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Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory

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> In reproduction life is *concrete* and is vitality. . . . Each of the individual moments is essentially the totality of all; their difference . . . is posited in reproduction as concrete totality of the whole.
>
> —G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*

> The leaders of the women's rights movement did not suspect that the enslavement of Black people in the South, the economic exploitation of Northern workers and the social oppression of women might be systematically related.
>
> —Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class*

We are at an inflection point in the development of materialist theories of multiple social oppressions. The most influential approach in the area—intersectionality theory—has been struggling to overcome the atomism that appears to be foundational to its conceptual outlook, as I show below. At the same time, social reproduction theory, which grew out of historical materialist analyses of gender relations, is being renovated in part as a response to critical challenges from intersectionality and antiracism. In what follows, I suggest that a dialectically revitalized social reproduction theory—one that rises to the critical challenges posed by intersectional analysis—offers the most promising perspective for those interested in an historical materialist theory of multiple oppressions within capitalist society.

Moving in this direction will require a fundamental protocol of dialectical theory: *immanent* criticism. It is all too typical for critical analyses to engage in wholesale rejection of alternative approaches,

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which may be all well and good where purely vulgar ideological formations are in question. But it will not do when we are trying to move beyond the limits of theory animated by a spirit of genuine inquiry. Here, dialectical criticism insists that a more comprehensive standpoint can be gained only by absorbing the strengths of a theoretical perspective in the course of overcoming its internal weaknesses. Rather than dogmatically dismissing a contending theory, dialectical criticism instead enters into its system of thinking, engages it on its own terms, and integrates its most critical insights. Truth, Hegel urges, is not a thing; it "is not a minted coin that can be given and pocketed ready-made." Rather, truth resides in the *process* of critical thinking, which can only move through partial and one-sided understandings toward richer and more comprehensive ones. The theoretical approach that prevailed at a particular point in time cannot then be glibly dismissed as "false." Even where it is transcended by a more robust theory, an earlier perspective full of false starts is still part of the history of truth, as a process of discovery, exploration, and theoretical formulation. "This truth thus includes the negative, what would be called the false, if it could be regarded as something from which one might abstract. The evanescent itself must, on the contrary, be regarded as essential, not as something fixed, cut off from the True."[1]

Hegel also describes this mode of criticism as a form of *determinate negation*. In contrast to abstract negation, which merely rejects one position in favor of another, determinate negation shows how the contradictions within a system of thought push toward their own overcoming. It thus engages these contradictions in a dual process of appropriating and overcoming. It is in this spirit that I engage intersectionality theory. Convinced that intersectional analyses bear deep theoretical flaws, I also recognize the critical insights they have generated. Yet, as many intersectional theorists themselves acknowledge, their perspective flounders in the face of some fundamental internal problems. So, while engaging this approach and its contradictions, I seek to show how they might be dialectically overcome—and their critical insights retained and repositioned—in a dialectically reconstructed social reproduction theory.

IMPASSES OF INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY

Intersectionality emerged through efforts to comprehend the multiple oppressions that constitute the social experience of many people, particularly women of color. Yet, from its beginnings, intersectionality

struggled with the spatial metaphor that defines it. An intersection, after all, is a space in which discrete roads or axes cross paths. Indeed, at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, one of the key founders of intersectional analysis, Kimberlé Crenshaw, illustrated her theorization with a visual image of a person standing at a junction of multiple roads as vehicles careened toward her from many angles.[2] Notwithstanding a growing dissatisfaction with this sort of imagery, intersectionality theorists have repeatedly resorted to describing multiple oppressions with spatialized terms such as *lines*, *locations*, *axes*, and *vectors*. Christine Bose, for instance, has deployed the image of "intersecting axes" of oppression, while Helma Lutz has enumerated "fourteen lines of difference," a view amended in Charlotte Bunch's suggestion that social differences run along "sixteen vectors."[3]

Dissatisfaction with the idea that all of these "axes" or "vectors" of power are independently constituted has propelled a number of analysts to amend the notion of intersecting relations with a vision of *interlocking* ones. Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, has proposed that we think in terms of interlocking systems of oppression that comprise a "matrix of domination," one which constitutes a "single, historically created system."[4] Sherene Razack pushes this approach slightly farther, urging that interlocking systems "need one another," implying perhaps that they are co-constituted.[5] More recently, Rita Kaur Dhamoon has suggested that the term *interactions* is preferable to *intersections*.[6] All of these theoretical moves rightly seek to overcome the conceptual image that has haunted intersectionality theory: that of reified, preconstituted identities or locations that come into some kind of external contact with each other. But at the same time, these modifications continue to be plagued by the ontological atomism inherent in the founding formulations of intersectionality theory: the idea that there are *independently constituted* relations of oppression that, in some circumstances, crisscross each other.

An especially clear expression of the atomism underlying intersectional accounts is offered by Floya Anthias, who overtly resists the idea that relations of power and oppression are co-constituting. A key problem with the idea of "mutual constitution," urges Anthias, is that it "disrupts the saliency of the categories in and of themselves."[7] The idea here seems to be that if we recognize, say, that relations of race and class are internally constitutive parts of gender, then the saliency of gender as a category is imperiled. This is ontological atomism to its core; it insists that one entity or relation cannot be understood as constituted

in and through another without losing the very identity of the thing itself. Things—be they entities, processes, or relations—can thus only be understood as utterly discrete atomic bits whose identities exclude the co-constituting effects of others. Nira Yuval-Davis makes this position even more theoretically explicit in claiming that, while each social difference is "intermeshed in other social divisions," nevertheless "the ontological basis of each of these divisions is autonomous."[8] If this is so, then intermeshing can only really be a kind of external contact among ontologically discrete relations, as if every power relation were capable of careening off of every other without its internal constitution being affected. The result is a sort of social Newtonianism, a mechanics of colliding bits of social reality.

By *social Newtonianism*, I refer in the first instance to Isaac Newton's theoretical model of the universe as composed of discrete atomic bits. Each of these bits has a principle of self-movement ("inertial motion") inscribed within it. Of course, Newton knew that other forces, such as gravity, acted upon these atoms. Indeed, he knew that every body exercises a gravitational pull on every other. Nevertheless, he argued that gravity operated *externally*, affecting each and every bit of matter from the outside (and thus modifying their internally generated motion). But if every bit was affected by gravity, how was it that gravity was not essential to their very nature? How was it, in other words, that gravity was not acknowledged as something constitutive of every bit, i.e., as something that inherently makes these atomic parts what they are? Part of the answer here is that such a position inherently challenges the atomism to which Newton was committed. After all, if what things are is significantly determined by forces that appear to be "outside" of them, then the world would appear to be a complex and dynamic organic system in which the boundaries between parts are always porous. Newton was very much aware of the degree to which the world is one of unending flux and transformation. What allowed him to insist upon the stability and identity of its parts was his conception of absolute space and time.

Rather than his dynamic model of the universe leading him toward a philosophy of internal relations—in which every part is in constant motion and interaction and thus internally affected and *intrinsically constituted* by its interrelations with other parts—Newton held that this world-in-flux was ultimately stabilized by the absoluteness of time and space. Each object and each atomic part, he insisted, occupies a unique location in unchanging space and time. To clarify this concept, Newton

urged that absolute space and time were mathematical in nature. Just as a pure geometric figure, like a circle or a triangle, can be constructed in an abstract space outside of any sensible form (for example, in our minds), so absolute time was independent of our sensations, and absolute space of any actual material substances. Thus, in his *Principia*, Newton claimed of "absolute, true and mathematical time" that it is "in and of itself and of its own nature, without reference to anything external." And in the same idiom he depicted an absolute space that "without reference to anything external, always remains homogeneous and immovable."[9] With this conception of homogeneous and unmoving space and time, Newton placed his dynamic world in constant motion upon fixed and unchanging foundations. This static metaphysics, with its conception of absolutely fixed space and time, thus rescued Newton's atomism, that is, his notion that the universe consists of discrete, independent atomic parts that are internally driven until modified by external collisions and interactions with other parts and forces. As much as our world appears to be one of endless flux and interaction among parts—which would seem to threaten an atomistic conception in which the bits of the world are utterly discrete and independent of each other—things are in fact stabilized, according to Newton, by the fixed, if invisible, coordinates of absolute space and time. The famous billiard-ball model of the universe, in which parts behave like colliding and careening balls that have been set in motion on a billiard table by an unseen mover, rests on just this static vision. A dynamic world in motion was thus held in check by an immutable (mathematically regulated) order.

Classical liberalism, particularly in the realm of political economy, adapted this mechanical philosophy to social life. For theorists like Adam Smith, the social universe is composed of self-moving atomic parts (self-seeking individuals) whose colliding movements are regulated by morality, law and, crucially, the market. In the hectic pell-mell of collisions among self-interested individuals, a stable social order thus emerges, one that can be analyzed in much the same way Newton deciphered the order amid the flux of the physical world. Smith's "invisible hand" of the market, which generates harmony out of the chaotic, self-interested behavior of individuals, is a deliberate analogue to the unseen forces that harmonize Newton's physical world.[10] Indeed, Newton's universe of abstract mathematical space-time is thoroughly consonant with the world of the capitalist market. "To the physical abstraction of space corresponds the economic abstraction of the market, which renders different types of

labour and wealth commensurable through the monetary relation," writes Daniel Bensaïd. "To homogeneous, empty physical time corresponds the linear time of circulation and accumulation."[11] Newtonian space is thus a corollary of the abstracting social space of commodified social life governed by capitalist markets.

In suggesting that intersectionality theory is haunted by social Newtonianism, I am referring precisely to the idea that different axes and vectors of difference can be mapped in social space as ontologically separate and autonomous "bits" that enter into external relations with other "bits." Just like every atom must be measurable and every commodity must have its measure in price, so a theory of distinct axes or vectors requires each relation to be enclosable, measurable, mappable. Ironically, major currents in modern science—from systems theory to chaos and complexity theory—have moved far beyond such an approach. As one commentator observes, "In modern science, dynamic interaction appears to be the central problem in all fields of reality."[12] With dynamic interaction—as opposed to external collisions among things—comes, at least implicitly, the notion that things are *internally* related, i.e., that one thing (part or relation) is intrinsically constituted by the relations it has with others. In this respect, contemporary scientific thought can often be found moving away from mechanics and toward dialectics.[13] Let us return to our examination of intersectionality theory in this light.

While intersectional theorists tend to work with locations and vectors rather than the atomic individuals of liberal theory, they confront a similar methodological problem. They too are challenged when it comes to deriving some kind of social order or system from these parts. Why, after all, do we have reason to hold that independently constituted axes of oppression will come into contact? If they do, why should an ordered pattern emerge, rather than random chaos? And why should such contact not internally affect the axes or vectors in question? Perhaps because intersectionality originates in legal theory—with its foundational doctrine of discrete and autonomous legal subjects who possess property and rights—it regularly finds itself trapped within an atomism that its most sophisticated proponents seek to escape (as in Hill Collins's efforts to theorize a singular "matrix of domination"). Atomic individuals, of course, can only collide, or avoid colliding, in social space. When the former happens, we witness violations of the personal space of rights and property. Little surprise, then, that intersectionality theory, notwithstanding admirable efforts to the contrary, regularly reverts to

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spatialized conceptions of the social whole. Indeed, Anthias ends up advocating a merger of intersectionality with stratification theory and its vulgar depiction of social relations of power in terms of geological strata.[14] The result is the adding of one rigidly spatial metaphor—strata—to those of axes, vectors, and locations.

Even where intersectional theorists try to move toward a conception of "interactions" between different relations of domination, they remain trapped in what Hegel describes as *chemism*, an outlook which acknowledges "reciprocal adjustment and combination" among elements but remains "infected . . . with externality," that is, with the idea that discrete, preconstituted ingredients can only affect each other from the outside, not in a truly formative manner.[15] Dialectical organicism, however, sees a diverse and complex social whole as constitutive of every part, and each part as reciprocally constitutive of every other. This enables it to overcome the aporias of intersectional atomism. In this way, dialectics can transcend what Himani Bannerji describes as "the habit of fragmentive or stratified thinking so prevalent among us, which ends up by erasing *the social* from the conception of ontology."[16]

ONTOLOGY AND DIALECTICS

In his *Science of Logic*, Hegel sets out a tripartite typology of models of interaction in the natural and human sciences. He identifies the three models in question as *mechanism*, *chemism*, and *teleology*. These models summarize the state of scientific thinking in his age and, I would suggest, continue to shed significant light on debates in the social sciences, including those concerning intersectionality and social reproduction theory.

Mechanism, which Hegel clearly associates with Newtonianism, involves "a mechanical style of thinking" in which discrete objects come into external relations with one another. To the degree to which mechanism conceives of a plurality of things, it considers them as an "aggregation"—recall here the lists of fourteen and then sixteen axes or vectors of difference that we have seen—in which the "unity" of all the parts is "an external indifferent one." Rather than the parts being unified as internally related aspects of a whole, the whole is instead considered to be a mere sum of indifferent parts. In this outlook, "the objects are self-subsistent in regard to one another" and exist in the form of "mutual externality."[17]

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Chemism, according to Hegel, has the merit of acknowledging interactions among differentiated elements. But because it too begins with the presumptions of atomism, with its vision of independently constituted bits of the world whose most basic properties are unaffected by other parts, it can only imagine interaction on the lines of "reciprocal adjustment and combination" of parts with each other. So, chemism may recognize the combination of two parts hydrogen with one part oxygen that produces water, but it does not theorize the qualitative transformations that this combination entails—the emergence of forms of life that are not reducible to these two chemical elements. As a result, the interactions of which chemism speaks are "still infected . . . with externality."[18] One can observe precisely this approach in intersectional accounts that speak in terms of "interactions between inequality-creating social structures."[19] These structures are taken to be discrete and relatively fixed "things" that preexist their interaction. A similar problem persists within accounts of interconnectivities and interlocking relations among multiple systems of oppression.[20] New combinations may be created by interactions and interconnectivities, but the structures themselves are viewed as constituted prior to their contact with one another.

In dialectical opposition to mechanism and chemism—by which, following Hegel, I mean a negation that overcomes theoretical contradictions and blockages while retaining a theory's most scientific insights—Hegel turns to teleology. Here, given the dominance of analytical and positivist modes of thought, a few clarifications are in order.

Positivism and postmodern theory converge today in their hostility to teleology. Positivism wants "the facts and just the facts," its hyperempiricism displaying an allergy to any larger causes or purposes that might superintend the immediately observable "facts." Events, such as wars or economic crises, are *merely* events; any larger theorization in terms, say, of the dynamics of capitalism and imperialism is considered illicit, as these transcend the particularity of the phenomenon taken as a discrete, atomic happening. In a different idiom, postmodern theory too has rejected teleology as a search for grand narratives, for stories that illegitimately seek an overarching directionality to discrete phenomena and events.[21] As critics have pointed out, both antiteleological positions are caught up in a performative contradiction. After all, a claim for no larger purposes or directionalities in nature and society is itself a grand

narrative, a universal claim that cannot be disclosed from single events in and of themselves.

Hegel's fundamental argument in this regard is that life itself has a teleological dynamic, i.e. life is purposeful. As Hegel explains, all life obeys a tendency to preserve and reproduce itself. We cannot comprehend our world and ourselves outside of an understanding of such life purposes. So, to use a familiar example, if I build a table, its *material cause* is wood. Its *formal cause* is the form of a table: that is, it must be formed with legs of roughly equal length in order to balance it, and so on. Its *efficient cause* is the activity—sawing wood, joining pieces, hammering nails, sanding the tabletop, and so on that I perform as a table maker. But the final cause (*telos*)—the purpose that informs its making—is the reproduction of the lives of those in my household.[22] It is around the table that we will gather to eat, drink, celebrate, and regenerate our communal bonds. It is around the table that we will socially and materially reproduce ourselves as interconnected living persons. For Hegel, the concept of teleology is both as simple and as profound as that.

The standpoint of teleology can only be an organic one. A part of a living system is not a discrete, self-sufficient atomic bit. The lungs do not exist simply to process oxygen unto themselves; they exist in relation to the heart, the circulatory system, and so on. It is the total organism that is alive—not the hands, eyes, or liver on their own. All of these organs have one overriding imperative—the reproduction of the total process of life—to which they are not equal on their own. Their functions make teleological sense only as an ensemble, only in their interconnections as parts whose purpose pertains to the whole, the living organism in its totality. The same applies to a product of human labor, such as a table. When I build a table for use in my household, table legs, joints, and wooden top are produced as elements of an organic whole, not as discrete ends in themselves. Similarly, when I build concepts with which to understand something, they are informed by the broader purpose of making sense of the world as part of living in it—and this applies as well to the vulgar empiricist, for whom the denial of general knowledge is part of her account of life. Living systems—from the body to the objects in a household to systems of knowledge—are all informed by purposes. Hegel holds that the same is true for social collectivities, from the family to the state.[23]

Among the most materialistic elements in Hegel's dialectic is his insistence that what pertains to life also pertains to thought. If life

is animated by the purposefulness of a dynamic organic system, then thought, as an aspect of life, must obey the same imperative. Thought must be equal to the complex, manifold richness of life. It must seek out "the real organic Concept or the whole."[24] Just as life is a journey that describes a dynamic, contradictory path, the same is true of thought. As a good and true life is one that increases in the richness of its relations, knowledge, and experience, the same is true of thought. True thinking endeavors not to produce fixed thought-objects, but to trace a *process* of ever richer comprehension. "Truth is not a minted coin that can be given and pocketed ready-made." Instead, truth is the process of ever richer, more detailed, more concrete comprehension of ourselves and our world. All quests for knowledge begin with specific bits of information (or "contents" of thought), says Hegel. The scientific method of philosophy, he argues, "is the necessary expansion of that content into an organic whole. Through this movement the path by which the concept of knowledge is reached becomes likewise a necessary and complete process of becoming."[25]

This is why Hegel, in a move that is radically at odds with formal logic, introduces the concept of life into his *Science of Logic*.[26] For if the task of thought—and what could be a higher goal?—is to comprehend life, then this requires a conceptual system adequate to life's complex, dynamic, multidimensional unfolding. However, this necessitates not formal-logical categories, but dialectical ones; not the fixed and static concepts of analytical philosophy, with its minted coins, but concepts that are internally dynamic and self-transforming, concepts that capture the very *becoming* of things in their many-sidedness. Dialectical concepts, Hegel insists, "become fluid" as one passes into another and attains a greater richness. This requires that the differences that constitute a phenomenon, its "differentiated moments," must lose their "fixity," as thought grapples with their fundamental dynamism and relationality—which is, of course, the dynamism and relationality of the elements of life itself.[27] Dialectical thinking thus drives beyond the "method of labelling . . . and pigeon-holing everything" in which "the living essence of the matter has been stripped away or boxed up." It resists the abstracting tendencies of analytical thinking, which endeavors to decompose phenomena into ever smaller bits that can be boxed up and labeled. By contrast, dialectics traces "the *coming to be of the object,*" the dynamic and changing interrelations among the elements of life that comprise a concrete (and hence internally differentiated) totality.[28]

For Marx, this mode of dialectical thinking was second nature, something upon which he rarely reflected, so much did he take it for granted. Yet, after Marx's death, Engels recognized how foreign it would be for many readers of Marx's work. As a result, Engels advised that readers of *Capital* should not look for

> fixed, cut-to-measure, once and for all applicable definitions in Marx's works. It is self-evident that where things and their interrelations are conceived, not as fixed, but as changing, their mental images, the ideas, are likewise subject to change and transformation, and they are not encapsulated in rigid definitions, but are developed in their historical or logical process of formation.[29]

This rejection of formal-logical methods of definition corresponds to a dialectical view of life as dynamic becoming. Concepts cannot be fixed and rigid because life is nothing of the sort. It follows that the multi-dimensionality of social life cannot be grasped by presupposing its parts to be "ontologically autonomous." On the contrary, as much as there are analytically identifiable components of living wholes—hands and eyes, or concrete individuals—they can only be fully understood relationally. For dialectical organicism, objects are in fact *relations*;[30] these relations are in flux, undergoing temporal transformations that reconfigure them as elements of a living system.

It is instructive that, in her critique of intersectionality theory, Himani Bannerji too insists on the priority of life, or lived experience. "Non-white and white people living in Canada or the West know," she writes,

> that this social experience is not, as lived, a matter of intersectionality. Their sense of being in the world, textured through myriad social relations and cultural forms, is lived or felt or perceived as being all together and all at once.[31]

From this perspective, Bannerji advocates an understanding of the concrete social whole in "its multiple mediations of social relations and forms."[32] "We need to venture," she writes, "into a more complex reading of the social, where every aspect can be shown to reflect others, where every little piece of it contains the macrocosm in the microcosm."[33] The distinct parts of a social whole are thus *internally* related; they mediate each other and in so doing constitute each other. And things (or

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relations) that are intermediated and co-constituting are not ontologically separate, even if they have properties that differentiate them and constitute a relative distinctiveness.

To be sure, there are properties specific to the different parts of a whole. The eye has particular functional properties quite different from those of the hand. Racism has specific characteristics that allow us to distinguish it in the first instance from sexism. But these distinctions do not provide exhaustive definitions. They afford a starting point from which thought unfolds the internal relations of parts to other parts and to the organic system as a whole. Racism, in other words, can be understood as a *partial totality* with unique features that must ultimately be grasped in relation to the other partial totalities that comprise the social whole in its process of becoming. Each partial totality, each partial system within the whole, has unique characteristics (and a certain "relative autonomy" or, better put, relational autonomy). The "heart-lung system," for instance constitutes such a partial totality within the human organism as a whole. But no part (or partial totality) is ontologically autonomous per se. Each part is both (partially) autonomous and dependent, (partially) separate and ontologically interconnected. Consequently, none can be grasped adequately as a self-sufficient unit outside of its membership in a living whole. Of course, the organic whole is constituted in and through its parts—it is these that give it determinateness and concreteness—but it is not reducible to its parts. It is something greater and more systematic than a mere additive sum. There are, insists Hegel, relations of reciprocity, rather than mechanism, between parts and between parts and the whole. Indeed, this is what it means to be a living organism rather than a lifeless mechanism.

It is at this point in his analysis of life that Hegel introduces his concept of reproduction. A living organism, after all, must reproduce itself; without reproduction—be it daily, seasonal, or generational—life ceases. Moreover, it is the organism as a whole that must reproduce itself, for it is the total organism that lives, biological or social. Individual organs live only through the reproduction of the entire organism. It follows that parts and whole are bound together in a single life-process:

> in reproduction life is *concrete* and is vitality. . . . Each of the individual moments is essentially the totality of all; their difference constitutes the ideal form determinateness, which is posited in reproduction as the concrete totality of the whole.[34]



A concrete totality attains concreteness ("determinateness") through the differences that comprise it. At the same time, each of these different parts carries the whole within it; as elements of life, their reproduction is impossible outside of the living whole. It is with just this conception in mind that Marx famously writes, "The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse."[35] Totalities or universals are not abstractions from the concrete diversity and multiplicity of things for Hegel and Marx. On the contrary, totalities are constituted in and through the diversity and dynamism of real life processes. This is what distinguishes the abstract universals of formal logic from "the concrete totality of the whole" that animates dialectical thinking. The dialectical concept of totality thus involves comprehending a process of *totalization* that unifies (without suppressing) the partial totalities constitutive of it. The social totality is thus grasped as existing "in and through those manifold mediations through which the specific complexes—i.e. 'partial totalities'—are linked to each other in a constantly shifting and changing, dynamic overall complex."[36]

This sort of conception, I submit, is what an intersectional theorist like Patricia Hill Collins aspires to when she writes that interlocking systems of oppression ought to be understood as "part of a single, historically created system." Hill Collins rightly points here toward a unitary ("single"), historically developing system. In so doing, her critical insight points beyond the spatial metaphor that constrains intersectional theory. Dialecticized, Hill Collins's move opens the way toward an organic conception of society as a dynamic system of internally connected (and thus co-constituting) social relations. The conundrum for intersectionality theory has been that the cartography of locations, vectors, and axes and the atomistic conceptual framing built upon it are unamenable to this sort of dialectical theorization.

Hill Collins's insightful reminder that social systems are "historically created" also gestures toward an aspect of Hegel's conception of teleology that is utterly crucial to his theory—and utterly foreign to empiricist and positivist forms of thought. I refer here to his concept of *retrodetermination*, a concept that is unthinkable by means of mechanism or chemism. After all, nondialectical thought is dominated by a concept of causation that pivots on temporal succession: first arrives a cause, then its effects. But Hegel's conception of life pushes beyond that. In life, after all, the full meaning of what I did in the past will only come to fruition in the present or the future. If I plant seeds in a garden, what I have done

remains to be seen. Perhaps my failure to tend these seeds, or a lack of rainfall will bring my efforts to naught. Perhaps war will drive me from my land. On the other hand, a whole series of *subsequent* actions may allow me to bring these seeds to fruition. Only after the fact might I be able to say that my planting was an act of creating food crops. Similarly, the meaning of my past social relationships and activities is open-ended and amendable. A painful childhood relation may be transformed into something quite different in adulthood. The meaning of my past would thus have been retroactively reworked. To take a political example, the meaning of activities by socialists today are indeterminate. If a socialist future were one day to arrive, this would give new meaning to the small and often thankless tasks we performed in the past. Understood in these terms, we may say that in life endings determine beginnings—or indeed that they *are* the beginnings. Hegel writes, "It can therefore be said of teleological activity that in it the end is the beginning, the consequent the ground, the effect the cause, that it is a becoming of what has become."[37]

This is one reason why abstract debates of the "is racism necessary to capitalism?" sort are so decidedly flawed. One cannot know such things in advance, on the basis of principles abstracted from concrete historical life. What we can say is that the actual historical process by which capitalism emerged in our world integrally involved social relations of race and racial domination. From the standpoint of "the effect"—racialized capitalism—we can say definitively that racism is a necessary feature of the historical capitalism in which we live. The effect has thus become a cause—and it is systematically reproduced in and through the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. In the "single, historically created system" (Hill Collins) in which we live, all of these relations of social power—from gender, racial, and sexual domination to capitalist exploitation—form a complex social whole, one in which "each of the individual moments is essentially the totality of the whole." This, it seems to me, is precisely what Bannerji intends when she urges that "'race' cannot be disarticulated form 'class' any more than milk can be separated from coffee once they are mixed, or the body divorced from consciousness in a living person."[38] These relations do not need to be brought into intersection because each is already inside the other, co-constituting one another to their very core. Rather than standing at intersections, we stand in the river of life, where multiple creeks and streams have converged into a complex, pulsating system.

REVISITING SOCIAL REPRODUCTION THEORY WITH ANGELA DAVIS'S *WOMEN, RACE AND CLASS*

As we have seen, Hegel's teleological model of life culminates in the concept of reproduction. There can be little doubt that this Hegelian insight lies at the basis of Marx's concept of the (expanded) reproduction of capital. As an organic system, the capitalist mode of production must be capable of reproducing itself in time and space. One of the purposes of *Capital* is to show the essential laws through which it does so, and the antagonisms, conflicts, and contradictions they generate.

Starting in the late 1960s, Marxist-feminist scholars began deploying a distinctive approach to how working-class households reproduce the essential commodity upon which capitalism revolves—labor power. Rather than focusing exclusively on capital's reproduction, they interrogated that of the working class, taking up the gendered dynamics through which the daily and generational reproduction of labor power occurred. In so doing, they underscored the daily and generational reproduction of living laborers, which is an essential precondition for the ongoing reproduction of capital. While some advocates of this approach—dubbed social reproduction theory or social reproduction feminism—lapsed into a fundamental dualism which posited distinct modes of production and reproduction (known as "dual systems theory"), the most sophisticated contributions to the field sought out a unitary conceptualization in which these were theorized as two moments of a complexly unified social process.[39] Yet, notwithstanding the powerful insights generated by social reproduction approaches, most commentators failed to integrate processes of racialization into their analysis. The great accomplishment of intersectionality theory was to expand the framework of discussion—initially to race, gender, and class, and more recently to other relations of oppression, such as those of sexuality and ability.

Yet, like dual systems approaches, intersectional theorists tended toward the *additive method* we have described in the first section of this paper. Where the dualists added together relations of class and gender, intersectionalists added a third element—race—to the mix, in efforts to arrive at a more complex picture of the social whole. Subsequent interventions have expanded the number of additional factors, to the point at which we now have discussions about the "sixteen vectors" of difference that define social being. Rarely, however, have attempts been made to think

all of these relations as co-constituting parts of the differentiated unity that comprises a concrete social totality. And as a postmodern cultural climate took hold—where plurality was celebrated and universality condemned—the emphasis on ontologically autonomous regions (locations, axes, vectors, etc.) of social life predominated, generating the intellectual fragmentation and stratification of the social bemoaned by Bannerji. More recently, however, in tandem with a broader renewal of historical materialism, imaginative theorists have undertaken to renovate social reproduction theory by accenting its emphasis on social labor in its widest sense as *human practical activity*. Highlighting embodied labor activities in concrete social-spatial relations, they have shown how the ensemble of practices which reproduce social life are simultaneously organized via multiple relations of domination and power, centrally including race. Lately, work in this vein has been developed in social reproduction theorizations of the global reproduction of labor power, including its cross-border organization.[40]

This renewed emphasis on the differentiated unity of practical activities through which human beings produce and reproduce themselves, their social relations, and their relations with the natural environment offers a compelling basis for dialectical theorization of the sort we have advocated above. As Ferguson argues, "such a theory encourages us to understand those layered and contradictory experiences as part of a much broader, dynamic, and materialist set of social relations—relations created, contested, and reproduced by our labor inside and outside the household."[41] In so doing, such a theoretical approach returns us to the complex unity of the multifaceted but internally connected processes by which life is reproduced in determinate social forms.

Here I want to venture a further claim. I want to insist that, largely because of its historical materialist orientation and its overriding emphasis on the interplay of the production of value and the reproduction of human beings, Angela Davis's seminal work, *Women, Race and Class* (1981), ought to be considered a social reproduction text in just the ways I have been outlining. In proposing this, I do not mean to deny the status Davis's text has in intersectionality literature. But I do mean to redeem its historical materialist core and its power as a classic in antiracist and feminist Marxism, one that shares the spirit of the most compelling work in social reproduction theory.

Davis's text, after all, repeatedly grounds the *labors* of Black women—as both wage-earners and members of households—in organizing their

lives. Davis regularly underlines the much higher proportion of Black women employed as wage workers compared to white women, and she highlights their struggles over conditions of employment. Crucially, she points out that for huge numbers of Black women, wage labor *was* household labor—for *other* households, that is, for wealthy white families—with overwhelming numbers of Black women employed as domestics.[42] Davis further demonstrates the complex unity of both racism and sexism toward Black women workers, particularly with respect to sexual assault on the job—showing the utterly interwoven character of sexism, racism, and class exploitation in the experience of Black working-class women. At the same time, she accents how involvement in labor in both the slave and post-slavery periods bestowed a distinctive independence upon Black women within African American households.[43] What holds the various elements of this analysis together is the text's insistence that the gendered and racialized relations of capitalist production and reproduction give an overriding unity to all these dimensions of social experience. Indeed, in an implicitly Hegelian-Marxist gesture, Davis urges that in the American situation, "the enslavement of Black people in the South, the economic exploitation of Northern workers and the social oppression of women" should be seen as "systematically related."[44]

Now, to be s*ystematically* related involves considerably more than mere intersection. Intersections can be relatively random and haphazard; systems cannot. In a system, all the parts are ordered and integrated in ways that are determined by the other components. For this reason, a system is always more than the sum of its parts. There is an inseparability here in which the whole determines the parts, even as it is reciprocally determined by its subunits in turn. Davis's formulation strongly suggests that black slavery, women's oppression, and the economic exploitation of wage labor comprised "a single, historically created system" (Hill Collins) in the United States, a complexly unified capitalist social formation. Seen in these terms, *Women, Race and Class* emerges as an explicitly historical materialist text that seeks to anatomize the social reproduction of a racist, male-dominated capitalist mode of production in the United States. Indeed, there seems no other way to fully appreciate the text's claim that, for Black and working-class women, an end to gender oppression can only mean the socialization of housework, whose precondition is "an end to the profit-motive's reign over the economy."[45] In other words, gender oppression is inextricably entwined (as is its overcoming) with the

capitalist structure of the economy—so much so that, to overturn one, the other must be transformed. This, of course, is another way of saying that, however much they are differentiated relations, they constitute an integral system.

For Davis, in other words, we are dealing with a capitalist mode of production and reproduction that entails historically specific relations of gender and racial oppression. Rather than enumerating discrete axes and vectors, she shows the systematic interrelations in and through which racial and gender domination are utterly interwoven with capitalist exploitation—so much so that they cannot legitimately be considered separable, even if they remain analytically distinct at a certain rough-and-ready level of abstraction. As a result, changes in one subset of relations presuppose changes in all the others and in the system as a whole.

There was a time, during the ascendance of neoliberalism and the flowering of the postmodern moment, when talk of system transformation was treated as hopelessly modernist. But that sociopolitical moment has waned in the face of an enduring global economic slump, a grinding age of austerity, and the resurgence of movements against capitalist social inequality. Our new conjuncture has given rise to an intellectual renaissance of historical materialism in the context of new anticapitalist struggles. After all, the fundamentally capitalist character of our world system is on dramatic display; the most inspiring radical social movements are posing the problem of system transformation rather than partial amelioration.[46] In this political-intellectual climate, it is not surprising that Marxist-inspired social reproduction theory has similarly resurged as a response to crucial aporias in intersectionality approaches, while also drawing upon critical insights about multiple forms of oppression that the latter has advanced. As I have tried to show here, to be equal to the tasks of the moment, a dialectically reconstructed social reproduction theory is vital if we are to understand the "unity of the diverse" that is the shape of our world—and if we are to change it.