SUSPICION

Before turning to intersectionality, let us briefly clarify what Srinivasan understands by 'consent-centric sex-positivity', so as to unpack the tension identified in the beginning of the article. Srinivasan largely identifies pro-sex feminism with Ellen Willis's critique of anti-porn feminism in her 1981 essay "Lust Horizon: Is the Women's Movement Pro-sex?" and the position that women are "sexual subjects in their own right, whose acts of consent – saying yes and saying no – [are] morally dispositive" (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 136). While radical 'anti-sex' feminists like Catharine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin saw sexual desire "its objects and expressions, fetishes and fantasies" as shaped by oppression, as a "construction of patriarchy," the legacy of Ellen Willis's "Lust Horizon" has given rise to a feminism that does not moralize about women's desires and insists that acting upon them is only morally constrained by the boundaries of consent. Srinivasan complicates Willis's position by underlining that though she insists that choice and consent are the only parameters for distinguishing 'good sex' from 'bad sex', she also, by the end of "Lust Horizon", argues that "a truly radical movement must look... beyond the right to choose, and keep focusing on the fundamental questions. Why do we choose

what we choose? What would we choose if we had a real choice?"

The 'task' that Willis sets for feminism is therefore, according to Srinivasan, "to treat as axiomatic our free sexual choices, while also seeing why (...) such choices, under patriarchy, are rarely free" (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 84). Srinivasan's main argument in the book is that, in its rush to do the former, contemporary feminism risks forgetting to do the latter. The consequence is a general reluctance to inquire into the ways in which sexual desires are shaped by oppressive forces, pushing towards a "naturalisation of sexual preference in which the rape fantasy becomes a primordial rather than a political fact" (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 84). Srinivasan argues that the sex-positive gaze, "unmoored by Willis's call to ambivalence" risks naturalising not only the rape fantasy but also something like "the supreme fuckability" of certain bodies and the unfuckability of others or the sexual disgust expressed towards, for instance, disabled, trans, and obese bodies. These "facts about fuckability" are, however, according to the philosopher, facts "that a truly intersectional feminism should demand we take seriously" (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 84).

Leaving the 'sex wars' of the 1980s behind, what interests me here are the ontological, epistemological, and political features that Srinivasan attributes to 'consent-centric sex-positivity' and to what extent they either align sex-positivity with or bring sex-positivity into tension with the alleged demands of intersectionality. Srinivasan notes that there is an interesting, though unintentional, convergence between the way contemporary 'pro-sex feminism' conceives of the norms of sex and the way liberals conceive of the norms of capitalist free exchange: "What matters is not what conditions give rise to the dynamics of supply and demand – why some people need to sell their labour power while others buy it – but only that both buyer and seller have agreed to the transfer" (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 82). Sex-positivity and liberalism thus converge in their insistence on treating choice and desire as given, rather than as conditioned and formed by a system of exploitation.

In other words, they share an epistemic assumption about the relationship between the subject and its experience: the idea that the subject of exchange is undecieved and knows what it wants.

It would, however, Srinivasan notes, be too easy to say that sex-positivity merely represents the co-optation of feminism by neoliberalism; the struggles of generations of feminists and gay and lesbian activists to free sex from “shame, stigma, coercion, abuse and unwanted pain” rest on the insistence that sexual preference is to a certain extent, something personal and private – something that cannot be understood and determined from a public or outsider’s perspective (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 82). Therefore, the question of self-deception and the imperative to take people at their word is not merely an epistemological issue, a question of experience and knowledge, but, perhaps more importantly, an ethical and political question, a question of agency and autonomy. Srinivasan argues that the imperative in contemporary feminism to take women at their word, to insist that “[i]f a woman says she enjoys working in porn, or being paid to have sex with men, or engaging in rape fantasies, or wearing stilettos – or even that she doesn’t just enjoy these things but finds them emancipatory, part of her feminist praxis,” we are “required to trust her,” is not merely based on an epistemic claim: “that a woman saying something about her own experience gives us a strong, though perhaps not indefeasible, reason to think it is true,” but perhaps primarily on an ethical claim: “a feminism that trades too freely in notions of self-deception is a feminism that risks dominating the subjects it presumes to liberate” (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 82). The essential difference between the reluctance to think in terms of self-deception in liberalism and in pro-sex feminism, respectively, thus appears to be that liberalism, broadly speaking, insists on an undecieved subject acting out of its own free will to obscure the underlying system of exploitation that actually determines and constrains the actions and choices of this subject, whereas sex-positive feminism insists on an undecieved subject in order to affirm the agency and autonomy of the subject.

For that reason, there seems to be a certain similarity between the sex-positive critique of anti-sex feminism and French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s critique of his ‘master’ Louis Althusser’s idea that subjects under capitalism “work all by themselves”, i.e. that they act ‘naturally’ and ‘spontaneously’ in line with the dominant ideology (Althusser, 1970/2012, p. 136). In his *Althusser’s Lesson*, Rancière criticizes the assumption at stake in Althusserianism and some other strains of Marxism that “domination functions thanks to a mechanism of dissimulation which hides its laws from its subjects by presenting them with an inverted reality.” For Rancière, this logic collapses into “a pure thought of resentment which declares the inability of the ignorant to be cured of their illusions, and hence the inability of the masses to take charge of their own destiny” (Rancière, 1974/2011, xvi). Viewed this way, the confrontation that Srinivasan sketches out between ‘pro-sex’ and ‘anti-sex’ feminism becomes a confrontation between two subjects: underlying the pro-sex position is a free subjectivity, a centre of initiative, author of and responsible for its actions, a subject that can be taken at its word, underlying the anti-sex position is a constituted subject, a subject that “works by itself” acting in compliance with the dominant patriarchal ideology.

If intersectionality both buttresses the case for consent-centric sex-positivity and contradicts consent-centric sex-positivity, then there appears to be a dual subject at stake in intersectionality. On the one hand, intersectionality does indeed seem to be characterised by a reproach to suspicion similar to the one characterising ‘consent-centric sex-positivity’ and liberalism, respectively, at least according to some of its critics. Marxist theorists, for instance, have criticised intersectionality for being overly focused on experience and for subscribing to a neoliberal idea of subjectivity. In the Marxist journal *Historical Materialism’s* special issue on ‘Identity Politics’, Chi Chi Shi argues that the contemporary framework of intersectionality epitomizes a form of identity politics in which identity has become “tied to the discourse of authenticity and disentangled from the material basis on which it is formed,” thus

converging with a “neo-liberal ‘authenticity-fantasy’” (Shi, 2018). Similarly, in a widely read and distributed pamphlet, Eve Mitchell argues that intersectionality simply creates “a list of naturalized identities, abstracted from their material and historical context” (Mitchell, 2014). These critiques tend to be directed towards simplified and sometimes straw versions of intersectionality conflating intersectionality with a certain version of identity politics. Yet to a certain extent, they resonate with a general theme in more substantiated Marxist critiques of intersectionality from a ‘social reproduction perspective’ reproaching intersectionality for being too focused on “social location” or “place” (Brenner, 2000, p. 293), for residing on the “micro-level” (Ferguson, 2016, p. 44) and for a “downplaying of theory” and a “resort to experience as the source of knowledge” (E. Gimenez, 2018, p. 90). Such is the importance given to the role of experience in the production of knowledge in intersectionality and Race, Class and Gender frameworks (RGC), Martha E. Gimenez notes, “that in the eight-page introduction to the first section of an RGC anthology, the word ‘experience’ is repeated 36 times” (E. Gimenez, 2018, p. 90). Though this excessive use of the word experience is far from being the case for all introductions to intersectionality and RGC frameworks, intersectionality scholars often emphasise the importance of seeing “lived experience as philosophically relevant” (M. May, 2015, p. 33) or of including narrative and experience “as valid sources of evidence for claim-making” (Hancock, 2016, p. 128). At the same time, it is often pointed out that intersectionality is and was always about systems and structures rather than simply about identity and subjectivity.¹ This is, to a certain extent true. Nevertheless, there appears to be a tendency to mostly rely on experience as a source of knowledge, due to the way in which intersectionality scholars theorize – or rather under-theorize – the relationship between the macro-level of intersecting structures of power and oppression and the micro-level at which these structures are lived and experienced. As Gimenez points out, intersectionality scholars often postulate the “existence of a more fundamental or ‘basic’ structure of unequal power relations and privilege which underlies race,

gender and class”, but they rarely offer a “macro-level theoretical perspective (...) to identify this basic, fundamental structure” (E. Gimenez, 2018, p. 89). This is, for instance, the case in Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge’s definition of intersectionality in their recent monograph:

Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences of everyday life. As an analytical tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity and race – among others – as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020, p. 2)

According to this definition, intersectionality is an analytical tool based on the idea that power relations are ‘intersecting’ and that ‘categories’ are ‘interrelated’. However, a number of key questions remain unanswered: What is the relationship between intersectionality as a methodology or concept – one that assumes that categories are interrelated and mutually shaping one another – and its object: the material phenomena it aims to grasp, namely, the ways in which intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences of everyday life? In other words, how does intersectionality as methodology constitute its object?² How are ‘power relations’ constituted, and how are they reproduced materially, discursively, and institutionally? What concept of power is at stake here? And what is implied by the word ‘influence’ in the definition? What exactly is the relationship between intersecting power relations and the experience of living within them? Does being located in a specific intersection of power structures entail awareness of being thus located?

Investigating a series of statements from some of Collins’s other writings, Gimenez argues that the implication of Collins’s account of intersectionality is ultimately that an individual’s “structural location in the intersection of inequality and oppression” is conflated with their “identity”, that is their “subjective

understanding of who they really are” (E. Gimenez, 2018, p. 28). Gimenez sees this as a consequence of Collins’s assumption of a cause-and-effect relationship between two claims: the claim that “each individual and group occupies a social position within interlocking structures of oppression” and the claim that “[e]veryone has a race/gender/class-specific identity” (E. Gimenez, 2018, p. 86). The assumption that structural location automatically leads to the development of an identity corresponding to this location is also partly reflected in Collins’s version of ‘standpoint epistemology’:

Individuals and groups differently located within intersecting systems of power have different points of view of their own and others’ experiences with complex social inequalities, typically advancing knowledge projects that reflect their social locations within power relations.”(Hill Collins, 2015, p. 14)

Though much depends on the implications of ‘reflect’ and ‘typically’ in this sentence, it confirms the importance granted to experience in the construction of knowledge in intersectionality, though it does not explain to what extent standpoints should be seen as immediate or achieved.

To sum up this section, in the case of Patricia Hill Collins’s version of intersectionality, the reliance on experience as a source of knowledge seems to be a consequence of two factors: 1) The underdevelopment of the theoretical framework of intersectionality which means that it seems confined to micro-level analyses of the experience of oppression from different locations 2) The fact that the relationship between structural location and identity is seen as isomorphic. Collins’s definition of intersectionality in the passages I have analyzed further lacks explanatory power when it comes to identifying what might or might not be a relevant or salient category of analysis in a given situation. What Judith Butler has referred to as “the embarrassed ”etc.” at the end of the list” (Butler, 1990, p. 432) – the “among others” concluding Bilge and Collins’s list – suggests that

their account relies on a potentially endless series of categories resulting in a potentially endless differentiation between subject-positions. Combined with the claim that knowledge and identities are effects of structural location, the etc.-problem de facto leads to a concept of experience as irreducible or incommensurable. Hence, intersectionality carries with it the demand to take women at their word, to refer back to Srinivasan, because it has become a discourse of singularity: if the experience of each female subject is necessarily structured differently from most, if not all, other female subjects, then no woman will be able to represent or speak on behalf of them as a group.

INTERSECTIONALITY AS A RESPONSE TO A PROBLEM

Though I am thus in general agreement with the Marxist diagnostic of contemporary intersectionality as a methodology and theory as underdeveloped and thus in a way “‘up for grabs,’ (...) open to any and all theoretical interpretations,” as Gimenez puts it, I do want to vindicate intersectionality as a political concept. More precisely, I think that in their eagerness to prove the theoretical superiority of the ‘SRT’ framework, and their tendency to posit ‘intersectionality theory’ and ‘social reproduction theory’ as competing social ontologies rather than supplementary critical perspectives, some ‘social reproduction scholars’ tend to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Rather than posing the question of intersectionality’s compatibility with Marxist theory as a question of two competing theoretical frameworks, other Marxist scholars have posed it in terms of a political division to be superseded.³ In her recent book, *Marxism and Intersectionality*, Ashley J. Bohrer explores the conditions of possibility of an intersectional Marxism demonstrating, through a critical historiography, that the ‘Marxist tradition’ and the ‘intersectional tradition’ share a long series of themes and political commitments (J. Bohrer, 2019).

In reflecting on the compatibility of Marxism and intersectionality, it is useful, I argue, to distinguish between two concepts of intersectionality: an earlier

version of intersectionality as *a response to a problem*, and a more contemporary version of intersectionality as *a theory of social identity*. Bohrer suggests that though the image of an intersection might have been productive of certain misunderstandings, we should not let the mistaken idea that: [I]ntersectionality theorists conceive of oppressions as separate structures of entities that intersect *somewhere*” substitute for the content of the theories of most intersectionality scholars that conceive of the structures or axes to be “fundamentally and irrevocably inseparable in ways that cannot be adequately rendered by the image of a traffic intersection” (J. Bohrer, 2019, p. 119). I suggest that the ‘mistaken idea’ Bohrer refers to is based on a misunderstanding of what the metaphor of an intersection is supposed to illustrate, both by its disciples and by its Marxist critics. The theoretical shortcomings of several contemporary accounts of intersectionality seem to stem from the fact that they seek to expand what was originally a response to a contextually specific problem and a specific metaphor to illustrate it into a general theory of social identity. On the other hand, many critiques of intersectionality are imprecise and unfair because they read the metaphor used to illustrate a contextually specific problem as an image of the social.

In that context, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s ‘traffic-metaphor’ has engendered a lot of discussion over whether roads crossing each other is a good way of explaining the interrelationships between race and gender and the constitution of raced and gendered subjects. Intersectionality scholars have suggested that the metaphor be revised or made more nuanced by adding more roads to the intersection or ‘a roundabout’ in its center, to talk about lines, axes or vectors rather than roads, to see these as ‘interacting’ or ‘interlocking’ (Hill Collins, 2000, pp. 24–25), ‘interwoven’, ‘intermeshed’ or ‘enmeshed’ (Lugones, 1994, p. 459) rather than ‘intersecting’. Marxist scholars, on the other hand, have often grounded their critique of intersectionality’s lack of conceptualization of the social totality in a critique of the “traffic model”. For instance, Susan Ferguson writes that Crenshaw portrays the social in spatial terms, in which “the

crossroads of Colonialism and Patriarchy represents a node of multiple oppressions. Identities and experiences here emerge from socio-specific spaces and times that cannot be reductively explained by any singular, overarching logic” (Ferguson, 2016, p. 41).

However, Crenshaw does not, at least not initially, use the image of ‘a traffic intersection’ to articulate an all-encompassing theory of identity and difference. She employs it to visualize a problem:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination [or both]” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149).

As Crenshaw later pointed out, intersectionality was thus not originally offered as “some new, totalizing theory of identity” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). Rather, it was coined to draw attention to the *problem* of the illegibility of multiple discriminations in American anti-discrimination law; because American anti-discrimination law defines sex discrimination and race discrimination as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis, and because discrimination in race discrimination cases tends to be viewed in terms of sex-or class-privileged Blacks and sex discrimination cases focus on race-and class-privileged women, the legal interests of Black women can only be recognized if they can be assimilated with those of white women or those of Black men. Situating herself in a certain tradition of US Black feminist thought, Crenshaw argues that the same problem is reflected in feminist theory and antiracist politics (Crenshaw, 1989).

The problem to which intersectionality, in Crenshaw’s articulation of it, is a response is thus that the legal interests of Black women – or more broadly their

political interests – can only be recognized if they are hit on either the “sex-discrimination road” or the “race discrimination road” but not at the intersection between them. She argues that *if* a ‘framework’ – legal, theoretical, activist or other – considers race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis, it will not be able to recognize the interests of those who are burdened by both. However, she does not, as such, say much about what race is and what gender is, how they are related to each other more broadly and how they are related to other categories of social life.

To the extent that it is possible to subsume a series of Black feminist theorists and activists coining what is often referred to as ‘precursor concepts’ to intersectionality, such as ‘double’, ‘triple’ and ‘multiple’- jeopardy or ‘interlocking systems of oppression’, under the grand umbrella of intersectionality, it is because they respond to *the same problem* as Crenshaw, albeit not in a legal context. In the set of texts that intersectionality scholarship often characterises as ‘proto-intersectional’ we do not find the language of ‘intersectionality’, ‘intersections’ or ‘intersecting’ forces, categories, vectors, axes or systems of oppression. Nor do we find a coherent *theory* of how ‘systems’ and ‘categories’ of oppression, class, race, gender *etc.*, are mutually constitutive on a structural level and interrelated in ‘lived experience.’ What we do find is a constellation of concepts or phrases that, in different ways, seek to encapsulate the ‘special situation’ of women of color. This is not to say that these texts do not make ontological claims about what race, class and gender are, how they are reproduced *etc.*, but they do not respond to these questions in the same way. In these so-called ‘proto-intersectional’ interventions the more general problem to which intersectionality is a response is that the most privileged subgroup of an oppressed group often comes to define the interests of the entire group thus excluding those who are oppressed by more factors than the one that they share with the rest of the group.

Therefore, reading these texts through the lens of contemporary intersectionality theory often leads

to more confusion than clarity. Take, for example, Frances Beal’s 1969 pamphlet “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female.” It is oftentimes claimed that Beal’s concept of “double jeopardy” is an “important precursor concept to intersectionality” (Carastathis, 2016) or that she puts forward an “intersectional argument to explain Black women’s lives.” (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). At the same time, the “jeopardy approach” that Beal is presumed to represent is often contrasted to a “full-blown theory of intersectionality” because it is thought to represent “an ‘additive approach’ that conceives systems and phenomena of oppression to be ontologically separate and merely adding on to each other rather than “an intersectional approach” that conceives them as mutually constructed and integratively maintained (J. Bohrer, 2019, p. 63).⁴

In “Double Jeopardy”, Beal does articulate an idea of *intersectionality as a response to a problem* through her critique of male-dominated movements for Black power and white dominated movements for women’s liberation from the perspective of the ‘special situation’ of African-American women. However, she does not, as such, seem to articulate a specific conceptual approach to understanding the interrelations of race, gender, and class that would correspond to either an ‘additive’ ‘jeopardy approach’ or an ‘integrative’ ‘intersectional approach’ as defined by contemporary intersectionality scholars. In its approach to understanding the interrelationships of race, class and gender, “Double Jeopardy” is closer to a Marxist-feminist approach that conceives the capitalist system as structurally dependent on sexism and racism in order to reproduce itself. Beal mentions three ways in which ‘the System’ is dependent on the oppression of women: first, that the oppression of women functions as an ‘escape valve’ for capitalism insofar as women are ‘scape goats’ for the evils of the system (M. Beal, 1969/2008, p. 170). Second, that women represent a surplus labor supply (M. Beal, 1969/2008, p. 170). Third, that women, and especially black women, can be employed to do the most degrading and badly paid jobs (‘superexploitation’) (M. Beal, 1969/2008, p. 172).

Contemporary intersectionality scholars are, to a certain extent, correct when they point out what they refer to as the foundationalist character of Beal's analysis; Beal does indeed give "causal and explanatory priority to capitalism" (Carastathis, 2016, p. 34). However, these scholars seem to misunderstand the consequences of this claim when they, in different ways, attempt to argue that this 'foundationalism' goes against what we might call 'intersectionality's rejection of primacy.' Bohrer explains that "the claim that oppressions cannot be ranked", conceived to be one of the key components of intersectionality theory, entails two claims: the claim that "no one oppression is *more important* (ontologically, experientially, politically) than the others, and the claim that "no one oppression *unilaterally causes* the others" (J. Bohrer, 2019, p. 92). These two claims are, however, different in nature: the first claim is based on a value judgement about the importance of different forms of oppression, the second is a claim about causality. Thus, it seems possible to accept the first – at least its political aspect – without accepting the second: while Beal asserts that "no oppression" is more important than the others in the context of political struggle, her account does grant explanatory primacy to capitalism.

In light of this, it seems strange to criticise Beal's approach for being additive or incremental. Or, at least, this claim would have to be substantiated by specifying what exactly it is that Beal 'adds' to each other which brings us back to the question: what does intersectionality scholars speak about when they speak about 'race, class, gender *etc.*?' Bohrer argues that "the very language of "double" and "triple" and "multiple jeopardy" suggests "both a separability of race, gender, and class, and that the particular positions of women of color are produced through the addition of multiple oppressions together" which fails to see how they are fundamentally, structurally and experientially interarticulated and mutually constructing (J. Bohrer, 2019, p. 96). If the assumption here is that Beal merely adds categories to each other, the critique is misplaced insofar as Beal's account, as Anna Carastathis correctly points out, does not rely

on the notion of categories or axes but rather on the notion of a system or structure (Carastathis, 2016, p. 35). If the assumption is that she adds systems to each other, the critique is meaningless insofar as Beal does not operate with separate systems to begin with; she operates with one system, that is capitalism, emphatically referred to as 'the System' with capital S. If the assumption is that she merely adds phenomena of oppression to each other on the level of experience, it is unclear to me what this would mean. Intersectionality is often defined by the claim that experiences of oppression cannot be separated, that different forms of oppression are experienced *simultaneously*.⁵ But it is difficult to see how an 'integrative' or 'constitutive approach' and an 'additive approach' would differ from each other on this point. If the point is that there is no non-raced experience of gender oppression and vice versa, what is the difference then between seeing experiences of sex-based oppression or experiences of race-based oppression as either added on to each other or as enmeshed, interrelated or co-constitutive? In general, as long as the co-constitution, enmeshment, interrelation – or whatever other term is used to avoid the accusation of an incremental approach – of oppressions remains merely postulated rather than explained, there appears to be no essential difference between an 'additive approach' and an 'integrative' or 'constitutive' approach.

LIVED EXPERIENCE AND ABSTRACTION

The problem of potentially endless differentiation in contemporary intersectionality theory is, to an extent, a consequence of a radicalization of the critique of 'woman' as the subject of feminist theory and practice advanced by early intersectional interventions. Exposing how various women's rights struggles in the US have been explicitly orientated by the specific interests of white women, Frances Beal, The Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis, bell hooks and others challenged the idea that women share experiences and political interests simply by virtue of being women. However, several early intersectional

interventions simultaneously point to the impossibility of considering African American women as such as a collective subject given that African American women as a group are differentiated by class, sexuality, ability, age etc..⁶

However, as I hope to have shown using Frances Beal's "Double Jeopardy" as an example, these so-called 'precursor concepts' were not coined to say something about the constitution of subjects in the intersection of structures of oppression on an ontological level, but to say something about the formation of political subjectivity or the dynamics of the formation of sub-groups within a larger group in the context of political struggle. Thus, they are not bound up on the same epistemological and ontological assumptions as contemporary intersectionality theory. For instance, Beal does not assume an isomorphic relationship between structural location and experience. Rather, she draws on a concept of experience as constituted through ideology. To the extent that subjects occur in Beal's text, they do not occur as subjects of 'lived experience,' as subjects that can be taken at their word, they occur as ideologically mystified subjects that works as functional constituents of the capitalist totality. Beal states that "the System" has "defined the roles to which each individual should subscribe," "manhood" and "femininity" "in terms of its own interests." (M. Beal, 1969/2008, p. 167). Thus, the System, capitalism, is attributed agency while its 'subjects' are mostly deprived of it: capitalism "manipulates", it defines the roles of each and every one, it has "goals" and finds things "necessary" and "expedient" to realize them.⁷ Subjects (here, Black women and Black men), on the other hand, are "manipulated by the System" (M. Beal, 1969/2008, p. 66), they do not understand "the true nature of the forces working upon them." (M. Beal, 1969/2008, p. 166) The 'subjects' at stake in Beal's text are thus closer to the Althusserian idea of subjects "working all by themselves" than they are to a subject that can be taken at its word. Though the experience of women of colour are indeed important in early intersectional interventions, a subject that can be taken at its word is hence not a necessary consequence of an

intersectional critique.

Rather, the reliance on a 'subject of lived experience' in contemporary intersectionality theory seems to be not so much a consequence of intersectional critique itself but rather of a certain 'zeitgeist' permeating many different theoretical fields and cultural tendencies. Invoked to underline the viscosity and non-vicariousness of experience, 'lived experience' appears to function as a marker of authenticity; a lived experience is an experience that cannot be communicated but needs to have been 'lived' in order to be understood. The frequent reference to lived experience in intersectionality theory might thus be interpreted as symptomatic of the same "anti-abstracting desire" or "jargon of authenticity" that Marina Vishmidt has detected in feminist discourses on 'the vulnerable body': "the positing of something basic and fundamental as a substratum to all further thought, something which produces but is itself not produced, which conditions but is itself unconditioned" (Vishmidt, 2020, p. 34) or what Anna Kornbluh in her recent book describes as a domination of 'immediacy' in contemporary theory, culture and politics (Kornbluh, 2023). Perhaps, it is then not so much intersectionality that has buttressed the case for sex-positivity, as it is the insistence on a 'subject that can be taken at its word' in contemporary theory, that has buttressed the case for a certain version of intersectionality.

I am suspicious of the idea of a 'subject that can be taken at its word' for the same reasons that Gayatri Spivak was suspicious towards Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze's call for *the oppressed to speak for themselves*. In her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Spivak criticised the idea expressed by the two philosophers in "a friendly exchange" that "the oppressed, if given the chance (...) *can speak and know their conditions*" (Spivak, 1988/2010, p. 252); that "the masses", in the words of Foucault, "*know perfectly well*," that "they know far better than [the intellectual] and they certainly say it very well" (Deleuze & Foucault, 1972/1977, p. 206). The problem with this reliance on a "naturally articulate

subject of oppression” (Spivak, 1988/2010, p. 259), is, according to Spivak, that it ultimately amounts to a reliance on a “self-proximate, if not self-identical, subject of the oppressed” (Spivak, 1988/2010, p. 248). Spivak’s critique of this “unquestioned valorisation of the oppressed subject” (Spivak, 1990, p. 241) is not just its implicit exoticism – the underlying idea that “[o]nly the dominant self can be problematic; the self of the Other is authentic without a problem” as Spivak puts it in an interview (Spivak, 1990, p. 66) – but also that it is symptomatic of a “disavowal of the role of ideology in reproducing social relations of production” (Spivak, 1988/2010, p. 241). More precisely, as I read it, Spivak’s problem with the idea of a self-proximate if not self-identical subject – a subject that is undecieved and knows what it wants, we might say – is that this conception relies on an idea of the transparency and immediacy of experience that forecloses an analysis of how oppression often operates through ideological mystification.⁸ Ultimately, this re inaugurates, Spivak argues, an abstract notion of a sovereign, constitutive and undivided subject.

In line with Spivak, Martha E. Gimenez, in the context of her critique of intersectionality, argues that “to be fully understood in its broader social and political implications”, experience “needs to be situated in the context of the capitalist forces that produce it.” Experience in itself is, Gimenez notes, “suspect” because “dialectically, it is a unity of opposites; it is unique, personal, insightful and revealing, and, at the same time, thoroughly social, partial, mystifying, itself the product of historical forces about which individuals may know little or nothing about” (E. Gimenez, 2018, p. 91). Spivak’s critique is immensely complex, and it is beyond the scope of this article to examine it in detail. What I want to tentatively suggest, however, is that a similar unquestioned valorisation of the oppressed subject – a “thematics of being undecieved” (Spivak, 1988/2010, p. 241) – may also be at stake in the reliance on lived experience in intersectionality theory.

How do we then conceive of experience as the ‘dialectical unity of opposites’ that Gimenez refers to? What

conception of subjectivity do we need to conceive of experience as simultaneously ‘personal, insightful and revealing’ and ‘social, partial and mystifying’? To an extent, the conception of lived experience seems to contradict, or at least be in very serious tension with, what is often represented as one of the core claims of intersectionality theory: the idea that ‘experience’ is influenced, shaped or structured by ‘interrelating power structures’ or ‘vectors’ or ‘axes’ or ‘systems’ or ‘categories’ of oppression, gender, race, class etc., that is by abstractions. This tension points back to the tension between two subjects at stake in intersectionality: a subject of lived experience that can be taken at its word and a subject that is an effect of intersecting structures of power and oppression. The challenge for intersectionality is thus to find ways of mediating these two subjects. In the beginning of her 1998 book *Constituting Feminist Subjects*, Kathi Weeks notes that feminists, in the wake of postmodern critiques of the 1980s, have been struggling to “develop theories of the subject that are adequate to a feminist politics,” that is theories of the subject that move beyond “models of the subject organized with reference to a natural core, authentic humanity or enduring metaphysical essence” while still acknowledging “feminism’s antagonistic force” and cultivating “its subversive potential” (Weeks, 1998, p. 1). The puzzle is, Weeks explains, “to understand how it could be that subjects so systematically constructed and well prepared to subject to the existing order can also collectively defy it” (Weeks, 1998, p. 1).

In line with Weeks’ project, we can ask: how can we think of ‘intersectional subjects’ in a way that recognizes a necessary opacity in the way in which the racial, capitalist and patriarchal order of oppression reproduces itself but without thereby depriving its ‘subjects’ of agency? In that context, I would suggest that intersectionality can benefit from Marxist methodology. The main problem pointed out by a series of critiques of intersectionality from a Marxist-feminist perspective is that intersectionality has become abstract: by conceiving what is *analytically discrete* as *actually discrete*, most contemporary accounts of intersectionality produce a “one-sided and abstract

accounting of reality”, as Susan Ferguson puts it (Ferguson, 2016, pp. 44–45).⁹ If intersectionality in parting from an imagined concrete, lived experience, has only been able to move towards “ever thinner abstractions” to end up with a “chaotic conception of the whole” to paraphrase Marx’s methodological reflections in the *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1857-58/2005), it would be interesting to ask what an intersectional method that moves from the abstract to the concrete would look like. This would be an approach that does not part from gendered, raced and classed individuals and their lived experience of oppression, but rather

moves from the abstract categories of ‘gender’, ‘race’ and ‘class’ to the concrete individuals constituted through these categories.¹⁰ I have thus not proposed a critique of contemporary intersectional methodology in order to suggest that we replace intersectionality with a different concept and a different metaphor, rather the opposite: it should be an occasion to further develop the project. Intersectionality can, I believe, benefit from Marxist methodology, but only if Marxist scholars recognise that intersectionality considered as a response to a problem is not merely ‘compatible’ with Marxism, it is vital for Marxism.

[1] See a.o. (Cho, 2013; Tomlinson, 2013)

[2] In her article “Intersectionality’s Definitional Dilemmas”, Collins elaborates on the relationship between “analytical categories” such as race, class and gender and “intersecting systems of power” – which here seems to be used interchangeably with “intersecting power relations” – such as “racism and sexism” but in a way that creates more confusion than clarity. Here analytical categories are somehow granted ontological primacy when Collins claims that “mutually constructing categories of analysis (...) underlie and shape intersecting systems of power” and that these systems of power “catalyze social formations of complex social inequalities that are organized via unequal material realities.” See (Hill Collins, 2015, p. 14)

[3] For instance, in their introduction to a recent collection of essays on Marxist philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya, Kevin B. Anderson, Kieran Durkin and Heather A. Brown suggests that today’s intellectual left is divided into two major streams: “The first stream, often espousing some forms of Marxism, highlights capital and class, accusing the left of the 1990s and after of being stuck in what it disparages as “identity politics.” The second stream holds to a focus on race, gender, and sexuality, attacking Marxists for a kind of class reductionism whose return they are shocked to see.” They then ask: “Can a Marxist theory and practice, albeit one that is informed by intersectionality, dialectically transcend (aufheben) this contradiction?”. See (B. Anderson et al., 2020, p. 4)

[4] See (K. King, 1988; Carasthatis, 2016)

[5] Anna Carasthatis refers to this as the “simultaneity benefit” of intersectional analysis, see (Carasthatis, 2016, pp. 54–55)

[6] For instance, The Combahee River Collective and Black Women for Wages for Housework – both breakaway groups from larger movements – drew attention to the fact that African American women are differentiated in terms of sexuality, arguing that Black lesbian women must assert autonomy not only towards white women and Black men but also in relation to Black heterosexual women. (Combahee River Collective, 1977/2017; Toupin, 2018)

[7] For instance Beal writes that “In keeping with its goal of destroying the black race’s will to resist its subjugation, capitalism found it necessary to create a situation where the black man found it impossible to find meaningful or productive employment.” (M. Beal, 1969/2008)

[8] In that context, Spivak quotes Althusser: “The reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the ruling ideology for the workers.” (Spivak, 2010, p. 240)

[9] Some scholars suggest that ‘woman of color’ has become an abstraction in contemporary intersectionality theory. Jennifer Nash writes that black women have become a ‘symbol’ within the field of US women’s studies ‘even if the field retains little interest in the materiality of black women’s bodies’ and Jasbir Puar emphatically refers to ‘woman of color’ with the acronym ‘WOC’ to ‘underscore the overdetermined emptiness of its graciousness.’ See (Nash, 2019, p. 4; Puar, 2012, p. 3)

[10] This is, for instance, the path followed by a 2014 article by Endnotes that, moving from the most abstract categories to the most concrete; from defining gender as a separation between spheres to specifying the individuals assigned to those spheres, traces the unfolding of gender as a real abstraction. (Endnotes, 2013)

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