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Looking Inward

Because politics has a personal dimension, it should come as no surprise that critical race theorists have turned critique inward, examining the interplay of power and authority within minority communities, movements, and even selves. This chapter analyzes several aspects of that interplay—intersectionality; antiessentialism; the tensions between nationalism and assimilation; and racial mixture and identity.

A. Intersectionality

“Intersectionality” means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combination plays out in various settings. These categories—and still others—can be separate disadvantaging factors. What happens when an individual occupies more than one of these categories, for example, is both gay and Native American or both female and black? Individuals like these operate at an intersection of recognized sites of oppression. Do such cases require that each disadvantaging factor be considered separately, additively, or in yet some other fashion? Should persons who experience

multiple forms of oppression have their own categories and representation, apart from those that correspond to the separate varieties of discrimination they experience? And what about the role of these “intersectional” persons in social movements such as feminism or gay liberation? Where do they belong? These are all questions that intersectional analysis attempts to address.

Imagine a black woman. She may be oppressed because of her race. She may also be so because of her gender. If she is a single working mother, she may experience discrimination by virtue of that status as well. She experiences, potentially, not only multiple forms of oppression but ones unique to her and to others like her. Suppose that such a person experiences discrimination at her workplace. She arrives one day to find a new supervisor, who, it turns out, does not like black women, believing them lazy and unreliable. He also thinks that many of them have an “attitude problem.” So he assigns her disagreeable work, requires her to notify him whenever she leaves her work area, and neglects to advise her of opportunities for promotion for which she is otherwise qualified.

She resolves to sue. But on what theory? Suppose she sues for racial discrimination—her supervisor does discriminate against her because she is black. But suppose it turns out that the supervisor does not dislike black men and, in fact, treats them well. He likes playing basketball with them after work, discussing sports with them on Monday, and engaging in easy banter with them about music or popular entertainment. Under current law, the

supervisor might well successfully defend against a discrimination suit, since he does not discriminate against blacks per se—just against black women.

Suppose, then, that she resolves to sue for sex discrimination. She is, after all, a black woman, and her supervisor does discriminate against her because of her sex. Once again, however, she might easily lose. The supervisor might show that he is not biased against women as a class and, indeed, enjoys having white women working for him. He finds white women attractive and good, reliable workers. He even occasionally dates one. White women remind him of his sister. He finds the younger ones pretty and decorative. He likes having them around.

Our plaintiff, then, will probably be unable to prove discrimination based on either race or sex. Yet she suffers discrimination based on her black womanhood. This is one aspect of the intersectional dilemma.

She may face a similar predicament in ordinary politics. Imagine that she wants to join with others in a movement to change society's treatment of people like her. She might look to the feminist movement for support and solidarity. But she is likely to find that this white-dominated movement embraces an agenda and a set of concerns that arise out of the white female experience, for example, the glass ceiling, abortion rights, and the election of a female president of the United States. She is more interested in day-care reform and Head Start programs for her young children. She may also be interested in protection from domestic abuse at the hands of black men. The feminist movement welcomes her with open arms, for she is one

more soldier to add to the ranks. But will its agenda ever get around to addressing her concerns?

Imagine, then, that she resolves to join the civil rights movement, hoping to address the type of discrimination that she suffers at work. This time she finds that racism is indeed the primary focus of the group. It supports affirmative action, restructuring the criminal justice system to eradicate racial disparities, and electing black mayors. It supports measures to end racial profiling and highway stops for "driving while black." But while these concerns are ones she shares as a black person, they are not necessarily the ones at the top of her agenda. The male-dominated civil rights movement will welcome her and persons like her, needing their numbers, but until women become a significant force within the group, it is apt to afford her concerns scant attention. Movement leaders may even ask her to stuff envelopes, run errands, answer the telephone, or make coffee.

If she persists in raising her concerns, she may even find herself accused of being divisive. Feminists may tell her to put aside her concerns as a black woman for a moment, in the interest of a "united" sisterhood, while the black men may be so caught up with life-and-death issues, such as disproportionate imposition of the death penalty or Taser-ing of black male motorists who do not respond quickly enough to police commands, that they react impatiently to her requests to consider her predicament at work.

When movements for racial justice prioritize broad concerns over those of particular subgroups, many needs, such

as those of our hypothetical black woman, may go undressed. This is no small problem. Many races are divided along lines of socioeconomic status, politics, religion, sexual orientation, and national origin, each of which generates intersectional individuals. Even within groups that are seemingly homogeneous, one finds attitudinal differences. Consider, for example, responses to black criminality. Some members of the black community hold that not enough of society's attention goes to law-abiding black citizens who are the victims of crime in black neighborhoods. This get-tough viewpoint is an example of what has been called a "politics of respectability" and disavows any identification with black criminality. It wants more, not fewer, police and harsher, not softer, sentences for black offenders. The opposite perspective within the black community is sometimes called the "politics of identification." Persons of this persuasion identify with the "race rebel" aspect of some black criminals and support them, at least if they are young, redeemable, and a potential asset to the community. African Americans who hold this view want the police to leave certain black offenders alone and let the community handle them. Antisnitching campaigns in black neighborhoods are evidence of this attitude. (Some Latino groups do something similar when they shelter or aid undocumented immigrants.)

Categories and subgroups, then, are not just matters of theoretical interest. How we frame them determines who has power, voice, and representation and who does not. Perspectivalism, the insistence on examining how things look from the perspective of individual actors, helps us

understand the predicament of intersectional individuals. It can enable us to frame approaches that may do justice to a broad range of people and avoid oversimplifying human experience.

A related critical tool that has proven useful in this respect is the notion of multiple consciousness, which holds that most of us experience the world in different ways on different occasions, because of who we are. The hope is that if we pay attention to the multiplicity of social life, perhaps our institutions and arrangements will better address the problems that plague us. The growing number of multiracial individuals suggests that this concern will only increase.

B. Essentialism and Antiessentialism

Do all oppressed people have something in common? This question lies at the heart of the essentialism/antiessentialism debate. On one level, the answer is obvious: of course all oppressed people have something in common—their oppression. But the forms of that oppression may vary from group to group. And if they do, the needs and political strategies of groups fighting for social change will vary as well. When a group organizes for social change, it must have a clear concept of what it is fighting to achieve. Essentialism, then, entails a search for the proper unit, or atom, of social analysis and change.

When we think of the term “essentializing,” we think of paring something down until the heart of the matter stands alone. Essentialism has a political dimension. As mentioned in the previous section, the goals of a “unified”

group may not reflect exactly those of certain factions within it, yet the larger group benefits from their participation because of the increased numbers they bring. We saw this in the case of the single black mother who sought to identify with a social movement but was thwarted on finding that the priorities of the two groups most likely to welcome her did not correspond to her life experience.

This tension seems inherent in our mode of existence. Large numbers of people motivated for social change have the power to alter social practice and perception. This is evident in the early achievements of the women's and civil rights movements. Today, hardly anyone expresses the view publicly that "women shouldn't work outside the home" or "people of color are intellectually inferior to whites." Would these advances in public consciousness have come about if underrepresented subgroups, such as black women, gay men, or Latino and Asian American Ph.D.s, had decided to sit things out?

It takes a multitude of the oppressed to make their voices heard and felt. But what about the voices that do not fit into one single category of oppression? Will social progress let them slip through the cracks? These issues are particularly acute regarding inter- and intraminority relations and tensions (see chapter 5). They also explain some of the critics' impatience with liberalism. The reader will recall that CRT takes liberalism to task for its cautious, incremental quality (see chapter 2). When we are tackling a structure as deeply embedded as race, radical measures are in order—otherwise the system merely swallows up

the small improvement one has made, and everything goes back to the way it was.

Ignoring the problem of intersectionality, as liberalism often does, risks doing things by half measures and leaving major sectors of the population dissatisfied. Classical liberalism also has been criticized as overly caught up in the search for universals, such as admissions standards for universities or sentencing guidelines that are the same for all. The critics point out that this approach is apt to do injustice to individuals whose experience and situation differ from the norm. They call for individualized treatment—"context"—that pays attention to minorities' lives. This deficiency is apt to be particularly glaring in the case of "double minorities," such as black women, gay Latinos, or Muslim women wearing head scarves, whose lives are twice removed from the experience of mainstream Americans.

Some observers hold that all minority races should compromise their differences and form a united front against racism in general. The danger in this essentialized approach is that certain minority groups, socioeconomic classes, and sexual orientations may end up better off and others worse. Recall how shabbily black women were treated in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, rarely allowed to speak for the group, made to march in the second row, and relegated, with a few exceptions, to support roles. Only lately have black women and Latinas emerged as powerful voices on the American scene. Perhaps the essentialism/antiessentialism debate sets in when mainstream thought is beginning to see the validity in

the larger groups' complaints. Like an automobile with deferred maintenance, smaller subgroups that have until then remained silent begin bringing suppressed issues to the larger group's attention. And so the dialectic continues.

C. Nationalism versus Assimilation

Two friends, William and Jamal, are walking down a main street. Both are African Americans and have been close friends since high school. Both have medium-brown skin and hazel eyes. Both are graduates of prestigious universities. William wears a business suit and carries a briefcase made by a famous designer. He is a third-year associate at a large law firm. Jamal, who is a music-industry executive making twice as much money as William, is sporting a tasteful kente shirt and wearing his hair in corn rows. On their way to a lunch date to discuss a new recording contract, they talk about mutual friends, their families, and their careers. On arriving at the restaurant, a trendy downtown eating establishment that caters to young professionals, William and Jamal exchange looks, and without speaking William enters first and asks the maitre d' for a quiet table for two.

The two friends illustrate twin poles in the way minorities of color can represent and position themselves. The nationalist, or separatist, position illustrated by Jamal holds that people of color should embrace their culture and origins. Jamal, who by choice lives in an upscale black neighborhood and sends his children to local schools, could easily fit into mainstream life. But he feels more

comfortable working and living in black milieux and considers that he has a duty to contribute to the minority community. Accordingly, he does as much business as possible with other blacks. The last time he and his family moved, for example, he made several phone calls until he found a black-owned moving company. He donates money to several African American philanthropies and colleges. And, of course, his work in the music industry allows him the opportunity to boost the careers of black musicians, which he does.

William also donates to several black causes. And, although he practices law in a white-dominated law firm on behalf of corporate clients, most of whom are white, he does pro bono work whenever possible on behalf of prison inmates, a large majority of whom are African American. He lives in an integrated suburb that is 90 percent white with a smattering of blacks and other people of color, most professionals like himself.

William and Jamal have discussed their contrasting lifestyles and have agreed to disagree. William believes he is doing more good breaking barriers in the white-dominated legal world and that his work as a lawyer, especially when he is crowned with the partnership he expects in a few years, will enable him to do some real good on behalf of minority clients and businesses. And even though Jamal is currently making more money than he, William believes that his own top salary as a partner will one day match that of his high school friend.

Debates about nationalism versus assimilation figure prominently in current discourse about race. One strand

of critical race theory energetically backs the nationalist view, which is particularly prominent with the materialists. Derrick Bell, for example, urged his fellow African Americans to foreswear the struggle for school integration and aim for building the best possible black schools. Other CRT nationalists advocate gun ownership, on the grounds that historically the police in this country have not protected blacks against violence, indeed have often visited it upon them. Other nationalists urge the establishment of all-black inner-city schools, sometimes just for males, on the grounds that boys of color need strong role models and cannot easily find them in the public schools. Others back black- or Latino-run charter schools in big cities. Nationalists of all types question the majoritarian assumption that northern European culture is superior. Most support ethnic studies departments at the university level.

At the high school level, a Latino studies program in at least one district (Tucson, Arizona) drew the ire of state officials, who enacted a ban on any program that teaches ethnic division. The program's supporters, of course, pointed out that they were merely teaching students their own history and pride in their own culture. They also emphasized that the program was not closed to non-Latino students and was very popular. When local authorities gave in to state officials' threat to cut the district's funding and eliminated the program, the community exploded in outrage. Their indignation increased when school officials removed the program's texts, which included William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and the very book you are reading, from the shelves of

the classrooms, in front of crying students. In response, the program's defenders staged protests, marched on the capital, and filed suit in federal court. A community-college instructor in Houston organized an automobile caravan hauling trunks full of "wet books" on the banned list all the way to Tucson, where the drivers gave them away to students and passersby on the sidewalks of that city.

Latino nationalists also endorse preservation of the Spanish language and ties with Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean or other homelands. A few speak of restoring what is now the U.S. Southwest to something like its previous condition—the mythical land of Aztlán.

Both Latino and black nationalists take a dim view of passing—the effort to deracinate oneself and present oneself as white. Latino nationalists usually reject the term "Hispanic" because of its association with Spain, the nation that oppressed their ancestors in Mexico and Central and South America. Nationalists honor ethnic studies and history as vital disciplines and look with skepticism on members of their groups who date, marry, or form close friendships with whites or seek employment in white-dominated workplaces or industries. Many Latino nationalists are sympathetic to Rodolfo Acuña's notion that Latinos in this country are an internal colony and that they should exploit that colonial status to build solidarity and resistance. Nationalists are apt to describe themselves as a nation within a nation and to hold that the loyalty and identification of black people, for example, should lie with that community and only secondarily with the United States.

A middle position, embraced by a few sophisticated thinkers, including on occasion Derrick Bell, holds that minorities of color should not try to fit into a flawed economic and political system but transform it. In this view, success, symbolized by a high income, token representation, and even a degree of influence, like that which William hopes to achieve, is not worth pursuing if the system itself remains unworthy and unjust.

A moderate position that falls between William's and Jamal's holds that it is acceptable for minorities to seek places in professions such as law, medicine, and business, so long as they apply their skills for the benefit of minority communities. In this view, nothing would be wrong with William's achievement of an Ivy League degree and bar certificate. But his practice in a corporate penthouse would be problematic; he should be a criminal or legal services lawyer instead. Or, if business law is his metier, then, like Jamal, he should be making his skills available to start-up black businesses.

A final intermediate position, one favoring William, holds that a strong U.S. economy benefits everyone. William's success as a black corporate lawyer produces wealth, some of which will trickle down to poor and minority communities; and, in any event, those communities need examples of successful, confident lawyers like William who can make their way anywhere.

Classroom Exercise

Divide your class or study group into two or more groups according to the aforementioned positions (Jamal's

and William's). Each confers for ten minutes, selects spokespersons, and then argues the opposite position from the one they really believe.

D. Racial Mixture

Imagine that Jamal and William have a third friend, Rebecca, the daughter of a black father who is a school principal and a mother who is a Lebanese immigrant and a simultaneous translator for a large international agency. Rebecca, whose skin is medium brown, wears her hair in a short Afro and grew up in an upper-class suburb, where she attended highly competitive public schools. In college, she was a member of both the black student caucus (where she met Jamal and William), as well as the international student organization, which she joined in order to meet Middle Eastern people like her mother and practice her Arabic. She is currently a third-year medical student whose dream job is to be a physician with Doctors Without Borders, practicing medicine in far-flung areas of the developing world. She and Jamal have had several intense conversations about the medical needs of impoverished black communities in the United States. Jamal wishes she would devote herself to the needs of domestic people of color. William, who is ambivalent on this issue, is sitting out this discussion.

The number of mixed-race individuals in the United States is growing, as is the number of marriages among members of different minority groups. (See Kenneth Prewitt, *Fix the Census' Archaic Racial Categories*, N.Y. Times, Aug. 21, 2013.) Some mixed-race people have been asking

for a category of their own in the U.S. Census and other official classification systems. Otherwise, some feel, they would be forced to disidentify with one side of their family or another. If Rebecca, who could be taken for black, lists herself that way and selects black friends as her main peer group, would she not, in effect, be rejecting her mother and her own Middle Eastern parentage?

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FOR CHAPTER IV

1. An Asian woman has been raising her hand at a meeting of white feminists planning a march to protest the “glass ceiling” in corporate management positions. When they finally recognize her, it turns out she wants to know when the group will discuss oppressive labor conditions in the garment industry. Is she being divisive?
2. Suppose the group responds that the agenda should reflect only items that concern all women “as women” and not ones that have to do with small factions, such as seamstresses in the clothing industry. Is the group implicitly adopting a middle-class white agenda?
3. Should minorities make an effort to “fit in” in social and work situations? Why or why not? Wouldn’t this just be a lot of extra work?
4. If blacks or Chicanos sit at separate tables in the cafeteria, is that self-segregation? Should whites politely ask if they can join them?
5. Should minorities make an effort to do business with minority firms? Assume that Firm A and Firm B offer the same product or service, but one is run by Mr. Gonzalez and the other by a person whose ancestors came over on the *Mayflower*. Which one should the person of color patronize?
6. A politician is born in the United States to a white mother and a black father from Kenya. His parents separate while he is young, and he is raised, first, by his mother and then, when she dies, by his white grandparents, who send him to elite schools. He speaks unaccented English,

wears impeccable clothing, and exercises every day. Is he white, black, or neither?

7. Can a white person ever pass as black? Why would he? (See chapter 5.)
8. Can an assimilated minority-group member work within the system to bring about reform in a way that a rebellious outsider cannot?
9. Consider Devon Carbado and Mitu Gulati's notion of performative identity in the workplace, as well as Kenji Yoshino's concept of "covering," in which gays and lesbians work hard to conceal their identity from others. In performative identity, according to Carbado and Gulati, some workers of color carry the heavy burden of reassuring their coworkers on a daily basis that they are not threatening, uncouth, incompetent, and jivey. They do all this, of course, in addition to their assigned work, a type of double duty not expected from others. Should minorities indignantly refuse to do this, and what if it endangers their standing at work?

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