Intersectionality, oppression, and Marxism

As we assess the ISO’s past theoretical approach to women’s oppression (and oppression more generally), many comrades have asked for clarification on the following question: Which aspects of the ISO’s past practice should be rejected and which should be retained? In this document, I present my viewpoint on this question, while encouraging other comrades to do the same in the weeks and months ahead.

Our starting point in this assessment stretches back several decades, to the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which led the International Socialist Tendency (IST) beginning in the 1970s. The SWP leadership played a key role in politically training IST member groups, including the ISO. The ISO had begun to diverge from the SWP on a number of perspectives issues in the years before we were expelled from the IST in 2001,1 but our approach to oppression largely mirrored theirs (albeit less stridently).

After our expulsion from the IST, we began to develop a critique of the political and organizational methods of the SWP, gradually shedding some of what we regarded to be the most misguided aspects of its practice2. But while shedding our own former hostility to “feminism”, we did so initially without confronting the underlying political and theoretical problems with the SWP’s approach.

The passage of time had made certain weaknesses fairly obvious. For example, the meaning of the term “patriarchy” evolved from its use as a theoretical construct in the 1970s to a loose description of sexism by the late 1990s. Likewise, the vast majority of young women and men who want to fight sexism quite reasonably regard themselves as feminists.

In response to this material reality, our practice changed sooner than our theory, as it became more and more inappropriate to recycle old arguments against patriarchy and “feminism” in the more recent context. This led us eventually to confront the SWP’s sectarianism toward feminism and also toward other theoretical contributions that it considered outside its tradition, which insulated the party from responding to crucial changes in the material world. Here I will focus on the SWP’s approach to women’s oppression, although I believe the effects of this insulation are not limited to oppression.3

Breaking with sectarianism and reclaiming the Marxist method

In the early and mid-1970s, SWP members had participated enthusiastically in the women’s liberation movement. But beginning in the late 1970s, the SWP leadership turned against feminism, suddenly directing hostility toward feminism as an entire body of theory and practice and moving to shut down Women’s Voice, its women’s liberation publication, against the wishes of many SWP comrades4.

To justify its sectarianism, party leaders invented a straw figure of “feminism”—which was in fact a caricature—composed of the highly unlikely combination of the movement’s most bourgeois and separatist elements. This fictional straw figure was never intended to engage feminist theorists in constructive debate, but rather to shun them altogether. The party thus never challenged itself to grapple with the other wings of feminism, resulting in political ignorance of virtually the entire left wing of feminist theory (including the contributions of socialist- and Marxist-feminists, as well as entire schools of feminist thought developed by Black feminists and other feminists of color) over a period of several decades.

The SWP’s hostility to this straw figure of feminism thus ignored the enormous contributions of the various political elements of the women’s movement. This was done in the name of hostility to “cross-class” women’s movements—as if a movement that seeks to combat women’s oppression as a whole cannot also benefit working-class women. [The problems with the SWP’s approach to feminism are outlined in greater detail in a Socialist Worker article by Canadian Marxist-feminist Abbie Bakan and Sharon Smith: “Marxism, Feminism and the Fight for Liberation,” available at http://socialistworker.org/2013/07/10/marxism-feminism-and-womens-liberation.]

This non-dialectical approach to theory has allowed the SWP today to continue to recycle the same old arguments against “feminism” and “patriarchy” it developed in the late 1970s and ’80s without regard to their dramatically changed social context.

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1 Our most prominent disagreement was a rejection of the slogan, “The 1990s is like the 1930s in slow motion”—based on the fact that 1) the 1990s was marked by economic boom, not slump, and 2) what seemed to us to be an inflated set of expectations both for the scale of class struggle and the rate of membership growth of our respective organizations.

2 This included, for example, a critique of the SWP’s method of “instant recruitment,” which based membership in a revolutionary organization as a process of signing a card rather than being won to a Marxist worldview.

3 The SWP has also, for example, retained its view of perpetual economic crisis since the mid-1970s, which likely played a role in its “1930s in slow motion” description of the 1990s, despite a significant economic boom.

4 It should be noted that the party shut down Women’s Voice at roughly the same time that it shut down its Black newspaper, Flame, and its rank and file groups within most unions—as part of a larger argument that the class struggle was entering a “downturn”.
The flip side of the SWP’s approach resulted in effectively minimizing the degree of sexism inside the working class, by insisting on agreement that working-class men do not “benefit” from women’s oppression. This insistence on describing working class men as having “advantages” (as opposed to “benefits” or “privileges”) over working-class women became a political litmus test, resulting in a bitter, hair-splitting argument in the 1980s between revolutionary socialists who all agreed that socialism provides the path toward women’s liberation. [See http://socialistworker.org/2013/01/31/marxism-feminism-and-womens-liberation for a fuller description of that debate.]

A less sectarian approach would have been to de-emphasize word choice and emphasize the structural ways in which the capitalist class benefits from women’s oppression under capitalism—and how a socialist society will create the material conditions for ending oppression, to the overriding benefit of the entire working class. What’s more, placing the stress on the idea that “men don’t benefit” turns on its head the classical Leninist approach to oppression: identifying first and foremost with the struggles of oppressed people. Working-class unity is not only possible on this basis but is also essential to building the strongest possible movement to fight against oppression.

This also requires admitting, however, that the victory of socialism, while creating the material conditions for ending oppression, will not automatically do so. Achieving genuine equality will require a continuation of struggle after the victory of a socialist society.

Correcting this non-dialectical approach to theory requires a return to the Marxist method. This, in turn, requires a deeper understanding of Marxism. This allows us to integrate those aspects of feminist theory, developed over the last four decades, that can help to further develop the Marxist method—without abandoning the centrality of the working class as the revolutionary agent in society.

Marxism is unique in identifying the revolutionary potential of the working class, as the only class in society capable of overthrowing capitalism. The revolutionary process is crucial in preparing the working class to run society in the interests of all of humanity. In Marx’s words, “this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.”

Rejecting our past sectarian approach to feminism does not, however, mean embracing all forms of feminism. As Marxists, we remain strongly critical of mainstream feminism that functions as a wing of the Democratic Party, and also of separatism (including its current “Rad-Fem” incarnation that actively embraces and enforces the oppression of trans people).

Likewise, rejecting the SWP’s litmus test described above, which insists on the use of the word “advantage” as opposed to the words “benefit” or “privilege” does not mean that it is appropriate for Marxists to now adopt various privilege theories—including “privilege checking.” [For a useful critique of privilege checking, see Ryne Poelker, “Does it help to ‘check privilege?’” http://socialistworker.org/2013/10/15/does-it-help-to-check-privilege.]

Key contributions of feminism to Marxist theory

My opinion is that there are two key developments in feminist theory that are most valuable in further developing our own theory on women’s oppression today: 1) Social reproduction theory as developed by Marxist- and socialist-feminists in the 1970s, and 2) the concept of intersectionality as developed within the Black feminist tradition over a period of many decades.


This document aims to explore the concept of intersectionality grounded in Black feminist theory and to contrast it with the notion of intersectionality that flows out of various theories based on postmodernism/post-structuralism.

Intersectionality is a concept that is widely accepted on the left today. It first developed from the Black feminist tradition, but more recently emerged in the context of postmodernism. Although Black feminism and some currents of postmodernist theory share certain common assumptions and some common language, these are overshadowed by key theoretical differences that make them two distinct approaches to combatting oppression. Thus the concept of intersectionality has two different political foundations, one informed by Black feminism and the other by postmodernism. [For more on the history and practice of Black feminism and its relationship to intersectionality, listen to the talk “Black Feminism and Intersectionality,” by Nikeeta Slade and Sharon Smith at Socialism 2013 (available in both video and audio at www.wearemany.org).]

Below I will examine these contrasting theoretical approaches.

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5 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The German Ideology, 1845-46. Available online at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/

approaches, while arguing that Black feminism, which emphasizes group identity and collective struggle, is far more compatible with Marxism than postmodernism, which stresses subjective identities, interpersonal relations, and discourse as the basis for mounting a challenge to women’s oppression.

Black feminism and “the simultaneity of oppression”

The term intersectionality was coined by Black legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 but is a long-standing concept within the Black feminist tradition. Indeed, as Black feminist and scholar Barbara Smith (who helped to pioneer this theoretical concept) noted in 1983, “The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality and, I believe, one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought.”

Since the time of Sojourner Truth’s famous “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech in 1851, Black feminists have recognized that Black women’s experience of oppression is a synthesis of multiple, interlocking oppressions. This recognition was originally based on the interlocking oppressions of race, gender and class, although left-wing Black feminists began to incorporate sexuality, disability and all other forms of oppression into this analysis in the 1970s.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many Black feminists, Latinas and other women of color were critical of both the predominantly white feminist movement for its racism and of nationalist and other anti-racist movements for their sexism. This alienation from both feminist and anti-racist movements in this period led many feminists of color to form separate organizations that could address the particular oppressions they faced.

But when Black feminists and other women of color of that era rightfully asserted the racial and class differences between women, they did so because these differences were largely ignored and neglected by much of the women’s movement at that time, thereby rendering Black women and other women of color invisible in theory and in practice.

The end goal was not, however, permanent racial separation for most left-wing Black and other feminists of color, as it has come to be understood since. Barbara Smith conceived of an inclusive approach to combatting multiple oppressions, beginning with coalition building around particular struggles. As she observed in 1983, “The most progressive sectors of the women’s movement, including radical white women, have taken [issues of racism], and many more, quite seriously.”

Asian American feminist Merle Woo argued explicitly, “Today...I feel even more deeply hurt when I realize how many people, how so many people, because of racism and sexism, fail to see what power we sacrifice by not joining hands.” But, she added, “not all white women are racist, and not all Asian-American men are sexist. And there are visible changes. Real, tangible, positive changes.”

The aim of intersectionality within the Black feminist tradition has been toward building a stronger movement for women’s liberation that represents the interests of all women. Barbara Smith described her own vision of feminism in 1984, “I have often wished I could spread the word that a movement committed to fighting sexual, racial, economic and heterosexist oppression, not to mention one which opposes imperialism, anti-Semitism, the oppressions visited upon the physically disabled, the old and the young, at the same time that it challenges imminent nuclear destruction.”

This approach to fighting oppression does not merely complement, but also strengthens, Marxist theory and practice—which seeks to unite not only all those who are exploited but also all those who are oppressed by capitalism into a single movement that fights for the liberation of all humanity. The Black feminist approach described above enhances Lenin’s famous phrase from What Is to Be Done?: “Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter what class is affected — unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a Social-Democratic point of view and no other.”

The Combahee River Collective, which represented perhaps the most self-consciously left-wing organization of Black feminists in the 1970s, acknowledged its adherence to socialism and anti-imperialism, while also arguing for greater attention to oppression:

*We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these*

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3 See, for example, the Combahee River Collective Statement, April 1977. Available online at http://circuitious.org/scraps/combahee.html.


12 Barbara Smith, pp. 257-58.

resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation...

Although we are in essential agreement with Marx’s theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.

At the same time, intersectionality cannot replace Marxism—and Black feminists have never attempted to do so. Intersectionality is a concept for understanding oppression, not exploitation. Even the commonly used term “classism” describes an aspect of class oppression—snobbery and elitism—not exploitation. Most Black feminists acknowledge the systemic roots of racism and sexism but place far less emphasis than Marxists on the connection between the system of exploitation and oppression.

Marxism provides a framework for understanding the relationship between oppression and exploitation (i.e., oppression as a product of the system of class exploitation), and also identifies the strategy for creating the material and social conditions that will make it possible to end both oppression and exploitation. Marxism’s critics have disparaged this framework as an aspect of Marx’s “economic reductionism.”

But, as Marxist-feminist Martha Gimenez responds, “To argue, then, that class is fundamental is not to ‘reduce’ gender or racial oppression to class, but to acknowledge that the underlying basic and ‘nameless’ power at the root of what happens in social interactions grounded in ‘intersectionality’ is class power.” The working class holds the potential to lead a struggle in the interests of all those who suffer injustice and oppression. This is because both exploitation and oppression are rooted in capitalism. Exploitation is the method by which the ruling class robs workers of surplus value; the various forms of oppression play a primary role in maintaining the rule of a tiny minority over the vast majority. In each case, the enemy is one and the same.

The class struggle helps to educate workers—sometimes very rapidly—challenging reactionary ideas and prejudices that keep workers divided. When workers go on strike, confronting capital and its agents of repression (the police), the class nature of society becomes suddenly clarified. Racist, sexist or homophobic ideas cultivated over a lifetime can disappear within a matter of days in a mass strike wave. And workers not only have the power to shut down the system through a mass strike. And workers not only have the power to shut down the system, but also to replace it with a socialist society, based upon collective ownership of the means of production. Although other groups in society suffer oppression, only the working class possesses this objective power.

These are the basic reasons why Marx argued that capitalism created its own gravediggers in the working class. But when Marx defined the working class as the agent for revolutionary change, he was describing its historical potential, rather than a foregone conclusion. This is the key to understanding Lenin’s words, above. The whole Leninist conception of the vanguard party rests on the understanding that a battle of ideas must be fought inside the working class movement. A section of workers, won to a socialist alternative and organized into a revolutionary party, can win other workers away from ruling class ideologies and provide an alternative worldview. For Lenin, the notion of political consciousness entailed workers' willingness to champion the interests of all the oppressed in society, as an integral part of the struggle for socialism.

As an additive to Marxist theory, intersectionality leads the way toward a much higher level of understanding of the character of oppression than that developed by classical Marxists, enabling the further development of the ways in which solidarity can be built between all those who suffer oppression and exploitation under capitalism to forge a unified movement.

Postmodernity

For both better and for worse, postmodernism marked a fairly decisive theoretical break with the past among radicals. [For a useful appraisal of postmodernism, listen to Tom Lewis’ Socialism 2013 presentation, “What do Marxists say about postmodernism?” at http://wearemany.org/a/2013/06/what-do-marxists-say-about-postmodernism.]

One aspect of this break marked an enormous advance: championing the fight against all forms of oppression as a political priority. British literary theorist Terry Eagleton described postmodernism’s “single most enduring achievement” as “the fact that it has helped to place questions of sexuality, gender and ethnicity so firmly on the political agenda that it is impossible to imagine them being erased without an ulimtate struggle.”

Although this process was set in motion first by the social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, its progress stalled until queer activists, initially organizing around the AIDS epidemic, began to struggle militantly around the slogan “We’re here; we’re queer; get used to it” in the 1980s.

Likewise, beginning in the 1990s so-called “third wave feminists” began to thoroughly embrace the struggles of all those facing racial, sexual, and gender discrimination, including transgender people.¹⁷

Postmodernism both informed and was informed by queer, third wave feminist and disability activism, and its importance should not be underestimated. In this way, postmodernism helped to transform the character of activism in a myriad of ways—most importantly toward an inclusive approach to fighting oppression on every front. This includes the oppression experienced by those who suffer from disabilities or who face age discrimination and many other forms of oppression that had been neglected on the left.

Other aspects of postmodernism marked more of a retreat than an advance, however.

It is well known that the 1970s witnessed the launch of the decades long “employers’ offensive,” which later became known as neoliberalism. Because the neoliberal project has been bipartisan from the beginning, Democrats followed Republicans rightward beginning in the late 1970s, dragging liberal organizations with them. The decline of mass struggle starting in the second half of the 1970s was coupled with this sharp shift rightward in mainstream politics.

Whereas in the early 1970s, many radicals believed revolution would soon be on the agenda, by the end of the decade the political trajectory was swiftly moving in the opposite direction. The neoliberal era transformed the balance of class and social forces decisively in favor of capital on a global scale, returning class inequality to that of the Gilded Age. This anti-working class onslaught has been accompanied by attacks on all the gains of the 1960s-era social movements, along with open racism, misogyny and homophobia in the political mainstream.

Even though neoliberal policies were responsible for the 2008 financial meltdown that resulted in the Great Recession, neoliberalism has survived virtually intact—with austerity remaining the centerpiece of ruling class policy worldwide.

In the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberal policy aggressively swept the globe via organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and the World Bank. Most radical activists and theorists who were forced to absorb this dramatic political and social transformation responded with a sense of pessimism, losing confidence that revolution was possible. Most radical social theorists adjusted to the neoliberal reality by turning away from structural analyses altogether—and Marxism in particular.

Some of these academics were veteran 1960s radicals who had lost faith in the possibility for revolution. They were joined by a new generation of radicals too young to have experienced the tumult of the 1960s but who were influenced by the pessimism of its aftermath. Marxism was widely dismissed as “reductionist” and “essentialist” by academics calling themselves postmodernists, poststructuralists and post-Marxists who rejected political generalization, social structures and objective material realities (referred to as “truths”, “totalities” and “universalities”—in the name of “anti-essentialism.” Postmodernists instead placed an overriding emphasis on subjective, individual and cultural relations as centers of struggle—including reclaiming or re-appropriating oppressive language as a tool to combat oppression.

While it flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, this fragmented and subjective focus of postmodernism effectively marginalized historical materialism. Within the broad theoretical category of postmodernism, “post-Marxism” provided a new theoretical framework for the practice of identity politics. Two of its key theorists, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, published the book, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics in 1985, which contains many of the themes underpinning a new concept of the politics of identity.

Laclau and Mouffe explain their theory as a negation of socialist “totality”, arguing, “There are not, for example, necessary links between anti-sexism and anti-capitalism, and a unity between the two can only be the result of a hegemonic articulation. It follows that it is only possible to construct this articulation on the basis of separate struggles... This requires the autonomization of the spheres of struggle.”¹⁹ Such “free-floating” struggles should thus be conducted entirely within what Marxists describe as the superstructure of society, with no relationship to its economic base.²⁰

Perhaps what is most remarkable about Laclau’s and Mouffe’s concept of the “autonomization of the spheres of struggle” is that it does not even need to involve more than

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¹⁹ Ibid, pp 178.

²⁰ While Marxists also recognize that there is no automatic unity between oppressed people, history has shown that solidarity is not only possible but also most effective at winning social change.
two people. They stated this explicitly: “[M]any of these forms of resistance are made manifest not in the form of collective struggles, but through an increasingly armed individualism.” In this way, interpersonal relationships can be key sites of struggle, based on subjective perceptions of which individual is in a position of “dominance” and which is in a position of “subordination” in any particular situation.

As British literary theorist Terry Eagleton described of postmodernism, “for all its talk of difference, plurality, heterogeneity, postmodern theory often operates with quite rigid binary oppositions, with ‘difference’, ‘plurality’ and allied terms lined up bravely on one side of the theoretical fence as unequivocally positive, and whatever their antitheses might be (unity, identity, totality, universality) ranged balefully on the other.”

Marxist-feminist Teresa Ebert has described poststructuralists, who she calls “ludic feminists,” as “caught in the contradictions between the political necessity of materialism and its displacement by the ludic priority given to discourse. They end up substituting discursive determinism for what they reject as an economic determinism in classical Marxism.”

Black feminism, poststructuralism and Marxism

In this way, poststructuralists have appropriated the meanings of terms such as “identity politics” and “difference” that originated in Black feminism. When the Combahee River Collective referred to the need for identity politics, for example, they were describing the group identity of Black women; when they emphasized the importance of recognizing “differences” among women, they were referring to Black women’s invisibility within predominantly white feminism at the time. In contrast, the post-structural notion of “identity” is defined subjectively on an individual basis, while “difference” likewise can refer to any characteristic that makes an individual stand apart from others.

This emphasis on individualism has led some poststructuralists to object to the use of broad, “binary” categories such as “women” and “Black women” — over the objection of many Black feminists, including Crenshaw. Crenshaw has taken issue with the assumptions of the “version of anti-essentialism, embodying what might be called the vulgarized social construction thesis, [which] is that since all categories are socially constructed, there is no such thing as, say, ‘Blacks’ or ‘women,’ and thus it makes little sense to continue reproducing those categories by organizing around them.” She concluded, “At this point in history, a strong case can be made that the most critical resistance strategy for dis-empowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location rather than to vacate and destroy it.”

Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins has likewise formulated a strong challenge to postmodern assumptions. As she wrote in Black Feminist Thought, “Postmodernism…has been forwarded as the antithesis and inevitable outcome of rejecting a positivist science. Within postmodern logic, groups themselves become suspect as well as any specialized thought. In extreme postmodern discourse, each group’s thought is equally valid. No group can claim to have a better interpretation of the ‘truth’ than another.” In Fighting Words, Collins wrote, “the postmodern rubric of decentering seemingly supports Black women’s long-standing efforts to challenge false universal knowledge that privileged Whiteness, maleness and wealth. However…current meanings attached to decentering as a construct illustrate how terms can continue to be used yet can be stripped of their oppositional intent.”

As feminist scholar Susan Archer Mann argued recently,

both [Black feminist] intersectionality theorists and poststructuralists speak of “marginalized” peoples. Yet the former anchor this concept in hierarchically structured, group-based inequalities, while poststructuralists often are referring to people whose behaviors lie outside of or transgress social norms. This latter conception of “margins” includes a much broader swath of people where the normative structure rather than structural relations of oppression is determinate. Indeed, not all countercultural lifestyles and politics reflect the historical, institutionalized oppressions highlighted by intersectionality theorists.

Postmodernism and “anarchoid-liberalism”

Just as neoliberalism survived the global meltdown of 2008, so too has postmodernism. To be sure, the dramatic growth in class inequality since 2008 has led to a sharp rise in class-consciousness—most recently demonstrated by the popular identification with Occupy Wall Street’s “99% vs. the 1%” slogan. And there has been a corresponding shift in recent years back toward structural analysis and even Marxism among some left-wing academics.

But this class-consciousness is limited to anger at class and

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21 Laclau and Mouffe, p164.
24 See, for example, Linda Martin, Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self (Oxford University Press, 2005)
26 Ibid., p. 1297.
29 Susan Archer Mann, op cit.
social inequality—without an obvious connection to a working-class strategy to transform society. This is completely understandable, since anyone in the U.S. who became politically aware after the mid-1970s will have had little to no opportunity to experience first-hand the solidarity engendered by an open-ended mass strike. Thus, while the misery perpetuated by the system is obvious to all those who are radicalizing today, the potential power of the working class to challenge it is not.

It is therefore not surprising that a postmodern, rather than Marxist, worldview can initially make more sense to those becoming radicalized in recent decades.

Moreover, the speed with which the Occupy movement fizzled in 2012, after having risen with such intensity just a few months earlier, highlights the lack of sustained struggle that has been an all too familiar characteristic of the current period thus far. Even the Chicago Teachers Union strike in 2012, while providing a powerful glimpse of the possibilities for the future class struggle, was not able to turn the tide in isolation from the rest of the labor movement.

A mood of pessimism remains fairly widespread among many on the left—all the more so since the Arab Spring began suffering major setbacks. While we should not expect this to be a permanent state of affairs, this pessimism presently helps to maintain the influence of common assumptions of postmodernist theory on the broad left—
even among many activists who have no idea what post-structuralism or postmodernism stand for.

Jacobin editor Bhaskar Sunkara has described this particular form of radicalism as “anarcho-liberalism”. He argues that it arose in the late twentieth century as a response to neoliberalism and the defeat of the Soviet bloc: “A crude overview, sure, but right in the broad strokes: the Marxist-derived Left was defeated, while social democracy reconciled to the neoliberal framework. ‘Anarcho-liberalism’ sauntered in a weird middle ground between both camps. Its representatives had the modest ambitions of the social liberals of the center Left, but the flair for the dramatic associated with the most militant anarchists of the far Left.”

Thus, Sunkara argues, “The reconfiguration of the Left at the end of the twentieth century created a void. The ‘anarcho-liberal’ filled it.” Sunkara describes the “anarcho-liberal” as “the iconic actor in the ‘anti-globalization’ movement”—“a figure in flux between the historic positions of the social democratic and anti-capitalist Lefts.”

Sunkara notes that the key political characteristics held in common by this group of activists, which are shared with postmodernism, include “an anti-intellectualism that manifested itself in a rejection of ‘grand narratives’ and structural critiques of capitalism, abhorrence for the traditional forms of left-wing organization, a localist impulse, and an individualistic tendency to conflate lifestyle choices with political action. The worst of both worlds, the ‘anarcho-liberal’ can neither manage the capitalist state nor overcome it, and aspires to do both and neither at the same time.”

While the Occupy movement marked an enormous advance in class and social struggle in its short existence, it contained clear political weaknesses—anarcho-liberalism among them. The failed call for a “general strike” on May Day 2012 (which sidestepped most unions) was perhaps the most obvious example of the problems with this political tendency. The general strike call conflated ostensibly “militant” tactics with success—even when the tactics chosen at that particular historical moment limited participation to a small minority of activists already convinced of them and failed to achieve its stated goal: a general strike. This tactical choice came at the expense of seeking to expand participation to include a broader layer of students and workers who, while in the process of radicalization, maintain some degree of faith in the possibilities for reforming the system.

The problems with anarcho-liberalism described above remain unresolved in the period of disorientation that has taken hold in the wake of Occupy.

Identity politics and privilege checking

Like anarcho-liberalism, identity politics and “privilege checking” are activist outgrowths of postmodernism, sharing many of its strengths and weaknesses. While rightfully emphasizing the fact that oppression is often expressed in the realm of personal relations, this approach unfortunately deemphasizes the systemic roots of oppression.

Institutional oppression and even the capitalist system are usually acknowledged by those involved in privilege checking, but these systems lurk in the background while the struggle takes place primarily through language and symbols—with a focus on individual experiences in which the site of resistance is interpersonal relationships.

Privilege checking originated with a 1989 essay, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” by Peggy McIntosh—and has been widely accepted among both

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31 Sunkara. Eagleton, perhaps more sympathetically, characterized the contradictions of this postmodern approach to politics as “libertarian pessimism”; in which “the dream of liberation would not be relinquished, however much one would scorn the naivety of those foolish enough to believe it could ever be realized. It would not be out of the question to run across people who wished to see the Epoch of Man pass away, and voted Liberal Democrat.” Op cit., p. 4.

32 See, for example, Elizabeth Schulte, “The workers’ movement that led to May Day,” Socialist Worker, March 6, 2012. http://socialistworker.org/2012/03/06/movement-that-led-to-may-day

33 This essay appears in Peggy McIntosh, White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See
leftists and liberals since. Privilege checking has become a primary form of political activity among many on the left, and if anything, has gained relative influence in the absence of sustained collective struggle that has characterized the current political period.

Privilege checking encourages activists to “call out” privileged people who appear to be unaware of or behave in ways that reinforce the oppressive status quo. Calling out racism, sexism, homophobia and other reactionary attitudes is obviously a necessary part of fighting oppression in daily life—and apologies from the offending parties are surely welcome—but this is also a far cry from what is needed to end oppression. In reality, privilege checking does little to challenge the class and social status quo—despite the fact that most activists who engage in privilege checking believe that the status quo needs changing.

Native American activist and scholar Andrea Smith recently noted this about the rituals of privilege checking:

In my experience working with a multitude of anti-racist organizing projects over the years, I frequently found myself participating in various workshops in which participants were asked to reflect on their gender/race/sexuality/class/etc. privilege. These workshops had a bit of a self-help orientation to them: “I am so and so, and I have x privilege.” It was never quite clear what the point of these confessions were. It was not as if other participants did not know the confessor in question had her/his proclaimed privilege. It did not appear that these individual confessions actually led to any political projects to dismantle the structures of domination that enabled their privilege. Rather, the confessions became the political project themselves. The benefits of these confessions seemed to be ephemeral. For the instant the confession took place, those who do not have that privilege in daily life would have a temporary position of power as the hearer of the confession who could grant absolution and forgiveness. The sayer of the confession could then be granted temporary forgiveness for her/his abuses of power and relief from white/male/heterosexual/etc guilt. Because of the perceived benefits of this ritual, there was generally little critique of the fact in the end, it primarily served to reinstantiate the structures of domination it was supposed to resist. One of the reasons there was little critique of this practice is that it bestowed cultural capital to those who seemed to be the “most oppressed.” Those who had little privilege did not have to confess and were in the position to be the judge of those who did have privilege. Consequently, people aspired to be oppressed. Inevitably, those with more privilege would develop new heretofore unknown forms of oppression from which they suffered. “I may be white, but my best friend was a person of color, which caused me to be

oppressed when we played together.” Consequently, the goal became not to actually end oppression but to be as oppressed as possible. These rituals often substituted confession for political movement-building. And despite the cultural capital that was, at least temporarily, bestowed to those who seemed to be the most oppressed, these rituals ultimately reinstated the white majority subject as the subject capable of self-reflexivity and the colonized/racialized subject as the occasion for self-reflexivity.

Smith concludes, “Essentially, the current social structure conditions us to exercise what privileges we may have. If we want to undermine those privileges, we must change the structures within which we live so that we become different peoples in the process.”

In addition, every individual is viewed as possessing both privileged and non-privileged attributes, so the balance of “privilege” changes depending upon the attributes of the participants in a particular personal interaction. A list of privileges that tip the balance in favor of an individual include, as described by the Transformative Justice Law Project of Illinois in the document “Checking your privilege 101,” Class Privilege, Race Privilege, Educational Privilege, Gender Privilege, Gender identity privilege, Age privilege, Body size privilege, Able-bodied privilege, Life on the outside privilege, “Passing” privilege, Religious privilege and Sexuality privilege.

Thus, privilege checking places a disproportionate emphasis on the role of individuals in perpetuating oppression, when the root of oppression is systemic.

The second problem with this approach to combatting oppression is its subjective and individualized approach to “identity,” which is taken directly from postmodernism as described above. Identity politics in the postmodern era does not exclusively define “marginalization” as a product of systemic oppression shared by groups of oppressed people but includes individually and subjectively defined identities that merely set individuals apart from the norm.

This celebration of diversity ironically (and undoubtedly unintentionally) downplays the experiences of genuine oppression. This is perhaps most evident in the growing list of sexual identities attached to the “LGBTQ” label—which originally designated a shared experience of oppression among lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and queer people in society at large. The list has now expanded to “LGBTQIAA” (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, ally and asexual) with additional identities, including pansexual, omnisexual, trisexual,

35 Ibid.  
agender, bigender, third gender and polyamorous, also gaining recognition. 37

While expanding sexualities is a welcome development in many respects, it also tends to bury the original purpose of the “LGBT” label, which was intended to include trans people as a recognized group of oppressed people—accompanied by demands for gender neutral campus housing, gender neutral bathrooms and gender neutral language which have been raised specifically to combat transgender oppression. While those who choose to identify as “asexual” or “ally,” for example, should have the right to do so, social attitudes and institutional discrimination against these identities are hardly comparable to the enormous degree of oppression faced by trans people.

The development described above is accompanied by an emphasis on appropriating and creating language that challenges social norms. Unfortunately, as the growing list of sexual identities described above demonstrates, access to rapidly changing terminology is limited to a relatively small number of people in society—primarily those already involved in radical activist communities. As Official Shrub.com advises,

Make an Effort to Learn the Lingo: Standard language just isn’t equipped to deal with the concepts that non-privileged groups have to engage with on a regular basis. And why would it? The language we’re taught is designed for the masses. But, just as you have to learn a bunch of new terms for things like science class, so do you need to do so for non-privileged groups... There are also places specifically designed for those who have no background in the area. In some, but not all, cases starting up a dialogue around a specific term is fine. What’s not fine, however, is telling a non-privileged group that their terms are wrong. You, as the privileged participant, don’t get to define what is and is not appropriate usage in a minority space. 38

Finally, the practice of privilege checking relies on its own fairly rigid method of mechanical determinism. As noted above, this approach assumes that individual people each possess a unique combination of privileged and non-privileged attributes, such that “power” dynamics shift in every interpersonal situation depending on who is present. Moreover, privilege checking assumes that the assertions of a non-privileged person who calls out a privileged person (based on a particular comment, misuse of language or personal demeanor) cannot be challenged. Those who are privileged in a given situation can only offer support and apologies to the non-privileged by checking their privilege and calling out others who are privileged. 39

Oppressed people are, of course, in the best position to describe and lead the fight against their own oppression. But the privilege-checking approach described above, places its overriding emphasis on who is making a particular argument or accusation, rather than the content of that argument or accusation. In this context, moralism can supersede politics.

If the privileged party objects to an argument made by a non-privileged person, the privileged person is automatically derided as “defensive”. It is easy to see how this approach can inhibit the free exchange of ideas—including necessary political debates—between and among those who are all committed to transforming society.

In this respect, privilege checking is a form of what is known as “prefigurative” politics, in which people attempt to behave in ways and exercise values that reflect their own vision for a future society—which is perceived as a way to help bring about that society.

But as Aaron Petkoff argued in his 2013 Socialism presentation, “Be the Change you Want to See? A Marxist Critique of Prefigurative Politics” (http://wearemany.org/a/2013/06/be-change-you-want-to-see): “You can’t prefigure or approximate an end to poverty, an end to the need for police and prisons, an end to homelessness. As George Orwell once put it, whoever tries to imagine socialism simply envisions ‘a vision of present society with the worst abuses left out.’” 40

The revolutionary organization, as described above, is a necessary means for achieving the goal of a socialist society, based upon the self-emancipation of the working class. But, Petkoff concludes,

The revolutionary party, therefore, does not prefigure the future socialist state... but is rather an organization specific to capitalism, meant to navigate the rocky terrain of contradictory class struggle in a capitalist society. Prefigurative politics urges activists to draw the means they use today from their vision of the future. However, means suited for the ideal circumstances and ideal people of the future, are not sufficient for revolutionaries who have to live in the present...

The tactics and methods we use in the movement, therefore, aren’t determined by an abstract and eternal sense of morality, e.g., violence is always immoral, power is always oppressive, leadership is always abusive, regardless of circumstances, but are rather selected on the basis of what unites working class and oppressed people, what raises its political confidence, and builds its power to transform society. 41

Solidarity and struggle

40 A written transcript of this talk is posted at http://abetterworldisprobable.wordpress.com/2013/07/01/be-the-change-you-want-to-see-a-marxist-criticism-of-prefigurative-politics/
41 Ibid.
Anyone who engages in racist, sexist, homophobic or other reactionary behavior must be challenged whenever such behavior occurs, including inside the movements. At the same time, there is a vast difference between those who own and control the institutions that produce exploitation and oppression and those who do not. A clear distinction should be made between those seeking to uphold the system and those seeking to change it for the better.

As materialists, we also understand that it would be virtually impossible for most people living under capitalism to break with every manifestation of ruling-class ideology as long as the system of capitalism exists. This is the case even for those who are dedicated to fighting against oppression and exploitation.

While postmodernists tend to emphasize the differences that exist between individuals, Marxists strive to unite all those who face a common enemy into a single movement. If our goal is to build a working-class movement, it requires engendering solidarity, as expressed in the slogan “An injury to one is an injury to all.” Such solidarity can only be built through a common project and a common trust shared by all who are fighting on the same side of the class struggle.

While we need to shed the sectarianism of the SWP, this does not mean we should abandon any aspect of the Marxist method. On the contrary, we should further develop Marxist theory and practice to fit our present political circumstances.

Sharon S. for the Steering Committee