

Intersectionality — Metaphor, Activist Term or Social Theory?

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Abstract:

In *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* Patricia Hill Collins explores intersectionality's potential to become a critical social theory. Collins asserts that in order for intersectionality to develop fully as a critical social theory, its scholars and practitioners have to profoundly engage with its methodologies, epistemologies, and the activist works upon which it is based. Collin's monograph can be seen as a dialogical engagement of intersectionality with other theoretical schools of thought and furthers its development into a theory of its own.

Intersektionalität — Metapher, aktivistischer Begriff oder Gesellschaftstheorie?

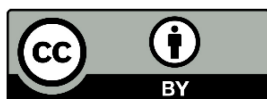
German Abstract:

In *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* erforscht Patricia Hill Collins die Eignung der Intersektionalität eine kritische Gesellschaftstheorie zu werden. Laut Collins kann Intersektionalität sich nur dann als kritische Gesellschaftstheorie entfalten, wenn sich ihre Akademiker_innen und Praktiker_innen tiefgreifend mit den Methodologien, Epistemologien sowie dem Aktivismus, auf dem sie basiert auseinandersetzen. Collins Werk kann als eine dialogische Auseinandersetzung der Intersektionalität mit anderen theoretischen Strömungen gesehen werden.

How to cite:

Yosef, Miriam: "Intersectionality — Metaphor, Activist Term or Social Theory? [Review of: Collins, Patricia Hill: *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.]." In: KULT_online 62 (2020).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2020.1048>



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Collins, Patricia Hill. *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. 376 pages, 28,50 EUR. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0542-1.

Intersectionality has become somewhat of an umbrella term in academic and activist circles alike, yet there is no clear agreement on what intersectionality actually is or could potentially be: a metaphor, an activist term, a methodology, a theory, or all of those. At the beginning of *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, Patricia Hill Collins states that “the time seems right to analyze what intersectionality is, what it is not, and what it might become” (p.22) and takes the reader along on this intellectual journey. While the focus of the monograph lies on the different theoretical dimensions of intersectionality, Collins seeks nonetheless inspiration from various activist projects.

According to Collins, an expert who has written extensively on the topic, “intersectionality is far broader than what most people, including many of its practitioners imagine it to be” (p. 2). For example, Collins questions the often repeated “coining narrative” (p.123) which mentions Kimberlé Crenshaw as the person who ‘coined’ intersectionality: a taken-for-granted narrative that often does not further engage with Crenshaw’s actual work on intersectionality, nor with those who have come before, such as Sojourner Truth or the Combahee River Women’s Collective: “The coining narrative simply stops the clock. Decades worth of intellectual activism disappears, thus suppressing the epistemic agency of many Black women and anointing Crenshaw as intersectionality’s designated spokesperson” (p. 135).

The complex and heavily theoretical nature of this book is balanced not only by the real life examples of the activist-intellectuals’ lives Collins features but also by its clear organizational structure. The book consists of four main parts that contain two chapters each, plus an introduction and an epilogue. Throughout the book, Collins follows the life trajectories of several activists and intellectuals, such as Frantz Fanon, Pauli Murray, Stuart Hill, and Ida B.

Wells-Barnett. Their stories function to illustrate different dimensions of intersectional theorizing and thus to deepen the reader's understanding of the meaning of intersectionality. The way the chapters are organized reflects the author's commitment to dialogical engagement between different disciplines, intellectuals, and schools of thought and the constant interrogation of intersectionality's potential.

Part 1 ("Framing the Issues") lays the theoretical basis of what will follow: Collins examines three ways the concept of intersectionality is commonly used: as a metaphor, as a paradigm, and as a heuristic device. Further, Collins explores the ways of thinking that are used to create intersectional knowledge and investigates how different interpretations of the meaning of critical scholarship may affect our understanding of intersectionality. By taking a closer look at three particular schools of thought, each coming out of a different national and historical context, Collins aims to illustrate the diversity of critical social theory: The Frankfurt school (1930s-1940s), British cultural studies (1970s-1980s), and Francophone social theory (1950s-1960s).

The second part of the study, "How Power Matters—Intersectionality and Intellectual Resistance," places the acknowledgment of activism and experience knowledge as a crucial premise for the study of intersectionality. In addition, Collins considers the impact of different critical knowledge projects, such as decolonial studies or critical race theory, on the concept of intersectionality. Collins explores the indispensable role of epistemic resistance in countering oppression such as classism, sexism, and racism—all while reminding the reader that "uncritically defending or celebrating intersectionality or any other form of critical theorizing as a finished critical social theory undercuts its critical potential" (p.120).

Part 3, "Theorizing Intersectionality—Social Action as a Way of Knowing" is dedicated to valorizing experience as a way of theorizing intersectionality. Collins puts US-American pragmatism and Black feminism in dialogue with one another as "dialogues are essential because no one individual or interpretive community can wrap its arms about the magnitude of intersectionality itself" (p. 221). Here, Collins concludes that "intersectionality must make room for them both and others. Building such a diverse intellectual community for intersectionality makes it far less likely that intersectionality's ideas will remain just ideas" (p. 188). Further, Collins asks in what ways ideas of freedom might inform intersectional theorizing.

This is illustrated by bringing the work of the two feminist intellectuals, Pauli Murray (1910-1985) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), into conversation and contrast with one another when it comes to their understandings of freedom.

In the fourth and final part, “Sharpening Intersectionality’s Critical Edge,” Collins questions how critical intersectionality really is and examines relationality within intersectionality and its connections to social justice. To do so, Collins poses intersectionality, which is most commonly seen connected to social justice discourses, in opposition to eugenics, generally perceived as connected with ideas of social injustice. Collins concludes that emancipatory-knowledge projects must consider ethical aspects and that since activists and academics both claim intersectionality, social justice “[...]may provide that unifying framework” (p. 277).

The book that Collins describes as “a labour of love that brings an additional lens to [their] ongoing intellectual activism” (p. 17) provides an insightful window into what intersectional critical theory and critically theorizing intersectionality could look like. Throughout the book, the author provides more questions than answers. Readers who were expecting a clear guideline to intersectional theory might be left disappointed. Others may regard this openness as an invitation to think creatively on the subject themselves. “Intersectionality has not yet realized its potential as a critical social theory, nor has adequately democratized its own processes for producing knowledge. But the foundation is there” (p. 2). And with *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, Collins managed to contribute essentially to this foundation. In the beginning of the book, Collins remarks that it was “challenging to write, and will probably be challenging for you to read” (p.7)—which is why I would recommend this book to advanced readers, both in academia and beyond. All in all, this book constitutes an extremely valuable resource for students, activists, and scholars who, while having already engaged with foundational texts on the topic, seek to deepen their understanding of intersectionality. Further, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* also opens a door for those who wish to continue the intellectual journey of theorizing intersectionality that Collins eloquently embarks on.