When a Theory Goes Viral

Intersectionality is now everywhere. Is that a good thing?

By Tom Bartlett | MAY 21, 2017

For such an unwieldy word, "intersectionality" sure does get around. You might run into it in a review of Dave Chappelle's latest comedy special (which was deemed insufficiently intersectional); or in an interview with the singer-songwriter Solange Knowles (who doesn’t just want to hear about intersectionality "but actually feel it"); or in a college-newspaper column about veganism (which informs herbivores that "our struggles are intersectional"). The word has migrated from women's-studies journals and conference keynotes into everyday conversation, turning what was once highbrow discourse into hashtag chatter.

When it’s not being heralded as a solution for societal ills, it’s being condemned for undermining rational thought. Under the headline "How Intersectionality Makes You Stupid," James Kirchick blamed the theory for replacing reasoned debate with "reflexive condemnation" and for advancing the view that "identity politics trumps all." In a much-talked-about essay, Andrew Sullivan described intersectionality as a quasi religion, one that stifles free expression on college campuses and threatens democracy itself. Meanwhile, Damon Linker predicted that the "kaleidoscopically balkanizing world of intersectionality" would prevent liberals from regaining political power in the United States.

To the degree that she can, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw prefers to steer clear of the rancor surrounding the word she coined, which refers to the idea that forms of prejudice overlap. An essay she wrote for the University of Chicago Legal Forum in 1989 is widely considered the movement's founding document, though many trace the idea to earlier works, including an 1851 speech by the slave-born abolitionist and

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feminist Sojourner Truth. Crenshaw contends that viewing racism and sexism in isolation leads to black women’s being "theoretically erased." Her argument is rooted in employment discrimination, specifically a case in which a court ruled that an employer hadn’t discriminated against black women because white women had been hired at the same time. The judge, in Crenshaw’s view, failed to recognize that black women are a "multiply-burdened class." She reaches a conclusion that seems, in itself, uncontroversial: Black women are not the same as white women or black men, and society should recognize this truth and respect those differences.

The theory has expanded well beyond that narrow legal description. While discussions of intersectionality still often focus on the voices and experiences of black women, the term is now used to encompass other markers of minority identity, like sexual orientation, disability, and class. Crenshaw’s own view of intersectionality has broadened as well: In a 2015 column for The Washington Post, she described the theory as "a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power" that has "given many advocates a way to frame their circumstances and to fight for their visibility and inclusion."

When I spoke with Crenshaw recently, she was holed up at a writer’s retreat in Marfa, Tex., where she had gone to take a break from a jam-packed speaking schedule. While the theory she set in motion has been chewed over in academic circles for decades, she is taken aback by the sudden spike in popular attention — she calls it "stunning" — and also by the way the word has become, at least in some circles, a target of derision. "It gets attached to anything and everything that critics don’t like," says Crenshaw, who is a professor of law at Columbia Law School and the University of California at Los Angeles.

One of the more vitriolic recent pieces about intersectionality was written by Alan Dershowitz, who is not known for mild opinions. He deemed it nothing more than a code word for anti-Semitism, pointing to how some Black Lives Matter activists express solidarity with Palestinians. He referred to a flier distributed on the University of Illinois campus that called for the "end of Jewish privilege," though it was unclear who was responsible for the flier or why intersectionality was to blame. Nevertheless, Dershowitz called the theory a "pseudo-academic concept" that advances an anti-American and anti-Israel "bigoted agenda."

It’s the sort of rant that causes Crenshaw to sigh and shake her head. As it happens, Dershowitz was one of Crenshaw’s professors at Harvard Law School, though the two haven’t kept in touch. "My bet is that he hasn’t read one thing about intersectionality," Crenshaw says. "And it doesn’t appear that Andrew Sullivan has, either. And if they have, I question their literacy in the field."

For Christina Hoff Sommers, author of Who Stole Feminism?, the original theory isn’t so much the problem, but rather how it’s morphed and grown more aggressive over the years. "It started out as a kind of reasonable observation about a certain myopia in the women’s movement," she says. Now she believes, it’s become a philosophy that confers prestige on those considered the most oppressed. "They’ve given this theory to 18- and 19-year-olds, and it’s turning a lot of otherwise nice kids into zealots."
Crenshaw finds such attacks tiresome and beside the point. "It’s such a simplistic, old-fashioned, book-burning way of interpreting ideas. You see people using a chant and you decide you’ll try to go after the entire field of thought," she says. She sees a certain hypocrisy in simultaneously proclaiming the sanctity of free speech while telling those who embrace intersectionality that their ideas are poisoning the youth. "To both hold the pitchfork and to defend freedom of thought at the same time — why doesn’t this strike people as obscene?" she says.

And she’s not sure why intersectionality is singled out as the reason that speakers like Charles Murray or Ann Coulter or Milo Yiannopoulos inspire campus protests. "What’s intersectional about that? No one protested a speaker before 1989?" she says. "It’s silly to say that these campus debates are being made possible because of intersectionality."

While many outside of academe are just now, for better or worse, taking notice of intersectionality, gender-studies scholars have long argued among themselves about what it means and whether the term remains useful. Nearly every paper about intersectionality begins with a few throat-clearing sentences about such definitional difficulties. Is it primarily a scholarly legal argument, as conceived (at least originally) by Crenshaw? Or has it become something much broader? Is it a theory or a methodology or a manifesto? What exactly are we talking about?

In the March issue of *American Quarterly*, Jennifer Nash dubbed the wrangling among scholars "the intersectionality wars," noting that nearly everything about the theory is in dispute, including "its histories and origins, its methodologies, its efficacy, its politics, its relationship to identity and identity politics, its central metaphor, its juridical orientations, its relationship to ‘black woman’ and to black feminism." Nash, an associate professor of gender and sexuality studies and African-American studies at Northwestern University, writes that among feminists, the debate around intersectionality has become "particularly and peculiarly contentious."

**Scholars wince at how intersectionality is used by well-meaning but often underinformed activists.**

As evidence, she points to the American Studies Association conference in 2014. One panel, called "Kill This Keyword," was about — as the title suggests — which buzzwords deserve to be put out of their misery. Those in attendance initially voted to dispatch intersectionality because of uncertainty about its meaning and because the word had become overly tied to squabbles surrounding identity. But it was then resurrected, according to Nash, after some objected that killing the theory of intersectionality would be equivalent to killing "black women as objects of study."

There’s also discomfort among scholars about how the word is employed by well-meaning, but often underinformed, activists. Sirma Bilge calls it "ornamental intersectionality," a phrase describing less-than-serious uses of the theory. Sometimes it is literally ornamental: You, too, can purchase an intersectionality-themed mug, T-shirt, or tote bag. She is the
The Intersectionality Wars - The Chronicle of Higher Education

author, along with Patricia Hill Collins, of a recent book titled simply Intersectionality (Polity, 2016), which attempts to deal with the theory in all its confounding glory. "It’s being used as a very fashionable word that gets sprinkled into things," Bilge says. "I don’t want to sound like a middle-aged academic, but I want us to use this in ways that are intelligent."

She finds the use of the word online overwhelming. Instagram, for instance, displays more than 100,000 photos tagged with some variation of “intersectional.” Huffpost published an article this year headlined "50 Groups To Learn About If You’re Committed To Intersectional Feminism." "It is used in so many ways that make no sense at all. It’s used as branding and self-aggrandizing," says Bilge, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Montreal. "That is a source of worry."

Like Bilge, Michele Tracy Berger sees the word being used without any scholarly or historical context. "There can be a flattening or leaking out of the richness," says Berger, an associate professor of women’s studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. At the same time, she doesn’t want to condemn young feminists who are taking a stand on social media for equality and unity. "They’ve come in contact with the term, and they know discrimination is wrong and that women of color experience different forms of discrimination," Berger says. "But you have to deepen that awareness."

Ange-Marie Hancock, author of Intersectionality: An Intellectual History (Oxford, 2016), agrees. In her book, Hancock, an associate professor of political science and gender studies at the University of Southern California, notes that the term "shape-shifts so much as to no longer be recognizable as anything other than a meme gone viral."

Crenshaw has fielded this complaint many times before, and while she doesn’t disagree with the observation, she doesn’t see it as a crisis. "There are people with the word in their mouths who have never read a thing about intersectionality," she says. "There’s nothing unusual or particularly problematic about intersectionality that leads to that kind of partial uptake. That’s just the nature of ideas. Democracy gets taken up that way; so does Marxism. To people who bemoan this, I want to just say, ‘That’s what happens.’"

When I spoke with Crenshaw, she pointed out — correctly — that The Chronicle hadn’t written much about intersectionality over the years, and now that it’s in the spotlight, the focus is on unpacking the critiques rather than digging into the theory or celebrating its successes. "It feels a little like being ushered through the back door," she says. "Where is intersectionality theory now? How has it transformed as it’s traveled from the law to other areas? None of the substance of the work is being talked about."

So where is intersectionality now? Judging by the numbers, its impact is more profound than ever. According to Google Scholar, fewer than 1,000 scholarly articles published in 2005 mentioned intersectionality; last year it was more than 10,000. More people searched for the term online after the anti-Trump women’s march, in January, than at any previous time. At least three books were published on the topic last year, and more are in the pipeline, including Crenshaw’s own book, On Intersectionality: Essential Writings, which is slated to
appear next May from The New Press. Perhaps most important for the future of the theory, it’s being embraced by a younger generation of feminists, many of whom echo the essayist Flavia Dzodan’s 2011 pledge that “my feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit.”

For Crenshaw, the ascendancy of the term is a mixed blessing. She believes that intersectionality has led to genuine social progress, like the “Say Her Name” movement, which draws attention to black women who are killed by police officers, and whose deaths tend to be downplayed if not ignored. And yet she also finds herself dodging criticism from both drive-by firebrands and quarrelsome scholars. “Do I feel gratified having to defend it? Not really,” she says. ”But it’s a lot better than had the term died in 1990.”

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