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# Intersectionality in working on socio-ecological transformation

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We have sent our abstract with the title of “Intersectionality in working on socio-ecological transformation”, as an contribution for clarifying the general conference theme of „understand and change“.

This, of course, puts the obligation upon ourselves to spell out clearly our interpretation of the conference theme of “understand and change”. To put it in a very condensed form, we propose to specify both aspects of this motto:

“*understand*” we should specify as a combination of structural and functional (law-like) determinations with situational insight, on the one hand,

while we should accentuate the aspect of “*change*” in the direction of “deep structural change”, i.e. in traditional terms, of revolutionary change.

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 on 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 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 understanding scientifically those historical conditions which make such a revolutionary practice 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 analyses of processes and our deliberations on future practice.

In the Marxian tradition, which we refer back to in a critical way, these five activities have temporarily been conflated, so that their critical dimension has been tendentially marginalized.

In recent debates in the social and political sciences the concept of intersectionality has been introduced in order to find *a way of criticising practices in research (and political life) 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 rather typical for Marx’s effective “method of research”, something, which Althusser has undertaken to capture by the concept of “over-determination”.

Instead of elaborating the relations between the concepts of “intersectionality”, we should like to concentrate on a central issue in this problem area – which we can introduce by a quote from *Balibar*: “Marx removed one of philosophy’s most ancient taboos: the radical distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*.”<sup>1</sup>

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 adequate for changing all societal relations which prevent human beings from becoming free from existing forms of domination, as they are reproduced by all kinds of practices of violence, heteronomy, discrimination, exploitation, oppression, or constraint.

The specific grounds, reasons, causes, and the responsible 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 where 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 analyzing the structures of capitalist domination, as they underly 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 color and when she has worked for 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 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 color to a location that resists telling about experiences of domination and violence.

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<sup>1</sup>Balibar, Étienne (1995), *The philosophy of Marx*, Verso, London, New York, 40

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."<sup>2</sup>

While sharing with Crenshaw's the desire to understand the societal development and operation of the world and to empower victims of violence to change that world, our efforts go beyond the horizon of "identity politics" within which Crenshaw has remained, and address the issue of structures and causal determinations of such specific relations of domination. On this basis we proceed to take up again the critique of political economy theoretically developed by Marx, 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", and adding capitalist domination again to the specific structures of domination 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'."<sup>3</sup>

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 all these forms of domination which maintain people in a subaltern or subordinated position, i.e. without freedom or with limited freedom<sup>4</sup>.

A productive help for a discussion of this question can be found in an analysis proposed by *Patricia Hill Collins* who 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;

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<sup>2</sup>Crenshaw, Kimberly (1991), Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color, *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, No. 6., S. 1241–1299, 1245

<sup>3</sup>Balibar (2011), The Genealogical Scheme: Race or Culture?, in *Trans-Scripts* 1 (2011), 1-9, 2

<sup>4</sup>Wolf, Frieder Otto (2011), in *Louis Althusser, Für Marx*, mit einem Nachwort herausgegeben von Frieder Otto Wolf, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 371

- (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.”<sup>5</sup>

For us, who make use of past debates on ‘over-determination’ (Althusser) and 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 people being strongly influenced 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<sup>6</sup>, as well as of Marx’s sketches of a critique of politics, we do accept this offer.

*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 sum 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 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 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 and Collins’ understanding of intersectionality, but also with such who deal with structural hierarchies, and their underlying trends and mechanisms in transnational and international relations like Balibar. But further, this 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, economic, Euro and EU crises.

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:

- 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,
- 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’,

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<sup>5</sup> Collins, Patricia, Hill (2015), Intersectionality’s Definitive Dilemmas, First published online as a Review in Advance for Annual Review of Sociology on March 23, 2015 at [soc.annualreviews.org](http://soc.annualreviews.org), 1

<sup>6</sup> Wolf, Frieder Otto (2011), a.a.O., 370

- in searching for agents and agencies capable of dealing with causes, causers and consequences of the crises, of violence against people and nature, as counter-powers with the capability of struggling for the emergence of alternative structures,
- 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

- 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",
- taking up and reinforcing the on-going struggles to protect and to strengthen existing democratic, social, ecological standards,
- helping to develop on-going struggles to protect, to democratise and to enlarge the public spheres,
- 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!"<sup>7</sup>, i.e. for a common work towards supporting the multitude in becoming capable to change the world.

see also:

Brangsch, L., Dellheim, J., Spangenberg, J.H. and Wolf, F.O. (2012), *Den Krisen entkommen. Sozialökologische Transformation [Escape the Crisis. Socio-Ecological Transformation]*, rls Manuskripte 99, Karl Dietz Verlag, Berlin.

Dellheim, Judith (2016), In search of possibilities for action, in: *Int. J. Sustainable Development*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2016, 201-215

Dellheim, Judith (2016), From 'Accumulation of Capital' to Solidarity Based Ways of Life, in: Judith Dellheim, Frieder Otto Wolf, Rosa Luxemburg: A Permanent Challenge for Political Economy. On the History and the Present of Luxemburg's 'Accumulation of Capital', Palgrave Macmillan, UK, 305-338

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<sup>7</sup> Wolf, Frieder Otto (2010/2011), Die Rückkehr des Staates, die Intersektionalität der Kämpfe, das Gemeinsame der Neuen Zeit und die Suche nach gemeinsamen Perspektiven, in: *Rückkehr in die Zukunft – Krisen und Alternativen, Beiträge zur radikalen Philosophie*, 2012