

Vivian M. May

Pursuing Intersectionality: Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries

New York: Routledge, 2015 (ISBN 978-0-415-80840-8)

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Using an interdisciplinary approach to examine a widely influential theoretical and political framework for the understanding of identity and power, *Pursuing Intersectionality: Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries* offers a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the complexities of intersectionality and explores how its potential may be enhanced and maximized. To do so, Vivian May, grounding intersectionality in the historical context of US Black feminist and feminist of color traditions, synthesizes the major concepts, practices, and politics associated with intersectionality. Approaching social identity as lived and interlocking, intersectionality deploys important concepts, such as the subjective, nonsummative, political, and mutually reinforcing character of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, among other social categories, for the examination and understanding of identity in the context of power and oppression in society. Such concepts challenge "single-axis" analytical orientations (that is, those that focus solely on race to understand the lived realities of people of color in the United States without paying attention to other aspects of their identity) in favor of a "matrix" worldview (that is, one that focuses simultaneously on race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and so on, to understand the lived realities of this group), which has become the hallmark of intersectional practice. The matrix worldview provides an orientation to politics that highlights the multidimensionality of power, privilege, and oppression; challenges hierarchies of oppression as "divide-and-conquer" strategies that ultimately favor those in power; and offers inclusive models of social transformation to eradicate social inequality at individual and systemic levels. Through her analysis, May convincingly demonstrates that intersectionality has been resisted, misunderstood, and misapplied by both supporters and critics of the framework. Calling this pervasive issue an "intersectional backlash," the author offers strategies to maximize—indeed actualize—the potential power of intersectional tools in multiple domains of social and political life.

The book is divided into six chapters. Recognizing that readers may not have a thorough and deep understanding of intersectionality, the first chapter provides an overview of the major premises and tenets of the concept itself. May identifies and examines several key premises, including an orientation to social engagement and praxis; a matrix worldview related to identity,

knowledge, inequality, and power; an inclusive philosophy that analyzes both privileged and unmarked as well as marginalized and marked social categories; and a political orientation committed to social justice. May goes on to explain the multifaceted character of intersectionality that includes an epistemological orientation that challenges dominant modes of thinking; an ontological multiplicity that accounts for the complexities of subjectivity and agency; a radical political orientation to collective action based on solidarity rather than sameness; and a resistant imaginary to intervene in conventional historical memory and unlearn dominant social imaginaries.

Although binary thinking and "single-axis" analysis have been recognized as problematic, chapter 2 examines why they are so entrenched in academic, social, and political discourse. Such entrenchment, May argues, is deeply connected to the power of normativity. More specifically, the normative appearance of dominant logics, such as either/or (for example, either gender or race) and gender-first (for example, gender as the primary factor) models of feminism, gives it a commonsensical, unquestionable, and hegemonic status. To challenge this normativity, the author first considers the material consequences of "single-axis" logics before turning to how intersectionality can be used as a tool of resistance and social change.

Using US feminist critiques of the concept, chapter 3 traces how intersectionality has been disciplined and even dismissed. May starts with how researchers reposition intersectionality as a "problem" rather than a useful analytical and political tool. She identifies four common themes for this characterization: (1) Intersectionality as an old and antiquated set of ideas that amounts to a form of "recycled" Black feminism; (2) intersectionality as an unsophisticated approach to identity and power that lacks nuance and complexity; (3) intersectionality as a narrow viewpoint that ostensibly pays too much attention to the disadvantaged and the marginalized; and (4) intersectionality as a destructive, fragmenting, and divisive force in US feminism. Because of these "problems" with intersectionality, May observes, some researchers indirectly advocate deracializing the concept to make it more universal and "useful," and others urge for a return to "single-axis" orientation, such as gender-first analysis, in feminist research.

Moving from conceptual critiques to its practice in method, theory, and policy, chapter 4 examines how intersectionality has been operationalized and applied in various contexts. These applications, May observes, tend to substantially depart from the original analytical, epistemological, and political vision of the concept. Methodologically, intersectionality is claimed in research, which requires that its tenets be used throughout a project from initial conceptualization and development of research questions, through data collection, treatment, and analysis, to interpretation of findings and conclusions. Unfortunately, a lot of research tends to use intersectionality as a descriptive device, that is, to characterize the diversity of the group under investigation, but abandons it as an analytical tool to unpack the dynamics of identity, power, and oppression. Theoretically, the matrix framework of intersectionality tends to be engaged through "single-axis" rather than "both/and" logics, which ultimately undermines the spirit and the power of the concept. To illustrate this, May cites research that theorizes difference and marginalization in terms of gender, producing generalizations about women and men, without attending to how such gendered processes are experienced and enacted simultaneously and more idiosyncratically as a result of other vectors of identity such as race, social class, sexuality, and so on. In its policy applications, intersectionality has been used both domestically

and internationally to examine a range of issues, including poverty and unemployment, violence and reproductive justice, indigenous sovereignty movements, workers' struggles, immigration-rights organizing, and queer-justice movements, among others. However, May argues that a number of such applications end up downplaying race and racism, reinforcing settler colonial logics, and maintaining normative structures. In short, these applications contribute to, rather than challenge and contest, marginalization, which is antithetical to the intersectionality project.

The last two chapters offer ways to counter dominant logics to produce richly intersectional work. Chapter 5 starts with a discussion of the epistemologies of ignorance—the process of "unknowing" the silences, unheard testimonies, and gaps of knowledge about certain groups—and their subsequent contestation. An intersectional approach treats those silences and gaps as potentially revelatory and deeply meaningful by focusing attention on the experiences and realities of individuals and groups that have been marginalized and oppressed. Through contestation of unknowing or willful ignorance, the unintelligibility of these groups can be challenged, their subjectivities can be recovered and rendered legitimate, and the dynamics of normative power can be demystified and highlighted. The chapter concludes by presenting two requisite practices—"bracketing" and "bias"—in intersectional work. Bracketing refers to the process of putting conventional ways of knowing on hold, and bias suggests a conscious and active mindset that defies conventional and dominant logics. When they are used together, bracketing and bias can produce a reorientation and rehabilitation to alternate ontological worlds and epistemological frameworks.

Recognizing that intersectionality is grounded in a particular intellectual and political history, open to critique and flexible to change, and committed to dismantling oppression and seeking multiple forms of justice, chapter 6 provides a number of strategies for cultivating an intersectional disposition. More specifically, May offers five sets of suggestions: remembering what intersectionality entails (and does not entail); honoring and fostering the anti-subordination impulse of intersectionality; using the matrix orientation of intersectionality to engage with heterogeneity, enmeshment, and divergence; applying bracketing and bias to opaque lives and realities and reading against the grain; and setting aside normative practices as a philosophical, political, research, and policy strategy. The book concludes by reminding the reader that intersectionality is an open, flexible, and dynamic system oriented toward radical social change that unsettles dominant logics and the normative power of the status quo.

Pursuing Intersectionality is a timely, useful, and important book. As neoliberal global capitalism continues to grow and expand in the twenty-first century, divisions between social groups deepen as social inequalities intensify and solidify (Harvey 2005). In this process, power and resources get redistributed upward and the suffering of individuals and groups located at lower levels of social and cultural hierarchies become normalized. As May reminds us, social movements fighting for immigrant rights, gender equity, and sexual minority rights, for example, have increasingly adopted a "single-axis" approach and produced new forms of normativity and inequality. By synthesizing the major concepts, practices, and politics of intersectionality and proposing ways to deeply engage in theoretical and political work to combat suffering and oppression in a single volume, May offers hope, tools, and inspiration for radical social change.

Although the book is international in its approach to research and policy work, as illustrated by numerous international and transnational examples, its focus is very much grounded in the United States. Given its historical emergence in US Black and women of color feminisms, this approach to intersectionality is certainly understandable. However, as the world becomes more globalized, I was hoping to see the author address the phenomenon of glocalization (Robertson 1992). In particular, the concept of glocality—the intersection between global and local meanings at a particular historical and geopolitical juncture—of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, among others, could potentially enhance the theoretical and political utility of intersectionality. For example, an intersectional approach to sexual-minority liberation in post-apartheid South Africa will necessarily involve the interplay and collision of local and global—indeed glocal—conceptions of sexuality as they are constituted in, with, and through other vectors of social identity, influenced by Western views of sexual rights, cultural imperialism, and neoliberal commodification. Perhaps this is beyond the scope of a single volume.

Overall, *Pursuing Intersectionality* has much to offer. It provides the reader with a potent toolbox for understanding the dynamics of privilege and oppression, engaging in rich and nuanced theoretical and political analysis, and promoting multiple forms of radical social change for different groups. As such, the book should be highly relevant to a multidisciplinary audience with different degrees of familiarity and engagement with the concept.

REFERENCES

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