

# International Relations Theory Will Be Intersectional or It Will Be... Better

Written by Alexander Stoffel

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The question of how to theorize the relation between gender and race has troubled feminist theory and practice for over a century. In an 1851 speech famously entitled 'Ain't I a Woman?', a black woman named Sojourner Truth asked a number of white anti-slavery activists to consider whose experiences, interests, and needs were reflected by the ostensibly universal category of 'woman' (hooks, 1981: 159). In more recent decades, Black feminism and postcolonial theory have been at pains to expose feminism's complicity with racism and white supremacy due to its failure to consider how race overlaps, interacts, and is entwined with gender. Currently, the most widely accepted articulation of this relationship is provided by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of 'intersectionality'.

In recent years, intersectionality has gained widespread traction, becoming one of the guiding frameworks of both feminist studies and the broader feminist movement in the West. Unsurprisingly, the term has emerged as a central concept in feminist scholarship within the discipline of International Relations (IR). However, attempts to theorize the relation between gender and race within feminist and postcolonial IR theory predate the popularization of intersectionality. This essay thus poses the question: Can the concept of intersectionality contribute to feminist and postcolonial scholarship in IR?

This essay argues the intersectionality, as a heuristic, does not contribute meaningfully to the existing debates within feminism and postcolonialism. In fact, although intersectionality is undoubtedly an immensely valuable concept within legal studies, existing analytical tools within feminist and postcolonial IR theory are better suited to the study of IR. This argument contains two critiques. The first is an *analytical* critique of the conception of identities as intersecting, rather than as relational and mutually constitutive. The second is a *political* critique of the normative consequences for the study of IR that follow from intersectionality's faulty conception of identity.

### Mapping intersectionality

Intersectionality has traveled from its origin in critical race theory to other academic disciplines, activism, and policy making, and has been applied to analyses of sexuality and class as well, becoming somewhat of a buzzword (Davis, 2008). Any analysis of a concept as fashionable as intersectionality is at risk of oversimplification or misrepresentation. To avoid such pitfalls, the scope of this essay is limited to a discussion of the concept as articulated by Crenshaw herself, and to a focus on race and gender.

#### *Crenshaw's articulation of 'intersectionality'*

In 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex', Crenshaw (1989) first used the notion of intersectionality to examine a central Black feminist critique of dominant feminism – namely, that by representing the concerns and experiences of *white*, bourgeois women, feminism excludes and subordinates black women due to the particular configuration of their multiple, interacting identities. The demand of intersectionality, therefore, was to center those women who were constitutively excluded from feminism, indeed from the very category of 'woman'. Crenshaw (1989: 157) introduced intersectionality as a challenge to 'an analysis of patriarchy rooted in white experience'. She illustrated the ways that rape laws, gender stereotypes, and assumptions about women's experiences in the

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household masquerade the particular experiences of white women as non-racial and universal. Two years later, Crenshaw (1991: 244) explicated the concept with reference to domestic violence against black women, noting that 'because of their intersectional identity as both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both'.

Importantly, for Crenshaw intersectionality is 'a method and a disposition, a heuristic and an analytical tool' (Crenshaw et al., 2013a: 303). From its initial iteration, intersectionality was conceived not only as a *legal* intervention but also as an intervention into feminist and antiracist *theory and practice*. Crenshaw has always been adamant that 'praxis [be] a key site of intersectional critique' (Crenshaw et al., 2013b: 786). Her 1989 article was both a critique of legal antidiscrimination doctrine and a critique of feminist and antiracist theory and practice more generally, and the slippage between these two dimensions is frequently hard to detect. As a result, the assumption that intersectionality as a heuristic device is equally useful in the legal and the political realm remains unquestioned. This essay prizes these two applications of intersectionality apart and is skeptical of the latter. Considering that the incorporation of intersectionality into feminist and postcolonial IR theory is based on the assumed heuristic usefulness of the term as a theoretical and political intervention (rather than a legal one), it is crucial that the conflation of these two usages be avoided.

## 'Intersectionality' in International Relations theory

Over the past two decades, intersectionality has emerged as a foundational concept within feminist and postcolonial IR scholarship, as well as international political philosophy (e.g., Yuval-Davis, 2007). The concept has even been used to account for the underrepresentation of marginal women within the discipline itself (Ackerly and True, 2008). Intersectionality found its way into feminist IR theory primarily through the publication of *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* (Ackerly, Stern, and True, 2006) and, more recently, *Researching War: Feminist Methods, Ethics, and Politics* (Wibben, 2016). In a review of feminist IR theory, Jacqui True (2010) writes that 'intersectional analysis of gender marks a paradigm shift' in feminist IR. She draws together under this rubric numerous feminist and postcolonial IR scholars, including Han and Ling (1998), Agathangelou and Ling (2004), Chan-Tiberghien (2004), and D'Costa (2006). However, it is worth noting that postcolonial scholars have been less inclined to adopt Crenshaw's concept than feminists. This is not to say that intersectionality has been disregarded entirely by postcolonial IR scholars. In *Power, Postcolonialism, and International Relations*, for instance, Chowdhry and Nair (2002: 2-3) refer to intersectionality as one of the four major themes in postcolonialism.

## Interrogating intersectionality's conception of identity

For Crenshaw (1991: 1244), at the heart of the concept is the effort to 'disrupt the tendency to see race and gender as exclusive or separable'. Intersectionality was intended as a challenge to the assumption that race and gender are 'essentially separate categories'. However, the term 'intersection' belies this very ambition. As one critic has astutely noted, 'the ostensible *mutual exclusivity* of the categories of race and gender is the *condition for the possibility of their intersecting*' (Carastathis, 2008: 28). This point becomes clearer when considering Crenshaw's (2016b) analogy of a crossroad, which she employed to visualize the relation between various axes of oppression. In this analogy, there are two roads, one representing race and one representing gender. Black women are positioned at the *intersection* of these two roads, experiencing the simultaneous impact of the traffic on both roads. The model of the crossroad conceives of race and gender as existing separately, as two different roads coming from different places and heading in different directions, until they intersect at the level of an individual subject. To state that race and gender intersect is not to challenge the assumption that they are separate. On the contrary, the notion of an intersection *requires* race and gender to be conceived as separate.

*Contra* Crenshaw, postcolonial feminist IR scholars have analyzed race and gender as *relational* and *mutually constituted*, rather than as *intersecting*. This approach shows these categories to be invariably 'contaminated' by one another and therefore truly complicates their ontological separation. This essay argues that feminist and postcolonial IR theory have richer descriptions and theorizations of the relation between race and gender than intersectionality can provide.

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## *Relationality*

According to the logic of intersectionality, the categories relevant for analysis are those that intersect within a given subject. To understand the unique vulnerabilities and silences that a black female victim of police brutality faces in the United States, for example, it is essential to take into account the fact that she is both black and a woman. In this case, the *logic of intersectionality* directs the analyst's attention towards these two identity categories and posits them as principal. This analytical approach differs from a *logic of relationality*.

Both feminist and postcolonial scholars have emphasized the *relational* character of all identity categories. Although early feminist IR scholars (e.g., Enloe, 2000) were primarily concerned with making women visible within global politics and with a methodological commitment to 'building knowledge from women's lives' (Tickner, 2005: 4), they insisted that the relations of power that rendered women's roles in, and experiences of, international relations invisible could not be understood without an analysis of men and masculinity. In *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*, Enloe (2000: 11) argued that it was incumbent on feminist IR theorists to expose the hidden 'workings of both femininity and masculinity in international politics'. Therefore, since its original formulations, feminist IR has regarded femininity and masculinity as mutually implicated and has argued that it is impossible to understand one without the other (Stears, 2003: 440). Nevertheless, this early, constructivist strand of feminist IR was prone to collapsing the categories of 'femininity' and 'woman', as well as 'masculinity' and 'man', and stopped short of explicitly theorizing the relation between these (presumably two) genders.

Later feminist IR scholars drew extensively on insights from poststructuralism, which conceptualized identity as relational – i.e., as 'always given through reference to something it is not' (Hansen, 2006: 6). For poststructuralist feminists, the very use of the term 'gender' (rather than 'woman') underscores the relational nature of the gender categorizations 'male' and 'female'. When gender is conceptualized as a discursive practice that is contingent upon time and place, an inquiry into the (re)production of a contextually-specific femininity requires an understanding of the masculine Other against which the feminine Self is defined. In the words of Peterson and Runyan (2014: 69), masculinities and femininities are 'not categorically separate, but rather exist in a relationship'. These terms are used in the plural to complicate the simplistic dichotomy of masculine/feminine, which fails to distinguish between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities. As Connell (1987: 183) writes: "'Hegemonic masculinity" is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women.' This formulation of relationality is more complex than the statement that 'one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender', which 'presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair' (Butler, 2007: 30).

A wealth of feminist IR scholarship on the role of men and masculinities has resulted from these insightful analyses of the role of relationality in the discursive formation of various masculinities and femininities. In *Rethinking the Man Question*, Daniel Conway (2008) examined the feminization (i.e., the devalorization of certain subject positions *in relation to* others) of white men who refused to serve in the military of the apartheid state in South Africa, and Dibyesh Anand (2008) showed how Hindu nationalist masculinity in India was constructed as controlled, ascetic, and asexualized *in relation to* a hypersexualized, threatening, and vilified Muslim (male or female) Other.

Postcolonialism, both grounded in and informing poststructuralism, has similarly conceived of identity through a logic of relationality rather than a logic of intersectionality (e.g., Barkawi and Laffey, 2006). In his landmark text, *Orientalism*, Said's primary objective was to trace the discursive formation and asymmetrical positioning of the Orient in relation to the Occident. He influentially argued that the West was constructed as 'rational, developed, humane, superior' in relation to its constitutive outside – the 'aberrant, undeveloped, inferior' Orient (Said, 2003: 300).

To return to the example of police brutality against black women, the logic of relationality goes beyond an awareness of the heightened vulnerability of black women in this context to prompt further questions that point towards a more instructive analysis and radical critique. What role do militarized masculinities play in the policing of black communities? How are boundaries erected through the designation of certain populations as worthy of protection and others as a threat to the (putatively white) body politic? How are the categories of 'whiteness' and 'masculinity' constructed and (literally) policed through the targeting of black women?

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## *Constitutivity*

In the first half of this section, I have only considered how gender and racial identities are (re)produced in relation to the dominant articulations of those categories. However, although 'man' and 'woman' or 'Occident' and 'Orient' were shown to be relationally constituted, rather than separate entities, I still treated 'gender' and 'race' as independent categories – a second assumption that the logic of intersectionality is predicated on. This assumption can be challenged through the logic of constitutivity, found primarily in postcolonial feminist scholarship, which demonstrates that race and gender comprise a single analytic field.

Consider the following example. In 'Demarginalizing the Intersection', Crenshaw (1989: 155-156) argued that the dominant conception of femininity in the West, which is associated with passivity, fragility, and dependence, is in fact a construction of *white* femininity. Black women are stereotyped as angry, aggressive, 'pathological matriarchs'. Here, race and gender are what Crenshaw (1991: 1242) refers to as 'dimensions of identity' that result in different constructions of femininity depending on the intersections. A more sophisticated analysis of the construction of white, bourgeois femininity can be achieved through the logic of constitutivity.

Postcolonial scholarship illustrates that race and gender are not separate categories, but rather are mutually constituted through complex political, cultural, and historical relations. In *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, Ann Laura Stoler (2002: 42) convincingly illuminates the co-constitution of race and gender by showing how *racial* divisions, such as the distinction between 'colonizer' and 'colonized', were shaped in *gendered* terms: 'Gender-specific sexual sanctions and prohibitions not only demarcated positions of power but also prescribed the personal and public boundaries of race.' Stoler's analysis brings to the fore the fact that racial differences are neither given nor static by showing how the boundaries between racial groups were naturalized and secured through forms of sexual control, cultural etiquettes, and European notions of privacy in the colonies – in other words, through domestic and social arrangements that were structured by the arrival of white women in the colonies. Therefore, it is not simply that race and gender intersected at the level of black women in European colonies, but rather that the racial category to which a woman belonged in the first place was determined in gendered terms. Similarly, the category of woman, which universalizes the experiences and interests of middle-class, white, Western women, is not only constructed in relation to certain hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, but is also constituted in distinction from particular *racial* Others.

Analyses that rely on a logic of constitutivity are prevalent within postcolonial feminist scholarship. In her discussion of the Islamic insurgency in 1980s Malaysia, for instance, Aihwa Ong (2003) distinguishes the Islamists' discursive framing of the Malay woman to the state's competing model of the Malay woman and argues that both the Islamists and the state sought to secure their project through these gendered representations. In other words, the ideological and political contestations that occurred during this period were rendered intelligible in gendered terms. Here, gender plays a *constitutive* role in the construction of categories such as the nation, modernity, and whiteness. Anna M. Agathangelou's (2002) examination of the emergence of desire economies in Turkey, Cyprus, and Greece, considers how women are constituted as sexual objects through the 'recolonization' of their bodies, and how these subjects are racialized through their sexual eroticization. Consider also Ashis Nandy's (1983) diagnosis of the 'pathological' culture of hypermasculinity as both constitutive of, and constituted by, the British colonial project.

These analyses problematize intersectionality. The logic of intersectionality conceives of race and gender as running their separate courses until they collide at the level of the individual. This section has attempted to critique this dominant conception of race and gender as intersecting, rather than as co-constituted. To return to Crenshaw's example of the construction of white femininity, intersectionality as a heuristic device does not elucidate the ways that this dominant conception of femininity is constituted in and through racial discourses and practices. Crenshaw uses intersectionality to demonstrate that the familiar figure of the bourgeois, white woman whose exploitation and gendered oppression occurs primarily within the domestic realm and who is seen as motherly and dependent, excludes women of color. However, the logic of constitutivity provides further and deeper analysis. Is white femininity not as much a product of racial exploitation as it is of gender exploitation? Would this figure of the housewife be possible without the resources available to her that were produced in the Global South? Can there be a construction of fragile and chaste (white) femininity without the construction of an unruly and hypersexualized (black) femininity?

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In sum, gender is constitutively (re)produced through race and vice versa. However, intersectionality cannot account for their mutual constitution. Perhaps more significantly, despite its political pretensions, intersectionality cannot formulate a strategy to challenge those axes of oppression without an adequate analysis of their political production and constitutive effects – a point addressed below.

## What's at stake?

As noted in the first section of this essay, Crenshaw considered intersectionality to be a political intervention. Accordingly, there are certain political stakes for the study of IR that follow from the analytical critique of intersectionality outlined above. This section presents reasons to be wary of the normative commitments that intersectionality imports into the discipline.

### *The focus on marginalized subject positions*

Numerous scholars have expressed concerns about the depoliticization of intersectionality. Central to these critiques is how the reformulations of intersectionality have 'whitened' the concept (Bilge, 2013) or rendered it 'colorblind' by removing black women from the analysis (Carbado, 2013). Crenshaw herself has challenged critics 'who de-racialize intersectionality' (Crenshaw et al, 2013a: 309). There is no doubt that Crenshaw would acknowledge that all subjects have intersecting identities. Even the category of 'white man' is discursively produced through the intersection of 'whiteness' and 'maleness'. However, Crenshaw would also note that the white man as the paradigmatic unified and universal subject is not marginalized through this particular intersection. Due to the feminist and antiracist political commitments of Crenshaw's articulation of intersectionality, intersectional analyses center subjects whose multidimensional identities produce conditions of vulnerability for them. Consequently, treating intersectionality as nothing more than an attempt to add together the number of intersections that exist at all times in any given person constitutes a depoliticization and decontextualization of the concept (Crenshaw, 2016a) – or so the argument goes.

Recently, Marsha Henry (2017) restated this argument in order to critique the uses of intersectionality within feminist critical military studies (FCMS), which explore male vulnerability in conflict situations. By taking dominant groups as the subjects of research, Henry argues, these scholars have disconnected intersectionality from its political origins in Black feminism. Henry (2017: 183) calls for a repoliticization of intersectionality through an approach that includes a focus on poor black women. This appraisal of the use of intersectionality within FCMS is indicative of the problems that the concept's normative entailments generate for the study of IR. For Henry to consider an intersectional analysis to be political, it must *either* focus exclusively on marginalized groups *or* on marginalized groups in addition to dominant ones. The logic of relationality renders this choice redundant since it challenges the very ontological separation of these positionalities. This logic already requires that both positionalities be taken into account.

Due to their attentiveness to the relational and mutually constitutive character of identities, poststructural feminists and postcolonialists have shown that an analysis of exalted subject positions need not be depoliticizing. Melanie Richter-Montpetit's reading of the torture of Abu Ghraib prisoners exemplifies this type of analysis. She writes of the torturers: 'Enacting violences on the bodies of Abu Ghraib prisoners reasserted not only the perceived control of the individual, militarized Selves... but also allowed them to enact "whiteness" – and thereby (re)produce the identity and hegemony of the US Empire and its heterosexed, racialized, and classed World (Dis)Order' (Richter-Montpetit, 2007: 51). In other words, it is not simply that a white woman tortured a racial Other, but rather that the torturer's racialization as white was (re)produced through the act of torture. Similarly, Sandra Whitworth (2008: 113) has shown that the masculinization of military soldiers occurs through the violent denigration of a feminized Other. Far from being depoliticizing, scholarship on dominant groups is indispensable to feminist and antiracist praxis. Without an account of the relationality between hierarchical subject positions, the marginalization and, indeed, production of subordinate subject positions cannot be fully understood.

### *The lost potential for emancipation*

Crenshaw (1989: 154) introduced intersectionality as a way to destabilize essentialist notions of 'true womanhood' by exposing the exclusion of black women that 'is reinforced when *white* women speak for and *as* women' and by

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challenging the notion that 'Black women were something less than real women'. Indeed, she refers to anti-essentialism as a 'closely related perspective' to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991: 1296). However, according to Crenshaw (1991: 1296-1297), anti-essentialism is at risk of distorting the 'political relevance' of socially constructed categories, whereas intersectionality 'presumes that categories have meaning and consequences'. These brief quotes reveal a tenuous relationship between intersectionality and anti-essentialism. On the one hand, intersectionality's grounding in Black feminism renders the concept skeptical of any professedly universal category of 'woman'. On the other hand, intersectionality requires identity categories as the basis of political organizing and therefore participates in their construction and reification. In short, despite the initial effort to problematize simplistic notions of womanhood, Crenshaw ironically imports the essentialist conception of identity that she purports to overcome.

The logics of relationality and constitutivity were introduced by critical scholars to contest essentialized, ahistorical, and static conceptions of identity. Indeed, the reason that these scholars prefer the term 'subjectivity' to 'identity' is their skepticism of the reifications that the term identity often entails. A conception of identity as fluid, malleable, and contextual conceives of subjects as being interpellated into subject positions that are designated by particular discourses. Rather than being prior to politics, subject positions are continually (re)produced – e.g., through the torture practices in Abu Ghraib. According to the model of intersectionality, marginalization *results from* the intersecting identities of an individual. More usefully, feminist and postcolonial scholars have conceived of marginalization as being (re)productive of certain identities. In other words, for Crenshaw, 'individuals "are" intersectional subjects prior to a political discourse that assigns them to that location' (Carastathis, 2008: 29). Rather than considering certain subjects to be *a priori* marginalized and oppressed, critical feminist and postcolonial scholars examine the political discourses that designate subordinate subject positions and that mark certain subjects out for violence through processes of racialization and feminization.

There is no doubt that within the legal realm, it is necessary to take certain identity categories as determined and stable. In order to advocate on someone's behalf, their identity must be presupposed and held constant. However, when intersectionality as a legal model is imported into the political sphere, it becomes susceptible to common critiques of representational politics. By taking intersecting identities as the basis for political action, intersectional discourses participate in the construction of the very subject whose emancipation they claim to facilitate (e.g., Butler, 2007; Brown, 1995). Identities are considered to be fixed and hence an adequate foundation for politics, rather than open to contestation and hence objects of political struggle. A more fruitful approach to race and gender that retains greater potential for emancipatory politics can be found in Agathangelou and Ling's (2009) theoretical development of 'worldism', which takes the *entanglement* of (rather than reified differences between) identity groups as a departure point for a transformative politics.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay argued that intersectionality does not meaningfully contribute to feminist and postcolonial IR scholarship. In particular, the concept is less useful than already-existing analytical tools within feminist and postcolonial theory. There are two dimensions to this argument. First, I contrasted intersectionality's conception of identity with the analytically richer conception informed by the logics of relationality and constitutivity. To return to the analogy of the crossroad, this *analytical* critique showed that intersectionality does not tell us where the crossroads are coming from, where they are going, or how they are constituted. Second, I argued that intersectionality's model of identity imports two *politically* problematic normative commitments into the study of IR – an assumption that the analysis of dominant subject positions is necessarily depoliticizing, and the essentialization of identity categories that removes the potential for emancipation.

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