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Guest lecture, March, 2019

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Course: PHIL 543 Philosophical Approaches to Issues in Feminism

What is Oppression?

During the previous weeks you have been seeking answers to the question “What is freedom?” Today we’re going to tackle another, related, question ‘What is oppression?’

My MA thesis project was to understand the concepts oppression and exploitation, particularly the relationship between the two. And I tried to do this through the lens of disability. The inspiration for the thesis came from an independent study we did with Yıldız on intersectional feminism. So my project also closely engaged intersectionality. What we found during our independent study was that theories of liberation and/or oppression tended to fall in two categories in terms of how they defined oppression.

Two paradigms:

Oppression-prioritizing paradigms that made exploitation a subset of oppression.

Exploitation-prioritizing paradigms that made oppression a subset of exploitation.

Oppression-prioritizing paradigms run the risk of side-stepping class issues and economics whereas exploitation-prioritizing paradigms may focus on class at the expense of other important parameters of oppression such as gender, race, or disability.

In my thesis, I was interested in putting these two camps into a productive dialogue. Until recently, disability has been undertheorized in both kinds of paradigms. So I thought that running disability through these two could help us understand the relationship between oppression and exploitation better. What I did in the first half of the thesis was to pick one oppression-prioritizing framework (intersectionality) and one exploitation-prioritizing framework (Marx’s surplus populations) and look at how they theorized disability. They yielded two different answers which in the second half I tried to mediate through a needs framework.

Today I’m not going to talk about disability. I am only going to share with you my

introductory chapter where I try to come up with a very provisional framework of oppression and parts of my first chapter where I introduce intersectionality.

I plan to talk for about an hour and then open the floor for discussion for another 30 minutes.

Plan of talk:

Anne Cudd's (2006) typology/genealogy of oppression theories in the West

Early modern (16th-18th cent)

19th cent

20th cent

3 takes on oppression

Frye

Young

Mies

A provisional framework

1

2

3

4

5

21st century

6. Intersectionality

Discussion

Anne Cudd (2006)

Early modern period: (Locke, Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau)

Oppression: "arbitrary or unjust laws imposed on citizens illegitimately that cause material (economic or physical) deprivation" (2006, p. 7).

18th century: oppression refers to economic exploitation by a ruler, usually in the form of over- or unequal-taxation (Cudd, 2006, p. 6).

domination, tyranny, oppression = synonymous

19th century: Four conceptual shifts

1. The first conceptual shift is from a purely political conception (ruler versus ruled) of oppression to a more social conception where **oppressor and oppressed**

correspond to social groups (2006, p. 7).

2. The second conceptual shift is the view of oppression as not strictly imposed by rulers but also by **social convention and tradition** (e.g. Wollstonecraft, Mill, both address women's oppression referring to prejudices, dominant social mores).

3. The third conceptual shift comes from Hegel and introduces the idea of **psychological domination** alongside physical and political domination as a cause (and consequence) of oppression (Cudd, 2006, p. 10).

4. The fourth shift is made by Marx in **locating the cause of oppression in the economic system**: "oppression begins with division of labour, and thus with the ability of one group of people to coercively appropriate the product of another's labour" (Cudd, 2006, p. 9).

All four shifts can still be discerned in current conceptions of oppression.

20th century: Cudd uses Fraser's terminology to distinguish theories

1. Theories of recognition (Hegel-inspired)
2. Theories of redistribution (Marx-inspired)
3. Combination of 1 + 2 (Beauvoir, Fanon, Gramsci, Bartky, etc.)

Now I'd like to turn to three examples of 20th century accounts of oppression.

Marlyn Frye's (1983) study of oppression, which you've read for this class, is a good starting point for a philosophical inquiry into oppression.

Two important aspects of Frye's account of oppression:

1. The **systematic, networked** character of oppression and
2. its **penalizing, prohibiting, limiting, immobilizing, molding and reductive** effect on the oppressed.

Oppression means being subject to multiple, often conflicting, systematically related, pressures. Frye calls this **the "double bind"** (Frye, 1983, p. 2).

The bird cage: Frye evokes the visual image of a bird cage to capture the systematic character of multiple forces coming together to form a seamless, invisible network that imprisons the oppressed (1983, p. 4). When taken on their own, one by one, the thin wires of the cage do not explain oppression. The level of analysis must be "bird's eye."

Oppression: systematic, often disguised.

Social group: Occupants of the cage are not individuals but certain kinds of people. One is trapped as a woman, as a Black person, as a lesbian and so on (Frye, 1983, pp. 7-8).

Problem: Frye doesn't have a very precise account of what constitutes a social group. This leads to the over-victimization of women. One sense she uses this is that being a woman always selects one for victimization and oppression. In contrast, according to Frye, men are never oppressed *as* men: men can be oppressed as members of other categories such as class, race, sexuality or disability but being a man is always something beneficial for men (1983, p. 16).

Counter-example: Conscription. In nations which still have conscription men are forced to become soldiers where they are expected to kill and maim other humans under orders from superiors, and sacrifice their own life in the name of several exalted taboo concepts like the flag, the nation, etc. The "heroism" offered in such scenarios seems a disproportionately small "benefit" for such horrors as the sacrifice of one's life or limb, the trauma of killing or hurting others, the dehumanization of being under unquestionable orders of superiors, or the bullying and violence rampant in military barracks. This seems to be at least one instant where being a man is not automatically beneficial for men.

Another controversial conclusion: Frye seems to think that race and class are categories that only organize men into which women have been dispersed; women have been assimilated and their group identity inhibited to the extent that they do not see themselves as a category of oppressed people (Frye, 1983, p. 8). This suggests on the one hand that the most fundamental divide is between women and men (both are social groups, not natural groups, for Frye) but also it strangely puts women outside of society, of history. Frye appears to be suggesting that there is an originary division between men and women after which women remain intact but men keep bifurcating further into other divisions of class, race and so on. This claim is not convincing.

But Frye has a stake in making the claim because it will buttress her other major claim: that **woman is a more fundamental category which cuts across other categories such as race and class**. According to Frye, women from all these groups are together in the same "**ghetto of function**": the service of men and their interests (Frye, 1983, p. 9), i.e., whatever race or class they are from, women service men. Frye identifies "women's sphere" as the "service sector" in an attempt to expand and feminize this economic term (Frye, 1983, p. 10).

Too narrow and too broad: On the one hand Frye wants to say that women's oppression is more fundamental and unique compared to other oppressions but on the other hand she wants to generalize this model of women's oppression as being

characteristic of all oppression in general. This tension makes her account too narrow (modeled on the specific oppression of women and the “service” idea) and too broad (oppression vaguely benefits one group to the detriment of another) at the same time.

Distinction between oppressive vs. non-oppressive social structures (bc the latter can also be limiting, molding, reducing): an oppressive structure reduces one group of persons for the benefit of another group, whereas a social structure limits all for the benefit of all. (e.g. Traffic lights)

The benefit question: In order to understand if a kind of social barrier is oppressive to a group Frye suggests asking these questions: who constructs, maintains, promotes and benefits from the barrier? Is the barrier protecting the interests, classification and status of one group as superior? Is the barrier part of a structure that serves to confine, reduce and immobilize one group? (1983, p. 14)

Dyadic oppressive relation: While these questions are very useful, this distinction between social and oppressive structures belies another problem with Frye's account of oppression: that it can only be used for clearly dyadic oppression relations between one specific oppressed group and one specific corresponding oppressor group which directly and consistently benefits from the oppression of the former. Not very useful when oppressor is not clear or when there are multiple oppressions.

Conclusion:

Problematic aspects: vague; too broad/narrow; race, class, etc. only organize men; dyadic oppression relation.

Useful aspects: structural, systematic character; network of seamless forces; target of oppression: social groups; the benefit question; different levels of analysis (micro, macro).

Iris Young (1992) aims to define a set of criteria to clearly describe the nature of oppression in a world where many groups are oppressed to different extents and in different ways. Oppression names a family of five concepts and conditions: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. If a group is subject to at least one of these, they are oppressed.

Before describing the five faces of oppression, Young first devotes some time to oppression as a structural concept and to the social ontology of groups. I will focus on this part of her essay and go relatively fast over the five faces.

Oppression as a structural concept:

This section could be considered extension/clarification of Frye. According to Young, something systematic is not the direct result of the intention of an individual with power, like a tyrant (1992, p. 39). It is not a direct result of choices or policies. **It is intention-independent.**

What causes oppression then? Young says that it is embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and assumptions that lie behind institutional rules and so changing laws does not eradicate oppression (1992, p. 39). **Law-independent.**

Oppression gets **systematically reproduced in economic, political, and cultural institutions**. Here Young repeats Frye's idea of the enclosing structure of forces and barriers that limits a group of people.

Unlike Frye, Young states that an oppressed group need not have a correlate oppressing group although for every oppressed group there seems to be a group that is privileged in relation to that group (Young, 1992, p. 39). **Non-dyadic privilege relationship.**

Young's account **does not privilege women's oppression as being fundamentally prior** to other forms of oppression. Rather all oppressions have their own dynamics and no form of oppression can be given causal or moral primacy (1992, p. 40).

Social Ontology of Groups:

There are three main ways philosophy deals with groups:

Aggregate view: **Arbitrary classification according to one attribute such as race. Individualist model that identifies oppression with group identification, as something that happens to groups when they are identified as such (Young, 1992, p. 44). In this view, people should be treated as individuals and not as members of groups; the solution to oppression then becomes the eradication of groups. Young argues that it is not group differentiation that is inherently oppressive; not all groups are oppressed.**

Association view: (Favored by political philosophers.) Social groups are defined by a sense of identity; identification with a certain social status, common history that social status produces, and self-identification. Social groups are real as forms of social relations. This view implicitly gives the individual ontological priority to the group: individuals constitute groups (Young, 1992, p. 42).

Process view: (Young's view) The individual is a product of social processes; there is no self prior to socialization (1992, p. 43). While social processes of affinity and differentiation produce groups, they do not give the groups a substantive essence:

group differentiation is fluid, cross-cutting, multiple and shifting and as such challenges the idea of a unified autonomous self (people tend to have multiple group affiliations) (1992, p. 45).

Five Faces of Oppression

1. Exploitation: Marxist idea of exploitation expanded beyond class. Whether class, race, or gender-based exploitation shares a basic structure: some people exercise their capacities under the control, according to the purposes, and for the benefit of, other people (Young, 1992, p. 46). This transfer of power is unreciprocated, structural, and continual: it is re/produced through systematic processes (Young, 1992, p. 47).

Young's exploitation = Frye's oppression

2. Marginalization: Marginals are people the system of labor will not use. In a capitalist society being outside the labour system = being cast out of the social system, extreme social and material deprivation, relegation to underclass. Marginals are often characterized as non-rational, dependent. Elderly, single mothers, the disabled, First Nations. Created by the capitalist mode of production. Similar to Marx's theory of surplus populations.

3. Powerlessness: Depends on Marx's distinction between manual and mental labour. Young treats the mental/manual labour, capitalist/working class, and professionals/non-professionals as similar distinctions. The latter distinction goes beyond the work-place creating an exclusive culture that discriminates against the oppressed.

4. Cultural imperialism: Addresses the subjective aspects of oppression. Mixture of different concepts such as hegemony, ideology, false consciousness, double consciousness. Dominant social group has exclusive access to the means of interpretation and communication so it can impose its own views as universal.

5. Violence: Oppressed groups are subject to systematic violence, harrassment, intimidation, and ridicule. Being a member of an oppressed group comes with this knowledge: the ever-present threat of becoming a victim is limiting and humiliating. Violence is a social practice that is always looming as a possibility. It is legitimized, tolerated, rule-bound, and pre-meditated. It is also group-directed: institutionalized, systemic, and enabled against certain groups. Illegal on paper but rampant.

Conclusion: In this account exploitation is a subset of oppression. But a very important one because three of the five criteria depend on the division of labor and the capitalist system of production. Violence could also be seen as a tool to institute and

maintain division of labor. While cultural imperialism coheres the least, it shows that we need a criterion to address the subjective aspects.

Problems: Watered-down versions of Marxist concepts and White-washed versions of concepts such as Du Bois's double-consciousness are some of the main problems.

Strengths: oppression as a structural concept, fluid social ontology of groups, violence as a tool of oppression.

Maria Mies's (2014) *Patriarchy and Accumulation* connects the capitalist division of labour with patriarchy, taking **the sexual division of labour to be the historically prior and politically most relevant oppression**. According to Maria Mies, **women's productivity is the precondition for all other activity**: women produce other humans but also the first division of labour in human societies between hunters and gatherers could only take place on the basis of women's subsistence activity. Hunting is a risky enterprise and compromised a small part of early human diet; even in contemporary hunter-gatherer societies women gather 80 percent of the daily food. **Mies challenges the man-the-hunter hypothesis**: men's productive activity as the biggest contributor to the survival of the community.

So why were women the producers unable to prevent the establishment of a hierarchical and exploitative relation between the sexes? Mies says that this question presupposes that political power directly emerges from economic power (2014, p. 61). **Men's political power arose from their monopoly of the means of violence** when their tool production diverged from women's productive tools (e.g. the digging stick, basket). Men made non-productive, lethal tools for hunting and began using them to terrorize, coerce, and enslave other people.

This **predatory, appropriative, exploitative object relation and mode of production based on patriarchal division of labour** was never abolished but transformed. It was fully realized during feudalism and **taken to its logical extreme in capitalism**: total domination over nature. Capitalism = manifestation of patriarchy. **Capitalism's innovation**: universalization and intensification of the use of violence as an economic force. Here Mies has in mind enclosures, primitive accumulation, colonialism, and imperialism. Capitalism as a force that appropriates non-capitalist strata and non-capitalist work as a free resource for capital in permanent primitive accumulation. Or what David Harvey would call accumulation by dispossession. From

this base, it might be possible to address various forms of oppression as a part of the history of the violent movement of capitalism across the globe.

Problems:

Mies wants to subsume oppression under exploitation because she fears that oppression without exploitation loses its historical-material basis and turn purely cultural or ideological. She also wants to expand Marx's specific notion of capitalist form of exploitation (appropriation of surplus labour by capitalists) towards a wider connotation:

“In the last analysis, it means that someone gains something by robbing someone else or is living at the expense of someone else. It is bound up with the emergence of men's dominance over women and the dominance of one class over others, or one people over others.” (2014, p. 36)

This definition is rather vague. But more importantly, Mies's historical thesis about early societies is very speculative. There is very limited information about such societies.

Characterizing capitalism as a patriarchal, appropriative mode of production since first human societies risks losing the historical specificity of capitalism.

While patriarchy and capitalism seem to be connected in some intimate way, there is no need to force an originary, causal relationship between the two.

Also this theory of early patriarchy depends on a binary view of gender which is also historical and culturally specific to the West. It is suggested by some post-colonial scholars that the binary view of gender was imposed on pre-colonial cultures with different gender systems (Lugones).

A Provisional Framework

Recapitulating the strongest points of each account.

1. Oppression has a systematic, seamlessly networked character. It is usually intention-independent and structurally reproduced by social, political, cultural, and economic institutions.

2. Oppression takes place at the level of the social group. Social groups are fluid processes of affinity and differentiation. There is no individual prior to socialization.

3. Oppression has a penalizing, prohibiting, limiting, immobilizing, molding and reducing effect on the oppressed, both objectively and subjectively.

4. Most oppression under capitalism takes the form of exploitation that can be

captured by Marx's conception thereof: appropriation of one class's surplus labour for the benefit of a dominant class.

5. Oppression is made possible and maintained through actual or threatened, overt or covert, direct or structural, economic or extra-economic violence.

Perhaps with the exception of the process ontology, this framework remains within the confines of a 20th century paradigm of oppression.

I suggest a 6th item to this framework which characterizes a new shift from single-axis oppressive paradigms to multiple-axis oppressive paradigms in the 21st century.

6. Oppressive systems tend to be intersectional, interlocking, simultaneous, and in some cases, mutually constitutive.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality-like thought can be traced back to Black women's philosophy and activism in the 19th century.

Perhaps we can talk about **4 waves of intersectionality**:

1. 19th century: Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett (without use of the term)
2. 70s and 80s: Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, bell hooks (without use of the term)
3. 90s: Kimberlé Crenshaw coins the term, closely followed by Patricia Hill Collins
4. 2000s-present: Mainstreamization of the term in academia and larger political discussions

One could take intersectionality to be a species of identity politics, as a theory of oppression, or as a theory of oppression and identity. These characterizations ask too much of intersectionality and set it up for failure. In my thesis I used **intersectionality** in a very specific sense: **As a framework for understanding oppression that centers the oppressed.** To make it even more specific: as a framework for understanding multiple, interlocking, and mutually constitutive oppressions. If centering the perspectives and needs of the oppressed to analyze oppression is identity politics then in this very general sense Marxism can also be taken as a species of

identity politics.

Just like, its contemporary, Standpoint Theory, which aimed to “study up”, that is, begin with the lives of the oppressed before moving to a more general analysis of society, intersectionality also suggests that **those at the intersections of multiple oppressions have epistemological and revolutionary advantage in terms of understanding and resisting against oppression**. But in both cases, this position is one of achievement, not ascription. It is not enough to be multiply oppressed.

There is, however, **the idea of the revolutionary bottom: an intersectional position that mediates all other oppressions**. If the base can be tipped, the whole structure will tumble. For example, **Combahee River Collective** was composed of Black working class lesbians and they drafted a manifesto in 1977 which stated that if people of this intersectional position (the intersection of class, race, gender, and sexuality) “were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression. (The Combahee River Collective, 1977/1983, p. 18) This idea is a thread that runs through a lot of intersectionality research.

Let me now turn to Crenshaw’s seminal article about anti-discrimination law that coined the term intersectionality.

Crenshaw says that feminist theory and anti-racist theory both operate on a **single-axis principle that addresses oppression by focusing on the privileged members** of the oppressed group. Feminism focuses on White, middle-class women. Anti-racism focuses on middle-class Black men. Both make the oppression of Black women invisible. The compoundedness and specificity of Black women’s experience becomes absorbed into the collective experience of the larger group or becomes marked as too different.

Race and gender in such paradigms become **significant only when they pose a disadvantage** but the privileges (such as whiteness, maleness) that may accompany race and gender are never addressed.

Here’s a quote that demonstrates how Black women are marginalized in these paradigms:

Imagine a basement which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked-feet standing on shoulders-with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged

by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor above which only those who are not disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that “but for” the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room. (1989, p. 151)

There is a hatch through which those immediately below the ceiling can crawl, but only available to those who have a singularity of burden. Those who are oppressed in multiple ways are left below unless they pull themselves to the groups permitted to squeeze through.

In single-axis paradigms this top-down framework is preserved whereas intersectionality allows for mediating different oppressions.

In another seminal article, Crenshaw finds a further mediating role for intersectionality: between multiple identity and the ongoing need for identity politics. Here Crenshaw distinguishes intersectionality from anti-categorical anti-essentialism. **The problem is not the existence of categories but the values attached to them and how those values create hierarchies. Identity politics can be meaningful as long as it is based on challenging the system of oppression built around that identity.** As opposed to **vulgar social constructionism that challenges the construction of identity per se.**

Taking intersectionality as a framework for understanding oppression that foregrounds that oppressed is very useful in this sense because it brings **the discussion to the level of common systems of oppression justified on those identities rather than the level of common identities. We can be oppressed by the same/similar systems without being the same.**

In a similar vein, bell hooks suggests moving from “I am a feminist” towards “I advocate feminism in order to eradicate sexist oppression.” The latter position no longer associates the revolutionary agent with a fixed or “natural” identity position but a very specific political commitment which is an achievement rather than an ascription—that is, an intersectional standpoint.

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