

## On 'intersectionality'

'Intersectionality' has become a hot term. Many in sociology and social theory are grabbing hold of it, applying it not only to their research/scholarship ('this paper addresses the intersectionality of ...') but also to themselves ('my research stands at the intersection/intersectionality of ...').

So the term has quickly become elastic, being deployed as an attribute of situations and of persons. In turn, too, there is a fudge as between 'intersection' and 'intersectionality'.

I put this fuzziness aside here.

Commonly, the term seems to be pointing to a combination of societal and even global forces that affect people's positions, identities and life chances. Characteristically, too, the term is laden – even impregnated – with evaluative overtones, for in the wake of the appearance of 'intersectionality' comes concerns about the presences of power structures, and social (in)justice of various kinds. The concerns in question typically embrace all or some of structural disadvantages arising from inequities of race, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic class. Sometimes, too, the matter of epistemic injustice is included in work on intersectionality.

On all of these matters – the scope of intersectionality, the extent to which it harbours values, the degree to which it turns to the future and contains recommendatory aspects, whether it is deployed to point to malformations in regions of the world (say, in the Global South OR, to the contrary, in the Global North) or to malformations that are actually global and are to be found across the world, and the character of the power structures in question – on all of these matters, the term 'intersectionality' characteristically leaves open, as it is actually used. The term 'intersectionality' is, therefore, at least a plastic term, being used in a multitude of ways, and often rather ill-worked through.

Is it a confused term? Is it conflicted? I will duck those matters here; and they are far from straightforward. But I speak deliberately of 'intersectionality' as a term rather than as a concept because it lacks the depth and the substance that warrants its being understood as a concept. It lacks bite. It has become a 'hurrah' term, and a symbol of claimed-legitimacy. In using the term, I indicate that I am locating myself in a certain intellectual milieu, implicitly claiming the assent of certain others and others, at that, who understand themselves to be working in a critical disposition.

I put all of these matters aside here too!

I want to say simply this: that the idea of intersectionality poses two sets of philosophical problems. Both problems have long existed in this neck of the woods (of scholarly research on large inequities) but they are posed starkly here. Of the two problems, I am especially interested in the second.

First, and the lesser of the two here, is that the idea of intersectionality, when taken seriously, posits a fragmentation of self and personal identity, for it implies that the self is being pulled this

way and that, split apart by the forces of race, ethnicity, social class and so forth. The unitary self is liable to disappear when treated to the forensic gaze inspired by this concept.

By the way, as I've implied, there are nice questions to be asked about the forces to be included under the umbrella of the concept. I have pointed to the ambiguous situation of epistemic injustice, one difficulty being – of course – is that that concept is itself a manifold of meanings and interpretations. (I cannot go into that matter here.)

The fundamental question here therefore is simply this: can a research agenda be seriously pursued that privileges or takes its departure from the idea of intersectionality that also holds open the possibility of a unitary self and, if so, how is that conundrum to be dissolved? How can that circle be squared, if indeed it can be squared?

Second, and more difficult still in way, this thorny question looms: the theory – to the extent it is a theory – of intersectionality springs from or works in parallel with concerns over limitations of human rights. (As stated, there are value positions here, but that is not my concern at this very moment.)

These concerns over human rights and their diminution arise or are put to work in particular settings, whether of regions of the world or in particular communities. But now this issue arises in spades. Are there universal human rights and, to the extent that there, how might the idea of intersectionality – given that it is being given its legitimacy in particular context with particular peoples – square with that idea of universal human rights?

This is, of course, territory that Žižek has ventured onto – and for which he has received some flack, with his insistence that in being human, one is already a claimant for inalienable universal rights. Žižek's argument draws resources from Christianity, where one is one's brother's keeper, and sees everyone as such, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, gender and social class. For Žižek, those latter categories are supervenient on (take on substance only after) the category of 'human' (though Žižek doesn't use the term 'supervenient'). And *to claim that one's identity depends on any such category – or even **intersectionality** of such categories – would diminish one's identity.* It would be tantamount to implying that, say, one's social class is more important than one's being human.

Moreover, to make such a claim might inadvertently bring about or reinforce just the kind of societal divisions that presumably the theory – or doctrine – of intersectionality is intended to dissolve. So the idea of intersectionality is self-defeating.

It may be said that nothing of the kind need be on the cards here, that researchers can attend to particular settings of intersectionality without impinging on more general concerns with human rights. Universality and particularity can go together. OK, but just how? It cannot blithely be assumed to be the case.

I am not saying that any of – still less all of - these matters cannot be adequately addressed from within the intersectionality camp, but they *should* be addressed and *within* the camp. And it

should not be assumed that there are gambits ready-to-hand. The onus is on those who seek resources in the idea and theory of intersectionality to show that the matters sketched here can yield satisfactory responses.

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