

## Locating Potentials for Solidarity Between Marxism and Intersectionality

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### Abstract:

Ashley J. Bohrer presents a compelling and forceful case for thinking about Marxism and intersectionality as distinct traditions that can nonetheless work in concert with one another. After citing the main contentions that exist between these two traditions, Bohrer ambitiously maps – through detailed historical and nuanced theoretical analyses – how seeming incompatibilities and critiques are more often than not erroneous, based on overly simplistic understandings of and miscommunications between sides. She pinpoints the ways in which these two traditions can be mobilized to work towards their shared ultimate aim of overthrowing oppressive and exploitative structures of racism, sexism, classism, and sexual discrimination under capitalism.

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Contention between critical traditions can certainly be productive when it motivates factions to sharpen their arguments and contour their agendas. Yet it can also impede the opening of paths and possibilities in intellectual thought, political activism, and action, particularly when such contentions are based on overly simplistic understandings of and miscommunications between sides. Ashley J. Bohrer presents a compelling and forceful case as to why this has largely been the case with the traditions of Marxism and intersectionality. After citing the main contentions that exist between these two traditions, Bohrer ambitiously maps – through detailed historical and nuanced theoretical analyses – how such discrepancies are more often than not erroneous. She pinpoints the ways in which these two traditions can be mobilized to work distinctly yet in concert towards their shared ultimate aim of overthrowing oppressive and exploitative structures of racism, sexism, classism, and sexual discrimination under capitalism.

Boher's detailed accounts of both traditions in relation to one another reveals multiple instances of what she refers to as "a 'synecdochal straw person fallacy': substituting the weakest part for the whole and dismissing the rest" (p. 20). Such crude dismissals, according to Bohrer, are performed at our own peril as thinkers and actors, as they prevent what could be born out of "modes of engagement that do justice to the insights of multiple traditions, multiple experiences, and multiple positions" (p. 14). This plea is arguably of urgent relevance to critical traditions beyond those isolated in Bohrer's project, particularly at a time when the pressure to introduce innovative academic work too often leads critical theorists and scholars to pit themselves against one another with rushed, rough strokes rather than acknowledge cooperative alliances that could be forged despite differences in perspective.

Bohrer begins the book with an expansive overview of both fields. Intersectionality maintains a lead throughout in terms of the specificity with which its main thinkers, postulates, and historical development are presented, though Bohrer's analyses and summations of Marxist thought, particularly its queer, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist strains, are impeccable. Section one, entitled "Histories," explores the historical theoretical ties between Marxism and intersectionality – how, for instance, "[m]any of the intellectual precursors of intersectionality were committed Marxists and/or socialists" (p. 31). Bohrer explores intersectionality's pre-history, showing how black women writers and activists of the nineteenth century generated a primordial constellation of ideas focused on "labor, class, capitalism, and political economy" in relation to the kinds of labor to which women were subjected (p. 35). She then traces how black women communists of the first half of the twentieth century addressed the interaction between "race and gender under capitalism," introducing terms such as "triple exploitation," used by Louise Thompson to describe the plights of black women workers (p. 35). Kimberlé Crenshaw's initiation of the notion of intersectionality in the 1980s was thus based on a long and rich tradition of thought that considered the imbrications of gender and race with theories of class and capitalism. Here Bohrer convincingly demonstrates that the affinities between Marxism and intersectionality have traceable roots.

In Part two, "Debates," Bohrer identifies the main premises of "The Intersectional Tradition" – a clear and concise summation recommendable to anyone seeking better understanding of the field – before devoting chapters to "Marxist Critiques of Intersectionality," "Queer, Feminist, Anti-Racist, and Anti Imperialist Marxisms" and "Intersectional Critiques of Marxism." In the two 'critique' chapters, Bohrer itemizes the main points of contention between traditions. Marxist thinkers, for instance, often remark that intersectionality "hinges on its conception of identity politics," which "constitutes a reinforcement of capitalist ideas of individuality" and supposedly encourages a sectarian way of viewing things that "makes solidarity, coalition, and work across differences impossible" (p. 119). Intersectional critiques of Marxism include the contentions that Marxism exhibits an unbalanced foregrounding of class above other categories of exploitation, Euro- and androcentrism, a homogenization of the proletariat, and the dismissal/ignorance of the activism and writing of women of color. Instead of merely listing such critiques, Bohrer consistently weaves in her own responses. Her mediations between traditions make for an eye-opening and rewarding reading experience. Chapter three on

“Queer, Feminist, Anti-Racist, and Anti-Imperialist Marxisms,” Marxisms which comprise the theoretical terrain upon which Bohrer’s work is clearly positioned, develops one of the book’s main arguments, namely that “no account of race, gender, sexuality, imperialism, or colonization could ever hope to be complete without a systematic understanding of how capitalism operates, not only as an economic system, but as a structuring field of life with ramifications far beyond the workplace” (p. 157). This point also concludes an article of Bohrer’s that appeared in issue 26.2 (2018) of *Historical Materialism* on the same topic that offers a particularly striking image for grasping this argument: “interwoven oppressions are the best way to render racism, exploitation, white supremacy, colonialism, heterosexism, cissexism. What I want to suggest is that if these oppressions are interwoven, then the tapestry is capitalism” (n. pag.).

In the third and last section of the book, “Possibilities,” Bohrer offers ways for bringing Marxist and intersectional thought into a productive and innovative scheme. In the chapter entitled “Oppression and Exploitation Beyond Reductions,” she argues that exploitation and oppression must be thought about as “equiprimordial” occurrences; “capitalism evidences a structural and logical commitment to both exploitation and oppression as fundamental modes of its constitution. Recognizing its co-constitution is thus the condition of the possibility of knowing and seeing what capitalism is in its deepest structures” (p. 205). It is with this kind of proposal for thinking about the key concerns of both Marxist and intersectional theorists that Bohrer transitions from a work characterized by painstaking historical and theoretical analyses to one aimed “at strategic openings of thought and action.” In the next chapter, “Dialectics of Difference,” she discusses how both traditions provide important impulses for a dialectical understanding of the world that can be used in combination. She synthesizes metaphors and figures of thought that stem from each tradition.

In the book’s final chapter, “Solidarity in the House of Difference,” Bohrer arrives at her book’s ultimate concern. It is a concern that is applicable to her book’s most immediate focus – the potentials for solidarity between two critical traditions – but is intended to reach beyond academic and scholarly forms of solidarity and apply to the political project of overthrowing capitalism’s structures of exploitation and oppression. She asks, “What does solidarity look like when it is refigured as an outgrowth of, rather than a challenge to, the very real differences of position and experience that capitalism depends on?” (p. 232-233). By proposing a definition of

solidarity “as grounded in the incommensurable differences of social location,” Bohrer defines fighting together as something not based on finding common ground or points of identification but rather through an embrace of differences (p. 234). Such differences nonetheless share one characteristic: that of having been formed by capitalism’s racist, heteronormative, imperial, and sexist history. Bohrer ends her work with a manifesto-like tone, stating that “It is only through a relational solidarity that we will truly bring to bear a new world from the ashes of the old, to build the only world worth fighting for” (p. 260). Her suggestion to cultivate a form of solidarity based on difference is thus much more than a proposal for the critical traditions of Marxism and intersectionality but for political activism grounded in these traditions. One is left wishing for more extensive original work at the book’s conclusion that would articulate “solidarity in the house of difference” in less abstract and more practical terms. This would have offered more of a payoff to the thorough groundwork laid in the book’s first two sections. But this is less of an objection and more a testament to the compelling openings in thought that Bohrer’s work achieves.

### **Potentiale für Solidarität zwischen Marxismus und Intersektionalität**

#### **German Abstract:**

Ashley J. Bohrer präsentiert ein überzeugendes und eindringliches Argument dafür, Marxismus und Intersektionalität als unterschiedliche Traditionen zu betrachten, die dennoch zusammenarbeiten können. Nachdem Bohrer die Hauptstreitigkeiten zwischen diesen beiden Traditionen zitiert hat, bildet sie ehrgeizig durch detaillierte historische und nuancierte theoretische Analysen ab, wie sogenannte Inkompatibilitäten und Kritiken häufig fehlerhaft sind, basierend auf einem zu simplen Verständnis und Missverständnissen zwischen beiden Traditionen. Sie zeigt auf, wie diese Traditionen mobilisiert werden können, um auf ihr gemeinsames Endziel hinzuarbeiten, nämlich unterdrückende und ausbeuterische Strukturen von Rassismus, Sexismus, Klassismus und sexueller Diskriminierung im Kapitalismus zu stürzen.