



## Dialectics over positivism for an intersectional Marxism

***Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism* By Ashley J. Bohrer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020). *Raya Dunayevskaya's Intersectional Marxism: Race, Class, Gender, and the Dialectics of Liberation* By Kevin B. Anderson, Kieran Durkin, and Heather Brown, eds. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021)**

Stephen Campbell<sup>1,2</sup> 

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Two new books published over the past couple years contribute greatly to overcoming the unproductive dichotomizing of Marxism and intersectionality theory. The first is Ashley J. Bohrer's (2020) *Marxism and Intersectionality*; the second, *Raya Dunayevskaya's Intersectional Marxism*—a multi-authored volume edited by Anderson et al. (2021). What becomes evident upon reading these texts is that previous claims of mutual theoretical irreconcilability were not so much about Marxism and intersectionality theory, per se, as both traditions are deeply heterogeneous. Instead, any alleged conceptual incompatibility has been between a specifically positivist (rather than dialectical) Marxist tendency, on the one hand, and a liberal (rather than radical) intersectionality theory, on the other. And as both of these books make clear, the dialectical Marxist tradition and radical theories of intersectionality have, from the start, offered in combination a powerful theoretical coupling for anti-capitalist analysis of variegated social landscapes in the present.

That said, my aim in this essay is not to summarize a conceptual reconciliation—the two books reviewed here do an admirable job of that themselves, and both deserve to be read in their entirety. I intend, rather, to highlight the ways these books draw out the tensions between positivist and dialectical tendencies in Marxist philosophy—tendencies that endure into the present. To that end, I proceed below by recalling the long, parallel histories of positivist and dialectical tendencies in Marxist thought. I then consider notions of difference and particularity through an intersectional historical materialist lens, as elaborated in the two books under review.

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✉ Stephen Campbell  
stephen.campbell@ntu.edu.sg

<sup>1</sup> Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

<sup>2</sup> University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

## Positivism and dialectics in Marxist philosophy

Having been appointed, upon the death of Friedrich Engels in 1895, as the latter's joint literary executor, Eduard Bernstein gained a stature in the international socialist movement out of proportion to his theretofore contributions. Thus positioned, he proceeded down a polemical path to becoming Marxism's first major revisionist. His prime target was Marx's Hegelianism; for dialectical logic, Bernstein argued, undermined rational positivist empiricism. And indeed, Hegel had employed dialectical logic's understanding of co-constitutive relations to critique Enlightenment empiricism's fetishism of the finite, of "the immediately given" (Pippin 2019: 96), and of the autonomous liberal subject. And whereas Marx had taken history as his paradigm, Bernstein, like his contemporary Émile Durkheim, took the natural sciences (Tudor 1993: xxv). "As soon as we leave the solid ground of empirically verifiable facts and think beyond them", wrote Bernstein (1993: 30) in 1899, "we enter the world of derived concepts."

To be sure, Bernstein was promptly repudiated by fellow members of the German Social Democratic Party, and of the Second International more broadly. At stake, however, was not so much his anti-dialectical positivism, but his blatant reformism, which had led him to disavow revolutionary class struggle in favour of cross-class collaboration and an appeal to the rational interests of an enlightened electorate—a position that aligned him with contemporary English Fabianism. And yet, despite Bernstein's political marginalization, the Second International, under the influence of Karl Kautsky's own theoretical positivism, evinced a similarly "pre-dialectical character", such that historical materialism became reduced to a "mechanical economic determinism in which the 'objective' is always the cause of the 'subjective'", in the words of Michael Lowy (2010).

In this way, Bernstein was the first of a long line of anti-Hegelian, anti-dialectical thinkers in the heterogenous history of Marxian philosophy. And while it is not necessary to list every partisan in this positivist tradition, I would underscore Erik Olin Wright, proponent of "rational choice Marxism", who remained to the end dismissive of dialectical logic and the Hegelian aspects of Marx's thought (see Wright 2015). I stress Wright here due to his enduring influence on contemporary US Marxism through, among others, his student Vivek Chibber (2013). The latter, in his book-length critique of postcolonial theory, likewise embraces rational choice theory and posits Marx as an unambiguous Enlightenment thinker—thus glossing over Marx's own critiques of Enlightenment reason. Reflecting on Chibber's conception of difference as epiphenomenal rather than constitutive, Chris Taylor (2013) identifies the former's epistemology as "pre-Hegelian", such that Chibber "keeps the particular and the universal apart, positing an antinomic relation between them." The working class, for example, as a "universal" social category is, in Chibber's hands, cleansed of all anthropological particularities—leaving an empty abstraction of form without content. Of especial relevance for the present essay, this same antinomy has informed numerous polemics in *Jacobin*, edited by Chibber's collaborator Bhaskar Sunkara, against what partisans see as a militantly particularist identity politics pursued at the

“expense of class-based universalism” (Naschek 2018). And to return full circle, Sunkara (see Matthews 2016) aligns his own brand of reformist Marxism with that of Karl Kautsky—“pre-dialectical” theoretician of “mechanical economic determinism”, in Lowy’s (2010) words.

Parallel to this line of anti-dialectical Marxist thought has run a concurrent history of explicitly dialectical historical materialism. Conventional surveys of Hegelian Marxism (for example, Bartonek and Burman 2018) trace its development from Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács, through the Frankfurt School, to Slavoj Žižek in the present. Yet, there are two glaring omissions in this genealogy.

First, the original post-Marx Hegelian Marxist was not Bloch or Lukács, but Antonio Labriola. In Labriola’s explicitly Hegelian critique of Second International orthodoxy, he repudiated the latter’s economic determinism and its systematization of mechanical “scientific” laws—arguing instead for an open philosophy of praxis that centred human subjectivity in non-teleological historical development (Greene 2016). And whereas Bernstein would appeal to the enlightened interests of an undifferentiated electorate, Labriola (1966 [1896]: 185–186) insisted that capitalist social orders are necessarily heterogenous: “society is not a homogeneous whole, but a body of specialized articulations, or, rather, a multiform complexus.” In most histories of Marxist thought, Labriola is granted little more than a passing mention. But his ideas had a significant influence on two of twentieth century Marxism’s most prominent theorists: Antonio Gramsci and Leon Trotsky (see Greene 2016). We see this influence in these latter theorists’ respective emphases on political-economic heterogeneity: in Gramsci’s attention to the co-constitutive relationship between Italy’s rural South and industrialized North, and in Trotsky’s focus on the “uneven and combined development” of Russian capitalism.

The second glaring omission in conventional histories of Hegelian Marxism is the Eurocentric neglect of Black radicalism. For as Cedric Robinson (2000 [1983]) observed, a consistently dialectical and often explicitly Hegelian current runs through the Black Radical Tradition (see also Johnson and Lubin 2017). Seminal theorists in this tradition include W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, Aimé Césaire, Walter Rodney, Hewy P. Newton, and Angela Davis. Characteristic of this intellectual–political tradition have been its contributors’ attention to relational difference, and their rejection of assimilation and separatism as the restricted options of a false dichotomy. The Black Radical Tradition is especially germane to the arguments of this essay due to its overlap with the critical theorizing of seminal proto-intersectional activist-intellectuals like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and the Combahee River Collective. Together with these latter writer-activists, intellectuals in the radical intersectional tradition have combined a Marxian critique of capitalism with a careful attention to the specificity of differential subordination along racialized, gendered, and other lines. And it has been by attending to the dialectics of relational difference that radical intersectional theorists have illuminated the “universal” (or “generalizable”) implications of diverse struggles for self-emanicipation—thereby distinguishing this radical tradition from prominent liberal recuperations of intersectionality theory, as I explore in the remainder of this essay in relation to the two books under review.

## The particular as universal

Together, *Marxism and Intersectionality* and *Raya Dunayevskaya's Intersectional Marxism* offer complementary approaches to conceiving an effective intersectional historical materialism. Bohrer, in the first text, provides a broad, sympathetic overview of seminal intersectional and proto-intersectional thinkers going back to early nineteenth century activists like Sojourner Truth and Maria Stewart. In her reading of this intellectual tradition, Bohrer stresses its philosophically dialectical and politically anti-capitalist currents and notes the many contributors who have acknowledged a Marxist influence on their thinking. Examples of the latter include Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and the Combahee River Collective, as noted, as well as other prominent intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, James Baldwin, and Angela Davis.

In the second text, Anderson, Durkin, Brown, and contributors attend to Raya Dunayevskaya's interventions into what could likewise be deemed proto-intersectional theory. While Dunayevskaya has been grossly neglected in histories of Marxist thought, her intellectual–political trajectory intersects with several prominent Marxist theorists of the last century. Born in eastern Ukraine in 1910, Dunayevskaya immigrated to the USA in 1922, where, as a teenager, she joined the Communist Party USA's youth wing. Expelled at 18 over her sympathy for Trotsky, Dunayevskaya went on to serve as Trotsky's secretary in Mexico in 1937–1938. In the end, she split with Trotsky over his conception of Stalin's Soviet Union as a “degenerated workers' state”; Dunayevskaya saw it as state capitalist. Back in the USA, she went on to establish the heterodox Johnson-Forest Tendency in 1945 with Trinidadian historian C.L.R. James and Chinese American Hegel scholar Grace Lee (later Grace Lee Boggs).

Against the economic determinism of then Stalinist orthodoxy, Dunayevskaya (in the Johnson-Forest Tendency and subsequently) consistently stressed the revolutionary subjectivity and capacity for self-emancipation that emerged among oppressed peoples everywhere. For Dunayevskaya, this is what Hegel had recognized in the dialectics of oppression and liberation—a dialectics of self-emancipation that, admittedly, Hegel saw through a stark Eurocentric lens, but which Dunayevskaya highlighted in anti-colonial struggles in Africa and elsewhere, Black liberation struggles in the USA, and the abolitionist currents of women's liberation movements globally. It was in recognizing the revolutionary content of these heterogenous struggles that Dunayevskaya's political theory aligned with later radical conceptions of intersectionality, and diverged from a certain Marxist orthodoxy that, in the mid-twentieth century North Atlantic, still saw the revolutionary proletariat quite narrowly—as white male industrial workers mostly, or at least as waged labourers whose other social differences were subsidiary.

In contrast to narrow conceptions of the working class as a unity of free waged labourers engaged in capitalist production, dissenting Marxists like Dunayevskaya have long stressed the heterogeneity of subordinated labour, and the ways political economic difference so often falls along lines of differential subordination—of race, gender, or citizenship, for example. This interconnection between

political economic difference and social inequality has more recently been recognized as constitutive of capitalism, and as socially produced within a capitalist dynamic (Roediger and Esch 2012). W.E.B. Du Bois (1997 [1935]), C.L.R. James (1989 [1938]), and Eric Williams (1994 [1944]), for example, all argued that New World slavery was capitalist in character, and an integral part of the capitalist world system. Social reproduction theorists, from Sylvia Federici (2012) to Tithi Bhattacharya (2017), have likewise stressed the centrality to capitalist orders of domestic labour—unpaid or low-waged, and overwhelmingly done by women. More broadly, Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue that under neoliberal restructuring, capitalism has been characterized by the “multiplication” of divergent labour arrangements. Think, for example, of salaried office workers in the financial sector, precarious gig workers in the platform economy, debt-bonded child labourers, and undocumented migrants violently coerced to labour on seafaring fishing boats. Capitalism, at present, is in this way variegated (Peck and Theodore 2007; see also Campbell 2020). It is thus “not a homogeneous whole, but a body of specialized articulations, or, rather, a multiform complexus”, in Labriola’s words (1966: 185–186).

Critically, however, reproducing this political economic heterogeneity has required differential ideological valuation to legitimize relative inclusion/exclusion. Recall Syed Hussain Alatas’s (1977: 2) classic critique of the myth of the lazy native that European colonial authorities deployed in Southeast Asia to justify the coercive mobilization of “semi-free” indigenous workers—a labour arrangement that deviated glaringly from the metropolitan norm of free wage labour. Or consider Maria Mies’s (1986) critical analysis of “housewifization”—the ideological construal as “housewives” of women engaged in home-based putting-out work, to legitimate the suppression of their wages as merely supplemental to those of a male breadwinner. And think of Philippe Bourgois’s (1989) ethnography of racialized labour market segmentation at a banana plantation along the Costa Rica–Panama border. Internalized racism, Bourgois argued, was key to reproducing the plantation’s hierarchically segmented and deeply precarious workforce.

This co-constitution of political economic heterogeneity and social differentiation is central to both books under review. In *Raya Dunayevskaya’s Intersectional Marxism*, Lilia Monzó (2021: 147) argues that, given the heterogeneity of capitalist labour arrangements, the term proletariat “has a far broader applicability than is often assumed.” And to ground her theorizing of intersectionality, Bohrer (2020: 15) quotes Sylvia Federici: capitalism “has been above all an accumulation of differences, inequalities, hierarchies, and divisions, which have alienated workers from each other and even from themselves.” Understood dialectically, such differences are at once integral and relationally constituted. Capitalist social orders are thus not “a homogenous unity” nor an assortment of disconnected fragments, but rather “unseparated difference”, as Dunayevskaya quoted from Hegel (Hudis and Anderson 2021: 28).

Identity, then, in an intersectional historical materialism, develops out of the individual’s experience of social differentiation upon a variegated political economic landscape. Such an understanding has informed the argument—made by Cedric Robinson (2000 [1983]: 2), Amílcar Cabral (1973: 77), and others—that there is a political economy to racism. Along similar lines, Bohrer (2020: 200)

writes of a “dynamic interplay between exploitation and oppression.” This does not mean that struggles against racism, patriarchy, or other forms of oppression are futile so long as capitalism persists, or that racism and patriarchy will instantly vanish with the end of capitalism. Rather, recognizing the political economy of racism, for instance, analytically clarifies the mutual benefits of anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggles, and how such struggles might be productively integrated. Recall here Angela Davis’s critique of the US women’s liberation movement of the nineteenth century: “The leaders of the women’s rights movement did not suspect that the enslavement of Black people in the South, the economic exploitation of Northern workers, and the social oppression of women might be systematically related” (1983: 66).

For Marxism, it has been the dialectical rather than positivist tradition that has been best able to grasp the anti-capitalist significance of struggles against varied oppressions outside the exploitation of free wage labourers. Notably, it was at his most Hegelian that Marx (1961: 72) posited the subject’s revolt against alienation amid relations of oppression as catalyst of world-historical change. It is for this reason that Dunayevskaya saw a certain revolutionary content in anti-colonial, anti-racist, feminist, and other liberatory struggles that may not articulate their politics in explicitly class terms (Rich 2021: 99). This is not to marginalize class struggle. It is instead to see the potential emergence of class struggle from out of varied emancipatory movements. Consider, as example, the recent campaigning of Black Lives Matter activists in support of the union registration drive at Amazon’s warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, where most of the workers are African American, and many are women (Black Lives Matter 2021). As Monzó (2021: 150) puts it in *Raya Dunayevskaya’s Intersectional Marxism*, “it really matters not around which axis the revolutionary struggle is built, since they must dialectically incorporate the struggle against all forms of oppression.”

Recognizing, in this way, the dialectical interconnection of varied forms of oppression, exploitation, and struggle opens space for a radical conception of identity politics. At least, that is how the Combahee River Collective, which coined the term identity politics in the 1970s, understood the concept—not as mutually exclusionary struggles, but as a starting point, or a grounding, for coalitional, and ultimately anti-capitalist, politics (Smith 2017). Of course, this is quite different from how “identity politics” has been articulated by conservative critics, and even by some liberal advocates. Bohrer (2020: 20) therefore asserts a clear distinction between, on the one hand, a dialectical conception of identity politics that grew out of anti-capitalist proto-intersectional activism, and which recognizes the systemic interrelation of diverse emancipatory struggles, and, on the other hand, an undialectical, and ultimately liberal, conception of identity politics that keeps such struggles conceptually and politically segregated. Moreover, along with the possibility of broad coalitional politics, struggles grounded in particular oppressions can operate as catalytic for the emancipatory struggles of other subordinated groups (Brown 2021: 106). Simply put, “the struggle for freedom can take particularized forms”, as Heather Brown writes in her discussion of Dunayevskaya’s writings on the abolitionist movement, but “the essence of freedom is universal” (ibid.).

In sum, the two books reviewed herein make important contributions to pushing Marxist debates beyond a dichotomizing critique of intersectionality theory. And moving forward, an intersectional historical materialism can foster greater appreciation of the mutually constitutive dynamics between capitalism's variegated political economic landscapes and heterogenous social terrains characterized by differential subordination. Such a dialectical approach is particularly relevant in the present, given the proliferation of diverse "non-standard" labour arrangements, alongside reactionary movements globally, which seek to deepen existing cleavages of differential subordination.

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