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Let me start with something biographical, which for me is where my questions about intersectionality became serious.

In 2019, a group of us in Melbourne were in the process of setting up a radical feminist group. At the first meeting, something happened which I experienced as dissonant, but which I also felt I couldn't ask questions about. As we went around, saying what radical feminist issues we were passionate about and wanted the group to work on, two women of colour said that it was important for the group to work on racism. I thought, that's odd, aren't racism and feminism two different issues? Immediately, as if provoked by those women's contribution, a woman with a physical disability said that it was also important for the group to work on discrimination against people with disabilities. I thought, again, that's odd... aren't ableism and feminism two different issues? And I started to worry about all the further social justices issues that there are, that might be affecting the different women at the table, and which might then be put forward for our group to work on. I wanted to work on *feminism*, and I worried that these further issues were changing the subject.

Some of you listening might be thinking, yeah that sounds like typical white woman reasoning! For a certain kind of white woman – namely the middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, non-trans, etc. white woman – the only thing that oppresses her is treatment on the basis of her sex, so she rather selfishly wants to protect a feminism that takes care of all and only her issues. But the same reaction might have been had by any woman at that table. A woman of colour who understood the way that racism and sexism could come together and wanted at least some anti-racism issues to be part of the group's focus might still have had the same reaction as me to the idea that the group should work on discrimination on the basis of disability. Any woman at that table, belonging to any combination of social groups, might have thought well *that* issue is not a feminist issue.

Now, if that table, instead of being the first meeting of strangers in the city's only radical feminist café, had been one of the round tables in a philosophy seminar room on my campus, I would have felt perfectly free to ask, "hey everyone, I'm feeling confused: these issues strike me as something other than feminism, can someone explain to me how we're conceiving of radical feminism, and what its agenda is? Can someone explain to me how all these issues, which appear *to me* as further issues, are in fact impossible to disentangle from feminism, or should be part of any feminism worth its salt?" In the philosophy seminar room, these kinds of questions are okay. Around that table, and I suspect in many newly-formed feminist groups, they are not. We worry about not being in the know, about saying the wrong thing, about offending another woman, about coming across like a bigot.

Indeed, not long afterwards, when a smaller group of us had broken away from the main group to work on opposing the sex self-identification legislation that was announced in Victoria that year, my asking of some of those questions caused quite a bit of trouble. We'd had posters designed for an event we were having on my campus on the future of sex-based rights. Two women in the group wanted us to add statements about indigenous land rights to all of the marketing materials for the event. I asked why, because again, it struck me that indigenous land rights – as important an issue as that is – are not obviously a feminist issue. (And in particular, do not obviously have anything to do with an event about the future of sex-based rights). First I was accused of racism, for asking, and when I defended myself, I was accused of "white fragility". This issue caused a rift between the women in the group, and the

two women making the accusations ended up leaving the group, which left us short on volunteers to run the actual event.

I think these reactions, and what would have happened if I'd asked these questions at that first meeting of the group, can be explained by the understanding of intersectionality that has made its way into the popular culture. And I put it that way, rather than just saying "can be explained by intersectionality", because I think there are important differences between what the academic theorists were actually trying to get at, and how some of these ideas have in fact been taken up and implemented.

What seems to have made it through into the popular culture is the idea that there are many different axes of oppression, for example race, sex, class, sexual orientation, being trans, and more. Then there is the idea that these axes can interact, or make each other worse, and maybe even, that they cannot really be disentangled from each other. And finally, there is a kind of implicit hierarchy: we have a rough sense of which axes of oppression are the better and the worse, and we roughly believe that being impacted by two is a lot worse than being impacted by one, being impacted by three is a lot worse than being impacted by two, and so on.

All of this means we can come up with a rough hierarchy in any group, based on a person's belonging to various social groups. And there are norms about how to treat people depending on where they sit in that hierarchy. The more oppressed a person is, the more it is the case that they should be *deferred to*. Some other popularised versions of academic ideas come in here too, like the idea that a person's unique lived experience gives her knowledge that people without that experience don't have, and *that* in turn justifies deferring to those people on matters relating to that experience *because they know more than you, or you have ignorance where they have knowledge*. All of these ideas have something to them, but they can be overdone.

The norm I would have been violating then, in that first meeting, had I questioned the inclusion of race and disability within our group's radical feminist agenda, would have been deference to worse-off women. As a white woman I am expected to defer, and asking those questions would have involved asserting myself as an equal. Asserting myself as an equal—treating all other women in the group as equals, both to myself and to each other—comes to mean *failing to acknowledge privilege*, and to perform the social signals that we have developed, on the left, for acknowledging and repudiating that privilege. Similarly when I later questioned the addition of claims about indigenous land rights on our event's marketing materials, I was very much failing to perform those signals. (For those outside Australia, which I assume is most of the audience tonight, there is a very strong social norm of acknowledging indigenous land rights in the context of public events, no matter their focus, and this is in part because Australia has failed to make any reparations for historical injustice).

But inside a feminism concerned centrally with sex caste, which I think both radical feminism and gender critical feminism are, it makes absolutely no sense to consider women as 'privileged'. The movement is simply not about putting all axes of oppression together and seeing who is the worst off and working on that. That would be the approach of a generalised movement for global justice, but it's not the approach of a movement for women's sex-based rights and interests.

Catherine MacKinnon referred to this idea of the privileged woman as "Woman, modified": "woman discounted by white, meaning she would be oppressed but for her privilege"

(MacKinnon 1991, p. 19). Her feminism centres sex. She says “women’s situation combines unequal pay with allocation to disrespected work, sexual targeting for rape, domestic battering, sexual abuse as children, and systemic sexual harassment; depersonalization, demeaned physical characteristics, use in denigrating entertainment, deprivation of reproductive control, and forced prostitution” (*ibid*, p. 15). And of white women, and the way the concept of the “privileged” white woman is used inside feminism, she says “What is done to white women can be done to any woman, and then some. This does not make white woman the essence of womanhood. It is a reality to observe that this is what can be done and *is* done to the most privileged of women. This is what privilege as a woman gets you: most valued as dead meat” (*ibid*, p. 21).

It is not remotely obvious that in any group of women, the one who will have had the worst experiences in virtue of her sex will be the one with the most identity features according to the popularised understanding of intersectionality. The wealthy straight white woman might have suffered a horrific childhood of sexual abuse, and the working class lesbian woman might have suffered only some sexual harassment and moderate verbal homophobia.

Before I go on to explain how these ideas are allowing middle-class white men to claim to be the most oppressed, let me make one clarification in what I’m saying about privilege. It’s not that radical and gender critical feminists should reject all ideas about privilege. Indeed they shouldn’t; the concept of male privilege is important. For the relevant axis of oppression, like sex, there will generally be a group with disadvantage, and a group with advantage. It can be useful for feminists to talk about male privilege, and to expect men to do the work to unlearn that privilege. Indeed, some of the opposition to having men with gender identities using women-only spaces is that those men are likely to bring male privilege into the space. The difference is in focusing on the privilege of those who are advantaged by the axis of oppression relative to the movement. For radical and gender critical feminism, that is male/female. So it is men, and *only* men, who have “privilege” in that context. That doesn’t mean women can’t have privilege in other contexts; they can. If an able-bodied woman goes to a disability rights activism meeting, she may appropriately be seen as having able-bodied privilege and be expected to defer to those with the relevant disadvantage, or to take steps to ‘unlearn’ that privilege, including ways of seeing and relating to people with disabilities. The same goes for the white woman at the black liberation meeting. My point here is one about privilege and deference *between women, inside radical and gender critical feminism*.

And even that needs qualification, because of course no activist group is going to be successful if its members have discriminatory or otherwise shitty attitudes toward other members of the group. So *of course* radical and gender critical feminists need to not be racists, homophobes, ableist, etc. That is a precondition of working together effectively across diversity. But that is a very different thing to putting all of the social justice issues in existence onto the feminist agenda.

Okay, on to middle-class white men and how they end up being perceived, on the left, as “the most oppressed”. I’m not claiming that all men with gender identities are white and middle-class, I’m just taking this cohort as the most dramatic illustration of the point. Imagine a male-presenting, fully male-bodied person who identifies as a woman and wants she/her pronouns; or a male-presenting, fully male-bodied person who identifies as nonbinary and wants people to use they/them pronouns. Suppose that these men are both middle-class, and both heterosexual, that is, are males attracted to females. For the person who maintains a sex/gender identity distinction, meaning, who thinks a person’s sex is one thing, and his

gender identity is another, such men have one and only one social group membership that make them disadvantaged, namely having gender identities (some would say, being trans – I’m just talking in terms of gender identities here to be clear that the most pressing issue is with mere self-identification).

But for the leftists who have become convinced that gender identity *transforms* sex, the identifications of these middle-class white heterosexual men catapult them to the bottom, or at least near the bottom, of the intersectional pile. The ‘man’ becomes a ‘woman’, and so is disadvantaged along the axis of sex. The ‘woman’ is attracted to ‘women’, and so is disadvantaged along the axis of sexual orientation. And the ‘woman’ is still trans, and so is disadvantaged along the axis of gender identity. *One* point of disadvantage magically becomes *three*, and our middle-class white straight man is suddenly a middle-class white lesbian trans woman.

An example of this exact reasoning showed up in an Australian news article last year. Western Sydney University Professor Jane Ussher was quoted in an *ABC News* article about sexual harassment and violence against transwomen saying: “[It’s] because they are women, because they are trans, because they are a woman of colour and many of whom were bisexual, queer or lesbian so these different multiple identities put them at high risk of sexual violence”. She’s describing someone born male as a ‘woman’, a ‘woman of colour’, and ‘queer’ or ‘lesbian’, in addition to being ‘trans’. Even if we’re talking about a straight male person of colour, *two* becomes *four* (person of colour + trans becomes woman + woman of colour + lesbian + trans). From one entirely subjective identity claim, we get oppression along four axes, and a strong claim, therefore, to being “the most oppressed”. Middle-class straight white men start “outranking” middle-class white lesbians, or middle-class straight women of colour, in the intersectional hierarchy. This is *absurd*.

The absurdity is *both* in thinking that gender identity transforms sex, which has knock-on effects for how we think about sexual orientations and compounded oppressions (like being a woman of colour), *and* in thinking in terms of total oppression hierarchies in the first place.

What’s the solution? We solve the problem of men ending up *anywhere* on the feminist intersectional hierarchy by refusing the idea that gender identity transforms sex, and insisting upon the sex / gender identity distinction. Sex is one thing, gender identity is another, and that is that. Radical and gender critical feminists are interested in sex caste, and so female people. An intersectional approach to radical feminism might mean being interested in a lot of other identity features of female people, but that never takes us to male people. Men “gaming the system” is thus ruled out.

But we can’t solve the problem of the feminist agenda coming to include all or almost all issues, and the problem of hierarchies between women inside feminism, without getting rid of the understanding of intersectionality that has made its way into popular culture. I think that radical and gender critical feminists should commit – perhaps should *recommit* – to the centrality of woman as a sex caste. I think that for the most part, radical and gender critical feminism should not be intersectional. It is a feminism for *all women*, but a feminism for all women *as women*, not as full persons. It should not be expected to speak to all aspects of women’s personhood, just as no other social justice movement does (consider e.g. Black Lives Matter, or Extinction Rebellion). It is perfectly okay for a feminism to focus on one system of oppression, namely oppression on the basis of sex. That means it is okay to bracket other

issues, even other issues that affect women (but affect them not as women but as people). Some issues really are “changing the subject”.

The challenge, for us all, if we commit to this, is discerning when something is a “women as women” issue and when it’s a “women as people” issue. One heuristic is to ask whether the issue affects women of the social group more than men of the social group. Suppose a Filipino woman in Australia is struggling to get work, and suggests to her local radfem group that they put employment for Filipino women on their agenda. We might look at whether Filipino women are struggling with employment more than Filipino men. Suppose we find it is roughly equal. Then we might think, this is a race issue, not a feminist issue. The group may quite reasonably therefore refuse to put this issue on their agenda. And this won’t make them racists: only focused feminists.

The remaining complication is for cases of what may be referred to as the ‘compound’ oppression that can arise when two axes of oppression mix together. Angela Davis talks about the fact that black women under slavery in the US were subject to both slavery and sexual exploitation by the slaveowners. As Davis puts it “the master would be subjecting her to the most elemental form of terrorism distinctly suited for the female: rape” (p. 96). This is a way that black women are treated but black men are not, and yet it is a form of domination that is made much easier by slavery. It would be difficult to argue that it’s either *really* a race issue or *really* a sex issue. It looks like both, in a way that is more than either combined. But because of its sexual element, it also looks clearly like a “women as women” issue.

There might be some ‘compound’ oppressions, between being female and other social group features, that are novel in this way, and so create a difference with men of that same group, and yet are not plausibly about “women as women”. In that case my suggested heuristic won’t work. So we all need to have a further discussion about whether we think radical and gender critical feminism should be exclusively about women as women issues (and exactly what we think that means), or about women as women issues *and* all of the compound oppression issues that intersect with being female. The first produces the narrowest agenda, but the compound oppressions may fall through the cracks if most social justice movements focus on a single axis of oppression like I think feminism should recommit to doing.

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