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Marxism, Intersectionality, and Therapy

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Intersectionality and marxism are not on great terms, supposedly.^[1] While some thinkers and activists recognize the need for intersectional insights in research and organizing, others maintain more negative attitudes and analyses towards such insights. The negative attitudes and analyses combine a new resent with the old tension between feminist and poststructuralist critiques of Marxist theory and the latter, sometimes named "identity politics" or "identarian politics." While intersectionalists claim that race, class, and gender (and other categories and discourses) compound, mingle, and mix in unique ways during particular events and experiences, Marxists allege that class trumps all with respect to oppression. The intersectionalists call for specific and particularized redress of compounded oppressions which sometimes do not include class or, in

other cases, are lost when class is the sole focus (or any single category of oppression by itself). The Marxists, on the other hand, call for changing the relations of production, focusing on class. Racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other oppressions will be ameliorated, or at least the conditions for their amelioration can only begin, after that shift in exploitative, alienating, and degrading relations of capitalist production. The debate leaves two conflicting camps on the Left. One with a particularized sensitivity to the complex layers of oppression, and the other with a fervent clarity regarding the link in the chain of domination which, if broken, will release the people from their bonds.

The choice is ultimately a false one, though the divisiveness it inspires is real. The matter deserves special attention, and some have begun to seriously consider it.^[2] I want to focus on the term "relations of production," since, for the Marxists, everything comes down to a shift in these relations. Thinkers as diverse as G.A. Cohen and Louis Althusser confirm, in their readings of Marx, that relations of production are what defines a social formation as any given moment: you can have any set of productive forces, but the kind of society you have--the modes of production--is largely defined by the relations of production. Looking at the term "relations of production" again shows that the tension between intersectionality and Marxism is, frankly, dumb.

Marx defines production, at least in the *Grundrisse*, as tackling nature and making our lives together.^[3] A "relation" of production is a kind of dynamic which forms between people when making their lives together, as well as a dynamic which forms between people and nonhuman things (like the means of production).^[4] Marx's German word for "relation" in "relation of production" is *Verhältnis*. In the *Grundrisse* and the crucial opening chapters of *Capital Vol. 1*, the term has two meanings which fit with the definition I just gave.^[5] The first meaning is in the sense of a mathematical ratio: a relation of production can mean an absolute or relative value of commodities in terms of other commodities, like prices or wages, for example. The second meaning is in the sense of person-to-person interactions like speech, action, and working together.

This division is useful for distinguishing different kinds of Marxist critique that have evolved over the years, one example being the critical theorists' distinction between recognition and redistribution (Nancy Fraser's is the best articulation of this^[6]). Take exploitation of labor, for example. Exploitation, in its distributive sense, occurs as a mathematical allotment based on the value of work completed and value received in exchange for that work. It is a mathematical relation between employer and employee. The value of work completed is always greater than the value in wages received, leaving employees bereft of the full value of their work. You can never be paid fully for what you do when you work for a wage, since the wage relation is an exploitative relation of production. Exploitation in its recognitive sense, in contrast (sometimes called alienation), refers to what it's like when people are exploited, both subjectively and intersubjectively (think Hegel's master-slave dialectic). The distributive sense of "relation of production" is mathematical and the recognitive sense of "relation of production" is more subjective, identarian.

Here's my claim. We should read Marx as saying that relations of production are *both* recognitive and distributive: that a single relation of production has a recognitive and redistributive aspect. There are two meanings of "relation of production," so why shouldn't the term mean both? Making our lives together in production requires both recognition between persons and mathematical ratios in the distribution of resources among persons. Recognition and distribution are two senses of the same notion, two moments of one dynamic, two sides of the same coin: they are simultaneously occasioned in any given relation of production.

If a relation of production is both redistributive and recognitive, then changing the relations of production requires changing both recognition and redistribution. To reverse oppression, in other words, both are necessary and sufficient. Neither on its own is enough for revolution. Making life together justly--an emancipatory production--means having just distributions and just recognitions. The *Verhältnisse* in a just society has to have each of these, conjoined, not a disjunction or causal implication. Thinking one is more important than one or the other, or that somehow one must be antecedent to the other, is dumb. Changing relations of production means changing ratios of distribution and changing interactive practices so that they are recognitive and not misrecognitive.

Radicals in the past have understood this point clearly. Fred Hampton understood it very clearly, as did many members of the Black Panther Party and others in the Black Power movement of the 1960s. Even Lenin and Marx showed evidence of understanding this point, specifically regarding the United States. Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor talks about this inclusive tradition in her excellent new book, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*.^[7] Though they may not have put it in these terms, some of the most effective activists and deepest radical thinkers in the leftist tradition understood that relations of production are dynamics composed of recognition and distribution, especially in the United States context.

There are at least two important kinds of oppression which flow from the two senses of "relation of production," whose conceptual relationship has been poorly formulated: distributive oppression and misrecognitive oppression. The dumb question to ask is: What causal role does an exploitative mathematical ratio of distribution play in oppression, generally speaking? How important is the first sense of *verhältnisse* to the second?

One position, taken by some Marxists, is that there is a direct causal link between the two, going one way. If the mathematical ratio is evened out, if there are widespread non-exploitative distributions, then oppression's chokehold is broken. All the recognitive problems will collapse, like a body without bones,

as soon as the correct ratios are put in place. Another position, taken by critics of the Marxists, is that the two are not causally linked. Other oppressions will survive and thrive (in fact, have survived and thrived) changes in the distributive ratios: women, people of color, marginalized sexualities and genders, and others will face the same recognitive oppressions whether or not they own the means of production together with others.

That these are two opposing positions is dumb. Rather than constituting some kind of crisis for the soul of the Left, they merely delimit two important aspects of liberation that both need to occur in tandem if the goal is changing the relations of production. Recognitive (misrecognitive) oppression must be redressed, and the way in which it is redressed must focus on the complexly layered, compounded experiences and events of those who face it by finding ways to unlearn old recognitive patterns and learn new ones. Distributive oppression must be redressed, and the way it is redressed must focus on securing the right kinds of mathematical ratios in distribution through changes in ownership of the means of production.

Perhaps "dumb" is too dumb a label for this false dichotomy. Given that distribution and recognition are both necessary and sufficient for relations of production, and the point of our work on the Left is changing relations of production, I propose the following. Whenever you start to think that a relation of production is *not* both recognitive and distributive (or you hear someone else talking like it is more one than the other), this a therapeutic issue, not a political one. By "therapeutic" I mean a kind of problem which is adjacent, but not identical, to the kinds of oppression activist work seeks to change. Therapeutic issues are made of traumas, desires, frustrations, projections, conflicts, and ambivalences. They are social and individual, and they are important for politics, but they are not political. These issues are not rational, but rather unconscious and implicit, and can compel you and others to think that relations of production are *either* recognitive *or* distributive, rather than both.

My proposal is that conflict over the hierarchy of distribution over recognition (or vice versa) in relations of production results from therapeutic problems in the *relations of activism* and not political problems in the *relations of production which the activism is trying to change*.

I think more people should go to therapy in general, but perhaps Leftists in particular would benefit from examining unconscious ambivalences and conflicts, specifically around this issue. Why would you come to think that redistribution is more important than recognition, or vice versa, rather than part of a singular relation of production? Therapeutic issues create disagreements about the relations of production when left unaddressed, like thinking there is some hierarchy between recognition and redistribution. Most likely, these "hierarchies" are just reified feelings of loss, frustration, or disappointment which neurotic persons have insinuated into the theoretical record.

I have been in therapy for years and I consider it part of my liberation, but not identical to my activism. The therapy helps me distinguish the conjuncture from my own baggage; or, better yet, therapy mobilizes my baggage so it compels me to take a more inquisitive approach to thinking about the conjuncture. These things--baggage and conjuncture--get confused, and the confusion trickles into how we work together to make another society. Too long has activism not been accompanied by liberatory therapy; too long have therapeutic issues been mistaken for political issues; too many political spaces have been hijacked for therapeutic purposes; too many meetings and debates have been spent going in exhausting circles. The confusion can lead to unhelpful splinters, petty fractions, and mismatching views of the conjuncture. Unfortunately, unaddressed therapeutic problems in the relations of activism can ultimately leave oppressive relations of production in place. A unified and inclusive view of relations of production as both recognitive and distributive, while creating access and then going to therapy, might help. It may show that Marxism and intersectionality are on the same side and more powerful when they work together.

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Notes

^[1] Eve Mitchell, "I am a Woman and Human: A Marxist-Feminist Critique of Intersectionality Theory, *Unity and Struggle*, <http://unityandstruggle.org/2013/09/12/i-am-a-woman-and-a-human-a-marxist-feminist-critique-of-intersectionality-theory/>; "Is Intersectionality Just Another Form of Identity Politics?" *Feminist Fight Back*, <http://www.feministfightback.org.uk/is-intersectionality-just-another-form-of-identity-politics/>.'

Mark Fisher, "Exiting the Vampire Castle," *The North Star*, <http://www.thenorthstar.info/?p=11299>, Julie Birchill, "Don't You Dare Tell Me To Check My Privilege," *The Spectator*, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2014/02/dont-you-dare-tell-me-to-check-my-privilege/>. My own thinking about this question was spurred by a tweet passed along by Benjamin Kunkel, which said "let them eat intersectionality."

^[2] Kevin B. Anderson, "Karl Marx and Intersectionality," *Logos*, <http://logosjournal.com/2015/anderson-marx/>

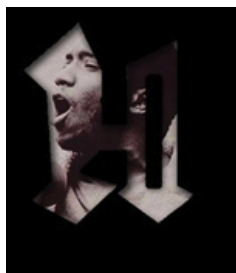
^[3] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Penguin: New York, 1993, p. 85-90. We might reasonably stipulate that most mentions of "relation" (85, 99, 108, 109, 159, 165) are occasions of communicative recognition, though more study of the German could reveal otherwise. Marx appears to write the word *Verhältnis* for "relation," which can mean "ratio" as well as "relationship." The former sense is a correlation between ideas while the latter implies a correspondence between speakers.

^[4] G.A. Cohen distinguishes the term like this in *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*.

^[5] Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, Penguin International, 1996, pp. 45-50.

^[6] Fraser, N., & Honneth, A. (2003). *Redistribution or recognition?: a political-philosophical exchange*. Verso.

^[7] Taylor, K. (2015). *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. New York: Haymarket, 2015, see chapter 7 pp. 205-209.



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