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Intersectionality in working on socio-ecological transformation

The central point of our argument (which we share with Etienne Balibar and others) lies in our double claim, (a) that effective structural change under modern structures of domination (which are not defined any more by personal relations of submission between individual persons, but by structural determinations of domination operated and institutionalized by impersonal role-takers) can only be brought about by subverting and overcoming these very relations as such, and (b) that only a revolutionary practice (in the sense just defined) which is fully informed about these structures is capable of addressing the task of such a transformation effectively.

In this perspective, our theoretical work is explicitly focused upon fully understanding specifically those historical conditions which make such a revolutionary practice necessary and possible. In other words, in order to make our scientific contribution to “changing the world” in a non-trivial way, we are working to carry out the following operations:

- analyzing reality,
- criticizing theories and ideologies
- reflecting available experiences of on-going or historical struggles against established societal power relations,
- reflecting our own past practices relating to these struggles,
- criticizing our own contributions to analyzing such processes and our participation in deliberations on future practice.

In the Marxian tradition, to which we refer back in a critical way, these five activities have for a long time been conflated as such (in a simplified postulate of the ‘unity of theory and practice’), so that their critical dimension has been tendentially marginalized. The Marxian tradition is, indeed, not “only” a theoretical, but also a very practical one. Marx acted as a scientist and a politician – as a member of the board of the IWA, the International Workingmen’s Association. Its political existence was a first practical example for a practice of intersectionality adequately defined. Especially thanks to Harriet Law, the women’s question was permanently present, and, thanks to Marx and others, also the question of colonialism.

In recent debates in the social and political sciences the concept of intersectionality has been introduced in order to find a way of criticising those practices in research (and in political life) which are marked by forms of unilateral reductionism (as e.g. in the over-stretching of the micro-economic utility function in neo-classical economic theory), insisting upon the distinctness and specificity of e.g. of class domination, gender asymmetries, and race discrimination. Especially feminist authors have made use of the concept of “intersectionality” simply to defend feminist theory against various kinds of economic reductionism (within the Marxist, as well as within the neo-classical tradition) – often with the side effect of eliminating economic analysis altogether, so that their claims became fuzzy to the point of effectively only stating the truism that the complexity of socio-historical reality is constituted by different, more or less contradictory regularities, phenomenal developments, actions and structures.

In the perspective, we have just alluded to, the concept of “intersectionality”, in fact, describes something which is rather typical for Marx’s effective “method of research”, something, which Althusser has undertaken to capture by the concept of “over-determination”.

Instead of fully elaborating the relations between different concepts of “intersectionality”, we should like to concentrate on a central issue in this problem area – which we may introduce by a quote from Balibar: “Marx removed one of philosophy’s most ancient taboos: the radical distinction between praxis and poiesis.”

Marx’s method of critique and of self-criticism have been so radical, because they persistently ask the question of how relations of domination can be specifically overcome, based on the idea of making human individuals effectively free and on the readiness to organise societal forces in a sufficient and adequate way for changing all societal relations which prevent human beings from becoming free from existing forms of domination, as they are constantly reproduced by all kinds of practices of violence, heteronomy, discrimination, exploitation, oppression, or constraint.

The specific grounds, reasons, causes of these structures and processes, and the responsible agencies and actors involved in such practices are certainly different, but ultimately they all go along with a specific kind of inequality between the individuals as members of their society in their different social and societal contexts.

This inequality is structural and connected to societal hierarchies in which the one can command the other, simply because of occupying a specific place in the structure of societal relations that stands in a relation of domination to the subservient place allotted to other members of society.

Marx did not make use of the concept of “intersectionality” – not even with a different terminology – in his referring to these hierarchies (or to their effects, e.g. in political struggles). Instead he has concentrated on analysing the structures of capitalist domination, as they underlie the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production and its determining role within modern societies. This concentration has often been mis-understood to justify a kind of economic reductionism which has, however, remained quite alien to his and Engels’s theoretical work, and, even more so, to their practice of political analysis.

The term “intersectionality” has been used only since the beginning of the nineties, when the feminist Kimberly Crenshaw has analysed the special problems of women of black colour and when she has worked for a community building of women facing sexism and racism – in a practice of community building connected with the social movements against racism, on the one hand, and against sexism, on the other hand.

Further Crenshaw has criticized that race, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or personal domination. She has brought out that the violence many women do experience is often also shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class.

Racism, sexism and societal subordination often intersect in the real lives of people, but they are not addressed as such by all feminist and anti-racist practices. Because of this lack of understanding and addressing real intersectionality, such practices tend to relegate the identity of women of colour to a location that prevents any telling about experiences of domination and violence.

Crenshaw's "focus on the intersections of race and gender ... highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed."

While sharing with Crenshaw the desire to understand the development of modern societies and the ways in which our common world presently operates, as well as to empower victims of violence to change that world, our efforts go beyond the horizon of "identity politics" within which Crenshaw has remained: We undertake to address the issues of structures and causal determinations for such specific relations of domination. On this basis, we proceed to take up again the critique of political economy, as it has been theoretically developed by Marx, more generally as a model for reconstructing processes of reproduction of existing forms of domination, and thereby attempt to widen Crenshaw's stressing her identity-oriented take on the intersectionality of violence to an analysis of the specific societal hierarchies which effectively function to reproduce them, while at the same time opening our analysis to class domination and class struggle beyond the current concentration on "race" and "gender" - thereby adding capitalist domination again to the specific structures of domination to be analysed, to be fought against and to be overcome.

In his part of the book written in common with Wallerstein "Race, Nation, Class", Étienne Balibar had considered to "form the preliminaries of an 'anthropology of the nation form' in modern times, involving at the same time a description of the model of subjectivity that could be called homo nationalis ... This was supposed ... to help ... understand how, in the wake of the constitution of 'nations' in the bourgeois sense ... a certain community-effect was produced and maintained, where racism was ... a necessary 'internal supplement'."

This quotation on his book part is taken from Balibar's contribution to a journal's inaugural text „Race: Theories, Identities, Intersections, Histories and the 'Post-Racial' Society“.

It reflects not only a significant enlargement of the use of the term „intersectionality“, but leads also to our central question, i.e. to the issue of a comprehensive critique of all relations of domination overdetermining the complex reality of modern society, in a way which neither excludes class-domination, nor falls back into the class reductionism characteristic for large parts of the „Marxist“ tradition.

Such a critique will most certainly not be capable to become a kind of „integral universalism“ which can tackle all relations of dominance by ONE comprehensive theory and result in ONE integrated practice of liberation. It will have to take on board the real material differences and the irreducible plurality of the existing structures and mechanisms of domination, while at the same time fully understanding their over-determination.

But the strategical question to be asked and to be answered in a perspective of liberation is the following: How to make possible (and real) a critique of all different kinds of domination and how to conceive and to develop a real and effective practice of liberation in which all these - very differently - oppressed and dominated forces - could get together in a combined political struggle against the politically maintained structures of reproduction of all these forms of domination which maintain people in a subaltern or subordinated position, i.e. without freedom or with limited freedom .

A productive help for a discussion of this question can be found in an analysis proposed by Patricia Hill Collins: She analyses „intersectionality as a knowledge project whose raison d'être lies in its attentiveness to power relations and social inequalities.“ She examines “three interdependent sets of

concerns: (a) intersectionality as a field of study that is situated within the power relations that it studies; (b) intersectionality as an analytical strategy that provides new angles of vision on social phenomena; and (c) intersectionality as critical praxis that informs social justice projects.”

For us, who make use of past debates on ‘over-determination’ (Althusser), as well as on the ‘politics of human rights’ (Balibar) in order to resituate the experience of identity politics within a perspective of struggles of liberation addressing the plurality of structures and mechanisms operative in the reproduction of domination, this is a challenge and an offer to cooperate.

As we are strongly marked by the critique of the political economy elaborated by Marx as the science dealing with the capitalist mode of production and its domination within modern bourgeois societies, as well as by Marx’s sketches of a critique of politics, we do start to co-operate from our side, by taking up and widening the concept of intersectionality.

Critically making use of Marx's heritage, we build our approach upon a specific understanding of society which also explains our approach to intersectionality:

We understand ‘society’ as the articulation of individuals, belonging to and dealing with nature existing within a territory and at the same time as the complex of relations, especially power relations, as they exist between these individuals with their gender, their physical and mental constitution, their social, ethnic, cultural, confessional, national origin and affiliation. Accordingly, the metabolism of humankind is going on in a societal form as relations between individuals, who at the same time are embedded into specific societal contexts with their power relations. In our contemporary societies, societal hierarchies are significantly determined by capitalist oligarchies, and by the specific interrelations they are capable of establishing – in a kind of ‘intersectionality from above’ - between class, gender, and ethnic issues and the underlying societal, social, ecological and global problems, on the one hand, and by the development of agencies like the EU (in its complex relations to the US, to NATO and to other global actors), on the other hand.

Such an approach allows us to co-operate with individuals and collectives following Crenshaw’s and Collins's understanding of intersectionality, but also with all those who deal with structural hierarchies, and their underlying trends and mechanisms in transnational and international relations, like e.g. Balibar.

But furthermore, our approach allows us, in an active and egalitarian way, to co-operate with critical ecologists - and with the many activists and groups who are getting involved in just, solidarity-based and democratic struggles with regard to the humanitarian, food, ecological, resources, financial, and economic crises, as well as with the waves of crisis concerning the Euro and the EU.

For working towards such a co-operation it is worth-while to make use of the presently renewing discussion on Marx, in order to highlight the growing awareness of Marx for the ecological issue. Authors like Hannah Holleman and Kohei Saito have shown that Marx in his later years became ever more aware of the ecological problem, whereas these learning processes of Marx have later been obscured and then marginalized by ‘official’ Marxists, as well as, of course, by the dominant forms of the bourgeois sciences of society and history.

Facing the enormous strength of the capitalist oligarchies as networks of the strongest owners of finance capital in industry and finance and of the ruling elites in politics, management, state administration, law, military and ‘security’, science, culture and media, accounting, consulting and

lobbying and their international organisations on the one hand and the on-going political defensive of the left on the other hand, we argue for the further enlargement of the notion of intersectionality in the following directions:

- ② by searching for and exposing the causes and causers of the different crises, deepening the complex reproduction crisis of humankind – namely in exposing the ‘intersectionality from above’ in the strategies of the capitalist oligarchies,
- ② in analysing conceptions and concepts for alternatives and in elaborating our own proposals and conceptions, which aim to build a broad alliance of societal forces, in the form of an extended ‘intersectionality from below’,
- ② in searching for agents and agencies capable of dealing with causes and consequences of the crises, i.e. of violence against people and nature, as counter-powers with the capability of struggling for the emergence of alternative structures,
- ② in organising new political alliances capable of struggling for hegemony within the political processes within civil society, as well as within national or trans-national state structures.

In thinking, researching and acting on this basis, we propose to extend Collins's orientation on power relations and social inequalities to the ecological and global dimensions of justice in a complex way.

Doing so, we focus on

- ② building a politics against the capitalist oligarchies as the main causers of the crises who are based in the energy, transportation, finance and high-tech spheres, in the military-industrial “security” complex and in agribusiness, and who effectively put into practice a strategy of “intersectionality from above”,
- ② taking up and reinforcing the on-going struggles to protect and to strengthen existing democratic, social, ecological standards,
- ② helping to develop on-going struggles to protect, to democratise and to enlarge the public spheres,
- ② organising solidarity-based emancipatory forces on the local and regional levels, while at the same time working on their intersectional co-operation on the levels of the (member) states, of the EU, of Europe and of global politics, and working to bring them together in broad alliances admitting of plurality.

In sum: We propose to take up the common work for an “intersectionality of the struggles!” , i.e. for a common work towards supporting the multitude in becoming capable to change the world. In this connection, it is necessary to stress at least the central questions concerning the organisation of agents and agencies. These are slightly contradictory and very complicated:

- ② An organisation that should change power relations has to respond to societal power structures but while doing so, these structures have a strong negative impact on democracy in framework of this very organisation – and, therefore, on its attractiveness for members and for interested, “sympathising” people – how can this be avoided?

- ❓ How to be politically and culturally very different, but at the same time really effective in terms of changing societal reality?
- ❓ How to respect and respond fully the existing different individual interests and desires, while still being capable to protect the socially and globally weakest – and to respond immediately to actions and reactions by the other, dominating side?
- ❓ How to be a party and a movement at the same time?
- ❓ How to cooperate sincerely and fully with grass roots movements, while developing co-operation with trade unions and other agents of organized societal resistance, while at the same time seeing and dealing with the important limitations of their present capacity to act?
- ❓ How to make use of all possibilities to act, while establishing and keeping one's own durability and resilience as a political organisation and as an effective alliance?
- ❓ How to realise the continuity, durability and flexibility of struggling organisations and especially of political alliances, with a perspective of dealing adequately with the underlying contradictions and their backgrounds in the very structures of interest of all participants?

Or, in one word:

- ❓ How to be radically democratical, but able to act in a radical, transformative way?

See also:

Brangsch, Lutz, Dellheim, Judith, Spangenberg, Joachim H. and Wolf, Frieder Otto (2012), Den Krisen entkommen. Sozialökologische Transformation [Escape the Crisis. Socio-Ecological Transformation], rls Manuskripte 99, Karl Dietz Verlag, Berlin.

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