Insurrections at the intersections: feminism, intersectionality and anarchism - Abbey Volcano and J Rogue

A critique of liberal conceptions of 'intersectionality' and an outline of an anarchist, class struggle approach.

We need to understand the body not as bound to the private or to the self—the western idea of the autonomous individual—but as being linked integrally to material expressions of community and public space. In this sense there is no neat divide between the corporeal and the social; there is instead what has been called a "social flesh." - Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar[1]

The birth of intersectionality

In response to various U.S. feminisms and feminist organizing efforts the Combahee River Collective[2], an organization of black lesbian socialist-feminists[3], wrote a statement that became the midwife of intersectionality. Intersectionality sprang from black feminist politics near the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s and is often understood as a response to mainstream feminism's construction around the erroneous idea of a "universal woman" or "sisterhood."[4] At the heart of intersectionality lies the desire to highlight the myriad ways that categories and social locations such as race, gender, and class intersect, interact, and overlap to produce systemic social inequalities; given this reality, talk of a universal women's experience was obviously based on false premises (and typically mirrored the most privileged categories of women— i.e. white, non-disabled, "middle class," heterosexual, and so on).

Initially conceived around the triad of "race/class/gender," intersectionality was later expanded by Patricia Hill Collins to include social locations such as nation, ability, sexuality, age, and ethnicity[5]. Rather than being conceptualized as an additive model, intersectionality offers us a lens through which to view race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. as mutually-constituting processes (that is, these categories do not exist independently from one another; rather, they mutually reinforce one another) and social relations that materially play out in people's everyday lives in complex ways. Rather than distinct categories, intersectionality

theorizes social positions as overlapping, complex, interacting, intersecting, and often contradictory configurations.

Toward an anarchist critique of liberal intersectionality

Intersectionality has been, and often still is, centered on identity. Although the theory suggests that hierarchies and systems of oppression are interlocking, mutually constituting, and sometimes even contradictory, intersectionality has often been used in a way that levels structural hierarchies and oppressions. For instance, "race, class, and gender" are often viewed as oppressions that are experienced in a variety of ways/degrees by everyone—that is, no one is free of the forced assignations of identity. This concept can be useful, especially when it comes to struggle, but the three "categories" are often treated solely as identities, and as though they are similar because they are "oppressions." For instance, it is put forward that we all have a race, a gender, and a class. Since everyone experiences these identities differently, many theorists writing on intersectionality have referred to something called "classism" to complement racism and sexism.

This can lead to the gravely confused notion that class oppression needs to be rectified by rich people treating poor people "nicer" while still maintaining class society. This analysis treats class differences as though they are simply cultural differences. In turn, this leads toward the limited strategy of "respecting diversity" rather than addressing the root of the problem. This argument precludes a class struggle analysis which views capitalism and class society as institutions and enemies of freedom. We don't wish to "get along" under capitalism by abolishing snobbery and class elitism. Rather, we wish to overthrow capitalism and end class society all together. We do recognize that there are some relevant points raised by the folks who are talking about classism—we do not mean to gloss over the stratification of income within the working class.

Organizing within the extremely diverse working class of the United States requires that we acknowledge and have consciousness of that diversity. However, we feel it is inaccurate to conflate this with holding systemic power over others – much of the so-called middle class may have relative financial advantage over their more poorly-waged peers, but that is not the same as exploiting or being in a position of power over them. This sociologically-based class analysis further confuses people by mistakenly leading them to believe their "identity" as a member of the "middle class" (a term which has so many definitions as to make it irrelevant) puts them in league with the ruling class/oppressors, contributing to the lack of class consciousness in the United States. Capitalism is a system of exploitation where the vast majority work for a living while very few own (i.e.: rob) for a living. The term classism does not explain exploitation, which makes it a flawed concept. We want an end to class society, not a society where classes "respect" each other. It is impossible to eradicate exploitation while class society still exists. To end exploitation we must also end class society (and all other institutionalized hierarchies).

This critical issue is frequently overlooked by theorists who use intersectionality to call for an end to "classism." Rather, as anarchists, we call for an end to all exploitation and oppression and this includes an end to class society. Liberal interpretations of intersectionality miss the uniqueness of class by viewing it as an identity and treating it as though it is the same as racism or sexism by tacking an "ism" onto the end. Eradicating capitalism means an end to class society; it means class war. Likewise, race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, age—the gamut of hierarchically-arranged social relations— are in their own ways unique. As anarchists, we might point those unique qualities out rather than leveling all of these social relations into a single framework.

By viewing class as "just another identity" that should be considered in the attempt to understand others' (and one's own) "identities," traditional conceptions of intersectionality do a dis- service to liberatory processes and struggle. While intersectionality illustrates the ways in which relations of domination interact with and prop up each other, this does not mean that these systems are identical or can be conflated. They are unique and function differently. These systems also reproduce one another. White supremacy is sexualized and gendered, heteronormativity is racialized and classed. Oppressive and exploitative institutions and structures are tightly woven together and hold one another up. Highlighting their intersections—their seams—gives us useful angles from which to tear them down and construct more liberatory, more desirable, and more sustainable relations with which to begin fashioning our futures.

An anarchist intersectionality of our own

Despite having noted this particularly common mistake by theorists and activists writing under the label of intersectionality, the theory does have a lot to offer that shouldn't be ignored. For instance, intersectionality rejects the idea of a central or primary oppression. Rather, as previously noted, all oppressions overlap and often mutually constitute each other. Interpreted on the structural and institutional levels, this means that the struggle against capitalism must also be the struggle against heterosexism, patriarchy, white supremacy, etc. Too often intersectionality is used solely as a tool to understand how these oppressions overlap in the everyday lives of people to produce an identity that is unique to them in degree and composition.

What is more useful to us as anarchists is using intersectionality to understand how the daily lives of people can be used to talk about the ways in which structures and institutions intersect and interact. This project can inform our analyses, strategies, and struggles against all forms of domination. That is, anarchists might use lived reality to draw connections to institutional processes that create, reproduce, and maintain social relations of domination. Unfortunately, a liberal interpretation of intersectionality precludes this kind of institutional analysis, so while we might borrow from intersectionality, we also need to critique it from a distinctly anarchist perspective.

It is worth noting that there really is no universally-accepted interpretation of intersectionality. Like feminism, it requires a modifier in order to be truly descriptive, which is why we'll use the term "anarchist intersectionality" to describe our perspective in this essay. We believe that an anti-state and anti-capitalist perspective (as well as a revolutionary stance regarding white supremacy and heteropatriarchy) is the logical conclusion of intersectionality. However, there are many who draw from intersectionality, yet take a more liberal approach. Again, this can be seen in the criticisms of "classism" rather than capitalism and class society, and the frequent absence of an analysis of the state[6]. Additionally, there is also at times a tendency to focus almost solely on individual experiences rather than systems and institutions.

While all these points of struggle are relevant, it is also true that people raised in the United States, socialized in a deeply self-centered culture, have a tendency to focus on the oppression and repression of individuals, oftentimes to the detriment of a broader, more systemic perspective. Our interest lies with how institutions function and how institutions are reproduced through our daily lives and patterns of social relations. How can we trace our "individual experiences" back to the systems that (re)produce them (and vice versa)? How can we trace the ways that these systems (re)produce one another? How can we smash them and create new social relations that foster freedom?

With an institutional and systemic analysis of intersectionality, anarchists are afforded the possibility of highlighting the social flesh mentioned in the opening quote. And if we are to give a full account of this social flesh—the ways that hierarchies and inequalities are woven into our social fabric—we'd be remiss if we failed to highlight a glaring omission in nearly everything ever written in intersectional theories: the state. We don't exist in a society of political equals, but in a complex system of domination where some are governed and controlled and ruled in institutional processes that anarchists describe as the state. Gustav Landauer, who discussed this hierarchical arrangement of humanity where some rule over others in a political body above and beyond the control of the people, saw the state as a social relationship.[7]

We are not just bodies that exist in assigned identities such as race, class, gender, ability, and the rest of the usual laundry list. We are also political subjects in a society ruled by politicians, judges, police, and bureaucrats of all manner. An intersectional analysis that accounts for the social flesh might be extended by anarchists, then, for insurrectionary ends, as our misery is embedded within institutions like capitalism and the state that produce, and are (re)produced, by the web of identities used to arrange humanity into neat groupings of oppressors and oppressed.

As anarchists, we have found that intersectionality is useful to the degree that it can inform our struggles. Intersectionality has been helpful for understanding the ways that oppressions overlap and play out in people's everyday lives. However, when interpreted through liberal frameworks, typical intersectional analyses often assume myriad oppressions to function identically, which can preclude a class analysis, an analysis of the state, and analyses of our ruling institutions. Our assessment is that everyday experiences of oppressions and exploitation are important and useful for struggle if we utilize intersectionality in a way that can encompass the different methods through which white supremacy, heteronormativity, patriarchy, class society, etc. function in people's lives, rather than simply listing them as though they all operate in similar fashions.

Truth is, the histories of heteronormativity, of white supremacy, of class society need to be understood for their similarities and differences. Moreover, they need to be understood for how they've each functioned to (re)shape one another, and vice versa. This level of analysis lends itself to a more holistic view of how our ruling institutions function and how that informs the everyday lives of people. It would be an oversight to not utilize intersectionality in this way.

From abstraction to organizing: reproductive freedom and anarchist intersectionality

The ways in which capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy—and disciplinary society more generally—have required control over bodies has been greatly detailed elsewhere[8], but we would like to offer a bit of that history in order to help build an argument that organizing for reproductive freedom would benefit from an anarchist intersectional analysis. Reproductive freedom, which we use as an explicitly anti-state, anti-capitalist interpretation of reproductive justice, argues that a simple "pro-choice" position is not sufficient for a revolutionary approach to reproductive "rights." Tracing how race, class, sexuality, nationality, and ability intersect and shape a woman's access to reproductive health requires a deeper understanding of systems of oppression, which Andrea Smith outlines in her book Conquest.[9] Looking at the history of colonialism in the Americas helps us understand the complexities of reproductive freedom in the current context. The state as an institution has always had a vested interest in maintaining control over social reproduction and in particular, the ways in which colonized peoples did and did not reproduce. Given the

history of forced sterilization of Native Americans, as well as African- Americans, Latinos, and even poor white women10, we can see that simple access to abortion does not address the complete issue of reproductive freedom.11 In order to have a comprehensive, revolutionary movement, we need to address all aspects of the issue: being able to have and support children, access to health care, housing, education, and transportation, adoption, non-traditional families, and so on. In order for a movement to be truly revolutionary it must be inclusive; the pro-choice movement has frequently neglected to address the needs of those at the margins. Does Roe v. Wade cover the complexities of the lives of women and mothers in prison?

What about the experiences of people who are undocumented? Trans* folks have long been fighting for healthcare that is inclusive.12 Simply defending the right to legal abortion does not bring together all those affected by heteropatriarchy. Similarly, legal "choice" where abortions are expensive procedures does nothing to help poor women and highlights the need to smash capitalism in order to access positive freedoms. Reproductive justice advocates have argued for an intersectional approach to these issues, and an anarchist feminist analysis of reproductive freedom could benefit by utilizing an anarchist intersectional analysis.

An anarchist intersectional analysis of reproductive freedom shows us that when a community begins to struggle together, they require an understanding of the ways that relations of ruling operate together in order to have a holistic sense of what they are fighting for. If we can figure out the ways that oppressive and exploitative social relations work together—and form the tapestry that is daily life—we are better equipped to tear them apart. For instance, to analyze the ways that women of color have been particularly and historically targeted for forced sterilizations requires an understanding of how heteropatriarchy, capitalism, the state, and white supremacy have worked together to create a situation where women of color are targeted bodily through social programs such as welfare, medical experiments, and eugenics.

How has racism and white supremacy functioned to support heteropatriarchy? How has sexuality been racialized in ways that have facilitated colonizers to remain without guilt about rape, genocide, and slavery, both historically and contemporarily? How has white supremacy been gendered with images such as the Mammy and the Jezebel?13 How has the welfare state been racialized and gendered with an agenda for killing the black body?14 Systemic oppressions such as white supremacy cannot be understood without an analysis of how those systems are gendered, sexualized, classed, etc. Similarly, this kind of analysis can be extended to understanding how heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, the state—all human relations of domination function. This is the weight behind an anarchist intersectional analysis.

An anarchist intersectional analysis, at least the way we are utilizing the standpoint, does not centralize any structure or institution over another, except by context. Rather, these structures and institutions operate to (re)produce one another. They are one another. Understood in this way, a central or primary oppressive or exploitative structure simply makes no sense. Rather, these social relations cannot be picked apart and one declared "central" and the others "peripheral." And they are intersectional. After all, what good is an insurrection if some of us are left behind?

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- 2. Combahee River Collective Statement. 1977. In Anzalduza, Gloria, and Cherrie Moraga (Eds). 1981. This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of

Color. Watertown, Mass: Persephone Press. Available at http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html

- 3. “Refusing to Wait: Anarchism and Intersectionality.” http://libcom.org/library/refusing-wait-anarchism-intersectionality
- 4. For example: Crenshaw, Kimberlé W. 1991. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” Stanford Law Review, 43 (6): 1241–1299.
- 5. See: Purkayastha, Bandana. 2012. “Intersectionality in a Transnational World.” Gender & Society 26: 55-66.
- 6. "Refusing to Wait: Anarchism and Intersectionality.”
- 7. Landauer, Gustav. 2010. Revolution and Other Writings, translated by Gabriel Kuhn. Oakland: PM Press.
- 8. For more analysis on how race, gender and sexuality shaped capitalism and colonialism in the U.S., see: Smith, Andrea. 2005. Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- 9. Smith, Andrea. 2005. Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- 10. For example: http://rockcenter.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2011/11/07/ 8640744-victims-speak-out-about-north-carolina-sterilization-pro- gram-which-targeted-women-young-girls-and-blacks?lite
- 11. For a good book that shows examples and the history of reproductive justice, see: Silliman, Jael M. 2004. Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice. Cambridge, Mass: South End Press.
- 12. Trans* is taken generally to mean: Transgender, Transsexual, genderqueer, Non-Binary, Genderfluid, Genderfuck, Intersex, Third gender, Transvestite, Cross-dresser, Bi-gender, Trans man, Trans woman, Agender.
- 13. Hill Collins, Patricia. 1991. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. New York: Routledge.
- 14. Roberts, Dorothy E. 1999. Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty. New York: Vintage.