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Module

03. Intersectionality and Social Movements

Module Progress 

Background Material

Intersectionality and Identity Politics

This section is adapted from [Is intersectionality just another form of identity politics?](#), an article published by [Feminist Fightback](#) on January 11, 2015.

This paper was written by two members of Feminist Fightback but draws heavily upon discussions within the wider collective. It reflects ‘thought in process’ rather than a final or united ‘position’, and was first circulated for discussion at the [Plan C ‘Fast Forward’](#) event in September 2014.

[Feminist Fightback](#) has for many years described itself as seeking to practice an ‘intersectional’ form of feminism, whereby we argue that the struggle for gender liberation must take account of, and join with, struggles against all other forms of

oppression and exploitation around the axis of class, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism etc. We began to use '*intersectional*' in place of '[socialist feminist](#)' in about 2007-8 because we felt that the latter term implied an interest in gender and class but did not give due emphasis to race. We continued to be inspired by a variety of Marxist and class-struggle anarchist currents, and we did not feel these to be in contradiction to a commitment to intersectionality.

Over the last year, however, intersectionality has been critiqued in both the mainstream media and on the Left as nothing more than a sophisticated version of identity politics, which is seen to undermine class struggle. We have considered these critiques and sought to clarify for ourselves whether we think that 'intersectional feminism' is still a useful term to describe the politics of [Feminist Fightback](#). As we will argue below, we think that it is incorrect to elide intersectionality with identity politics. In fact, when intersectionality theory was first formulated by Black feminists it was specifically intended to be both a critique of and an alternative to identity politics. What we continue to debate, however, is whether the term has now acquired a new set of meanings from those with which it was originally imbued, and therefore if it can be 'reclaimed'. We also differ as to whether intersectionality can be described as a political practice, or if it is simply an analytical perspective. The debate has also helped us to clarify our understanding (and disagreements) over how exactly we think capitalism functions, and how it both reproduces and benefits from patriarchy and white supremacy etc.

A Brief History of Intersectionality

The term 'intersectionality' was first coined by [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#) in 1990 and was developed by Patricia Hill Collins in a publication that same year. Crenshaw was a US legal scholar frustrated at the failure of anti-discrimination law, which

developed to address either racism or sexism. As Crenshaw pointed out, it therefore failed to respond to the experiences of those with 'intersecting' identities, particularly Black women. However, the ideas of intersectionality had already been developed (without the term itself being used) from the 1970s onwards by Black feminists such as [Angela Davis](#) in [Women, Race, Class \(1981\)](#) and the [Combahee River Collective](#). Black feminism has always been important to theories of intersectionality precisely because women of colour have no choice but to attend to the intersections of race and gender when struggling against their particular experience of oppression and exploitation. Intersectional ideas can also be traced back to socialist-feminist, materialist feminist and feminist marxist analyses of the 1970s and 80s, which sought to theorise the relationship between gender and class. (And obviously Black feminism and socialist-feminisms are not two separate traditions, but have often critically overlapped). Perhaps the most well-known statement of interlocking oppressions is bell hooks' description of our political system as an 'imperialist, white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.'

We therefore want to emphasise that intersectionality emerged through a critique of identity politics. Firstly, this occurred through its attack on the notion of particular aspects of identity as fixed and coherent. Essentialist understandings of identity were evident within many forms of radical and liberal feminism which proposed to unite women around a falsely universalist identity of 'womanhood', and also in some anti-racist movements which failed to attend to how women of colour experienced racism differently from the Black male subject. In showing how the experience of individuals was made up of a variety of intersecting oppressions (e.g. Black women experienced a distinctively gendered form of racism and a racialised form of sexism) intersectionality theory by definition destabilised simplistic and essentialist conceptualisations of identity. Secondly, intersectionality theory re-focused attention upon systems and structures rather

than on the identity of the individual. Individuals might stand at the 'crossroads' of various intersecting oppressions, but early proponents of intersectionality clearly stated that this theory was about how oppressions were inextricably intertwined at a structural level.

Intersectionality, Identity Politics and their Critics

It is this recognition of how systems of oppression and exploitation do not simply sit alongside each other but are mutually constituted, that [Feminist Fightback](#) has found most useful in intersectionality theory. We would argue that capitalism, as an economic system of exploitation, does not sit on top of, or in parallel to, pre-existing, separate systems of oppression such as patriarchy and racism etc. Rather, we maintain that as capitalism developed historically it depended upon and reproduced racism, patriarchy and heteronormativity etc. While it is true that at certain points in time capitalism also undermined feudal and patriarchal hierarchies, it is impossible to point to any significant development within capitalism which has not been made possible either by generating new forms of oppression or benefiting from old ones. For example, imperial expansion in the nineteenth century was justified by and re-inscribed racism, while the rise of industrial capitalism was dependent upon the confinement of women in the private sphere to perform the necessary reproductive labour unwaged. The form taken by capitalism in these historical moments was therefore determined by the other forms of oppression that it utilised, and likewise distinctively capitalist forms of racism and patriarchy were generated.



That class exploitation under capitalism is mutually constituted by other intersecting oppressions is not merely a point of historical or theoretical interest. The insights revealed by intersectionality theory are crucial to both our ability to understand how capitalism works at a day-to-day level, and also how to struggle against it. Take the example of the undocumented migrant women cleaning offices in the City: her work is low paid because it has been historically defined as women's work, and her employers can get away with poverty wages partly because her 'illegal' status makes it much harder for her to organise with other workers. Any successful 'class struggle' involving such workers must also struggle against border controls and the stigmatisation of reproductive labour as less valuable than work that has been gendered as male, in order to be effective. An

intersectional approach in this context is not about making class struggle more 'politically correct', but about making it more likely to succeed.

For this reason we have been confused by critiques of intersectionality that have attacked it as distracting from and/or undermining class struggle. Julie Burchill's denunciations of intersectionality in the Guardian (2012) and the Spectator (2014) might have been more easily dismissed as another 'political correctness gone mad' tirade, had they not revealed the extent to which the term 'intersectionality' had become common currency in the Left/liberal mainstream as well as bearing a strong resemblance to more 'serious' critiques being made by the libertarian/Marxist Left. Perhaps the most widely read and cited of these was Mark Fisher's '[Exiting the Vampire Castle](#)' (2013), which, like Burchill, blamed a 'po-faced' and 'moralistic' obsession with racism, sexism and heteronormativity not just for distracting us from class struggle, but as mounting a direct obstacle to it. Far more thoughtful critiques have also come from Eve Mitchell and Michael Rectenwald, both of which make a powerful case for the need to come together around our capacity to labour, and the shared experience of having this labour exploited under capitalism, rather than around essentialist notions of identity. However, both Mitchell and Rectenwald treat intersectionality as nothing more than particularly sophisticated form of identity politics; rather than judging it according to the professed aims of its early theorists who conceived of intersectionality theory as a way to analyse capitalism and make resistance more effective.

This elision of intersectionality with identity politics reflects, we think, something more significant than simply a failure to have thoroughly read the work of its early theorists. In order to explore it further, we need to define what is meant by identity politics. The term is most frequently used as shorthand to describe the feminist/anti-racist/gay liberation movements that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in a moment when the more traditional Left and trade union politics fell

into decline in the West. Identity politics are therefore commonly seen to have emerged in response to a 'failure' of class struggle, but what does this mean? Many, including Rectenwald, have argued that identity politics rushed to fill the vacuum left by the Marxist Left and the labour movement, implying that, for want of something better, people turned to identity politics in a moment of defeat. What such an analysis conveniently ignores, however, is that the 'failure' of the Left during this period was in part due to its incapacity to understand and reach out to the diverse groups that made up the working class. Women, Black and Queer workers turned to feminism, antiracism and gay liberation, not because they couldn't find a trade union or a Marxist group to join, but because existing forms of politics (predicated upon the white male subject) failed to respond to their needs as workers. Of course, there were many complex reasons why worker militancy went into retreat from the 1970s onwards, but the notion that this was due to all those selfish, feminist and gays preoccupied with their identitarian agenda is ridiculous. The rich, multiple and various currents of feminist/anti-racist/Queer politics that have emerged over the last forty years or so should not be viewed as a threat to class struggle, but, to the contrary, as a way to make struggles around class and labour at the point of production more effective, more widespread and more powerful. It is important, therefore, not to confuse a very particular manifestation of 'equality' politics – that seek merely to fight for the individual rights of women, or people of colour within the existing capitalist system – with those movements which, in taking account of differences within the working class, have ultimately sought to make class struggle better. Intersectionality, we think, needs to be acknowledged as such.

Putting Intersectionality into Practice in Feminist Fightback

The question of whether intersectionality can be transformed into a political practice, rather than just a frame of analysis, continues to be debated within

Feminist Fightback. We conclude this paper by outlining a few of the ways in which intersectionality has informed aspects of our politics and activism over the last 8 years. Needless to say, our claim to practice intersectional feminism remains aspirational and we do not wish to imply that we have by any means achieved this goal 100 per cent!



In 2008 we made a decision to stop referring to ‘abortion rights’ to describe our pro-choice politics and instead use the phrase ‘reproductive freedom’. In doing so, we drew upon critiques of mainstream pro-choice politics made by Black feminists in the United States and some socialist-feminists in Britain in the 1980s. They had argued that framing the issue solely in terms of access to legal abortion ignored the fact that real choice for the majority of women depended not simply upon

legal rights but also whether they could afford to raise a child. Moreover, while white middle-class women have tended historically to be pressured into having children, Black and working-class women have often been prevented from reproducing. To demand real 'choice' and reproductive freedom, it was therefore necessary to demand, alongside the right to abortion, a free and publicly funded health service and decent child and a single-parent benefits, for example.



Extend Abortion Rights to Northern Ireland

These more wide-ranging demands had already been part of the propaganda for a torch-lit march Feminist Fightback had organised in 2007 to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the 1967 Act that first legalised abortion in Britain. They also continued to inform the work we did in 2008-10 opposing first Private Members Bills to reduce the time limit on abortion and later our opposition to similar attempts attached to the Human Fertilisation and Embryologies Act of 2010. Now, this campaign was by no means carried out perfectly and we made a lot of mistakes. Yet we think it is fair to say that many of the challenges we faced in attempting to intervene in the wider pro-choice movement were due to the 'intersectional' nature of our demands. For example, the campaign organisation Abortion Rights refused to support our torch-lit march in 2007 and also rejected motions we brought to its Annual General Meeting in 2009. Their reason for this was that they were a single issue campaign, which sought support from a broad political spectrum, and therefore our demands around welfare rights and the health service merely muddled the waters. We think this raises interesting issues with regards to the wider question of the kinds of political practices a feminist movement might find most effective. Within the mainstream feminism, at least, we identify a tendency towards simple messages and single issue campaigns which often seek redress from the state through legislation and/or policy change. But the intersectional approach we sought to practice could not be reduced to straightforward model of legal reform.

Feminist Fightback has also intervened in debates about sex work and made alliances with sex worker rights activists. Here, an intersectional approach has been crucial in enabling us to assert that sex work as an income generating activity (whereby sex workers, like all workers, are selling not their bodies but their power to labour), while remaining alert to the ways in which sex work is variously

patriarchal, racist and classed. So, for example, the [English Collective of Prostitutes](#) (ECP) foreground the gendered nature of sex work and draw attention to inadequate welfare provisions for single mothers. The [X:Talk](#), which organises peer-led English classes for migrants sex workers, have likewise insisted on understanding, and organising in a way relevant to, the relationship between UK borders and sex work.



In solidarity with these activists, then, we have in recent years joined the Red Umbrella block on the [Reclaim the Night](#) (RTN) marches in London. Along with sex worker rights activists we have criticised RTN for its narrow, individualistic conception of violence, and for developing a close relationship with the police, manifest in the fact that the march has been sponsored by the police, and in

2009 the organisers saw no problem with asking the police to interrogate the Red Umbrella contingent on arrival. Drawing on our own experiences, as well as writings of Black feminists and sex worker rights activists, it is clear that the police cannot be relied upon to protect the interests of women, and especially those of Black, working-class women and sex workers. Joining the RTN march, then, our intention has been to highlight the need for a broader, systemic conceptualisation of violence against women. As in the case of our campaigning around 'reproductive freedom', Feminist Fightback has experienced challenges in attempting to practice intersectional politics around sex work. Along with being policed by other feminists, we have been labelled as defending the sex industry because of our solidarity with sex workers rights activists. Again, the simple messages and binaries around which much contemporary activism continues to be organised, have proved resistant to pressing and intersectional analysis into practice.

Some Not Very Conclusive Remarks

In this paper we have discussed the shifting meaning of the term intersectionality and contrasted its contemporary mainstream deployment as a form of identity politics, to the way in which we sought to define it in Feminist Fightback when we adopted the term to describe our politics in 2007. As a collective we are presently in some discussion about the continuing usefulness of the term and have by no means reached a consensus upon it. We would be very interested to hear your views on whether you think it continues to be a useful way to describe and inform an anticapitalist, 'militant' feminist Praxis. We have also, in this paper, attempted to reflect upon some of the ways in which we tried to put into such an hourly to into practice and the obstacles we face.

Social Movements

The Black Panthers Movement

[Who were the Black Panthers?](#) The Black Panthers also lead a movement in Oakland feeding breakfast to the kids of the community—one of the main inspirations for the free/reduced lunch program in today's schools:



[Broad \(2016\) From the Black Panthers to the USDA](#)



Interested in learning more about the Black Panthers? You can watch the entire documentary *The Black Panther's: Vanguard of the Revolution* below

The Black Panthers Vanguard of the Revolution 2015 - full movie



César Chávez & the United Farm Worker Movement

The following text is adapted from The History Channel's page dedicated to [César Chávez](#). It is a reprint from *The Reader's Companion to American History* by Eric Foner and John A. Garraty, Editors.

Mexican-American César Chávez (1927-1993) was a prominent union leader and labor organizer. Hardened by his early experience as a migrant worker, Chávez founded the National Farm Workers Association in 1962. His union joined with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee in its first strike against grape growers in California, and the two organizations later merged to become the United Farm Workers. Stressing nonviolent methods, Chávez drew attention for his causes via boycotts, marches and hunger strikes. Despite conflicts with the Teamsters union and legal barriers, he was able to secure raises and improve conditions for farm workers in California, Texas, Arizona and Florida.

Born in Yuma, Arizona, to immigrant parents, Chávez moved to California with his

family in 1939. For the next ten years they moved up and down the state working in the fields. During this period Chávez encountered the conditions that he would dedicate his life to changing: wretched migrant camps, corrupt labor contractors, meager wages for backbreaking work, bitter racism. His introduction to labor organizing began in 1952 when he met Father Donald McDonnell, an activist Catholic priest, and Fred Ross, an organizer with the Community Service Organization, who recruited Chávez to join his group. Within a few years Chávez had become national director, but in 1962 resigned to devote his energies to organizing a union for farm workers.

A major turning point came in September 1965 when the fledgling Farm Workers Association voted to join a strike that had been initiated by Filipino farm workers in Delano's grape fields. Within months Chávez and his union became nationally known. Chávez's drawing on the imagery of the civil rights movement, his insistence on nonviolence, his reliance on volunteers from urban universities and religious organizations, his alliance with organized labor, and his use of mass mobilizing techniques such as a famous march on Sacramento in 1966 brought the grape strike and consumer boycott into the national consciousness. The boycott in particular was responsible for pressuring the growers to recognize the [United Farm Workers](#) (*uflw*, renamed after the union joined the *afl-cio*). The first contracts were signed in 1966, but were followed by more years of strife. In 1968 Chávez went on a fast for twenty-five days to protest the increasing advocacy of violence within the union. Victory came finally on July 29, 1970, when twenty-six Delano growers formally signed contracts recognizing the *uflw* and bringing peace to the vineyards.

That same year the Teamsters' union challenged the *UFW* in the Salinas valley by signing sweetheart contracts with the growers there. Thus began a bloody four-year struggle. Finally in 1973, the Teamsters signed a jurisdictional agreement that

temporarily ended the strife.

Believing that the only permanent solution to the problems of farm workers lay in legislation, Chávez supported the passage of California's Agricultural Labor Relations Act (the first of its kind in the nation), which promised to end the cycle of misery and exploitation and ensure justice for the workers. These promises, however, proved to be short-lived as grower opposition and a series of hostile governors undercut the effectiveness of the law.

After 1976 Chávez led the union through a major reorganization, intended to improve efficiency and outreach to the public. In 1984 in response to the grape industry's refusal to control the use of pesticides on its crops, Chávez inaugurated an international boycott of table grapes.

For thirty years Chávez tenaciously devoted himself to the problems of some of the poorest workers in America. The movement he inspired succeeded in raising salaries and improving working conditions for farm workers in California, Texas, Arizona, and Florida.

Asian American and Native American Movements

Although the UFW was a predominantly Latin@ movement, there were a lot of allies who came from different ethnic and racial groups. The resources below introduce some of these, including Asian American civil rights issues and native American Food Systems.



JACL (2008) An Unnoticed Struggle

First Nations' Work in Native Food Systems



Movements Today

Read [Black Lives Matter: Birth of a Movement](#) to get a sense of the history behind the Black Lives Matter movement. And, current leaders of color briefly describe their perspectives on [structural racism and white privilege in the food system](#). Social movements are also happening around the globe. Check out [5 Latin American Campesino Movements You Really Need to Know](#).

Additional Resources

- [Federation of Southern Cooperatives](#)
- [La Via Campesina North America](#)
- [Slow Food Movement](#)

Reflection Questions



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