

Karl Marx and Intersectionality

by Kevin B. Anderson

In the late twentieth century, a theoretical discourse of intersectionality became almost hegemonic in many sectors of radical intellectual life. In this discourse, which concerned social issues and movements around race, gender, class, sexuality, and other forms of oppression, it was often said we should avoid any kind of class reductionism or essentialism in which gender and race are subsumed under the category of class.



At most, it was said, movements around race, gender, sexuality, or class can intersect with each other, but cannot easily coalesce into a single movement against the power structure and the capitalist system that, according to Marxists, stands behind it. Thus, the actual intersectionality of these social movements — as opposed to their separateness — was usually seen as rather limited, both as reality and as possibility. Saying otherwise ran the danger of falling into the abyss of reductionism or essentialism.

Let us take the example of racial oppression and its potential intersectionality with class oppression. Slogans popular in earlier periods, like “Black and white, unite and fight,” receded somewhat in the wake of intersectionality. To some extent, this was a positive development, in that it recognized the uniqueness of the oppression and the creativity of the struggles of African-Americans for self-liberation, and the concomitant failure in many instances of white labor to unite with Black labor due to the deep racism of U.S. society, a racism to which white workers were not immune. At another level, however, the new stance was problematic, since some varieties of intersectionality theory tended to deny any serious possibility of class unity against capital across racial lines.

Where does this leave the discussion of Karl Marx, the greatest thinker in terms of both capitalism and the possibility of overcoming it?

If Marx is to be claimed as a contemporary thinker, as I think we would want to do, I believe it is imperative not to sweep the issues around intersectionality under the rug when dealing with Marx's thought. To be sure, Marx's main concentration and most original writings concerned the nature of capitalism and the possibility of its transcendence, and of the modern proletariat as the vehicle for that transcendence. Provided, of course, that those workers were connected — albeit not in a hierarchical, vanguardist manner — to the far-reaching dialectical critique of capital that Marxist theory and politics offered.

But what did Marx actually have to say about the inter-relationship of race, gender, and class? Actually, quite a lot. Unfortunately, the post-Marx Marxists who formalized his thought were often unaware of this, or worse, in some cases rejected outright Marx's thought on race and gender.

Take, for example, his writings on race and class and their relationship to capital. Even before the *Communist Manifesto*, the young Marx theorized that modern capitalism existed on the foundation of Black slave labor: "Direct slavery is as much the pivot upon which our present-day industrialism turns as are machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery there would be no cotton, without cotton there would be no modern industry" (Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* [hereafter MECW] 38, pp. 101-2, trans. slightly altered). Thus, it was not only a question of capital's exploitation of legally free wage labor inside Britain, the leading industrial power of the day, but also one of a wider set of relationships that involved a type of unfree labor, slave labor, organized in a highly modern capitalist sense, one that had marked differences from Roman or other earlier forms of slavery.

As Marx wrote in the 1861-63 preparatory manuscript for his magnum opus, *Capital*, the relentless pressure of value production, of capital accumulation, gave this modern capitalist form of slavery a ruthless, almost genocidal character, working Africans to death: "If the capitalist sets the worker to work for e.g. 20 hours today, tomorrow he will be incapable of working the normal labor time of 12 hours or perhaps any labor time at all. If the overwork extends over a long period, the worker will perhaps only preserve himself and therefore his labor capacity for 7 years instead of the 20 or 30 years for which he might otherwise have preserved it.... This is still at this moment the case in Cuba, where after 12 hours in the fields the Negroes have a further two hours of manufacturing labor to perform in connection with the preparation of sugar or tobacco" (MECW 30, pp. 182-83).

In Vol. I of *Capital*, Marx also addressed the subjective factors concerning race, class, and revolution in terms of the changing social consciousness of white industrial labor in the U.S., here during the revolutionary era that followed the Civil War: "In the United States of America, every independent workers' movement was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. *Labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin.* However, a new life immediately arose from the death of slavery" (Marx, *Capital I*, Fowkes trans., NY: Penguin 1977, p. 414, emphasis added).

For Marx, uprooting slavery and racism in America was not only a political question of constitutional amendments and civil rights bills, but also one that concerned the economic structures of society. Therefore, he also refers in *Capital* to the fight to divide up the large slave plantations into land grants of forty acres and a mule to each freed slave, writing that “after the abolition of slavery, a radical transformation in the existing relations of capital and landed property is on the agenda” in the U.S. (*Capital I*, pp. 93). Only such an economic transformation, not achieved in the U.S. to this day, could uproot the material foundations of racial oppression.

I want to emphasize that every example I have quoted so far has come from Marx’s “economic” writings. Of course, he writes a lot more on race and revolution elsewhere, whether in journalism or letters. One prominent example I could mention is his discussion in a letter to Engels of John Brown’s 1859 raid in Virginia, where Marx enthuses over the possibility of a “slave revolution” (MECW 41, p. 4, trans. altered). Here we find Marx extolling the revolutionary subjectivity of African-Americans.

What about the example of Marx and gender? Heather Brown has published an excellent book on this topic (*Marx on Gender and the Family*, Leiden: Brill, 2012), and because of this I will be much briefer than I was with race. However, I would like to mention, for example, Marx’s late *Ethnological Notebooks*, where he examined a variety of precapitalist societies and their communal, collectivist social relations, from the Iroquois and other Native Americans, to the very early Greco-Roman societies. His conclusion was that many preliterate societies around the world exhibited a far greater degree of women’s participation and social power, including in political leadership, than is found in modern ones. At the same time, and here unlike Engels and others since, Marx did not idealize these early social relations, because (1) even in these societies, there were many indications that women remained to a degree subordinate to men, and (2) the type of collectivism found in these societies did not leave room for individual freedom and self-development in the modern sense.

As Raya Dunayevskaya has suggested, in these late writings, after *Capital* and just before his death, Marx had returned to the radicalism of the 1840s, in particular that of the 1844 *Manuscripts* where he first laid out the dialectical humanist categories that were to frame his lifework. To take another example on gender, Marx in 1844 discussed not only capital, class, alienation, and humanism, but also gender, seeing what he called the “relationship of man to woman” as a fundamental yardstick with which to measure overall social progress, to wit: “Therefore, on the basis of this relationship, we can judge the whole stage of development of the human being. From the character of this relationship it follows to what degree the *human being* has become and recognized himself or herself as a *species being*; a *human being*” (MECW 3, pp. 295-96, trans. altered). As Dunayevskaya also wrote, here “Marx extended the concept of Alienation to the Man/Woman relationship and to all life under capitalism” (*Women’s Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution*, NJ: Humanities Press, 1985, p. 10).

While he certainly didn’t answer all of the questions that press down on us as revolutionaries today, I think we can say that for Marx, race, class, and gender were concrete categories that intersected in various ways — and sometimes coalesced in a revolutionary fashion — across the historical modes of production that he analyzed.

As Marxist-Humanists, we have tried to carry forth this aspect of Marx, not only by a direct confrontation with his writings, some of them sidelined in the dominant interpretations, but also mediated through the writings and struggles of the founders of Marxist-Humanism in the U.S., the philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya, author of *Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution* and of *American Civilization on Trial: Black Masses as Vanguard*, and the Black civil rights and labor activist Charles Denby (Simon Owens), author of *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal*. Recently, Jacqueline Jones's *Dreadful Deceit*, an acclaimed new book on race in America, has brought Denby's life and work to a wider public than ever before, garnering mentions in leading daily newspapers.

In conclusion, I would like to quote from our Convention Call on Jones's book: "In analyzing Denby's actions and ideas, Jones stresses the interrelation of race, class, and Marxist-Humanism. She notes Denby's perception of white working class racism as the major impediment to social revolution in America, writing of 'those workers who insisted as identifying themselves as white in opposition to their Black co-workers.' At the same time, she chronicles his lifelong quest, sometimes successful, to create working class solidarity across racial lines."

Not only that, but Jones also grasps, although not fully, how the Marxist-Humanist tradition sees the relationship of philosophy to organization and activism, here in contrast to another figure in Marxism and Black liberation, C.L.R. James. Again quoting from our Convention Call, we write that in Jones's book, Dunayevskaya and Denby's "commitment to 'the role of philosophy in guiding workers to self-understanding, as opposed to simply collecting workers' stories and letting those stories point toward the revolution' is portrayed as the major cause of their split with C.L.R. James in 1955."

And that too, is a question for our times, directly connected to the theme of our Convention this weekend, "From Philosophy to Organization and Back."

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