

## ABSTRACT

Gender is a crucial dimension of capitalist modern societies (Mandel and Shalev, M. 2009), yet there exists no universally applicable conceptualisation of gender and thus different roles in the analysis of/in its relation to capitalism, varying across different schools of thought. Feminist theories in particular are concerned with the intertwining of these issues. Theoretical works since the 1980s on this subject include the multidimensional and multifaceted aspects of gender, especially its overlaps with race, ethnicity and class. I depict the debate on two strands of literature, namely decolonial feminist theory and intersectional feminist theory. Both share common definitions and perceptions on capitalist power structures, oppression and labour division, despite some differences, such as the role of colonisation. Within the following paper, I will not either depict a complete picture of the concept of intersectionality or decolonial feminist theory. By the reduction to the essential and unifying characteristics and tools of each school of thought I attempt to make the 'meaning' or 'understanding' of gender more clear by comparing the (mainstreamed) essential features of these theories.

The discussions that influenced a more general critique of the concept of gender and perspectives for analysis from feminist and anti-racist movements, started in the 19th century, and have been at the core of intersectional theories. Especially American civil rights advocate and critical race theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her article on the marginalised rights claims of *Black, working class women* (Crenshaw 1989), has had a major impact on the broader dissemination of intersectional theories, which became more and more popular during the 1980s. Crenshaw's metaphor of the 'intersection' of multifaceted forms of inequality and power structures in her 1989/91 articles, coined the term that serves as umbrella term used to describe the emerging analytical theory of intersectionality. As stated here, although Crenshaw is a key figure in intersectionality research, there are many more theorists and activists connected to this topic. One of the earliest ones being Sojourner Truth who famously asked the question already in 1851: "Ain't I a Woman?".<sup>1</sup>

In the preface of American sociologist Patricia Hill Collin's book *Black Feminist Thought* on the marginalised knowledge of black women in the US, she writes "How can I as one person speak for such a large and complex group as African-American women? [...] The answer is that I cannot [...] I [...] see my work as being part of a larger process, as one voice in a dialogue among people who have been silenced." (p. xi, Collins 2000). Her point of starting the conversation as a topic that people can have multiple versions, perceptions or experiences on, serves as a good comparison for the fact that also, generally speaking, the history of any (political) movement and the generation of knowledge about it is never free from the problem of the exclusion of marginalised groups. The same holds true for the theories of intersectionality (Meyer 2019), as presented here. The reduced display of concepts and derived conclusions in this paper are therefore a specific representation of feminist theorists views, which constitute to the mainstreamed discussion and history of events of intersectional feminist thought.

Equally, the same holds true on the descriptions and arguments on the decolonial feminist thoughts presented here. From the multiple feminisms in the field of decolonial theory I concentrate on the works of Argentine feminist philosopher María Lugones, who was at the forefront of placing gender in a (de-)colonial perspective. Lugones describes in her theoretical work (Lugones 2010, 2016) how inseparable a critique of power is from the analysis of gender and race, which needs to be understood when applying the concept in decolonial theories. It is a more general critique, such as the intersectional theories, to any forms of 'white feminism' or 'second wave feminism' that constitute the starting point of the definition of gender in many political, theoretical, activist or academic discussions within modern capitalist societies. Again, there are manifold theoretical approaches that subsume within the broad concepts of intersectionality and decolonial studies.

By expanding the discussion on differences and similarities between the two theoretical approaches (Velez 2019), further insights can be gained as to how gender serves both as a concept in describing inequalities and analysing (neo-liberal) capitalism. More precisely, I show that gender within decolonial studies and the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) leads to an enriched understanding of this term, as well as a more differentiated picture of its relation to/ role in/ criticism of capitalism. The derived research question to be answered asks:

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<sup>1</sup> Delivered in a speech in 1851, such as denoted briefly here: : <https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm>

**What does 'gender' in capitalist societies mean? A comparison of decolonial and intersectional feminist perspectives.**

*“What does the concept of ‘gender’ in intersectional and decolonial feminist analyses mean and what is its relation to capitalism in modern societies?”*

Put differently, what relation does the concept of gender have with the analysis of capitalism? Gender as a concept is deeply intertwined with the history of the formation of capitalist structures and is still relevant today. Both, the intersectional political economy framework, as well as decolonial theory give crucial insights on the role of gender, although the relative importance to other forms of discrimination such as class, race, sexuality or religion as well as their adequate description of structural balances of power is partly evaluated differently. Going beyond universal one-dimensional conceptions of gender, requires a more pronounced definition of sexuality and self-identity, which cannot be captured in (mostly dichotomous) categories that are inherent to capitalism. Yet, the critique of gender identity frameworks by feminist theory highlights the methodological issues brought forward by the comparison of the theoretical approaches. Expanding the notion of gender as a concept inherent to modern capitalism conclusions are left to call for an emancipatory concept of self in capitalist societies.

The used methodological approach will emphasise what can be learned about the definition of gender by a comparison of the concept within intersectional (materialist) theory and decolonial theory. Contrasting similarities and differences between the two, gender as a concept (and as a methodological tool) will be better understood, especially in its relation to capitalism. Against the often mentioned critique of modern feminists to abolish ‘gender’ altogether (as in ‘multiple gender identity’ frameworks or subjectivity concepts of ‘human bodies’, Young 2005) the importance of the displayed discussion on ‘what gender in capitalist societies is’ becomes readily apparent. This is again not to say, that ‘gender’ in its most used notion might be outdated.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: section 2 discusses the main premises of intersectionality and how gender is defined within this field of research. It contains the explanation of the use of social categories as an analytical framework and discussions of applicability in a broader analysis of power. In section 3 the same is done from a decolonial perspective, whereas the centrality of coloniality and thus its historic materialist critique of social phenomena will be emphasised. In section 4 I will discuss what can be learned from the comparison between section 2 and 3 about the concept of gender. To do this, I choose three aspects that I assess to be crucial in giving a final answer to the proposed research question in the concluding section 5 of this paper.

## References

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