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Intersectionality: Origins and limitations

Nora Dimitrova Clinton

Abstract. Intersectionality has become a dominant, largely unchallenged framework in contemporary academia. This paper examines its origins, core concepts, and applications, evaluating its assumptions and methods against standards of academic rigour. Using historical reconstruction and conceptual analysis, it places intersectionality within broader traditions of political and philosophical thought.

The analysis argues that intersectionality has significant theoretical and methodological flaws, including treating normative conclusions as given premises, conflating correlation with causation, and resisting empirical testing. In policy and institutional use, these features can produce harmful effects by undermining individual agency, meritocratic standards, and equal treatment under the law.

The paper concludes by contrasting intersectionality with approaches grounded in empirical accountability, conceptual clarity, and moral universalism, which offer more coherent and constructive ways to address social problems.

Keywords: intersectionality, critical theory, identity politics, academic methodology, liberal democracy

Methodological note

This study analyses intersectionality as it is commonly used in contemporary academia and institutional practice, assessing whether it provides a coherent and empirically robust account of social reality. The analysis proceeds in three stages: reconstructing its conceptual foundations, evaluating its methodological assumptions, and examining its practical applications. It treats intersectionality as a form of critical theory, which prioritizes normative critique over objective evaluation, creating tension with core requirements of theory.

Rather than surveying all empirical uses or denying multidimensional discrimination, the study focuses on the framework's core commitments, explanatory logic, and normative implications in influential contexts. It evaluates intersectionality on epistemic and moral grounds – coherence, clarity, empirical accountability, and testability – independent of proponents' intentions.[1]

[1] The author acknowledges limited use of Microsoft Copilot for language editing. All ideas, data, and substantive content are the author's own.

I. Introduction: Definition and bibliography review

1. Etymology and definition

Few theoretical frameworks have enjoyed such widespread popularity and rapid implementation across cultural, educational, governmental, legal, and corporate institutions, and society at large as intersectionality. Douglas Murray remarks that "[t]he interpretation of the world through the lens of 'social justice,' 'identity group politics,' and 'intersectionalism' is probably the most audacious and comprehensive effort since the end of the Cold War at creating a new ideology" (Murray 2021, 2).

Intersectionality derives from the verb "intersect," a word of Latin origin that means "to divide into two parts by passing through." It is typically defined as an analytical framework, which seeks to explain how individual and collective identities, such as race, gender, sexuality, disability, age, appearance, religion, class, or other characteristics result in different combinations of discrimination and privilege.

2. Selected sources

2.1. Concept development and positive evaluation

The term "intersectionality" was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 in her analysis of U.S. anti-discrimination law. She argued that prevailing legal and political frameworks failed to capture the compounded discrimination experienced by black women (Crenshaw 1989, 139–167) as positioned at intersecting axes of oppression (Crenshaw 1991, 1241–1299; cf. Crenshaw 2015)[2]. Intellectual precursors to intersectionality can be found in black feminist thought, notably the notion of "interlocking oppressions" articulated in the 1977 *Combahee River Collective Statement* (cf. McIntosh 1989; Collins 1990). More recently, scholars have framed W. E. B. Du Bois as a precursor to intersectionality, arguing that his analysis of race, class, gender, and "outsider within" epistemology anticipates its core concepts (Hughey 2023, 51–68).

Yuval-Davis expanded intersectionality's analytical scope by distinguishing between social divisions, identity, and power hierarchies (Yuval-Davis 2006, 193–209). Subsequent scholarship added new domains: Deckha, for example, proposed species difference as an axis of intersectional analysis within feminist legal and posthumanist theory (Deckha 2009; see also Deckha 2006; Deckha 2012), while later work increasingly incorporated sexuality and other social categories into intersectional frameworks (see, e.g., Holley, Chambers, Warner 2016, 93–116).

Patricia Hill Collins systematized intersectionality as an approach that treats race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, and age as mutually constitutive dimensions of social inequality (Collins 2015, 2). Collins has consistently emphasized that intersectionality functions both as an analytical lens and as a practical framework for research, pedagogy, and social justice practice.

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[2] On intersectionality across disciplines and its evolving applications in law, sociology, and public policy, see also Carbado et al. 2013, 303–312.

Hancock traced the political and intellectual history of intersectionality across disciplines (Hancock 2016), while Collins later framed it as a mature form of critical social theory (Collins 2019). Collins and Bilge further elaborated its foundations and applications in *Intersectionality* (2016; 2nd ed. 2020), now a standard text across sociology, gender studies, and related fields (Collins, Bilge 2020)[3].

2.2. Explosion in popularity since ca. 2020

Since approximately 2020, intersectionality has experienced rapid expansion in scholarly output and institutional uptake as a global, interdisciplinary framework. Recent bibliometric research documents substantial growth in intersectionality scholarship, alongside the emergence of new thematic areas such as climate justice, digital inequality, health equity, and epistemic decolonization (Rukminiarti, Andriani, Yusuf 2024, 168–185). In medicine and public health, intersectionality has been promoted as a core framework for identifying structural inequities within professional and clinical institutions (The Lancet Regional Health – Americas 2025). Parallel developments appear in education, where intersectionality increasingly informs teacher training, curriculum reform, and inclusive pedagogy (Pham Xuan 2025, 384–402).

Methodologically, intersectionality has expanded beyond its qualitative origins into quantitative approaches, including Multi-level Analysis of Individual Heterogeneity and Discriminatory Accuracy, designed to model intersectional stratification in large-scale datasets (Van Dusen et al. 2024). The framework has also been operationalized through institutional training practices and pedagogical tools aimed at raising intersectional awareness, influencing human-resources policy, organizational climate, and workforce development (Thomas et al. 2021, 5). A 2025 theoretical study reaffirmed the framework's roots in black feminist thought while underscoring its application to overlapping systems of oppression across multiple disciplines (Bukenya 2025, 30–34).

Intersectionality has thus evolved into an overarching analytical behemoth – a global academic field marked by rapid growth in publications, methods, and tools, applied across identity groups and social justice initiatives through large-scale Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion ("DEI") reforms.

2.3. Internal critique

Alongside its positive reception, intersectionality has generated sustained internal critique from scholars broadly sympathetic to its normative aims. These critiques focus on conceptual ambiguity, theoretical coherence, methodological challenges, and the risk of depoliticization as the framework entered mainstream academia.

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[3] Cf. Andersen, Collins (Eds) 2020, which emphasizes the intertwined nature of social identities and institutional systems.

Early methodological concerns were raised by McCall, who questioned approaches that treat social categories as either fixed or wholly fluid (McCall 2005, 1771–1800). Davis later characterized intersectionality's conceptual "messiness" as both a source of its appeal and a limitation on analytical precision (Davis 2008, 67–85).

Bürkner warned of conceptual vagueness in migration studies (Bürkner 2011, 15–28), while Garry criticized static metaphors such as "intersections" for oversimplifying identity (Garry 2011, 826–850). Winker and Degele proposed a multi-level framework integrating structure, representation, and identity to address such shortcomings (Winker, Degele 2011, 51–66).

Other critics highlighted theoretical gaps. Walby, Armstrong, and Strid argued that intersectionality lacked adequate macro-level theorization and focused excessively on identity (Walby, Armstrong, Strid 2012, 224–240). Carastathis challenged additive approaches to identity and advocated a relational, non-reductive understanding (Carastathis 2016). Bilge warned against the depoliticization and "whitening" of intersectionality in academic contexts (Bilge 2013, 405–424), while Bauer emphasized the difficulty applying quantitative analysis without individualizing structural inequality (Bauer 2014, 10–17).

More recent critiques have addressed institutionalization and epistemic practices. Else-Quest and Hyde criticized additive identity models in psychology (Else-Quest, Hyde 2016, 319–336), while Nash argued that intersectionality had become over-institutionalized (Nash 2019), expanding on her earlier critiques of the field (Nash 2008, 1–15).

Vivian May contended that intersectionality was often coopted, with dominant interpretive frameworks producing what she terms "interpretive violence" (May 2014, 94–112). A 2021 review warned of conceptual overreach, methodological inconsistency, and difficulties maintaining political commitments amid diverse applications (Collins et al. 2021, 690–725).

Christoffersen and Emejulu highlighted how institutional diversity practices can hollow out intersectionality's black feminist foundations (Christoffersen, Emejulu 2023, 630–653), while Bowleg and others identified superficial adoption and continued reliance on single-axis frameworks (Bowleg et al. 2023). Esposito (Esposito 2024, 505–521) and Piqueras-Leza (Piqueras-Leza et al. 2026, 1–19) each documented conceptual drift and weak operationalization, calling for more rigorous and politically grounded applications.

2.4. External critique

In contrast to internal criticism, external critiques of intersectionality have received limited academic attention[4]. These critics argue that intersectionality

[4] Select journalistic and non-academic sources are referenced here not as substitutes for scholarly argument, but because they articulate clearly formulated critiques of intersectionality whose relative absence from the academic literature reflects ideological bias rather than analytical insignificance.

overextends its explanatory scope, promotes divisive identity essentialism, and undermines individual rights.

External critics contend that intersectionality reframes social analysis as a hierarchy of oppression, encouraging social fragmentation and normative coercion. Continetti argued that it fosters solipsism and division (Continetti 2018), while Murray critiqued identity-based politics as destabilizing liberal democratic norms (Murray 2019)[5]. Hochman emphasized the framework's reliance on subjective lived experience (Hochman 2019), and Bloch characterized intersectionality as a caste-like system based on identity (Bloch 2019; cf. Coaston 2019).

Other critics situate intersectionality within broader postmodern and critical-theory traditions. Mohamed argued that intersectionality instrumentalizes victimhood (Mohamed 2019), while Pluckrose and Lindsay traced its genealogy through postmodern epistemology (Pluckrose, Lindsay 2020). Magness (Magness 2020; Magness 2021) and Ramaswamy (Ramaswamy 2021) critiqued its incompatibility with classical liberal institutions, and Shapiro argued that it facilitates ideological conformity across academic and cultural domains (Shapiro 2021).

More recently, Glawson discussed intersectionality as incompatible with commitments to individual liberty (Glawson 2024), while Rojas argued that its rejection of liberal institutions undermines minority flourishing (Rojas 2025, 183–202). Jacobson, Kaye (Jacobson, Kaye 2025), and Stulman (Stulman 2026a; Stulman 2026b; Stulman 2026c; Stulman 2026d) extended these critiques to institutional and campus contexts, contending that intersectionality has become an organizing framework for extremist activism and a driver of contemporary antisemitism. Bernstein argued that intersectionality is a collectivist framework that subordinates individual rights to group identity and perpetuates racial thinking under a new moral vocabulary (Bernstein 2026a).

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The prominence of intersectionality within academia and its widespread institutional adoption reveal a substantial imbalance between its favourable reception and its critical scrutiny. While supportive scholarship circulates widely across the humanities and social sciences, critical perspectives receive little academic engagement, despite the significance of their arguments. The paper examines this imbalance by evaluating intersectionality's methodology, conclusions, and institutional applications, and by proposing alternative approaches capable of addressing inequality.

II. Academic evaluation of intersectionality's methodology and conclusions

1. Intersectionality with respect to sound academic theories

As a framework, intersectionality seeks to explain how individual and group identities generate compounded patterns of discrimination and privilege

[5] This paper cites the Kindle edition, Murray 2021.

through the interaction of factors such as race, gender, sexuality, age, disability, class, and religion. Although initially focused on race and gender, the list of relevant categories has continually expanded and remains fluid.

This approach is epistemologically flawed from the outset. Samuel B. Bacharach defines theory as a logically coherent system of constructs and propositions explaining phenomena within stated assumptions (Bacharach 1989, 498), while Salih O. Noor describes theory in political science as a set of consistent statements accounting for observable social and political outcomes. In both formulations, explanation *follows* observation, and conclusions *arise* from evidence rather than preceding it (Noor 2022).

Intersectionality is often presented as an analytical framework or theory, yet in practice it functions as a scientifically authoritative construct with broad institutional implementation. Its central premise, however, fails to meet basic standards of theory formation. In its dominant formulations, intersectionality begins with a predetermined conclusion: that identity categories necessarily produce intersecting forms of unjust discrimination or unearned privilege. This claim is treated as axiomatic rather than tested against empirical reality.

Rigorous theory proceeds differently, beginning with open-ended examination of facts, testing competing hypotheses, and deriving conclusions from evidence before formulating practical recommendations. Intersectionality reverses this process by adopting pre-formulated conclusions and developing methods designed to confirm them, thereby collapsing inquiry into advocacy.

This foregone conclusion is embedded in both methodology and data selection. Although intersectionality employs qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, evidence is gathered and interpreted through an analytical lens explicitly intended to demonstrate interlocking injustice. Rather than allowing evidence to challenge assumptions, observations are filtered through a framework that presupposes oppression as the explanatory outcome.

While individuals may certainly experience discrimination across multiple dimensions, such claims require empirical demonstration on a case-by-case basis. It does not follow as a matter of logic or evidence that combined identities must inevitably produce compounded injustice or privilege. Treating this proposition as a theoretical starting point rather than a hypothesis to be tested constitutes a fundamental epistemological error.

This departure from objectivity is not accidental but explicitly defended by leading intersectional theorists. Scholars such as Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall caution against departing from intersectionality's activist foundations, arguing that depoliticization weakens its transformative purpose (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall 2013, 785–810). Bilge similarly criticizes efforts to "whiten" or neutralize the framework within mainstream academia (Bilge 2013, 405–424), while Collins insists that intersectionality must remain politically engaged. Intersectionality thus prioritizes political commitment over explanatory neutrality, reinforcing its role as an ideological programme rather than a disinterested analytical theory (Collins 2019).

2. Methodological problems

Intersectionality research employs a wide range of qualitative methods – including narrative and discourse analysis, interviews, oral histories, participant observation, case studies, and historical texts – explicitly directed toward identifying intersecting forms of discrimination and privilege. Scholars also examine outcome data on income, health, education, and employment to identify disparities across combinations of social categories. Quantitatively, they rely on census and administrative data, interaction models (e.g., race × gender), network and geographic analysis, and hierarchical or machine-learning techniques to assess how intersecting social positions correlate with patterns of inequality across identity categories (see, e.g., Guan et al. 2021; Bauer et al. 2021; Misra, Curington, Green 2021, 9–28; Abrams et al. 2020).

Despite this methodological diversity, intersectionality relies heavily on disparate outcome data to substantiate claims of systemic oppression and to justify policy interventions such as DEI and affirmative action. Such data, however, establish correlation rather than causation. Concluding that disparities necessarily result from discrimination requires demonstrating that alternative explanatory variables have been systematically examined and ruled out.

That standard is seldom met. Consider immigrant women from Nigeria or India, who are among the most highly educated and highest-earning demographic groups in the United States. Empirical evidence shows that African immigrant women, including Nigerians, exhibit the highest prevalence of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees among immigrant women and are significantly more likely than other groups to be enrolled in higher education (see, e.g., Lorenzi, Batalova 2022; NDuUSA 2024; Ufere 2023; Thomas, Logan 2012, 87–107). Nigerian immigrants overall show educational attainment far exceeding national averages (Rutland, Batalova 2025b).

Indian immigrants – including women – demonstrate even more pronounced outcomes, with median household incomes roughly double the U.S. average and extraordinarily high rates of graduate and professional degrees (Greene, Batalova 2024; Pew Research Center 2024; Chaudhury 2022; American Immigration Council 2025; cf. American Immigration Council 2023). These cases do not refute the existence of discrimination in every context, but they challenge the claim that intersectional disadvantage is an explanatory default.

Similarly, second-generation Caribbean immigrants have demonstrated sustained upward mobility since at least the 1980s, with longitudinal studies documenting substantial improvements in income and socioeconomic status (see, e.g., Sowell 1981, 220; Rutland, Batalova 2025a; cf. Villarreal, Tamborini 2018, 686–715; Abramitzky et al. 2020; Ifatunji 2017, 522–543; John 2014, 108–129). These groups often lacked comparable opportunities in their countries of origin but succeeded within the institutional framework of the United States. By intersectionality's logic, immigrant women of colour should face compounded and enduring barriers due to overlapping identities, yet the empirical record frequently contradicts this expectation.

These cases illustrate a central methodological problem: disparate outcomes cannot be interpreted in isolation. Valid causal inference requires accounting for

multiple explanatory variables, including education, family structure, cultural norms, geography, individual preferences, and human capital investment. Disparities in wages or representation can be attributed to discrimination only when other relevant factors are demonstrably equal – an evidentiary standard rarely fulfilled in complex social systems.

Occupational distribution further illustrates this point. Approximately 83 percent of U.S. pilots are male and about 85 percent are white (see, e.g., U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025; cf. Zippia 2025),[6] a pattern often attributed by proponents of intersectionality to discriminatory exclusion. Yet a closer inspection reveals multiple non-discriminatory explanations: longstanding differences in vocational interests, cultural preferences, self-selection, and aptitude. While historical barriers against female pilots did exist, there is no conclusive evidence of pervasive contemporary discrimination sufficient to explain present disparities. Likewise, the fact that over 96 percent of kindergarten teachers are women does not imply systemic discrimination against men (Elsesser 2024).

These patterns persist even in societies with high formal gender equality, such as Scandinavian countries, where women disproportionately choose caring professions and men gravitate toward STEM fields (Falk, Hermle 2018).[7] Such outcomes neither deny individual exceptions nor imply innate incapacity; rather, they reflect aggregate tendencies shaped by both biological inclinations and cultural influences.

There is also no conclusive evidence that proves present-day racial discrimination and oppression in American aviation. According to demographic data, approximately 3% are black; ca. 5% are Hispanic or Latino; and ca. 2% are Asian; these figures have varied over the past decade (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025; cf. Zippia 2025). While these percentages are lower than the ratios of the respective minority populations, the reasons for the disparate representation are predominantly based on individual interests and skills and the varying cultural popularity of aviation careers.

Similar reasoning applies to racial representation in athletics: the prominence of African Americans in basketball and Hispanics or Latinos in soccer does not establish discrimination against other groups but reflects differences in interest, talent distribution, and cultural emphasis.

A deeper methodological inconsistency lies in intersectionality's conflation of fundamentally different categories. Immutable characteristics such as sex, race, age, or disability are routinely treated as socially constructed and politically equivalent to contingent categories like class, religion, immigration status, or digital access. This collapse of the distinction between traits beyond individual control and those shaped by agency obscures responsibility, causation, and moral evaluation.

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[6] Percentages may vary.

[7] While it is debated whether such preferences are higher in Scandinavian societies than in traditional cultures, clear tendencies of gender-specific job preferences remain.

This confusion has direct policy consequences. While discrimination based on immutable traits is unjust, differential treatment based on relevant qualifications is both legitimate and necessary. Selection based on objective criteria – such as physical capacity, cognitive aptitude, or technical skill – does not constitute injustice, even when it yields unequal outcomes. Intersectionality provides no principled basis for distinguishing unlawful discrimination from justified selection.

Methodologically, intersectionality begins with the presumption of injustice and structures its analysis to confirm that presumption. As Karl Popper argued, a scientific theory must expose itself to potential falsification; claims that all observations confirm, and none can refute, fall outside empirical inquiry. Because intersectionality treats disparities as *prima facie* evidence of oppression while reinterpreting counterevidence as further proof of systemic bias, its core claims are insulated from refutation rather than tested against reality.

Differences in talent, effort, preference, and circumstance – including chance – ensure that unequal outcomes are a normal result of fair competition. Forced equality of outcomes, like a Procrustean bed, would therefore signal external manipulation rather than justice, undermining merit and the meaningfulness of competition itself.

Intersectionality thus relies on circular reasoning: inequality is taken as evidence of oppression, and oppression is inferred from inequality. This rests on a further error – the conflation of fairness with equal outcomes. Fairness presupposes impartial rules and equal opportunity, not uniform results. When conclusions are embedded in premises, inquiry becomes performative rather than investigative.

Consequently, intersectionality functions less as a disinterested analytical framework than as a politically motivated interpretive system that assigns collective moral status by identity. Its methodological commitments subordinate evidence to ideology, rendering its claims unfalsifiable and its applications epistemologically unsound.

3. Problematic claims

These concerns address not the intentions of intersectional theorists but the moral logic implicit in the framework's premises. Assigning collective moral virtue or guilt on the basis of immutable traits – such as race, sex, age, or disability – is logically untenable, since moral responsibility presupposes agency and cannot arise from characteristics beyond individual control.

Yet intersectionality treats social "victimhood" as a source of moral status, implicitly elevating disadvantage into ethical superiority. As Murray notes, contemporary social justice discourse increasingly regards victimhood not as a condition to overcome but as a moral credential, conferring presumed virtue independent of conduct. Membership in an oppressed category, however, no more guarantees moral excellence than membership in a dominant category establishes moral fault (Murray 2021, 252).

Intersectionality's moral reclassification is rooted in a post-Marxist power-conflict paradigm that divides society into "oppressors" and "oppressed" and

interprets social relations through that binary. In doing so, it systematically pits groups against one another – men against women, majorities against minorities – transforming social identity into a site of permanent antagonism and eroding shared civic identity and institutional cooperation.

The internal contradictions of this framework become even clearer when subjected to *reductio ad absurdum*. Intersectionality posits that individuals simultaneously occupy multiple identity categories, some conferring oppression and others conferring privilege. The result is an incoherent moral calculus in which a single person may be both victim and oppressor to varying degrees. A white woman is deemed oppressed by gender but oppressive by race; a homosexual man of colour is assigned multiple layers of oppression offset by presumed privilege along other axes. Yet intersectionality provides no principled method for adjudicating how these statuses interact or cancel out. There is no objective scale, no weighting mechanism, and no clear endpoint for determining moral standing.

Pushed to its logical conclusion, the framework reduces all social relations to a single transitive verb: *to oppress*. Advancement is interpreted not as cooperation, innovation, sacrifice, or merit, but as the exercise of power over others. Those who lose social or economic contests are therefore treated as morally superior, while success itself becomes suspect as evidence of domination. Moral worth is rendered relative and positional rather than intrinsic or principled: whoever occupies the lower position is "good," and whoever occupies the higher is "evil," with moral valuation shifting as positions change. No stable concept of justice remains – only fluctuating power relations.

This worldview excludes alternative accounts of human behaviour such as love, loyalty, voluntary exchange, mutual obligation, or self-sacrifice, despite their central role in history. Practices grounded in responsibility, such as men going to war to protect women and children, cannot be explained within a framework that treats all asymmetry as oppression and domination. The result is an inverted moral hierarchy in which presumed virtue correlates with accumulated "oppressed" identities, while individuals associated with "oppressor" categories are rendered morally suspect by status alone. As Murray notes, this represents not the abolition of hierarchy but its reversal: the creation of a new moral aristocracy overseen by an ideological clerisy charged with enforcing it (Murray 2021, 93).

Yet the logic of this hierarchy ultimately collapses. In theory, the highest moral standing would require an individual composed solely of "oppressed" identities – an increasingly implausible configuration as categories proliferate. Conversely, those assigned exclusively to "oppressor" categories are offered no path to moral redemption other than continual self-denial, symbolic renunciation, or perpetual atonement for an inherited and immutable "privilege." This is not merely theoretical. In some academic and activist discourse, moral condemnation has given way to extremism concerning entire demographic groups, blurring the line between critique and dehumanization (see, e.g., Sanders 2005; cf. John Locke Foundation 2005).

The contradictions generated by intersectionality's internal logic are therefore not merely theoretical but socially consequential. By legitimizing collective

moral attribution and reducing complex social realities to identity-based power narratives, the framework supplies ideological justification for resentment, exclusion, and, in extreme cases, open hostility. The resurgence of antisemitism across American campuses and cities illustrates how a framework presented as emancipatory can be appropriated by radical actors once universal moral standards give way to identity-based moral accounting.

Taken to its logical conclusion, intersectionality rejects moral universalism, dissolves individual agency, and replaces empirical inquiry with ideological presumption. The result is not an explanatory framework but a closed moral system that interprets difference as guilt, disparity as proof of injustice, and disagreement as complicity in oppression.

4. Problematic consequences

A vivid illustration of intersectionality's logical trajectory is offered by Abe Greenwald in "The Woke Jihad." He describes a scene at Princeton University in which a student displaying the flag of Hezbollah – a designated terrorist organization – appears visually incongruous but ideologically consistent when viewed through an intersectional lens.

As Greenwald argues, intersectionality produces a systematic moral inversion: racism is reframed as virtue when directed against the West; colourblindness becomes racism; liberal democracy is cast as tyranny; tyranny as liberation; Jews are reclassified as "white oppressors"; and terrorist organizations are recast as authentic agents of resistance. This inversion follows logically from a framework that assigns moral standing according to relative position within an identity-based hierarchy of power (Greenwald 2024).

Such inversions reflect a broader intellectual tradition within Western academia that treats Western civilization as uniquely malignant rather than as a complex and self-correcting historical phenomenon. Susan Sontag's claim that Western achievements fail to "redeem" what she described as the civilizational crimes of the "white race," viewed by her as the "cancer of human history," exemplifies this posture. Her statement was not an empirical argument open to falsification, but an absolute moral judgment that rejected comparison, proportionality, and differentiation (Sontag 1967, 57–97; cf. Bernstein 2026b).

When these premises are absorbed into intersectional reasoning, the consequences are predictable. If all power asymmetries are redefined as oppression and Western institutions are presumed as illegitimate, actors opposed to the West – regardless of their methods or crimes – can be recast as morally virtuous. Under this logic, even jihadist movements may appear as marginalized "voices" resisting hegemonic power. Intersectionality thus supplies a moral framework through which otherwise indefensible alignments are rendered intelligible.

This produces a central paradox. In seeking to oppose injustice, intersectionality replaces older forms of collective condemnation with new ones. Because individuals occupy multiple intersecting identities, the logic of oppression expands without limit. As Jordan Peterson notes, once marginalization becomes the primary metric of justice, the relevant identity intersections become effec-

tively infinite. Justice then rests not on universal principles or shared standards, but on ever finer and more volatile identity accounting (Peterson 2019).

The epistemological consequence is the absence of any stable moral or political resolution. There are always further intersections to consider, asymmetries to redress, and grievances to foreground. Rather than alleviating injustice, the framework institutionalizes grievance as permanent and moral competition as a defining feature of civic life. The promise of justice is indefinitely deferred – not because reform is impossible, but because the theory itself admits no logical endpoint.

What emerges is not a corrective to discrimination but a self-reinforcing ideology that fosters moral confusion, alliances with illiberal actors, and hostility toward liberal democratic norms. The Princeton image is therefore not anomalous but a *reductio ad absurdum* made visible: when moral judgment rests solely on identity and positionality, even violent extremism can be reframed as virtue if it aligns against a sufficiently stigmatized "oppressor."

Applied consistently, intersectionality yields neither greater clarity nor justice but moral inversion, analytical incoherence, and the erosion of universal ethical standards – outcomes that follow directly from its foundational assumptions.

5. Sound theories in contrast to intersectionality

Intersectionality exhibits serious theoretical deficiencies, yet it is widely taught as settled scholarship and implemented as beneficial policy. This disconnect between epistemic weakness and institutional authority produces harmful practical and political consequences that compound its underlying errors. Sound scholarly and policy frameworks begin by seeking an accurate understanding of reality and only then derive recommendations. This sequence has underpinned successful scientific, political, and institutional development across history.

A canonical example is Newton's theory of gravity. By correcting earlier explanations,[8] Newton articulated a unified account of motion that later enabled practical advances such as satellite technology. The practical success followed from the theory's fidelity to reality, not from ideological intent.

The same epistemic sequence characterizes durable political theory. Solon's reforms in sixth-century BC Athens, extended by Cleisthenes, were grounded in empirical assessment of social instability and institutional design, laying the foundations for civic stability and cultural flourishing.

The American Founders followed a similar path. Drawing on historical experience – from Greek and Roman politics to British constitutionalism and Enlightenment thought – they developed a constitutional order balancing liberty and restraint through the rule of law, separation of powers, and popular sovereignty. This framework enabled unprecedented stability and prosperity by rejecting arbitrary privilege in favour of equal legal standards.

[8] According to Aristotle, the world was composed of five elements – earth, water, air, fire, and aether – each with its own natural motion rather than governed by a single uniform principle.

This tradition stands in direct opposition to "privilege" as deployed in intersectional theory. Derived from Latin *privilegium*, a private law applied to select individuals, privilege presupposes unequal rules rather than universal law. The American constitutional order explicitly rejected this logic, insisting that the law apply equally to all and that opportunity depend on merit and effort rather than categorical status.[9]

Intersectionality departs sharply from this tradition. Rather than neutrally assessing facts, it advances remedies – through DEI, identity-based governance, and affirmative action – that have frequently proven divisive, unlawful, or counterproductive. Across government, academia, nonprofits, and workplaces, candidates are increasingly evaluated by aggregated identity categories rather than demonstrated competence. Public and philanthropic funds are redirected toward intersectional initiatives, often without transparent consent, fueling resentment, weakening standards, and eroding institutional trust.

As Murray observes, intersectionality presents itself as a scientific framework but functions primarily as a political project: its claims are asserted rather than demonstrated, its philosophical foundations thin, and its assumptions – shared goals among "oppressed" groups and inevitable moral progress through coalition – remain empirically untested (Murray 2021, 91).

This produces an intersectionality paradox: a weak explanatory framework has achieved broad academic and institutional dominance, while sustained critique remains marginal. The paper argues that this dominance is best explained not by analytical rigour but by ideological utility. As an intellectual descendant of critical theory, intersectionality aligns with prevailing political sensibilities in Western academic culture. Its success thus reflects advocacy rather than explanatory strength.

III. Philosophical roots of intersectionality

1. Critical theory

As an explanatory framework, intersectionality is philosophically grounded in what is commonly referred to as "critical theory" (Collins 2019). Critical theory provides the conceptual prism through which proponents of intersectionality interpret history and social reality.

From an etymological standpoint, the phrase *critical theory* is revealing. The adjective "critical" derives from the Greek *kritēs* ("judge"), itself rooted in the verb *krinō* ("to discern" or "to judge"). The term could denote either neutral, rigorous examination or evaluative, particularly negative judgment. The noun "theory" derives from the Greek *theōros*,[10] meaning "sacred observer," formed from *theos* ("deity") and *horaō* ("to see"). Over time, the term became

[9] While it took time for this principle to be realized in legislation, the Founders' blueprint affirmed the inherent equal worth and rights of all human beings, rooted in classical antiquity, Judeo Christian ethics, and Lockean liberalism.

[10] On the etymology of *theōros*, see Dimitrova 2008, 9–14.

associated with *thea* ("sight"), yielding the more general meaning of "observation," rendered in Latin as *speculatio*, meaning both observation and speculation.

Critical theory may therefore signify linguistically either "judicious observation" or "judgmental speculation." As will be shown, it is the latter meaning that has come to dominate its modern usage.

Critique in the sense of careful, methodical examination was central to Enlightenment philosophy, notably in the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant employed "critique" as a disciplined inquiry into the limits and conditions of reason, not as ideological condemnation. Karl Marx, by contrast, explicitly rejected neutral evaluation in favour of activism. He famously called for "ruthless criticism of all that exists," emphasizing not dispassionate inquiry but confrontation and demolition regardless of consequence (Marx 1843).

Marxist and Leninist doctrine rejects objective truth and universal morality, subordinating both to class interests as defined by historical circumstances. Lenin explicitly argued that morality is not timeless or universal but determined by the aims of class struggle (Lenin 1920).

Post-Marxist intellectuals who came to shape American academia in the mid-twentieth century – including members of the German Institute for Social Research (see, e.g., Corradetti n.d.) and their successors – refined and institutionalized this outlook (see, e.g., Walsh 2015[11]). In a 1937 essay, Max Horkheimer formally articulated "critical theory" as a revision of Marx's critique of traditional society (Horkheimer 1937/1972, 245–294/188–243).

Horkheimer argued that whereas traditional theory seeks to describe and explain social reality, critical theory aims to challenge and transform it. Rather than standing apart as an observer, it intervenes deliberately in society and thus functions as political advocacy rather than disinterested inquiry, emphasizing "the negative aspects of this society, which we want to change" (Murphy 2014; SocioPhilosophy 2011). Thinkers such as Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse (cf. Marcuse 1965, 81–117), and later Jürgen Habermas further developed and popularized this approach within academic and cultural institutions.

This conception of critical theory gives rise to a conceptual contradiction. In an academic context, the noun "theory" presupposes neutral, objective observation and explanatory intent. When modified by the adjective "critical" in its judgmental sense, the term instead signals evaluative speculation aimed at identifying and condemning flaws. The result is an oxymoron: a "theory" defined not by explanatory rigour but by normative intent. This stands in tension with the principles of sound scientific methodology.

Francis Bacon illustrated genuine scientific inquiry with his metaphor of the bee, which gathers material from the world but transforms it through disciplined reasoning – unlike the ant, which merely collects, or the spider, which spins webs from its own substance (Bacon 1620).

By contrast, critical theory more closely resembles Bacon's spider: it generates interpretations largely from internal presuppositions rather than integrat-

[11] For critiques of progressive and socialist influences on education, see Bernstein 2022.

ing observation with empirical synthesis. Consequently, it functions less as a corrective lens than as an instrument of distortion, oriented toward deconstruction and demolition – rather than objective explanation – of the social order.

2. Classical versus cultural Marxism; postmodernism

Critical theory rose to prominence in the United States through post-Marxist thinkers who shifted Marxist analysis from economics to culture, producing what later became known as "cultural Marxism" or "political correctness" (William 2016).[12] Over time, this intellectual current culminated in the institutional ascendancy of critical race theory, intersectionality, and eventually, DEI initiatives across major social, educational, and governmental institutions.

Classical, economics-based Marxism failed in practice, prompting its successors to revise the framework rather than abandon it. The core "oppressor–oppressed" model was detached from class struggle and redeployed across shifting cultural and identity categories. As Paul Kengor notes, both classical and cultural Marxism interpret history as a conflict between oppressors and victims, differing mainly in how the victim class is defined. Where classical Marxism elevated the proletariat, cultural Marxism continually expands and reconfigures the category of moral victims – ranging from identity groups to symbolic and even environmental subjects – while identifying a corresponding set of cultural oppressors (Kengor 2018).

Critical theory and intersectionality thus represent evolved forms of Marxist ideology. The Marxist focus on the working class has been replaced by a fluid victimology organized around perceived marginalization. Similarly, the Marxist notion of a violent revolution has been supplanted by the strategy of gradual institutional capture – the so-called "long march through the institutions."[13]

Another intellectual tradition that contributed decisively to the mainstreaming of intersectionality is postmodernism (cf. Pluckrose, Lindsay 2020). Although distinct in origin, critical theory and postmodernism emerged as influential twentieth-century movements and increasingly converged in academic practice. Critical theory sought to expose domination within capitalist societies while still treating reason as a tool of critique. Postmodernism later rejected Enlightenment rationalism, scientific objectivity, and universal truth. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard opposed "grand narratives" – comprehensive explanatory frameworks – and emphasized skepticism, relativism, and the instability of language (see, e.g., Postmodernism 2026; Best, Kellner 1991a, 215–255; Salberg et al. n.d.).

Despite their differences, critical theory and postmodernism share key presuppositions. Both reject positivism and the objective evaluation of facts, dissolve disciplinary boundaries, and foreground power as the central explanatory vari-

[12] Various authors describe this ideology as "cultural Marxism," associating it with critical theory.

[13] The 1960s slogan "long march through the institutions," attributed to socialist activist Rudi Dutschke, refers to a strategy of cultural transformation through institutional infiltration.

able in human affairs. Postmodern analyses of discourse and micro-power complement critical theory's macro-level critiques of ideology and political economy. In contemporary academia, these approaches have increasingly merged (Best, Kellner 1991b; Agger 1991, 105–131). The result has been a sustained, two-pronged assault on the very concept of scientific objectivity. In an Orwellian inversion of reality, skepticism and relativism are elevated as moral virtues, while empirical rigour is treated as ideological bias.

Through the principle of "immanent critique," central to critical theory, many humanities and social-science departments have largely replaced scholarly inquiry with political activism. Many universities have recently shifted from sites of open inquiry to instruments of political indoctrination, increasingly undermining core civic principles from within rather than fostering debate and engagement with the canon.

Critical theory consequently serves as a conduit for widespread neo-Marxist and anti-Western ideology. As early as October 1989 – just days after the fall of the Berlin Wall – journalists such as Felicity Barringer observed the "mainstreaming of Marxism in U.S. colleges" (Barringer, 1989). Barringer noted that "[a]s Karl Marx's ideological heirs in Communist nations struggle to transform his political legacy, his intellectual heirs on American campuses have virtually [become] assimilated academic insiders" (Barringer, 1989). A typical example is Howard Zinn's highly influential monograph *A People's History of the United States*, despite its factual distortions and ideological bias (see, e.g., Grabar 2019).

Today, critical theory exists in numerous derivative forms – critical legal theory, critical race theory, critical pedagogy, critical management theory, and others – that extend far beyond academia into American culture and public life. Their empirical manifestations include DEI programmes, affirmative action policies, and identity-based governance frameworks (see, e.g., Bernstein 2024; Swain 2020).

Nor is this influence confined to the humanities and social sciences. As Heather MacDonald has noted, intersectional ideology has increasingly entered STEM fields. For example, a National Science Foundation grant exceeding half a million dollars supported research that treated "intersectional oppression" as the presumptive explanation for demographic disparities in science and engineering. Here as elsewhere, the conclusion precedes the inquiry: inequality of outcome is assumed to result from systemic oppression, and research is designed to confirm the premise rather than to test it (MacDonald 2018, 190–193).

3. Socialism

The intersectional prioritization of group identity over individual merit and conduct predates critical theory and the Marxist–Leninist tradition. Its conceptual roots extend to early socialist thinkers of the French Revolutionary period and to German philosophers who subordinated individual rights to collective or statist objectives.

Intersectionality is inherently collectivist in orientation, evaluating individuals primarily by group identity rather than personal conduct or achievement. Given its widespread academic endorsement – largely within intellectual frame-

works shaped by Marxist thought – it is therefore useful to situate the concept within the broader socialist tradition.

The term *socialism* is commonly associated with Henri de Saint-Simon, a late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century French thinker who advocated collective ownership administered by centralized authority and rejected the liberal emphasis on individual rights and legal equality. Saint-Simon envisioned socialism as an authoritarian reorganization of society, opposing the liberalism of the French Revolution.[14]

Even before the term *socialism* was coined, Enlightenment thinkers articulated proto-socialist ideas, most notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who famously considered private property as the primary source of crime, war, and social misery (Rousseau 1755/1997). Rousseau lamented the shift from communal life to individual self-interest, portraying civilization as a rupture of natural social bonds. He argued that in primitive societies resources were held in common but became instruments of inequality and exchange with the advent of private property.

This critique of civilization was later extended by Friedrich Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Engels 2010). Rousseau and Engels framed private property as a deviation from the natural order, contrasting cooperative hunter-gatherer societies with agricultural systems that enabled accumulation and domination, a view that later became central to socialist thought. It is noteworthy that the very term *culture* derives from the Latin *colo*, meaning "to till the land." The conception of private property as the source of inequality became a central pillar of socialist thought.[15]

Marxist theory formalized these assumptions into a historical schema driven by class struggle, moving from primitive communal society through slavery, feudalism, and capitalism to socialism, envisioned as a state-imposed return to communal ownership. Socialism thus represents a utopian effort to restore an imagined condition of equal distribution, disregarding differences in effort, talent, and merit. In practice, it subordinates individual rights to an abstract collective good, centralizes control over labour and resources, and, in its pure form, tends toward totalitarianism by eroding civil society and reducing individuals to interchangeable units defined solely by their social function.

As Alan Charles Kors observed, "No cause, ever, in the history of all mankind, has produced more cold-blooded tyrants, more slaughtered innocents, and more orphans than socialism with power." Wherever socialism acquired the means to reorganize society and abolish private property, it culminated in the destruction of individual, economic, religious, associational, and political liber-

[14] The Revolution of course had its violent and illiberal aspects, famously analysed by Edmund Burke in 1790 (Burke 1910).

[15] It is not incidental that some National Socialists embraced nature worship and vegetarianism: animals were idealized as "pure," while human beings, reduced to abstract categories, were devalued and destroyed. This reflected an ideology that denied the inherent worth of human life (see Arluke, Sax 1992, 6–31).

ty (Kors 2003, 1–17). Despite this record, it continues to be promoted by many academics as a viable and morally superior alternative.

In his 1949 essay "The Intellectuals and Socialism," F. A. Hayek argued that intellectuals exert influence less through political power than by shaping the ideas and moral narratives through which societies understand themselves. Socialism, he noted, originated as an abstract theory developed and propagated by intellectual elites rather than as an organic working-class movement (Hayek 1949, 417–433).

A key source of its enduring appeal – and one that also illuminates the rise of intersectional frameworks – is its tendency to attribute failure to systemic injustice rather than individual responsibility. Such explanations are rhetorically and psychologically easier than self-examination, despite abundant historical evidence of success driven by discipline, talent, and effort independent of group identity.

As early as 1848, Alexis de Tocqueville contrasted socialism with classical liberal democracy. Liberal democracy, he argued, attaches the highest value to the individual, whereas socialism reduces each person to "an agent, an instrument, a number" (de Tocqueville 2015, 546). In its collectivist and socialist emphasis on group identity over individual worth, intersectionality stands in direct opposition to foundational American principles affirming equal, inherent, and inalienable individual rights.

IV. Political and practical implications of intersectionality

1. Political goals

Intersectional ideology treats oppression as a permanent and defining feature of Western society. While such a characterization may apply to authoritarian regimes, it is ill-suited to a constitutional republic grounded in free elections, the rule of law, and equal legal protection. Intersectional theorists generally seek not reform within the American constitutional framework but its radical transformation, which they regard as structurally unjust and irredeemable. As Victor Davis Hanson observes, intersectionality aims to assemble a coalition of the "oppressed" unified less by shared civic goals than by perceived victimhood (Hanson 2023).

A central political feature of intersectionality is its ability to unite groups with incompatible or conflicting interests. Feminist priorities, for example, often clash with transgender activism over issues such as women's sports and single-sex spaces (see, e.g., Single Sex Spaces 2025), while many gender- and sexuality-based advocacy groups that would face persecution in Islamic societies nevertheless operate as allies within Western democracies under the banner of intersectional solidarity. These alliances are sustained not by shared long-term interests but by temporary convergence around a common adversary, allowing disparate grievances to be mobilized against existing Western institutions.

This dynamic supports a broader, multi-layered effort to delegitimize Western institutions. It includes the normalization of anti-Israel rhetoric and growing antisemitism, the framing of the United States and Israel as twin symbols

of oppression, and a more general repudiation of Western civilization through ideological activism and, at the margins, extremism. As Melanie Phillips notes, institutional reluctance to confront antisemitism often reflects ideological sympathy rooted in identity politics, intersectionality, and victim culture (Phillips 2023).

Critical theory provides the intellectual foundation for DEI initiatives and related intersectional practices. Although presented as efforts toward "social justice," these approaches frequently abandon equal standards of evaluation. Redistributive policies and identity-based decision-making penalize merit, distort incentives, and produce unequal treatment under the law, replacing fairness with preferential moral accounting and eroding public trust in democratic institutions.

2. Lack of constructivity

Intersectionality also lacks constructive orientation. Rather than proportionally identifying problems, acknowledging progress, and proposing reforms that preserve what works, it treats Western society as fundamentally corrupt and unworthy of preservation. As Murray notes, intersectional critique adopts the posture not of a benevolent reformer but of an adversary intent on repudiation (Murray 2021, 245).

The cumulative effects of DEI and identity-based governance thus include increased group antagonism, declining institutional standards, politicization of neutral institutions, and the erosion of civic trust – outcomes more consistent with destabilization than reform (see, e.g., Network Contagion Research Institute 2024).

3. Policy failure

These deficiencies extend directly to policy. Implemented through DEI mandates, identity-based admissions and hiring, and redistributive programmes, intersectionality has not delivered its promised reductions in inequality. Instead, it entrenches grievance, undermines institutional competence, and weakens meritocratic norms. By attributing disparate outcomes primarily to systemic oppression, it misdiagnoses the sources of social and economic mobility, diverting attention from empirically supported drivers such as educational quality, family stability, cultural norms, and individual agency.

4. Alternative solutions: Individual agency versus group-based explanations

By contrast, the success of groups such as Nigerian and Indian women and second-generation Caribbean immigrants underscores the explanatory power of motivation, cultural values, and disciplined effort over group-based theories of oppression. Historically, classical liberal education, civic instruction, stable families, and the core American values of responsibility, perseverance, and legal equality have generated upward mobility across diverse populations. As Jordan

Peterson observes, Western societies addressed proliferating claims of victimhood by emphasizing the individual and prioritizing merit – an imperfect but demonstrably more effective approach than identity-based alternatives (Peterson 2019).

V. Synthesis: Epistemology, policy failure, and moral philosophy

Taken together, intersectionality's epistemological premises, methodological practices, and policy outcomes form a consistent pattern at odds with sound scholarship, effective governance, and moral responsibility. Epistemologically, it prioritizes presupposed conclusions over truth-seeking inquiry, subordinating evidence to ideology. Methodologically, it treats correlation as causation and disparity as injustice, insulating its claims from falsification.

These flaws translate directly into policy failure. Intersectionality-derived policies misidentify the sources of human flourishing, incentivize grievance, weaken standards, and erode institutional competence. Rather than fostering individual agency and responsibility, they allocate moral status and material benefit by identity, producing resentment and fragmentation.

Morally, intersectionality rejects the universal principles of liberal democracy – equal dignity, individual worth, and equal justice – replacing them with a relativistic hierarchy of collective victimhood. The result is not merely theoretical or practical failure, but a retreat from the intellectual, moral, and institutional foundations of pluralistic democracy.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has argued that intersectionality, despite its academic and institutional authority, suffers from unresolved epistemological, methodological, and philosophical flaws. It substitutes presupposition for inquiry, treats disparity as automatic proof of injustice, and resists empirical testing, which is inconsistent with the basic standards of sound theory and scholarly objectivity.

These defects extend beyond academia. As intersectionality has been operationalized through DEI mandates, identity-based policies, and wide-ranging reforms, it has replaced merit and individual conduct with categorical moral evaluation, weakening institutional confidence, fostering resentment, and eroding equal treatment under the law. These outcomes flow directly from its foundational premises.

More broadly, intersectionality reflects a decades-long transformation within the humanities and social sciences in which politically activated critical theory has displaced empirical inquiry, methodological restraint, and open debate. Explanation yields to advocacy, disagreement is moralized, and scholarship is subordinated to ideology.

Restoring excellence in these disciplines does not require denying injustice but re-establishing academic rigour, consistent with the classical liberal arts tradition: a commitment to objectivity, evidentiary standards, falsifiability, universal human dignity, and equal moral and legal treatment. The historical record shows that societies guided by individual agency, merit, and evidence-based

reform have addressed injustice much more effectively than those organized around identity hierarchy. Revitalizing the humanities and social sciences therefore requires intellectual courage and a renewed dedication to truth-seeking inquiry.

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Nora Dimitrova Clinton, PhD
American Research Center in Sofia
75 Vasil Petleshkov Str., Hadzhi Dimitar Residential District
1510 Sofia, Bulgaria
Email: nmd5@cornell.edu