

## Book review

Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016; 249 pp.: 978-0-7456-8448-2.

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During the past few years, debates about intersectionality have been particularly prevalent. These debates have focused predominantly on what intersectionality actually is, and how it should be applied. Questions such as: Where did it come from (genealogy)? Is it a form of Black Feminism (subjects)? How should it be revised in order to be more scholarly (methodology)? How should it be revisited in order not to lose sight of politics (activism)? What kinds of flaws does it have (theory)? Or, what is its level of analysis (identity vs. structures)? However, one of the most debated question concerning intersectionality is its travelling, namely how it has changed as it has travelled from the USA to Europe. In their much needed and timely book *Intersectionality* Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, both widely published academics who have made important contributions to the development of intersectionality, address all these questions. *Intersectionality* is an excellent summary of what has happened in the field of scholarship named as intersectionality, and how it should be conceptualized in ways that do not waste its political potential.

Hill Collins and Bilge foreground intersectionality's double role as a critical mode of inquiry and critical praxis. Their focus is not on academic debates on intersectionality – “metatheoretical musings”, to use Bilge's (2013) term – but on its functions in the world, in global movements and in concrete situations. As such, the book is exemplary of the dialogue of critical inquiry and critical praxis: it uses several case studies, examples and recent real

life debates, in demonstrating what (else) we can see with intersectional lenses when we look at the FIFA World Cup, for example. The book is designed to be pedagogical and highly accessible to students and other practitioners of intersectionality in its tendency to avoid heavy notation and academic discourse. Theory and praxis are presented as always intertwined and mutually complementary and the many practical case studies in the text evolve from chapter to chapter so that the reader can easily see intersectionality at work.

In the first two chapters, Hill Collins and Bilge introduce their key ideas illustrating them with apposite case studies. They open by using the case of the 2014 FIFA World cup held in Brazil to extract six core ideas of an intersectional framework. These are: 1. Social inequality, 2. Power, 3. Relationality, 4. Social context, 5. Complexity, and 6. Social justice. These six core idea will no doubt find their way into lectures on intersectionality in the near future.

The writers explain that “intersectionality” for them always means this kind of synergy between theory and praxis, rejecting approaches that prioritize theory (pp. 33, 42). Even though [the text is clearly written by authors who position themselves as a reader spots an American position of writers](#), the examples used in the book are transnational, coming from most of the continents in the world so that they are globally identifiable and recognizable.

As mentioned earlier, the politics of genealogy and the travelling of theory have led to heated debates within intersectional studies. Hill Collins and Bilge dedicate a whole chapter to both issues. They emphasize that intersectionality’s history cannot be divided into neat time periods or geographic locations. However, they are clear that intersectionality’s roots lie in social movement activism, particularly on Black feminism, but also on “multiple narratives of intersectionality” (pp. 71) including Chicana-activism, Native American women, and South Asian women, as well as several heterogeneous alliances between social

movements forged during the 1960's and 1970's. Political activism, and particularly American-based political activism, remains at the heart of their intersectional genealogical discussions.

The exceptional feature in the authors' reading of genealogy is their thorough analysis on how and why intersectionality became institutionally incorporated during the 1990's with Kimberlé Crenshaw "coining" the term intersectionality. They make a convincing analysis of Crenshaw's 1991 article "Mapping the Margins", explaining why that particular text was so important at that time. They describe how Crenshaw, as an ideally located academic, seeing the possibilities afforded by the linguistic turn within social theory, was able to do the "coining".

As well as permeating academia, intersectionality's global dispersion through and into digital and social media has been wide and fast. Hill Collins and Bilge have many transnational and insightful examples of how activism related to human rights has utilized digital media in spreading intersectionality. Twitter, blogs, digital petitions, and many forms of digital feminism are related to intersectionality, and particularly its emphasis on relationality and social justice. As an academic discourse, on the other hand, intersectionality has travelled widely accompanying scholars in many kinds of critical studies, including queer studies, critical race studies, or disability studies. However, Hill Collins and Bilge remain critical of those white feminists, more prevalent in Europe, who have devalued intersectionality either claiming that it lacks theorization, or that it has an excess of theorizing. In both cases the authors criticise the ignoring of what they see as intersectionality's central commitment to social equality and social justice.

Intersectionality's relation to identity has also been a much debated issue. Hill Collins and Bilge give this debate a novel start by beginning with hip hop. They note that critics of the ties between identity and intersectionality typically write from a Global North perspective. In contrast, they are not afraid of connecting intersectionality with identity politics (as a form of critical praxis) and claim that "given the centrality of identity politics within both intersectionality and hip hop, contemporary academic debates about identity can seem strangely out of touch" (pp. 123). The difficult question of identity politics is tackled with a sophisticated analysis of intersectionality as a form of critical praxis reclaiming strategic goals of identity politics. Identities are understood, however, as coalitional and holistic, involving complex social structures and inter-group alliances that serve to constitute identities, not as essentialist and excluding entities.

**Kommentoinut [KI1]:** Better?

Hill Collins and Bilge pay particular attention to intersectionality's potential for considering the workings of neoliberalism, global social protests, current developments in securitization, and neoliberalist tendencies in education. Intersectionality's role in activism, as a critical praxis, is foregrounded with reason. Intersectionality has the potential to be a tool that sheds light on seemingly discrete phenomena of racism, coercive neoliberal state policies, global capitalism, sexism, and several types of hierarchical divisions. In their thorough analysis of the US education system Hill Collins and Bilge warn that it is important not to water down intersectionality to managerialist diversity talk (cf. Ahmed 2012), but always to keep in mind its goal of increasing social equality and justice. All in all, *Intersectionality* is a rich book foregrounding praxis, which is often over-shadowed in theoretical scholarship. In the book, intersectionality becomes a "creative sensibility between knowing and doing" (pp. 191), as an inherently relational and complex concept with an ethos of social justice.

**Kommentoinut [KI2]:** Better? "With reason" may also be deleted if it is unsuitable.

**Bibliography:**

Ahmed, S (2012) *On Being Included. Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bilge, S (2013) Intersectionality Undone. Saving Intersectionality from Feminist Intersectionality Studies. *Du Bois Review* Vol. 10:2, 405-424.

Crenshaw, K (1991) Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review* 43: 1241-99.