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## **MARXISM, AND CLASS, GENDER, AND RACE: RETHINKING THE TRILOGY**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the soundness of critical assessments of Marxism which present, as an unassailable conclusion, the view that Marx and Marxism are of little use for the study of the connections between class, gender and race. Arguing that, contrary to the prevailing view, Marx and Marxism are indeed necessary for elucidating the relationship between class and identities, the author examines the limitations of the Race, Gender & Class perspective and suggests that the nameless power underlying all "raced, gendered, and classed" interactions is none other than class power and that, consequently, the RGC perspective needs Marxism to go beyond semantics (e.g., the endless proliferation of terms to name the connections between class, gender and race) and fulfill its avowed theoretical and emancipatory objectives.

**Keywords:** Marxism, class, gender, race

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A taken for granted feature of most social science publications today, especially those about inequality, is the ritual critique of Marx and Marxism in the process of introducing theoretical alternatives intended to remedy its alleged "failures." This practice became popular in early feminist literature: Marx and Marxists were criticized for not developing an in-depth analysis of the oppression of women, their "economism," "class reductionism," and "sex blind" categories of analysis. Soon after it became common place to assert that Marxism was also at fault for neglecting race, demography, ethnicity, the environment and practically everything that mattered to the "new social movements" in the West. As the movements died, scholarship informed by those political concerns flourished; the energy that might have been spent in the public arena found expression in academic programs (e.g., women's studies, racial/ethnic studies) and efforts to increase "diversity" in the curriculum and the population of educational institutions. Publication of the journal *Race, Sex & Class* (changed afterwards to *Race, Gender & Class*), in 1993, signaled the convergence of those political and intellectual interests into a new social science perspective that soon acquired enormous visibility, as demonstrated by the proliferation of journal articles and books with race, gender and class in their titles. This perspective, put forth primarily but not exclusively by social scientists of color, emerged as a reaction to feminist theories which neglected racial/ethnic and class differences among women, theories of racial/ethnic inequality which neglected sexism among men of color and, predictably, as a corrective to Marxism's alleged shortcomings. For example, Jean Belkhir, editor and founder of *Race, Sex & Class*, prefaces an article on this topic as follows: "The 'Failure' Of Marxism To Develop Adequate Tools and A Comprehensive Theory of Ethnicity, Gender and Class Issues is Undisputable" (Belkhir, 1994:79). The list of putative "failures" could be as long as we wanted it to be but what would that prove, beyond the fact that Marx's and Engels' political and theoretical priorities differed from those of contemporary social scientists? Less biased, albeit debatable, is the conclusion that Marxism, although offering "crucial and unparalleled insights" into the operation of capitalism, "needs to develop the analytical tools to investigate the study of racism, sexism and classism" (Belkhir, 1994: 79). To refer to class as "classism" is, from the standpoint of Marxist theory, "a deeply misleading formulation" (Eagleton, 1996:57; see also Kandal, 1995:143) because class is not simply another ideology legitimating oppression; it denotes exploitative relations between people mediated by their relations to the means of production. Nevertheless, it is the case that neither Marx nor Engels devoted the intensity of effort to the investigation of gender and race (and other issues) that would have satisfied today's critics.

It is (and any literature review would support this point) far easier to emphasize their "sins" of omission and – in light of current political sensibilities – commission, than it is to use their theoretical and methodological contributions to theorize and investigate those aspects of capitalist social formations that today concern us. Notable exceptions are Berberoglu (1994), who has examined the underlying class forces leading to gender and racial divisions in the U.S. working class, linking gender and racial oppression to capital accumulation, and Kandal (1995), who has forcefully argued for the need to avoid the racialization and

feminization of social conflicts while minimizing or overlooking the significance of class. In this essay, I intend to argue that Marxism does contain the analytical tools necessary to theorize and deepen our understanding of class, gender and race. I intend critically to examine, from the standpoint of Marxist theory, the arguments for race, gender and class studies offered by some of their main proponents, assessing their strengths and limitations and demonstrating, in the process, that Marxism is theoretically and politically necessary if the study of class, gender and race is to achieve more than the endless documentation of variations in their relative salience and combined effects in very specific contexts and experiences.

### RACE, GENDER & CLASS AS A SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Long before the popularization of the Race, Gender & Class (RGC) perspective, I suspect that most Marxist sociologists teaching social stratification were already adept practitioners. For many years, for example, the Section on Marxist sociology of the American Sociological Association included in its annual program a session on Class, Gender and Race. I certainly called my students' attention, in twenty nine years of teaching social stratification and other subjects in which inequality matters, to the fact that everybody's lives are affected by class, gender and race/ethnic structures (in addition to age and other sources of inequality). We are, in Marx's terms, "*an ensemble of social relations*" (Marx, 1994: 100, emphasis added), and we live our lives at the core of the intersection of a number of unequal social relations based on hierarchically interrelated structures which, together, define the historical specificity of the capitalist modes of production and reproduction and underlay their observable manifestations. I also routinely called students' attention to the problems inherent in the widespread practice of assuming the existence of common interests, ideologies, politics, and experiences based on gender, race and ethnicity because class location, and socio-economic status differences within classes, divide those population aggregates into classes and strata with contradictory and conflicting interests. In turn, aggregates sharing the same class location, or similar socio-economic characteristics within a class, are themselves divided by gender, race and ethnicity so that it is problematic to assume that they might spontaneously coalesce into class or status self-conscious, organized groups. This is why, in the late sixties and early 1970s, I was critical of feminist theories which ignored class, racial and ethnic divisions among women and men, and theories of patriarchy that ignored how most men under capitalism are relatively powerless (Gimenez, 1975). Later on, I published a critical assessment of the "feminization of poverty" thesis because it was not sensitive to the effects of class, socio-economic status, racial and ethnic divisions among men and women; it neglected the connections between the poverty of women and the poverty of men and overlooked the significance of this thesis as a powerful indicator of the immiseration of the lower strata within the U.S. working class (Gimenez, 1990).

I am aware, however, that most sociologists do not take Marxism seriously and that theorists of gender and racial oppression have been, on the whole, hostile to Marxism's alleged reductionisms. More importantly, this is a country where class is not part of the common sense understanding of the world and remains conspicuously absent from the vocabulary of politicians and most mass media pundits. This is why, despite the U.S. history of labor struggles, today

people are more likely to understand their social and economic grievances in gender, racial and ethnic terms, rather than in class terms, despite the fact that class is an ineradicable dimension of everybody's lives. I am not arguing that racial and gender based grievances are less important nor that they are a form of "false consciousness;" in the present historical conjuncture in the U.S. it has become increasingly difficult, exceptions notwithstanding, to articulate class grievances separately from gender and racial/ethnic grievances. The ideological and political struggles against "class reductionism" have succeeded too well, as Kandal (1995) pointed out, resulting in what amounts to gender and race/ethnic reductionisms. This situation does not indicate the demise of class as a fundamental determinant of peoples' lives, but that the relationship between structural changes, class formations and political consciousness is more complex than what simplistic versions of Marxism would suggest. It is an important principle of historical materialism that it is necessary to differentiate between material or objective processes of economic change and the ideological (e.g., legal, political, philosophical, etc.) ways in which people become conscious of these processes of transformations and conflicts and fight them out (Marx, [1859]1970:21). This is why I welcomed the emergence of the RGC perspective because, I thought, it would contribute to raise awareness about the reality and the importance of class and the extent to which neither racial nor gender oppression can be understood in isolation from the realities of class exploitation. My expectations, however, were misplaced: the location of class in the RGC trilogy, at the end, replicates its relative significance within this approach; class is "the weak link in the chain" (Kandal, 1995:143). But altering the place of class in the trilogy would not matter, for the RGC perspective erases the qualitative differences between class and other sources of inequality and oppression, an erasure grounded in its essentially atheoretical nature.

What is RGC's object of study? Essentially, it is the "intersections of race, gender and class" (Collins, 1997:74). Authors vary in the metaphors they use to describe the nature of these intersections: e.g., triple oppression, interplay, interrelation, cumulative effects, interconnections (Belkhir, 1994); interactive, triadic relation, overlapping, interactive systems (Belkhir, 1993:4); multiple jeopardy, meaning "not only *several*, *simultaneous* oppressions but also the *multiplicative* relations among them" (King, cited in Barnett et al., 1999:14, emphasis in the text); multiplicative, simultaneous, inter-connected systems of a whole (Barnett et al., 1999:15). Collins, however, appears to disagree with mathematical interpretations of these relationships, for she states that they (meaning race, gender and class) cannot be "added together to produce one so-called grand oppression" (Collins, cited in Barnett, 1999:15); it follows they cannot be multiplied either. Collins views are the most helpful for identifying the main elements of this approach:

1. Race, gender and class are "distinctive yet interlocking structures of oppression" (Collins, 1993:26)
2. "The notion of interlocking refers to the macro level connections linking systems of oppression such as race, class and gender" (Collins, 1997:74).
3. "The notion of intersectionality describes microlevel processes - namely, how each individual and group occupies a social position within interlocking structures of oppression described by the metaphor of

intersectionality" (Collins, 1997:74).

4. "Everyone has a race/gender/class specific identity" (Collins, 1993:28).

5. Every individual is, simultaneously, "being oppressed and oppressor" (Collins, 1993:28).

6. Oppressions should not be ranked nor should we struggle about which oppression is more fundamental: to theorize these connections it is necessary "to support a working hypothesis of equivalency between oppressions" (Collins, 1997:74).

7. These perspective requires that we ask new questions such as, for example, "How are relationships of domination and subordination structured and maintained in the American political economy? How do race, class and gender function as parallel and interlocking systems that shape this basic relationship of domination and subordination?" (Collins, 1993:29).

As Collins acknowledges (and this is something evident in the preceding sample of metaphors attempting to deal with this issue) "the area of race, class and gender studies struggles with the complex question of how to think about intersections of systems of oppression" (Collins, 1997:73). One solution, based on the assumption that gender, race and class are simultaneously experienced, is to consider them as "situated accomplishments;" they are not only individual attributes but "something which is accomplished in interaction with others" who, in turn, render these accomplishments accountable within institutional settings (West and Fenstermaker, 1997:64). From this ethnomethodological stance, people simultaneously "do" difference (i.e., gender, race and class) in the process of interacting with others and, through their "doings," contribute to the reproduction of those structures. As Collins rightly points out, this postmodern, social constructionist analysis that reduces oppressive structures to "difference," leaves out "the power relations and material inequalities that constitute oppression" (Collins, 1997:75). The ethnomethodological solution is unsatisfactory for other reasons as well, which follow from its basic RGC assumptions; i.e., that everyone has a race, gender, class identity, and that the effects of all social interactions are simultaneously "gendered," "raced," and "classed." (West and Fenstermaker, 1997: 60).

To postulate an isomorphic relation between structural location – whether location is conceptualized singly or intersectionally makes no difference – and identity or identities entails a structural determinism similar to that imputed to "orthodox Marxism." While it is true, as it could not be otherwise, that all members of a given society are simultaneously *located* in a number of structures which, together, shape their experiences and opportunity structures, *structural location does not necessarily entail awareness of being thus located or the automatic development of identities corresponding to those locations*. It cannot be assumed, then, that everyone has a race/gender/class identity, as Collins argues, though it is true that everyone, by definition, is located at the intersection of class, gender, and racial/ethnic structures. That most individuals in this country are more likely to adopt and self-consciously display gender and racial/ethnic rather than class identities is not an automatic reflection of their structural locations but the combined effect of many factors such as, for example, the heritage of slavery,



the presence of colonized minorities, the composition of past and current immigration flows, McCarthyism, the balance of power between classes and characteristics of the class struggle and, last but not least, the effects of the 1960s social movements and dominant ideologies defining the limits of political discourse. RGC thinking conflates objective location in the intersection of structures of inequality and oppression with identities; i.e., individuals' subjective understanding of who they *really* are, and this conflation opens the way to the ethnomethodological solution to "intersectionality," which assumes that everyone deploys those identities in the course of social interaction, so that all social exchanges are "raced," "gendered," and "classed" (and the list could go on; "aged" "ethnicized," "nationalitized," etc.).

As most institutional settings are characterized by hierarchical structures which distribute people in locations associated with different statuses, power, privilege, etc. it is likely that, whatever individuals' conception of who they *really* are might be, their behavior is routinely interpreted in different terms by their peers and by those who are located high in the hierarchical structure, in positions that give them the power to make decisions affecting other people's lives. Identities are a contested terrain, both a product of individuals' spontaneous, common sense self-understanding and political choices that help them make sense of their existence, and a product of labeling from above (e.g., by employers and by the state) or by their peers; i.e., the effects of acts of power. It is important, therefore, to differentiate between "legitimizing identities," which are the product of dominant institutions and groups, and "resistance identities," which emerge from the grassroots (Castells, 1997). How "intersectionality" is experienced, then, is itself a thoroughly political process that raises questions about the possibility that what once were "resistance identities," when linked to social movements, might in time become "legitimizing identities," when harnessed by the state to narrow legal and political boundaries that rule out other forms of political self-understanding.

How are we to understand, at the macro level of analysis, the racialization, genderization and the placement of people in given class and or socio-economic status locations? Are these and other structures of inequality reproduced simply by "doing difference"? While empirical research on these matters is important to document the persistence and pervasiveness of gender, class, and race prejudice and stereotypes that permeate ordinary, day to day interactions, it demonstrates at the same time the limited, descriptive, non-explanatory nature of "intersectionality." In the context of Marxist theory, the argument that people are "an ensemble of social relations," meaning everyone is located at the intersection of numerous social structures, counteracts one-sided, abstract, ahistorical notions of human nature. As an RGC insight, it is also useful to critique dominant stereotypes which associate poverty, race, and ethnicity with women and with "minority" (i.e., "non-white") status, as if "whites," besides having "culture" (ethnicity being the culture of the relatively powerless) were mostly rich and male. But this insight, captured in the metaphor of "intersectionality" and having as a referent the multiple locations of individuals in the structures that make up the social formation as a whole, allows us only a) to map the distribution of the population in these manifold locations where most individuals occupy "contradictory" locations; i.e., locations where dominant and subordinate relations intersect (Wright, 1978); and b) to investigate empirically the extent to which locations and identities coincide or not, and the patterns of

recognition and mis-recognition that ensue. A graphic depiction of several of these intersections, placing individuals and couples in the intersection of wealth ownership, income levels, occupations, gender, race, ethnicity, age and employment status is the well known "American Profile Poster" accompanying Rose's periodic description of U.S. social stratification (Rose, 1992). A description, however, no matter how thorough, has meaning only within a specific theoretical context. Intersectionality in itself, as an account of the multiplicity of locations effecting individuals experiences, or as a study of the patterned variations in the identities individuals claim for themselves regardless of those locations, cannot explain either the sources of inequalities or their reproduction over time; intersectionality must be placed in the "institutional bases of power shaping race, class and gender" (Collins, 1997:74). What are these institutional bases of power? How do we identify them? How do we link intersectionality to its macro level conditions of possibility, those "interlocking" structures of oppression? It is here that the RGC perspective runs into a theoretical dead end which the abundance of metaphors (e.g., interlocking, intersecting, etc.) can neither hide nor overcome. Collins postulates the existence of a "basic relationship of domination and subordination" within the American political economy which is "shaped" by the "race, class and gender interlocking system" (Collins, 1993:29). RGC studies, as Andersen and Collins point out, require the "analysis and criticism of existing systems of power and privilege" (Andersen and Collins, 1995:xiii). While they postulate the existence of a more fundamental or "basic" structure of unequal power relations and privilege which underlies race, gender and class, no macro level theoretical perspective is offered to identify this basic, fundamental structures. It is at this point that the formal nature of the RGC perspective becomes clear: race, gender and class have become, for all practical purposes, taken for granted categories of analysis whose meaning apparently remains invariant in all theoretical frameworks and contexts. There are many competing theories of race, gender, class, American society, political economy, power, etc. but no specific theory is invoked to define how the terms race, gender and class are used, or to identify how they are related to the rest of the social system. To some extent, race, gender and class and their intersections and interlockings have become a mantra to be invoked in any and all theoretical contexts, for a tacit agreement about their ubiquitousness and meaning seems to have developed among RGC studies advocates, so that all that remains to be done is empirically to document their intersections everywhere, for everything that happens is, by definition, raced, classed, and gendered. This pragmatic acceptance of race, gender and class, as givens, results in the downplaying of theory, and the resort to experience as the source of knowledge. The emphasis on experience in the construction of knowledge is intended as a corrective to theories that, presumably, reflect only the experience of the powerful. RGC seems to offer a subjectivist understanding of theory as simply a reflection of the experience and consciousness of the individual theorist, rather than as a body of propositions which is collectively and systematically produced under historically specific conditions of possibility which grant them historical validity for as long as those conditions prevail. Instead, knowledge and theory are pragmatically conceived as the products or reflection of experience and, as such, unavoidably partial, so that greater accuracy and relative completeness can be approximated only through gathering the experiential accounts of all groups. Such is the importance given to the role of experience in the production of knowledge that in the eight page introduction to the first section of an RGC anthology, the word experience is repeated thirty six times (Andersen and Collins, 1995:1-9).



I agree with the importance of learning from the experience of all groups, especially those who have been silenced by oppression and exclusion and by the effects of ideologies that mystify their actual conditions of existence. To learn how people describe their understanding of their lives is very illuminating, for "ideas are the conscious expression – real or illusory – of (our) actual relations and activities" (Marx, 1994:111), because "social existence determines consciousness" (Marx, 1994: 211). Given that our existence is shaped by the capitalist mode of production, experience, to be fully understood in its broader social and political implications, has to be situated in the context of the capitalist forces and relations that produce it. Experience in itself, however, is suspect because, dialectically, it is a unity of opposites; it is, at the same time, unique, personal, insightful and revealing and, at the same time, thoroughly social, partial, mystifying, itself the product of historical forces about which individuals may know little or nothing about (for a critical assessment of experience as a source of knowledge see Sherry Gorelick, "Contradictions of feminist methodology," in Chow, Wilkinson, and Baca Zinn, 1996; applicable to the role of experience in contemporary RGC and feminist research is Jacoby's critique of the 1960s politics of subjectivity: Jacoby, 1973:37-49). Given the emancipatory goals of the RGC perspective, it is through the analytical tools of Marxist theory that it can move forward, beyond the impasse revealed by the constant reiteration of variations on the "interlocking" metaphor. This would require, however, a) a rethinking and modification of the postulated relationships between race, class and gender, and b) a reconsideration of the notion that, because everyone is located at the intersection of these structures, all social relations and interactions are "raced," "classed," and "gendered."

In the RGC perspective, race, gender and class are presented as equivalent systems of oppression with extremely negative consequences for the oppressed. It is also asserted that the theorization of the connections between these systems require "a working hypothesis of equivalency" (Collins, 1997:74). Whether or not it is possible to view class as just another system of oppression depends on the theoretical framework within class is defined. If defined within the traditional sociology of stratification perspective, in terms of a gradation perspective, class refers simply to strata or population aggregates ranked on the basis of standard SES indicators (income, occupation, and education) (for an excellent discussion of the difference between gradational and relational concepts of class, see Ossowski, 1963). Class in this non-relational, descriptive sense has no claims to being more fundamental than gender or racial oppression; it simply refers to the set of individual attributes that place individuals within an aggregate or strata arbitrarily defined by the researcher (i.e., depending on their data and research purposes, anywhere from three or four to twelve "classes" can be identified).

From the standpoint of Marxist theory, however, class is qualitatively different from gender and race and cannot be considered just another system of oppression. As Eagleton points out, whereas racism and sexism are unremittably bad, class is not entirely a "bad thing" even though socialists would like to abolish it. The bourgeoisie in its revolutionary stage was instrumental in ushering a new era in historical development, one which liberated the average person from the oppressions of feudalism and put forth the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. Today, however, it has an unquestionably negative role to play as it expands and deepens the rule of capital over the entire globe. The working class, on the other hand, is pivotally located to wage the final struggle against capital and,

consequently, it is "an excellent thing" (Eagleton, 1996:57). While racism and sexism have no redeeming feature, class relations are, dialectically, a unity of opposites; both a site of exploitation and, objectively, a site where the potential agents of social change are forged. To argue that the working class is the fundamental agent of change does not entail the notion that it is the only agent of change. The working class is of course composed of women and men who belong to different races, ethnicities, national origins, cultures, and so forth, so that gender and racial/ethnic struggles have the potential of fueling class struggles because, given the patterns of wealth ownership and income distribution in this and all capitalist countries, those who raise the banners of gender and racial struggles are overwhelmingly propertyless workers, technically members of the working class, people who need to work for economic survival whether it is for a wage or a salary, for whom racism, sexism and class exploitation matter. But this vision of a mobilized working class where gender and racial struggles are not subsumed but are nevertheless related requires a class conscious effort to link RGC studies to the Marxist analysis of historical change. In so far as the "class" in RGC remains a neutral concept, open to any and all theoretical meanings, just one oppression among others, intersectionality will not realize its revolutionary potential.

Nevertheless, I want to argue against the notion that class should be considered equivalent to gender and race. I find the grounds for my argument not only on the crucial role class struggles play in processes of epochal change but also in the very assumptions of RGC studies and the ethnomethodological insights put forth by West and Fenstermaker (1994). The assumption of the simultaneity of experience (i.e., all interactions are raced, classed, gendered) together with the ambiguity inherent in the interactions themselves, so that while one person might think he or she is "doing gender," another might interpret those "doings" in terms of "doing class," highlight the basic issue that Collins accurately identifies when she argues that ethnomethodology ignores power relations. Power relations underlie all processes of social interaction and this is why social facts are constraining upon people. But the pervasiveness of power ought not to obfuscate the fact that some power relations are more important and consequential than others. For example, the power that physical attractiveness might confer a woman in her interactions with her less attractive female supervisor or employer does not match the economic power of the latter over the former. In my view, the flattening or erasure of the qualitative difference between class, race and gender in the RGC perspective is the foundation for the recognition that it is important to deal with "basic relations of domination and subordination" which now appear disembodied, outside class relations. In the effort to reject "class reductionism," by postulating the equivalence between class and other forms of oppression, the RGC perspective both negates the fundamental importance of class but it is forced to acknowledge its importance by postulating some other "basic" structures of domination.

Class relations – whether we are referring to the relations between capitalist and wage workers, or to the relations between workers (salaried and waged) and their managers and supervisors, those who are placed in "contradictory class locations," (Wright, 1978) – are of paramount importance, for most people's economic survival is determined by them. Those in dominant class positions do exert power over their employees and subordinates and a crucial way in which that power is used is through their choosing the identity they impute their workers. Whatever identity workers might claim or "do," employers can, in turn,

disregard their claims and "read" their "doings" differently as "raced" or "gendered" or both, rather than as "classed," thus downplaying their class location and the class nature of their grievances. To argue, then, that class is fundamental is not to "reduce" gender or racial oppression to class, but to acknowledge that the underlying basic and "nameless" power at the root of what happens in social interactions grounded in "intersectionality" is class power.

## CONCLUSION

As long as the RGC perspective reduces class to just another form of oppression, and remains theoretically eclectic, so that intersectionality and interlockings are, in a way, "up for grabs," meaning open to any and all theoretical interpretations, the nature of those metaphors of division and connection will remain ambiguous and open to conflicting and even contradictory interpretations. Marxism is not the only macro level theory that the RGC perspective could link to in order to explore the "basic structures of domination" but it is, I would argue, the most suitable for RGC's emancipatory political objectives.

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