The Politics of Intersectionality: Race, Class and Gender

MPhil Politics and International Studies
Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS)
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The course explores the rapidly rising interest, both academically and politically, in ideas of intersectionality. Introduced through a famous essay by Black feminist legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, the concept of intersectionality has since significantly impacted the humanities and social sciences, and is gaining increasing traction in politics and international relations. Most scholars agree that intersectionality seeks to overcome unidimensional analyses that prioritise one single social fault line by urging us to investigate interlocking systems of power, particularly along the lines of race, class and gender. However, the stellar career of the concept has been critically assessed by key proponents and critics alike, arguing, for instance, that in many instances it has become the kind of very hollow universalist assumption it was set out to critique in the first place.

The course explores how intersectional theorists such as bell hooks, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, and their interlocutors, draw on feminist, postcolonial and Marxist theories and why intersectional analysis has developed into a key concept for politics and international studies today. By doing that, we will critically analyse how a contemporary, “sanitised” version of intersectionality ignores its more radical roots in Black feminist thought. We will also explore how scholars from various disciplines have sought to expand the scope of intersectionality to include questions of religion, nationality, ecology, among others, and discuss current debates between advocates, activists and critics of the concept. In this way, we will address the question, what are the concrete analytical benefits that an intersectional lens can provide? To what extent is intersectionality an academic lens, a political programme or both? What are the limits of intersectionality and what are the pitfalls in the way the term has been applied to various context by different scholars, particularly beyond its origin in Black feminism in the United States?

The seminars will be held online on Fridays, 12-2pm, the invitation links will be provided closer to the date. Students are expected to read the core readings for each session, and are invited to read the complementary readings they are interested in.

Overview of the seminar sessions
Week 1 (22 Jan) Intersectionality: From Black feminism to mainstream politics?
Week 2 (29 Jan) Early feminists of colour: Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, bell hooks
Week 3 (5 Feb) Intersectionality, Marxism and state power (Guest speaker: Vanessa Wills)
Week 4 (12 Feb) Gender, racism, nation and Islam: Muslim women
Week 5 (19 Feb) Hum/Animal/Environmental racism (Guest speaker: Skeema Rathor)
Week 6 (26 Feb) Masculinity and white supremacy
Week 7 (5 March) Social movements and solidarity across difference
Introductory readings
(these are not mandatory but will provide a helpful background)

Overviews


Popular introductory readings


A Litany For Survival

For those of us who live at the shoreline standing upon the constant edges of decision crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed futures
like bread in our children’s mouths
so their dreams will not reflect the death of ours;

For those of us who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the centre of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak remembering
we were never meant to survive.

– Audre Lorde.
Week 1: Intersectionality: From Black feminism to mainstream politics?

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy.
– Combahee River Collective

How did the concept of intersectionality emerge and what does it help us to understand about contemporary politics? In most academic and popular references to intersectionality, Kimberle Crenshaw’s 1989 and 1991 essays are the central reference points. However, contemporary references frequently overlook or consciously go beyond the term’s roots in Black feminist thought and in radical politics, and the long history of analysing intersecting discriminations and forms of violence that Crenshaw and others build on. The Combahee River Collective (CRC) was a radical group of Black feminists that based their politics not only in feminist anti-capitalism and anti-racism, but also included heteropatriarchy and homophobia in their critical investigations. Authors who have taken up the concept more frequently, however, locate the precursors and origin of intersectionality in queer and disability studies, arguing that questions of class and race are but two among a variety of categories that intersectional analysis should focus on. This raises the question, what do the different genealogies of the concept tell us about its popularity and the different politics that are associated with it? In this session, we will explore two foundational texts of intersectionality scholarship and discuss how these have been taken up, side-lined and developed in the last decades, in which it has become a remarkably versatile “buzzword” in public and academic discourse.

Core readings


Complementary readings


**Week 2: Early feminists of colour: Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, bell hooks**

*You cannot, you cannot use someone else’s fire. You can only use your own. And in order to do that, you must first be willing to believe that you have it.*

– Audre Lorde

Identifying interlocking systems of power through centring the experiences particularly of frequently marginalised women of colour is at the heart of intersectional scholarship. This is why the experiences of women of colour form the principal empirical basis for a lot of intersectional scholarship, frequently involving the political struggles in which the theorists were involved themselves, as was prominently the case with Angela Davis and her prison-related activism following her own incarceration. Intersectional scholars frequently try to avoid the canonisation of specific thinkers or “great books” which dominates much Western political and social theory. However, the writings of a series of US American Black feminist activist-scholars have decisively shaped conversations around race, class and gender in the second half of the 20th century. The recent surge in popularity of the concept of intersectionality seems to have invigorated a closer engagement with these thinkers. However, many contemporary readings of key authors such as Audre Lorde, Angela Davis and bell hooks are reduced to the level of inspirational quotes. This fails to acknowledge the historical situatedness of their work and the very real political contestations that are of vital importance for understanding their thinking. In this session, we will read some of the key texts of Lorde, Davis and hooks in order to map the similarities and differences in the vocabulary, references and political projects they are engaged in. This will
provide us with a solid foundation based on which we can understand the limitations and criticisms of their approaches discussed in later sessions.

**Audre Lorde (1934-1992)**

**Core Readings**

  Especially *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*; *Poetry Is Not a Luxury; The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House; Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference; The Uses of Anger: Women Responding To Racism*. Most of these texts can also be found in Lorde, Audre (2007). *Sister outsider: essays and speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press.
  Especially *Apartheid U.S.A.; My Words Will Be There; Poet as Teacher—Human as Poet—Teacher as Human; Difference and Survival: An Address at Hunter College; There is No Hierarchy in Oppression*.

**Complementary readings**


**Angela Davis (*1944)**

**Core Readings**


**Complementary readings**


**bell hooks (*1952)**

**Core readings**


**Complementary readings**

Week 3: Intersectionality, Marxism and state power

*Marxism and feminism are one and that one is Marxism.*
– Heide Hartmann and Amy Bridges, quoted in MacKinnon (1989)

Since the emergence of socialism in the 19th century, and later articulations by thinkers such as Rosa Luxemburg, Marxism has represented a major analytical framework through which to understand the oppression of women. This perspective has been taken up by some parts of the feminist movement through the rise of radical and socialist feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, the question over which system of oppression—capitalism or patriarchy—is ultimately responsible for and the root cause of gendered exploitation and domination has been a consistent disagreement among feminists and Marxists. As the anti-capitalist politics of the Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis, bell hooks demonstrate, class analysis has been a key element of intersectional theorising. At the same time, in line with radical feminists such as Katherine MacKinnon, they argue that the lens of capitalism alone is insufficient to account for the pervasive systems of domination along the lines of class and race. In this session we will have a closer look at the tension between intersectional theory and Marxism, in particular around the question of how to analyse the state, to what extent the state is a helpful object of intersectional analysis in the first place, and how intersectionality can help us to make sense of the stratifying effects of nation states today. This allows us to understand why many leftist political groups and parties are very critical of intersectionality, discussing the argument that intersectionality tends to fail to acknowledge the centrality of capital and class in the exercise of social and political power.

**Guest speaker:** Prof. Vanessa Wills (George Washington University)

**Core readings**


**Complementary readings**


**Week 4: Gender, racism, nation and Islam: Muslim women**

*The relation between the Middle East and the West is really defined as sexual.*
– Edward Said

Intersectionality is commonly understood to investigate the “matrix of domination” (Patricia Hill Collins) along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and frequently disability, age, nationality, and what Judith Butler calls an embarrassing “etc.” Religion, however, sits in an awkward and frequently uncomfortable place within intersectional analysis. While religion is a protected characteristic, for instance under the 2010 Equality Act in the UK, various (post)secular arrangements also prohibit many forms of direct state support to religious groups. Not only in Marx’s analysis, but also in critical scholarship from liberal and feminist perspectives, religion has been acknowledged as one of the most pervasive social forces that reproduces and upholds patriarchal norms, particularly with regards to the nuclear family, reproductive rights, same-sex marriage and the role of women more broadly. While there exists a tendency, to single out Islam as a particularly oppressive socio-religious system, others have argued that this exceptionalisation of Islam is just another iteration of an exoticising, racializing and colonising Orientalist gaze seeking to control women’s bodies. We will discuss to what extent secular assumptions that underlie some feminist scholarship might reproduce some of the patronising and marginalising discourses it sets out to criticise. In this session we will discuss the contested position of religion within intersectional analysis, asking how to make sense of the tension between religion as both a frequently patriarchal power and as a marker of discrimination.

**Core readings**

**Complementary readings**
• Dokumaci, Pinar (2020) Toward a Relational Approach? Common Models of Pious Women’s Agency and Pious Feminist Autonomy in Turkey, Hypatia, online first.

**Week 5: Hum/Animal/Environmental racism**

_The white utopia was black inferno._

– Sylvia Winter (quoted in Yusoff 2018)

1402, 1492, or 1610 are frequently mentioned as alternative dates that should mark the beginning of the epoch now commonly referred to as the Anthropocene. Against conventional narratives that identify the steam engine in the 1800s or the nuclear age after 1945 as the beginning, locating the multiple genocides of indigenous populations in the Americas and the imprisonment, shipping and killing of more than 12 million Black people from West Africa across the Atlantic as the origin of the Anthropocene allows us to bring into focus the entangled histories of colonialism, racism and the climate breakdown. Resistance against capitalism and colonialism pushing the frontiers of exploitation along the lines of race and gender forms an archive based on which feminist scholars are weaving together the critique of male exploitation of matter and bodies, human and non-human. In this session, we will explore the gendered histories and contemporary politics of (post)colonialism and capitalism in the conceptualisation of “nature” and its continuous destruction.

**Guest speaker:** Cllr Skeena Rathor, Co-Founder of Extinction Rebellion

**Core readings**


**Complementary readings**


**Week 6: Masculinity and white supremacy**

*The truth will set you free. But first it will piss you off.*
– Gloria Steinem

In the previous sessions we have discussed how the experiences particularly of frequently marginalised women of colour is at the heart of intersectional theorising. In this session, we shift the perspective towards masculinity and white supremacy in order to understand how these systems of oppression distribute power and privilege, but also exercise pressure and violence on men and white people. We discuss the question, what role do men and white people play in different strands of intersectional scholarship? How does intersectionality help us to understand the various social stratifications and fault lines among men and white people? What are the possibilities and limits of political allyship? The men’s consciousness movement in the 1960s and 1970s called for the abandonment of the notion of masculinity altogether, as it is necessarily steeped in oppression of non-conforming men, women and non-binary people. On the other hand, bell hooks argues that it is patriarchal masculinity, rather than masculinity as such, that should be
the object of feminist movements, since lumping black men into the oppressor class would not do justice to the realities and struggles of men and families in Black communities. We will investigate the relationship between (heteropatriarchal) masculinity and white supremacy, how they mutually constitute each other, and where their, at times conflicting, logics produce further mechanisms of oppression and exclusion.

Core readings

Complementary readings:
Week 7: Social movements and solidarity across difference

Before we can create a new world we must first unearth and destroy the myths and realities, the lies and propaganda which have been used to oppress, enslave, incinerate, gas, torture and starve the human beings of this planet. Facing the lies of history is a basic human responsibility. It is unpleasant to do, but liberating to accomplish. It liberates all of us.

– Ben Okri

It has been argued that intersectionality might provide an umbrella framework that can forge powerful links between feminist movements, anti-capitalist struggles, anti-racist movements and other forms of resistance against oppression. However, critics have argued that “identity politics”, rather than providing a common, unifying basis, might split up political alliances into small pockets defined by their particular experiences of oppression. This raises the question, how is solidarity across difference possible? Can social movements be “global” without falling into the trap of reproducing the very colonialist mindsets they seek to overcome? What role does shared history and experience play in the mobilisation for certain political goals and in the possibilities and limits of forging new alliances? In this final seminar we will investigate how different groups have tried to “translate” intersectionality into practice and under what circumstances different forms of community and resistance can emerge.

Core readings


Complementary readings