Agency and ontology within intersectional analysis: a critical realist contribution
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Abstract:	The paper analyses the historical roots of intersectional theory and argues that the ambiguities and elisions which mark intersectional analysis are a weakness not a strength. The paper makes an argument for why Archer's morphogenetic approach provides a more secure basis for analysing the overlapping oppressions that intersectional theory highlights. It avoids conflating experience with structural and cultural conditions and their elaboration and provides an analytical framework for the development of explanatory accounts of how intersections between gender, race, class and other markers of difference operate in concrete historical circumstances. Equally importantly critical realism provides rich resources for theorising agency and in particular corporate agency which is central to understanding the emergence of social movements including feminism. The paper argues that critical realism provides a basis for the maintaining the significance of the normative in analysing social life and in contrast to poststructuralism provides a secure philosophical basis for the research programme opened up by a consideration of intersectionality.
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Agency and ontology within intersectional analysis: a critical realist contribution[i]

Introduction

This paper will explore one of the most important and influential currents within contemporary feminist analysis, namely, intersectionality. Intersectional analysis was developed by black women scholars who identified important absences, both political and theoretical, in feminist and other strands of anti-racist and critical theory (Crenshaw 1989). The success of intersectional theory has been in its bringing together of activist political concerns with poststructuralist sensibilities. As Davis (2008) argues, intersectional theory has been remarkably successful in overcoming the apparent incompatibilities between these two projects:

> It takes up the political project of making the social and material
> consequences of the categories of gender/race/class visible, but does
> so by employing the methodologies compatible with the
> poststructuralist project of deconstructing categories, unmasking
> universalism, and exploring the dynamic and contradictory workings
> of power (2008, 74).

This is a seductive combination. Davis has argued that the ambiguities and contradictions within intersectional theory, rather than being a problem, are the source of its productivity. In this paper, I will explore some of these contradictions and tensions, and suggest that while they do indeed contribute to the theory's popularity, they limit its explanatory potential.

Pointing to the gaps and slippages within intersectional theory is not new (Anthias, 1998). However, I argue that we can draw on the resources offered by critical realism, notably, the work of Margaret Archer (1995, 1996, 2000, 2007, 2012), as a resource to reconceptualise what the research projects of intersectional theory might be. Intersectional theory is productive of numerous research questions at different levels of analysis but rather than celebrating, as Davis (2008) does, the blurring of distinctions between different projects and analytical levels, I suggest that critical realism offers a way of unpacking them. The challenge faced by intersectional analysis is that analytical distinctions between structure and agency, and between culture and agency, are elided. By equivocating between experiences of oppression and the structures that produce them the historicity of emergence is collapsed.

This is particularly the case in post-structuralist and other anti-categorical accounts in which, as Martinez Dy et al (2014) point out, 'notions of positionality or structural discrimination are often collapsed into the concept of 'identity''(Martinez Dy et al 2014, 454). Notions of identity are insufficient to the analytical task of providing accounts of the contextual conditions and structural components that engender (or inhibit) them. Along with other authors (Martinez Dy et al, 2014) I will argue that critical realism has much to offer. In particular, it avoids elisions between structural processes and the identity work of persons: in Archerian terms (1995), between structurally emergent properties (SEPs), culturally emergent properties (CEPs), and the emergent properties of people (PEPs). Critical realism challenges linguistic notions of identity and offers an account of 'being human' (Archer 2000) and of the *sui generis* powers of persons (the PEPs) not just of social structures. I will argue that such an

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account of agency is important to sustain the normative intent of intersectional analysis and the political projects that underpin it.

Accordingly the paper is structured in four parts: the first deals with the emergence of intersectional theory and its antinomies and elisions. The second introduces some of the key concepts from critical realism, with a specific focus on morphogenesis. The third involves an analysis of agency, since personal and corporate agency are central to understanding why intersectional theory matters. Finally, I will reprise why I think that critical realism is a better theoretical resource than poststructuralism, notwithstanding the many important insights feminist poststructuralist theorists have contributed to the analysis of the intersections between gender/race/ class and other markers of structural and cultural difference.

Intersectional theory

In order to make sense of the current debates about intersectionality, it is necessary to locate the particular historical circumstances within which the term came into usage. Intersectionality is not so much a unified theory as a series of concrete socio-political problems and situations which require analysis. It can be seen as extending the research programme which flowed from initial feminist interventions across the disciplines in the late 1960s. As Mirza (2009) in her introduction to a special issue of *Race Ethnicity and Education* on black and postcolonial feminisms succinctly puts it:

> Women, who are collectively defined as 'black' or 'Asian' in official policy or practice have multiple experiences in terms of their age, sexuality, disability, religion or culture. Thus it is argued racism, patriarchy, social class and other systems of oppression simultaneously structure the relative position of these women at any one time creating specific and varied patterns of inequality and discrimination. It is the cultural and historical specificity of inequality that black, postcolonial and anti-racist feminists stress as important in developing a more holistic intersectional approach to mainstream feminist analysis (2009, 3).

Presented as such, this might seem uncontroversial, but the particular circumstances in which intersectionality came to be seen as a necessary corrective is indicated in the reference in the last sentence to 'mainstream feminist analysis'. From the early days of second wave feminism there had been debates about the tensions between the idea of 'women' as a unified political subject, and the increasingly voiced lived realities of experiences of difference and other forms of oppression not simply based on gender. These views challenged mainstream feminist theory and gave rise to a perception that feminism was universalistic in its orientation, based on a false generalisation from white women's experiences, which was identified as a weakness both analytical and political.

This was never a simple story; the women's movement was nothing if not fractious, and vigorous debate emerged about forms of difference based on sexuality, race, class and other categories of oppression and how to theorise them. The general critique was that 1970s feminism had essentialised and generalised from middle class white women's experiences (Segal 1987, 1999). This was always problematic as the argument fails to distinguish between the political demands of new corporate agents (groups of women) agitating against particular forms of oppression, and identity as a woman. What made this so potent in feminism was the role of the personal (David 2003) and the practice of

'consciousness raising' as a way of going from the personal to the political. This meant that direct personal experience and identity were valorised in ways not found in other radical political projects of the left. It was not an issue in the same way, for example, in class politics (except in its Lukácsian formulation) since class is not assumed to be a unitary identity, although of course one of the criticisms many feminists made against class politics was that it *de facto* represented the interests of white, and often skilled and organised, men. At its worst, the formulation of the 'personal is political' reduced to forms of bitterly fought identity politics. The charge of unconscious privilege was levelled at white middle class women who had undoubtedly dominated many early women's groups (Rowbotham 1990). These strains have re-emerged in popular usages of intersectionality (Williams 2013) despite poststructuralism's theoretical break with universalism and 'experience'. The tensions between universalism as a strategy and the necessity of attention to difference reoccur over and over again. For example, in her book *Sexual/textual politics: feminist literary theory* Moi (1985) did much to theoretically destabilise the category of woman while insisting on its strategic political importance, while more recently Gunnarsson (2011, 2015) has defended the category of women and the importance of research that deals with the distinctive powers and properties of gender, race, and class.

The need to theorise differences between women as well as the nature of women's oppression, therefore, did not begin with the coinage of the term intersectionality but what it did, according to Davis (2008), was give it a 'novel twist'. As early as 1974, for example, the Manifesto of the Combahee River Collective began 'As black feminists and lesbians who know that we have a very definite revolutionary task to perform' and they went on to describe the major systems of oppression as 'interlocking' (Eisenstein 1978). The term intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) was an attempt to concretely theorise these experiences and to show how they worked. What Crenshaw, an academic lawyer, did in articulating 'intersectionality' was to draw attention to the tendency for gender and race to be treated as separate categories, with the result that black women were marginalised in both feminist and anti-racist theory and politics. She argued that:

> Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of
> racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality
> into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in
> which black women are subordinated (1989, 140)

She made her case through a meticulous analysis of the ways in which black women are erased within antidiscrimination law. Her key example was of a law case brought against General Motors, alleging that the seniority system perpetuated discrimination against black women. Although prior to the Civil Rights Act, General Motors had not hired black women, it had hired white women, so the ruling argued that GM was not discriminating on the basis of sex. At the same time the court recommended that their claim be considered with another case as part of a general race discrimination claim, thus denying the relevance of gender. Other cases similarly denied remediation to black women as black women, thus, white women in effect became the default plaintiffs of cases of sex discrimination, while black men took priority in cases of racial discrimination.

Crenshaw was also critical of mainstream feminist theory. She argued that despite having drawn on black women's history, most notably Sojourner Truth's *Ain't I a woman?* (1989, 153), white feminists had failed to take account of the needs, interests,

and experiences of black women when articulating their political demands and in theorising the position of women. Another example of this, much debated in the 1970s, was the theoretical attention paid to women's relegation to the private sphere of the home, but these debates had little to say about black women's history and the ways they were denied 'home'. Crenshaw (1989) was similarly critical of the ways anti-racist politics and theory failed to address gender and the specificity of black women's experiences.

Since 1989, intersectionality has become a widely used term and, as Davis (2008) has persuasively argued, the ambiguity of the term has allowed the interests of both generalist and specialist feminist theoreticians to come together with those of activists. Yuval-Davis (2006), however, points out intersectional analysis arrived on the European scene from the US without much effect on policy makers. She argues, furthermore, that the 'triple oppression' approach was especially problematic as there 'is no such thing as suffering from oppression 'as Black', 'as a woman', 'as a working class person' (2006, 195). Rather, she and other theorists have pointed to the different ontological bases of each social division, irreducible and distinct from one another (see also Anthias 1998) It important to notice, therefore, that from the beginning, a number of different sorts of arguments were being adduced: about historically sedimented structures of multiple oppressions, about experiences and identities, about black women as political subjects and the ways their specific issues could be addressed in theory, how feminist and anti-racist theory itself failed to address the particular intersections of race, gender and other forms of oppression, and about the political conclusions that can be made from these different forms of analysis. The breadth of arguments that can be encompassed under the heading of intersectionality and the additive effect of different sorts of arguments make elision particularly problematic.

These problems are compounded by what Martinez Dy et al (2014) describe as, on the one hand, the feminist empiricist tradition which treats race, class, and gender as additive effects, and on the other, the hermeneutic tradition which concentrates on experiences and anti-categorical notions of identity. As they point out both these traditions risk omitting 'that which may be unexercised, unactualised, or unobserved' (2014: 452) and exclude an ontology of 'transfactuality'. Along with Martinez Dy et al (2014) and Gunnarsson (2015), I draw on concepts from critical realism which bring greater clarity to the notion of intersectional explanation, and which also allow us to make analytical distinctions between structure and agency in theorising intersectionality. I will argue that intersectional analysis is better understood not as a singular theory but as a research programme spanning a number of disciplines. I am not however presenting a unified critical realist version of intersectionality, since there is no unitary object to be investigated. The questions posed in the debates on intersectionality operate across different time periods, at different analytical levels, and are amenable to different normative conclusions. The analysis of historically specific intersections requires paying attention to structural and cultural properties as well to the operation of individual and collective agency. It makes no more sense, however, to reduce structural problems to individual experience than it does to think that experience can be deduced from structure, which is why I suggest that Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach has much to offer.

Critical realism and morphogenetic analysis

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Critical realism offers a series of theoretical concepts that are central to the possibility of doing sociological work in general, a role Bhaskar (1978) described as under-labouring. Bhaskar (1978, 1979) provides a powerful analysis of the inadequacies of both idealism and positivism. In their place he argues for a depth ontology in which the domain of the real encompasses not only experiences (our sensory perceptions of things) and events (actual occurring things) but also underlying mechanisms. These, often non-observable, mechanisms are nonetheless real and Bhaskar argues that it is they that produce the world of events which we come to experience in the here and now. Explanation involves the identification of underlying mechanisms which operate transfactually in the open systems confronted in doing social science, which has methodological implications. Sayer (1992) in his book *Method in Social Science* provides insight into the process of retroduction: 'a mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating (and identifying) mechanisms which are capable of producing them' (1992, 107). In particular, he describes the process whereby we need to abstract from the particularities of the concrete situation and exclude those things which have no significant effects in order to isolate and concentrate on the things that do. This form of abstraction and the reconstitution of the concrete is particularly important, as we shall see, when confronted by increasingly extended lists of the numbers of possible intersections (Yuval-Davis 2006). The recognition of the need for a depth ontology is crucial in resolving some of the analytical and methodological problems which have beset research on intersectionality (Martinez Dy et al 2014).
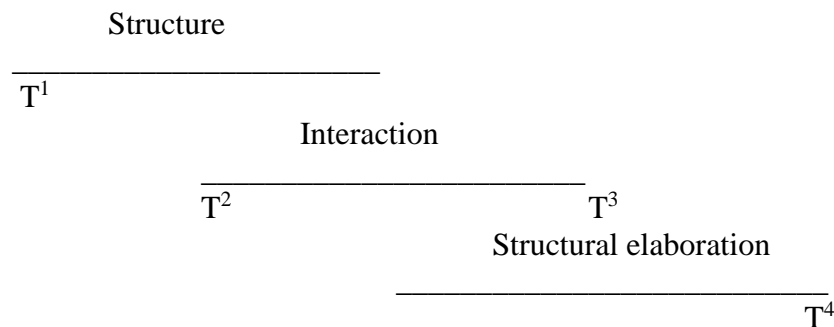
Equally important, however, given that historicity is equally crucial for understanding the ways multiple structures of oppression operate is Archer's (1995) argument about the historicity of emergence. Archer (1995) is the key theorist of a morphogenetic approach to analysing social life. This is developed in Archer's work, grounding her explanatory methodology:

> The 'morpho' element is an acknowledgement that society has no
> pre-set form or preferred state: the 'genetic' part is a recognition
> that it takes its shape from, and is formed by, agents, originating
> from the intended and unintended consequences of their activities.
> (1995, 5)

In keeping with the rejection of both idealism and positivism that underpins all critical realism, Archer develops a critique of their sociological manifestations in the form of downward, upward, and central conflations of structure and agency. Instead, she argues the need for analytical dualism. She is critical of both upward and downward conflation and also what she describes as the central conflation, of social theorists such as Giddens, which she argues involves an elisionist rather than an emergentist ontology (Archer 1995, 60-61). Upward conflation (Archer 1995, 4) involves viewing society as no more than the aggregate of the behaviour of individuals, whereas downward conflation (Archer 1995, 3) reifies society and reduces individual action to societal determination. Central conflation involves a denial of the separability of structure and agency since every aspect of structure is activity dependent. She argues that conflationary analysis effectively confines itself to a sociology of the present in which structure is only evident in its present enactments. In contrast her morphogenetic approach is fundamentally about historicity. Her approach is based on the necessity of analytically distinguishing between structure and agency and their separate emergent, irreducible, and autonomous causal properties. Time becomes the key to understanding how structural conditioning at time 1 and socio-cultural interaction at time 2 to time 3

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results in structural elaboration (morphogenesis) or structural reproduction (morphostasis) at time 4.

Figure1 The Morphogenetic Sequence (Archer 1995, 76)

Structure
_____
T^1

Interaction
_____
T^2 T^3

Structural elaboration
_____
T^4

It is important to stress that the dualism is analytical rather than ontological, and that the key features of the model are historicity, emergence and mediation based on the real powers and properties of SEPs, CEPs and PEPs. Crucially, this approach allows us to explore restructuring over time and insists on the irreducible and continuing significance of agency as well as structure:

> All structural properties in any society are continuously activity dependent. Nevertheless, it is possible to separate 'structure' and 'agency' through analytical dualism and to examine their interplay in order to account for the structuring and restructuring of the social order. Fundamentally, this is possible for two reasons. Firstly 'structure' and 'agency' are *different kinds of emergent properties….* Secondly, and fundamental to the workability of this explanatory methodology, 'structure' and 'agency' operate diachronically over different tracts of time because: (i) structure necessarily pre-dates the action(s) that transform it and (ii) structural elaboration necessarily post-dates those actions .. (2012, 52)

This is key if we are to make sense of the structuring at time 1 which confronts black women (and other actors) with conditions not of their own choosing and upon which they reflexively act. It is clear from studies that the structuring conditions at time 1 are multiple and, moreover, if we are thinking in terms of both race and gender, that some areas are deeply resistant to change. We can identify a *long durée* in terms of reproduction with periods of morphostasis in relation to gender relations of power for example. The outcome is not preordained but our explanations as to why the outcome is change rather than stasis depend on looking at the structuring conditions and at individual and collective, or what Archer (2000) calls corporate, agency.

Archer (1996) not only takes into account structural properties and emergence, but also takes culture seriously, introducing an analytically important distinction between Cultural System and the Socio-Cultural. The Cultural System refers to the existing intelligiblia: the ideas that can be expressed at any one time (whether these are actually expressed or not). The logical relations between these elements within the system can be analysed through the formal features of the system namely those of contradiction,

change, mutual reinforcement (complementarities), and reproduction. The Socio-Cultural refers to how ideas map onto relationships between people – in other words, how ideas are taken up and mobilised. To simply reduce the former to the latter would be a form of epistemic fallacy since it reduces culture to our understanding of it. Socio-Cultural elaboration at time 2-3 at the cultural level involves paying attention to both the System and the Socio-Cultural, which again can result in either morphogensis or morphostasis.

Analytical dualism offers a valuable resource for thinking about intersections because it prises open the connections between structure and agency, and thus opens them up for explanatory accounts. Conflationary analysis is especially problematic in intersectional theorising where structures of oppression are seen as instantiated in the doing of race and gender and other forms of oppression. For example, West and Fenstermaker (1995) make valuable criticisms of mathematical metaphors in feminist theory, of which of course the intersection is one. Their solution, however, is to propose an ethnomethodological approach in which 'the 'objective' and 'factual' properties of social life attain such status through the situated conduct of societal members' (1995, 19). Effectively, different forms of oppression are analysed simultaneously by looking at how they are achieved through the ongoing activity of actors in the present. This is a form of central conflation, since neither structure not agency can be thought of independently of one another. What we have instead is continuous reproduction in present time. The historicity of emergence is lost in this account, and with it, the potential for explanatory analysis since structure is dissolved into repeated contextual enactments.

This lack of analytical distinction also presents major problems for sustaining analytically useful categories such as women, since of course 'woman' is never instantiated in isolation from other social properties; hence, the charge of essentialism against early feminists who the used the term 'women/woman' in their accounts of women's oppression. However, in a carefully argued critical realist account Gunnarsson (2011) defends the category of women pointing out that the starting point of feminist theory is to show how women are oppressed and exploited '*by virtue of the fact of their being women*' (2011, 24). Drawing on the work of Sayer (1992) she argues that abstract categories such as gender, race and class are essential for theorisation of structures of oppression that do not reduce to the level of the lived reality of individuals. When we use the term women we are referring to an abstraction as part of an explanatory account and crucially:

> critical realists apply a 'causal criterion' for ascribing a distinct reality to something …. If something has an impact on the world that is irreducible to the causal effects of other entities we can talk of it as a distinct reality, *even though its reality is wholly premised on its relationship with other things* (2015, 5).

The critical realist account of explanation and the morphogenetic approach allow us to address the issue of separate but entangled processes in a way that does not lead to central conflation. This ability to hold structure and agency analytically separate is essential to address the multiple forms of oppression and exploitation that Crenshaw identified, since at the level of lived experience the concrete realities of race, class and gender co-exist, but we need to be able to separate structure and agency to account for statis and change over time.

Social theory needs to wrestle with understanding the multiple determinations of the concrete by employing necessary abstraction and accounting for the unseen. For this reason, critical realists utilise unifying non-deterministic categories as well as recognise the reality of mechanisms, not just events. In addition, the significance of historicity would be common ground for many intersectional theorists, although not necessarily under the terms considered above. Before further considering the potential explanatory power of morphogenetic analysis, however, I want to introduce Archer's concept of agency, since this is highly distinctive and marks a break with poststructuralist theories of identity on which much intersectional analysis rests (Davis 2008).

Agency

Central to Archer's (2000) theory of agency is the assertion of the primacy of practice rather than language, and her insistence that people have *sui generis* properties and powers which are not reducible to either those of structure or culture. In doing so she breaks with the disembodied subject of 'modernity's man':

> The metaphysics of modernity thus adduced a model of instrumentally rational man who could attain his ends in the world by pure *logos,* a rationality working through the formal manipulation of linguistic symbols to generate truth (2000, 23).

Instead, in her book *Being Human: the problem of agency,* she elaborates a theory of the potentiality of active human agents whose properties and powers are emergent from our relations with the environment and with relative autonomy from both society and biology:

> The properties and powers of the human being are neither seen as *pregiven*, nor as *socially appropriated,* but rather these are emergent from our relations with our environment. As such they have relative autonomy from biology and society alike, and causal powers to modify both of them (2000, 87).

By insisting on the importance of the embodied human being and the primacy of practice – Marx's 'continuous practical activity in a material world' (2000, 122) – and as a species being with natural potentials, she develops a theory of the conditions for the emergence of the self in its necessary relations with the environment. In doing so she distinguishes between concepts of the self which are necessarily social, and a sense of the self which is not. So that while there are discursively produced subjectivities, there is also an embodied sense of self continuous through the history of a particular life. She argues that a coherent account of the development of agents and social actors needs to be grounded in this non-discursively formed continuous sense of self. This is a decisive break with the linguistic dominance found poststructuralist theorising and acts to ground her account of what it means to act in the world.

Archer's model of personal and social identity is one in which individual and collective agents have the resources to act creatively in the world, thus creating conditions for transformation and change as well as social stasis. She theorises the ways in which people come to be able to act reflexively through her notion of the 'internal conversation' which is essential to how humans come to make (always fallible) judgements about the conditions in which they find themselves and deliberate about possible courses of action. She argues that human beings are fundamentally evaluative

in their relations with reality, and that the 'inner conversation' is critical in understanding how human beings come to make commitments:

> The 'inner conversation' is how our personal emergent powers are exercised on and in the world – natural, practical and social – which is our triune environment. This 'interior dialogue' is not just a window on the world, rather it is what determines our being in the world, though not in times and circumstances of our choosing. Fundamentally, the 'inner conversation' is constitutive of our concrete singularity. However, it is also and necessarily a conversation *about* reality. This is because the triune world sets us three problems, none of which can be evaded, made as we are. It confronts us with three inescapable concerns: with our physical well-being, our performative competence and our self worth (2003, 318).

In keeping with her morphogenetic approach she elaborates how the 'me' in the present – 'the conditioning me' at time 1 – becomes at time 2 the conversational 'I', whereby possible future projects are reviewed for the 'you' at time 3. The 'I' reflexively monitors its ultimate concerns. Human beings in this account are strong evaluators with a range of personal powers who confront their triune environment and who perforce possess embodied knowledge, practical knowledge, and discursive knowledge. Reflexivity and the internal conversation are the means by which human beings can come to commit to their central concerns. Not all forms of reflexivity are the same and based on her empirical work she distinguishes between communicative, autonomous, meta, and fractured reflexivity (although historically and cross-culturally there may be more). Her work identifies 'communicative reflexives' who remain anchored in the natal social context of their birth families; 'autonomous reflexives' who adopt strategic stances towards constraints and become upwardly socially mobile; 'meta-reflexives' who are 'contextually incongruous' and 'subversive towards social constraints and enablements, because of their willingness to pay the price of the former and to forfeit the benefits of the latter in the attempt to live out their idea'; and 'fractured reflexivity' where people are unable to form and act on their central projects or cares. Her view of humans includes an elaboration of the importance of both first and second order emotion. It is a misapprehension on the part of some feminists, for example, in Nelson's (2003) contribution to a protracted debate about the value of critical realism for feminist economics, that critical realism excludes such matters (XXXX 2013).

It is by virtue of these powers that humans come to reflexively define their central commitments through the internal conversation, which crucially forms the basis for corporate agency:

> Organised interest groups represent the generation of a new emergent property amongst people (a PEP), whose power is the very special punch they pack as far as systemic stability and change are concerned. Only those who are aware of what they want, can articulate it to themselves and others, and have organised in order to obtain it, can engage in concerted action to reshape or retain the structural and /or cultural features in question. These are termed 'Corporate Agents': they include self-conscious vested interest groups, promotive interest groups, social movements and defensive associations (2000, 265)

I have argued elsewhere that Archer's concepts give us a powerful basis for theorising agency in feminism and for breaking both with the unified subject of modernity and the poststructuralist problematic of dissolving the political subject of feminism (XXXX 2006). While poststructuralist analysis has successfully documented aspects of unfixity and fragmentation in terms of social identity, it lacks the theoretical resource to explain the powerful sense of self which it ends up negating. This is because, despite the seeming openness in poststructuralism at the level of ontology offered by the *and/and* formulation, rather than *either /or* (Davies 1997, 2004) poststructuralism's fundamental ontological claim involves the primacy of the discursive and denial of a pre-discursive self. With these distinctions in mind, it is now possible to return to the central theme of this paper, namely, critical realism as a resource for theorising the multiple intersections to which intersectionality refers.

Intersectional theory and critical realism

I have argued elsewhere (XXXX 2006, 2012) that there is often much commonality at the level of concrete analysis between theorists from different traditions. While there is overlap in terms of substantive analysis, critical realism rejects the Nietzschean legacy of poststructuralism and the idea that that the individual subject is a fiction, that the will to power is constitutive of identity and reality, and that science itself has no special epistemological significance. Poststructuralism has offered intersectional theorists many useful methodological tools, but these are not the preserve of poststructural analysis. Attention to the significance of the discursive is not unique to poststructuralism and critical realism pays attention both to the discursive and the critical deconstruction of categories. In taking issue with specific pieces of research, it is often the ontological status of the claims being made that are being challenged and not the specific empirical arguments or the data presented.

Intersectional theory, as we have seen, resonated powerfully because the substantive situations its analysis sought to address are of immense importance for sociological theory, and it seemed to successfully align competing strands of feminist theory. However, as indicated, the danger in intersectional analysis is that analytical distinctions between structure and agency, and between culture and agency, are elided; additionally, in simultaneously talking about both the experiences and the structures of oppression, the historicity of emergence is collapsed. This is particularly problematic where positions are argued which appear to be about structural and cultural forms of inequality (in critical realist terms: the operation of the SEPs and CEPs at time 1) but which are then reduced to the question of multiple identities. Yuval-Davis (2006) gives a particularly apposite example of this kind of reasoning in the report of the Working Group on Women and Human Rights where she shows how the report begins with structural concerns which 'structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes and the like' (2006, 197) but is transmuted into a concern with specific identities. This slippage allows no space in which to consider how actors engage with structural conditions over time, reflexively engaging with the structural conditions at time 1 in order to commit to projects which may or may not result in morphogenesis. In this instance, the example is policy, in which the ability of people to come to evaluations and act upon their concerns is central. Therefore, the elaboration of particular identities may or may not have salience in the formation of particular social movements or alliances (or in Archerian terms, the exercise of corporate agency).

Thinking about historically sedimented structures of multiple oppressions presents a series of contexts which are suited to morphogenetic analysis at both the cultural and social level. A critical realist reading of Crenshaw's GM example could be that constraints in the ideational cultural system at time one, implied by the legal separation of 'race' and 'gender', are elaborated and challenged at the socio-cultural level at time two as actors challenge this separation by insisting on the specificity of their oppression as 'black women' through attempts to seek remediation in court. Crenshaw identifies black women as previously unrecognised corporate actors; as such the ways their activities have led to changes in law and other institutions over time is clearly important. Equally important are questions regarding what has not changed, and the nature of structural constraints. The issue is not the elaboration of intersectional theory as a unitary set of propositions but of the specification of clear problems which can be analysed in ways which show how particular intersections operate over time. Historicity is, therefore, key to the argument.

The challenge for critical realist analysis is to bring the analytical lens which it affords to existing work on intersectionality, with the aim of clarifying what the claims might be, and also to mobilise critical realism as a resource for nascent research projects that explore specific instances of how intersections are operating. From a critical realist perspective, there is an important role for research which looks at the operation of specific mechanisms in particular geohistorical locations:

> As long as we are clear that an analysis of for instance gender on its own terms relies on an abstraction of some processual parts from an infinitely complex social whole …, it is desirable that some theorists engage in 'separatist' theoretical explorations of what precisely this 'gender' (or 'race', 'class' 'sexuality') *is,* in certain geohistorical locations.
> Otherwise there is a risk that we reproduce unreflected notions of their ontologies (Gunnarsson 2015, 10)

In other words, not all analysis undertaken form a critical realist perspective will be *of* intersections but the philosophical clarity underpinning the work will mean that the work is capable of contributing to the wider research programme. The work of identifying particular mechanisms is grounded in a general philosophical model of explanation in the social sciences, based on the twin ideas of 'retroduction' and 'retrodiction' (Bhaskar 1986, 68). Theoretical explanation is retroductive and involves identifying and analysing the causal powers, underlying mechanisms, and the entities that possess them. Retrodiction involves the analysis of concrete phenomena through the analysis of the multiple causal forces operating in the messy open systems of the social world. Retrodiction is of particular significance for intersectional analysis because, as Mirza (2009) indicates, this involves charting how different forms of oppression create 'specific and varied patterns of inequality' (2009, 3), thereby using abstraction and knowledge of multiple mechanisms to reconstitute the concrete.

As Davis (2008) points out, the political aims influenced by the idea of multiple oppressions and poststructuralism appeared to share the common goal of deconstructing the unified concept of woman. But poststructuralism, at its extreme, deconstructs all sorts of difference including those which gave rise to the need to theorise intersectionality in the first place. The danger is that the structures and experiences referred to by Crenshaw and Mirza are reduced to the merely discursive and to the fluidity of unfixed identities. However, this presents particular problems for sustaining the idea of agency in the critical realist sense, which is necessary in order to understand

and theorise the collective mobilisation involved in political projects. This problem is produced within poststructuralism by a deconstruction of the subject such that agency and voice are reduced to subjectification, the on-going process of producing a 'self' which lacks ontological status.

This is illustrated in the arguments of Davies (1997, 2004), where, following Foucault, she describes the unfixity of the subject as the ongoing process of the constitution of the 'self'. While she defines the subject as fictional (note the scare quotes around 'self'), she nonetheless recognises the power of these fictions as central to the feminist project of bringing about change. So the central contradiction Davis (2008) identifies with movement activists is glossed over into a feminist subject discursively brought into being. What is important to note from a critical realist perspective is that, in this account, the powers accorded to PEPs disappear from view as a subject to be analysed at the empirical and philosophical level, while distinctions between epistemic and judgemental relativism are simply collapsed.

In order to meaningfully address issues of identity, we need a proper theory of persons. This is central to the task of analysing experiences and identities from a critical realist perspective. This would allow us to tease out people's concerns in their relations with the natural, practical and social order, to consider how the causal powers of human beings come to be exercised, and how as strong evaluators people come to understand the salience of race and gender, for example, as key aspects (or not) of their personal and in some circumstances political identity. This is not a simple or singular exercise and involves understanding how people come to deliberate on their circumstances and reflexively identify themselves (or not) as, say, a black woman. In relation to the emergence of new political subjects, critical realism would suggest that it is within the context of people's emergent powers and the possibilities that the development of corporate agency can be understood.

Furthermore, an analysis of social movements and the conditions under which they flourish is essential. In the exchange between Harding (1999, 2003) from a standpoint theorist perspective, and Lawson (1999, 2002), from a critical realist perspective, Harding makes important arguments about why powerful insights are produced by differently positioned groups of actors. Harding's account of why feminists historically chose to struggle on the epistemological front is one such explanatory account, but that does not foreclose the ontological argument about the stratified nature of reality as emphasised by Lawson. In some of the writing on intersectionality corporate agency has been strategically deployed not to argue the case for sectional interests (specifically the interests of black women or women of colour) but to extend the case to developing a more universal set of claims about social justice. Hill Collins (2004) in her book *Black Sexual Politics* argues that she is dealing with a local manifestation of more general global phenomena and extends the commitment to social justice to all human beings. So the sorts of corporate agents she imagines are defined not only in terms of their personal characteristics, but by virtue of their values and commitments to social justice.

These commitments are best analysed within a view of social science which is alive to human values and flourishing. Concerns with social justice constitute a key element of critical realist thinking. An important part of critical realism's Bhaskarian legacy is the connection between critical realism and concerns with human emancipation (Bhaskar 1986). He argued that if we can identify the underlying mechanisms which are

producing injustice or suffering, then we can show under what conditions it could be otherwise. In these circumstances, the argument becomes that *ceritus paribis* (other things being equal) we should change it. Sayer in his book *Why Things Matter to People* (2011) deconstructs and shows the inadequacy of the fact-value separation which has plagued much philosophy and social scientific thinking. This separation is closely related to the historically gendered separation between reason and emotion (XXXX 2013) and the denial of a relation between two. This dichotomisation and its detrimental consequences have been the target of much feminist scholarship (eg Boler 1999) and Archer (2000) has argued that emotions are important for the personal commitments people make to the things that matter to them and are thus central in understanding human agency. Sayer's (2011) naturalistic grounding of claims about the conditions for human flourishing are important for the broader political projects articulated by Hill-Collins (2004) and others. They are not the only theorists to do so; critical realists share much common ground with other sorts of critical theory. Normative reasoning and conclusions are central to any political praxis as is the power of deconstruction, and I am not arguing that critical realists have the only claim to these traditions. In *Bodies That Matter* Judith Butler, for example, argues that:

> To call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it; rather, it is to free it from its metaphysical lodgings in order to understand what political interests were secured in and by that metaphysical placing, and thereby to permit the term to occupy and to serve very different political aims (1993, 30).

Although she eschews an explanatory account of how these metaphysical lodgings came to exercise their hold, the emancipatory logic is clear. I am claiming, however, that radical politics, and this includes the motivating force behind all intersectional theory, is better served by analyses which can impute agency to actors. The tensions between poststructuralist accounts of selfhood as subjectification (Davies 1997, 2004) and the aspirations of activists for a better world cannot be simply reduced to the charge of essentialism against the early women's movement (although there are examples of this in speech and writing designed to mobilise). Nor is it to deny that many analyses of particular situations were inadequate because they failed to take account of the complexity of the ways structural features of race, class and other oppressions operate. Explanatory analysis is difficult and always incomplete. However, substantive analyses would be better if not hobbled by inadequate accounts of structure and agency, and the flat ontologies of both poststructuralism and empiricism.

This is why a morphogenetic account is important: it neither reduces society to individual experience, nor experience to society. Furthermore, and most importantly, it does not conflate the two in an endless and amorphous present. Rather, it offers the analytical tools to analyse the historicity of emergence. All this means nothing, however, if our theory of persons is too thin to account for first, our capacity to act in the world and second, our reasons as strong evaluators, powered by first and second order emotions and reflexivity, for doing so (Archer 2000). Of course there are differences between critical realists in relation, for example, to the relative importance of habitual action and reflexivity and how to theorise these. No theory is or can be complete, but because I am not a judgemental relativist I think some theories are better than others. Critical realism both acts as an under-labourer for science and, as we have seem in Archer's case, offers substantive propositions about the nature of the internal conversation and situated reflexivity. It brings both of these benefits to the analysis of intersectionality, enhancing the possibilities for its research programme. A philosophical

approach which cannot adequately theorize human agency and the possibilities for corporate agency seems inadequate to the task of both analysis and politics. By articulating agency and exploring historical emergence and the morphogenetic cycle, this work can ground radical normative aims. While Davis's (2008) argument about the productivity of intersectionality as a research programme is sociologically insightful, a research programme underpinned by a philosophy that clearly explicates its relation to human practice has even more potential.

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[i] This paper is an amended and extended version of a paper presented at Kritische Soziologie Meets Critical Realism. Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena 1st-3rd Feb. A version of that talk *Critical realism as a theoretical resource for analysing intersectionality* will be published in German in an edited book based on the Conference

Agency and ontology within intersectional analysis: a critical realist contribution[i]

Introduction

This paper will explore one of the most important and influential currents within
contemporary feminist analysis, namely, intersectionality. Intersectional analysis was
developed by black women scholars who identified important absences, both political
and theoretical, in feminist and other strands of anti-racist and critical theory (Crenshaw
1989). The success of intersectional theory has been in its bringing together of activist
political concerns with poststructuralist sensibilities. As Davis (2008) argues,
intersectional theory has been remarkably successful in overcoming the apparent
incompatibilities between these two projects:

> It takes up the political project of making the social and material
> consequences of the categories of gender/race/class visible, but does
> so by employing the methodologies compatible with the
> poststructuralist project of deconstructing categories, unmasking
> universalism, and exploring the dynamic and contradictory workings
> of power (2008, 74).

This is a seductive combination. Davis has argued that the ambiguities and
contradictions within intersectional theory, rather than being a problem, are the source
of its productivity. In this paper, I will explore some of these contradictions and
tensions, and suggest that while they do indeed contribute to the theory's popularity,
they limit its explanatory potential.

Pointing to the gaps and slippages within intersectional theory is not new (Anthias,
1998). However, I argue that we can draw on the resources offered by critical realism,
notably, the work of Margaret Archer (1995, 1996, 2000, 2007, 2012), as a resource to
reconceptualise what the research projects of intersectional theory might be.
Intersectional theory is productive of numerous research questions at different levels of
analysis but rather than celebrating, as Davis (2008) does, the blurring of distinctions
between different projects and analytical levels, I suggest that critical realism offers a
way of unpacking them. The challenge faced by intersectional analysis is that
analytical distinctions between structure and agency, and between culture and agency,
are elided. By equivocating between experiences of oppression and the structures that
produce them the historicity of emergence is collapsed.

This is particularly the case in post-structuralist and other anti-categorical accounts in
which, as Martinez Dy et al (2014) point out, 'notions of positionality or structural
discrimination are often collapsed into the concept of 'identity''(Martinez Dy et al
2014, 454). Notions of identity are insufficient to the analytical task of providing
accounts of the contextual conditions and structural components that engender (or
inhibit) them. Along with other authors (Martinez Dy et al, 2014) I will argue that
critical realism has much to offer. In particular, it avoids elisions between structural
processes and the identity work of persons: in Archerian terms (1995), between
structurally emergent properties (SEPs), culturally emergent properties (CEPs), and the
emergent properties of people (PEPs). Critical realism challenges linguistic notions of
identity and offers an account of 'being human' (Archer 2000) and of the *sui generis*
powers of persons (the PEPs) not just of social structures. I will argue that such an

account of agency is important to sustain the normative intent of intersectional analysis and the political projects that underpin it.

Accordingly the paper is structured in four parts: the first deals with the emergence of intersectional theory and its antinomies and elisions. The second introduces some of the key concepts from critical realism, with a specific focus on morphogenesis. The third involves an analysis of agency, since personal and corporate agency are central to understanding why intersectional theory matters. Finally, I will reprise why I think that critical realism is a better theoretical resource than poststructuralism, notwithstanding the many important insights feminist poststructuralist theorists have contributed to the analysis of the intersections between gender/race/ class and other markers of structural and cultural difference.

Intersectional theory

In order to make sense of the current debates about intersectionality, it is necessary to locate the particular historical circumstances within which the term came into usage. Intersectionality is not so much a unified theory as a series of concrete socio-political problems and situations which require analysis. It can be seen as extending the research programme which flowed from initial feminist interventions across the disciplines in the late 1960s. As Mirza (2009) in her introduction to a special issue of *Race Ethnicity and Education* on black and postcolonial feminisms succinctly puts it:

> Women, who are collectively defined as 'black' or 'Asian' in official policy or practice have multiple experiences in terms of their age, sexuality, disability, religion or culture. Thus it is argued racism, patriarchy, social class and other systems of oppression simultaneously structure the relative position of these women at any one time creating specific and varied patterns of inequality and discrimination. It is the cultural and historical specificity of inequality that black, postcolonial and anti-racist feminists stress as important in developing a more holistic intersectional approach to mainstream feminist analysis (2009, 3).

Presented as such, this might seem uncontroversial, but the particular circumstances in which intersectionality came to be seen as a necessary corrective is indicated in the reference in the last sentence to 'mainstream feminist analysis'. From the early days of second wave feminism there had been debates about the tensions between the idea of 'women' as a unified political subject, and the increasingly voiced lived realities of experiences of difference and other forms of oppression not simply based on gender. These views challenged mainstream feminist theory and gave rise to a perception that feminism was universalistic in its orientation, based on a false generalisation from white women's experiences, which was identified as a weakness both analytical and political.

This was never a simple story; the women's movement was nothing if not fractious, and vigorous debate emerged about forms of difference based on sexuality, race, class and other categories of oppression and how to theorise them. The general critique was that 1970s feminism had essentialised and generalised from middle class white women's experiences (Segal 1987, 1999). This was always problematic as the argument fails to distinguish between the political demands of new corporate agents (groups of women) agitating against particular forms of oppression, and identity as a woman. What made this so potent in feminism was the role of the personal (David 2003) and the practice of

'consciousness raising' as a way of going from the personal to the political. This meant that direct personal experience and identity were valorised in ways not found in other radical political projects of the left. It was not an issue in the same way, for example, in class politics (except in its Lukácsian formulation) since class is not assumed to be a unitary identity, although of course one of the criticisms many feminists made against class politics was that it *de facto* represented the interests of white, and often skilled and organised, men. At its worst, the formulation of the 'personal is political' reduced to forms of bitterly fought identity politics. The charge of unconscious privilege was levelled at white middle class women who had undoubtedly dominated many early women's groups (Rowbotham 1990). These strains have re-emerged in popular usages of intersectionality (Williams 2013) despite poststructuralism's theoretical break with universalism and 'experience'. The tensions between universalism as a strategy and the necessity of attention to difference reoccur over and over again. For example, in her book *Sexual/textual politics: feminist literary theory* Moi (1985) did much to theoretically destabilise the category of woman while insisting on its strategic political importance, while more recently Gunnarsson (2011, 2015) has defended the category of women and the importance of research that deals with the distinctive powers and properties of gender, race, and class.

The need to theorise differences between women as well as the nature of women's oppression, therefore, did not begin with the coinage of the term intersectionality but what it did, according to Davis (2008), was give it a 'novel twist'. As early as 1974, for example, the Manifesto of the Combahee River Collective began 'As black feminists and lesbians who know that we have a very definite revolutionary task to perform' and they went on to describe the major systems of oppression as 'interlocking' (Eisenstein 1978). The term intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) was an attempt to concretely theorise these experiences and to show how they worked. What Crenshaw, an academic lawyer, did in articulating 'intersectionality' was to draw attention to the tendency for gender and race to be treated as separate categories, with the result that black women were marginalised in both feminist and anti-racist theory and politics. She argued that:

> Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of
> racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality
> into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in
> which black women are subordinated (1989, 140)

She made her case through a meticulous analysis of the ways in which black women are erased within antidiscrimination law. Her key example was of a law case brought against General Motors, alleging that the seniority system perpetuated discrimination against black women. Although prior to the Civil Rights Act, General Motors had not hired black women, it had hired white women, so the ruling argued that GM was not discriminating on the basis of sex. At the same time the court recommended that their claim be considered with another case as part of a general race discrimination claim, thus denying the relevance of gender. Other cases similarly denied remediation to black women as black women, thus, white women in effect became the default plaintiffs of cases of sex discrimination, while black men took priority in cases of racial discrimination.

Crenshaw was also critical of mainstream feminist theory. She argued that despite having drawn on black women's history, most notably Sojourner Truth's *Ain't I a woman?* (1989, 153), white feminists had failed to take account of the needs, interests,

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and experiences of black women when articulating their political demands and in theorising the position of women. Another example of this, much debated in the 1970s, was the theoretical attention paid to women's relegation to the private sphere of the home, but these debates had little to say about black women's history and the ways they were denied 'home'. Crenshaw (1989) was similarly critical of the ways anti-racist politics and theory failed to address gender and the specificity of black women's experiences.

Since 1989, intersectionality has become a widely used term and, as Davis (2008) has persuasively argued, the ambiguity of the term has allowed the interests of both generalist and specialist feminist theoreticians to come together with those of activists. Yuval-Davis (2006), however, points out intersectional analysis arrived on the European scene from the US without much effect on policy makers. She argues, furthermore, that the 'triple oppression' approach was especially problematic as there 'is no such thing as suffering from oppression 'as Black', 'as a woman', 'as a working class person' (2006, 195). Rather, she and other theorists have pointed to the different ontological bases of each social division, irreducible and distinct from one another (see also Anthias 1998) It important to notice, therefore, that from the beginning, a number of different sorts of arguments were being adduced: about historically sedimented structures of multiple oppressions, about experiences and identities, about black women as political subjects and the ways their specific issues could be addressed in theory, how feminist and anti-racist theory itself failed to address the particular intersections of race, gender and other forms of oppression, and about the political conclusions that can be made from these different forms of analysis. The breadth of arguments that can be encompassed under the heading of intersectionality and the additive effect of different sorts of arguments make elision particularly problematic.

These problems are compounded by what Martinez Dy et al (2014) describe as, on the one hand, the feminist empiricist tradition which treats race, class, and gender as additive effects, and on the other, the hermeneutic tradition which concentrates on experiences and anti-categorical notions of identity. As they point out both these traditions risk omitting 'that which may be unexercised, unactualised, or unobserved' (2014: 452) and exclude an ontology of 'transfactuality'. Along with Martinez Dy et al (2014) and Gunnarsson (2015), I draw on concepts from critical realism which bring greater clarity to the notion of intersectional explanation, and which also allow us to make analytical distinctions between structure and agency in theorising intersectionality. I will argue that intersectional analysis is better understood not as a singular theory but as a research programme spanning a number of disciplines. I am not however presenting a unified critical realist version of intersectionality, since there is no unitary object to be investigated. The questions posed in the debates on intersectionality operate across different time periods, at different analytical levels, and are amenable to different normative conclusions. The analysis of historically specific intersections requires paying attention to structural and cultural properties as well to the operation of individual and collective agency. It makes no more sense, however, to reduce structural problems to individual experience than it does to think that experience can be deduced from structure, which is why I suggest that Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach has much to offer.

Critical realism and morphogenetic analysis

Critical realism offers a series of theoretical concepts that are central to the possibility of doing sociological work in general, a role Bhaskar (1978) described as under-labouring. Bhaskar (1978, 1979) provides a powerful analysis of the inadequacies of both idealism and positivism. In their place he argues for a depth ontology in which the domain of the real encompasses not only experiences (our sensory perceptions of things) and events (actual occurring things) but also underlying mechanisms. These, often non-observable, mechanisms are nonetheless real and Bhaskar argues that it is they that produce the world of events which we come to experience in the here and now. Explanation involves the identification of underlying mechanisms which operate transfactually in the open systems confronted in doing social science, which has methodological implications. Sayer (1992) in his book *Method in Social Science* provides insight into the process of retroduction: 'a mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating (and identifying) mechanisms which are capable of producing them' (1992, 107). In particular, he describes the process whereby we need to abstract from the particularities of the concrete situation and exclude those things which have no significant effects in order to isolate and concentrate on the things that do. This form of abstraction and the reconstitution of the concrete is particularly important, as we shall see, when confronted by increasingly extended lists of the numbers of possible intersections (Yuval-Davis 2006). The recognition of the need for a depth ontology is crucial in resolving some of the analytical and methodological problems which have beset research on intersectionality (Martinez Dy et al 2014).
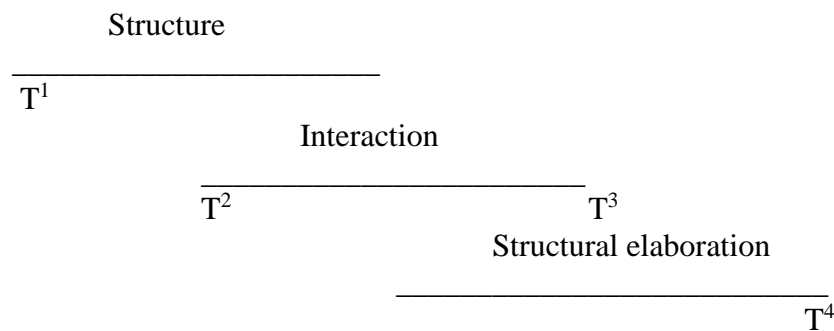
Equally important, however, given that historicity is equally crucial for understanding the ways multiple structures of oppression operate is Archer's (1995) argument about the historicity of emergence. Archer (1995) is the key theorist of a morphogenetic approach to analysing social life. This is developed in Archer's work, grounding her explanatory methodology:

> The 'morpho' element is an acknowledgement that society has no
> pre-set form or preferred state: the 'genetic' part is a recognition
> that it takes its shape from, and is formed by, agents, originating
> from the intended and unintended consequences of their activities.
> (1995, 5)

In keeping with the rejection of both idealism and positivism that underpins all critical realism, Archer develops a critique of their sociological manifestations in the form of downward, upward, and central conflations of structure and agency. Instead, she argues the need for analytical dualism. She is critical of both upward and downward conflation and also what she describes as the central conflation, of social theorists such as Giddens, which she argues involves an elisionist rather than an emergentist ontology (Archer 1995, 60-61). Upward conflation (Archer 1995, 4) involves viewing society as no more than the aggregate of the behaviour of individuals, whereas downward conflation (Archer 1995, 3) reifies society and reduces individual action to societal determination. Central conflation involves a denial of the separability of structure and agency since every aspect of structure is activity dependent. She argues that conflationary analysis effectively confines itself to a sociology of the present in which structure is only evident in its present enactments. In contrast her morphogenetic approach is fundamentally about historicity. Her approach is based on the necessity of analytically distinguishing between structure and agency and their separate emergent, irreducible, and autonomous causal properties. Time becomes the key to understanding how structural conditioning at time 1 and socio-cultural interaction at time 2 to time 3

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results in structural elaboration (morphogenesis) or structural reproduction (morphostasis) at time 4.

Figure1 The Morphogenetic Sequence (Archer 1995, 76)

Structure

_____

T^1

Interaction

_____

T^2 T^3

Structural elaboration

_____

T^4

It is important to stress that the dualism is analytical rather than ontological, and that the key features of the model are historicity, emergence and mediation based on the real powers and properties of SEPs, CEPs and PEPs. Crucially, this approach allows us to explore restructuring over time and insists on the irreducible and continuing significance of agency as well as structure:

> All structural properties in any society are continuously activity dependent. Nevertheless, it is possible to separate 'structure' and 'agency' through analytical dualism and to examine their interplay in order to account for the structuring and restructuring of the social order. Fundamentally, this is possible for two reasons. Firstly 'structure' and 'agency' are *different kinds of emergent properties….* Secondly, and fundamental to the workability of this explanatory methodology, 'structure' and 'agency' operate diachronically over different tracts of time because: (i) structure necessarily pre-dates the action(s) that transform it and (ii) structural elaboration necessarily post-dates those actions .. (2012, 52)

This is key if we are to make sense of the structuring at time 1 which confronts black women (and other actors) with conditions not of their own choosing and upon which they reflexively act. It is clear from studies that the structuring conditions at time 1 are multiple and, moreover, if we are thinking in terms of both race and gender, that some areas are deeply resistant to change. We can identify a *long durée* in terms of reproduction with periods of morphostasis in relation to gender relations of power for example. The outcome is not preordained but our explanations as to why the outcome is change rather than stasis depend on looking at the structuring conditions and at individual and collective, or what Archer (2000) calls corporate, agency.

Archer (1996) not only takes into account structural properties and emergence, but also takes culture seriously, introducing an analytically important distinction between Cultural System and the Socio-Cultural. The Cultural System refers to the existing intelligiblia: the ideas that can be expressed at any one time (whether these are actually

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expressed or not). The logical relations between these elements within the system can be analysed through the formal features of the system namely those of contradiction, change, mutual reinforcement (complementarities), and reproduction. The Socio-Cultural refers to how ideas map onto relationships between people – in other words, how ideas are taken up and mobilised. To simply reduce the former to the latter would be a form of epistemic fallacy since it reduces culture to our understanding of it. Socio-Cultural elaboration at time 2-3 at the cultural level involves paying attention to both the System and the Socio-Cultural, which again can result in either morphogensis or morphostasis.

Analytical dualism offers a valuable resource for thinking about intersections because it prises open the connections between structure and agency, and thus opens them up for explanatory accounts. Conflationary analysis is especially problematic in intersectional theorising where structures of oppression are seen as instantiated in the doing of race and gender and other forms of oppression. For example, West and Fenstermaker (1995) make valuable criticisms of mathematical metaphors in feminist theory, of which of course the intersection is one. Their solution, however, is to propose an ethnomethodological approach in which 'the 'objective' and 'factual' properties of social life attain such status through the situated conduct of societal members' (1995, 19). Effectively, different forms of oppression are analysed simultaneously by looking at how they are achieved through the ongoing activity of actors in the present. This is a form of central conflation, since neither structure not agency can be thought of independently of one another. What we have instead is continuous reproduction in present time. The historicity of emergence is lost in this account, and with it, the potential for explanatory analysis since structure is dissolved into repeated contextual enactments.

This lack of analytical distinction also presents major problems for sustaining analytically useful categories such as women, since of course 'woman' is never instantiated in isolation from other social properties; hence, the charge of essentialism against early feminists who the used the term 'women/woman' in their accounts of women's oppression. However, in a carefully argued critical realist account Gunnarsson (2011) defends the category of women pointing out that the starting point of feminist theory is to show how women are oppressed and exploited '*by virtue of the fact of their being women*' (2011, 24). Drawing on the work of Sayer (1992) she argues that abstract categories such as gender, race and class are essential for theorisation of structures of oppression that do not reduce to the level of the lived reality of individuals. When we use the term women we are referring to an abstraction as part of an explanatory account and crucially:

> critical realists apply a 'causal criterion' for ascribing a distinct reality to something …. If something has an impact on the world that is irreducible to the causal effects of other entities we can talk of it as a distinct reality, *even though its reality is wholly premised on its relationship with other things* (2015, 5).

The critical realist account of explanation and the morphogenetic approach allow us to address the issue of separate but entangled processes in a way that does not lead to central conflation. This ability to hold structure and agency analytically separate is essential to address the multiple forms of oppression and exploitation that Crenshaw identified, since at the level of lived experience the concrete realities of race, class and

gender co-exist, but we need to be able to separate structure and agency to account for statis and change over time.

Social theory needs to wrestle with understanding the multiple determinations of the concrete by employing necessary abstraction and accounting for the unseen. For this reason, critical realists utilise unifying non-deterministic categories as well as recognise the reality of mechanisms, not just events. In addition, the significance of historicity would be common ground for many intersectional theorists, although not necessarily under the terms considered above. Before further considering the potential explanatory power of morphogenetic analysis, however, I want to introduce Archer's concept of agency, since this is highly distinctive and marks a break with poststructuralist theories of identity on which much intersectional analysis rests (Davis 2008).

Agency

Central to Archer's (2000) theory of agency is the assertion of the primacy of practice rather than language, and her insistence that people have *sui generis* properties and powers which are not reducible to either those of structure or culture. In doing so she breaks with the disembodied subject of 'modernity's man':

> The metaphysics of modernity thus adduced a model of instrumentally rational man who could attain his ends in the world by pure *logos,* a rationality working through the formal manipulation of linguistic symbols to generate truth (2000, 23).

Instead, in her book *Being Human: the problem of agency,* she elaborates a theory of the potentiality of active human agents whose properties and powers are emergent from our relations with the environment and with relative autonomy from both society and biology:

> The properties and powers of the human being are neither seen as *pregiven*, nor as *socially appropriated,* but rather these are emergent from our relations with our environment. As such they have relative autonomy from biology and society alike, and causal powers to modify both of them (2000, 87).

By insisting on the importance of the embodied human being and the primacy of practice – Marx's 'continuous practical activity in a material world' (2000, 122) – and as a species being with natural potentials, she develops a theory of the conditions for the emergence of the self in its necessary relations with the environment. In doing so she distinguishes between concepts of the self which are necessarily social, and a sense of the self which is not. So that while there are discursively produced subjectivities, there is also an embodied sense of self continuous through the history of a particular life. She argues that a coherent account of the development of agents and social actors needs to be grounded in this non-discursively formed continuous sense of self. This is a decisive break with the linguistic dominance found poststructuralist theorising and acts to ground her account of what it means to act in the world.

Archer's model of personal and social identity is one in which individual and collective agents have the resources to act creatively in the world, thus creating conditions for transformation and change as well as social stasis. She theorises the ways in which people come to be able to act reflexively through her notion of the 'internal conversation' which is essential to how humans come to make (always fallible)

judgements about the conditions in which they find themselves and deliberate about possible courses of action. She argues that human beings are fundamentally evaluative in their relations with reality, and that the 'inner conversation' is critical in understanding how human beings come to make commitments:

> The 'inner conversation' is how our personal emergent powers are exercised on and in the world – natural, practical and social – which is our triune environment. This 'interior dialogue' is not just a window on the world, rather it is what determines our being in the world, though not in times and circumstances of our choosing. Fundamentally, the 'inner conversation' is constitutive of our concrete singularity. However, it is also and necessarily a conversation *about* reality. This is because the triune world sets us three problems, none of which can be evaded, made as we are. It confronts us with three inescapable concerns: with our physical well-being, our performative competence and our self worth (2003, 318).

In keeping with her morphogenetic approach she elaborates how the 'me' in the present – 'the conditioning me' at time 1 – becomes at time 2 the conversational 'I', whereby possible future projects are reviewed for the 'you' at time 3. The 'I' reflexively monitors its ultimate concerns. Human beings in this account are strong evaluators with a range of personal powers who confront their triune environment and who perforce possess embodied knowledge, practical knowledge, and discursive knowledge. Reflexivity and the internal conversation are the means by which human beings can come to commit to their central concerns. Not all forms of reflexivity are the same and based on her empirical work she distinguishes between communicative, autonomous, meta, and fractured reflexivity (although historically and cross-culturally there may be more). Her work identifies 'communicative reflexives' who remain anchored in the natal social context of their birth families; 'autonomous reflexives' who adopt strategic stances towards constraints and become upwardly socially mobile; 'meta-reflexives' who are 'contextually incongruous' and 'subversive towards social constraints and enablements, because of their willingness to pay the price of the former and to forfeit the benefits of the latter in the attempt to live out their idea' ; and 'fractured reflexivity' where people are unable to form and act on their central projects or cares. Her view of humans includes an elaboration of the importance of both first and second order emotion. It is a misapprehension on the part of some feminists, for example, in Nelson's (2003) contribution to a protracted debate about the value of critical realism for feminist economics, that critical realism excludes such matters (Clegg 2013).

It is by virtue of these powers that humans come to reflexively define their central commitments through the internal conversation, which crucially forms the basis for corporate agency:

> Organised interest groups represent the generation of a new emergent property amongst people (a PEP), whose power is the very special punch they pack as far as systemic stability and change are concerned. Only those who are aware of what they want, can articulate it to themselves and others, and have organised in order to obtain it, can engage in concerted action to reshape or retain the structural and /or cultural features in question. These are termed 'Corporate Agents': they include self-conscious vested interest

groups, promotive interest groups, social movements and defensive
associations (2000, 265)

I have argued elsewhere that Archer's concepts give us a powerful basis for theorising agency in feminism and for breaking both with the unified subject of modernity and the poststructuralist problematic of dissolving the political subject of feminism (Clegg 2006). While poststructuralist analysis has successfully documented aspects of unfixity and fragmentation in terms of social identity, it lacks the theoretical resource to explain the powerful sense of self which it ends up negating. This is because, despite the seeming openness in poststructuralism at the level of ontology offered by the *and/and* formulation, rather than *either /or* (Davies 1997, 2004) poststructuralism's fundamental ontological claim involves the primacy of the discursive and denial of a pre-discursive self. With these distinctions in mind, it is now possible to return to the central theme of this paper, namely, critical realism as a resource for theorising the multiple intersections to which intersectionality refers.

Intersectional theory and critical realism

I have argued elsewhere (Clegg 2006, 2012) that there is often much commonality at the level of concrete analysis between theorists from different traditions. While there is overlap in terms of substantive analysis, critical realism rejects the Nietzschean legacy of poststructuralism and the idea that that the individual subject is a fiction, that the will to power is constitutive of identity and reality, and that science itself has no special epistemological significance. Poststructuralism has offered intersectional theorists many useful methodological tools, but these are not the preserve of poststructural analysis. Attention to the significance of the discursive is not unique to poststructuralism and critical realism pays attention both to the discursive and the critical deconstruction of categories. In taking issue with specific pieces of research, it is often the ontological status of the claims being made that are being challenged and not the specific empirical arguments or the data presented.

Intersectional theory, as we have seen, resonated powerfully because the substantive situations its analysis sought to address are of immense importance for sociological theory, and it seemed to successfully align competing strands of feminist theory. However, as indicated, the danger in intersectional analysis is that analytical distinctions between structure and agency, and between culture and agency, are elided; additionally, in simultaneously talking about both the experiences and the structures of oppression, the historicity of emergence is collapsed. This is particularly problematic where positions are argued which appear to be about structural and cultural forms of inequality (in critical realist terms: the operation of the SEPs and CEPs at time 1) but which are then reduced to the question of multiple identities. Yuval-Davis (2006) gives a particularly apposite example of this kind of reasoning in the report of the Working Group on Women and Human Rights where she shows how the report begins with structural concerns which 'structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes and the like' (2006, 197) but is transmuted into a concern with specific identities. This slippage allows no space in which to consider how actors engage with structural conditions over time, reflexively engaging with the structural conditions at time 1 in order to commit to projects which may or may not result in morphogenesis. In this instance, the example is policy, in which the ability of people to come to evaluations and act upon their concerns is central. Therefore, the elaboration of

particular identities may or may not have salience in the formation of particular social movements or alliances (or in Archerian terms, the exercise of corporate agency).

Thinking about historically sedimented structures of multiple oppressions presents a series of contexts which are suited to morphogenetic analysis at both the cultural and social level. A critical realist reading of Crenshaw's GM example could be that constraints in the ideational cultural system at time one, implied by the legal separation of 'race' and 'gender', are elaborated and challenged at the socio-cultural level at time two as actors challenge this separation by insisting on the specificity of their oppression as 'black women' through attempts to seek remediation in court. Crenshaw identifies black women as previously unrecognised corporate actors; as such the ways their activities have led to changes in law and other institutions over time is clearly important. Equally important are questions regarding what has not changed, and the nature of structural constraints. The issue is not the elaboration of intersectional theory as a unitary set of propositions but of the specification of clear problems which can be analysed in ways which show how particular intersections operate over time. Historicity is, therefore, key to the argument.

The challenge for critical realist analysis is to bring the analytical lens which it affords to existing work on intersectionality, with the aim of clarifying what the claims might be, and also to mobilise critical realism as a resource for nascent research projects that explore specific instances of how intersections are operating. From a critical realist perspective, there is an important role for research which looks at the operation of specific mechanisms in particular geohistorical locations:

> As long as we are clear that an analysis of for instance gender on its own terms relies on an abstraction of some processual parts from an infinitely complex social whole …, it is desirable that some theorists engage in 'separatist' theoretical explorations of what precisely this 'gender' (or 'race', 'class' 'sexuality') *is,* in certain geohistorical locations.
> Otherwise there is a risk that we reproduce unreflected notions of their ontologies (Gunnarsson 2015, 10)

In other words, not all analysis undertaken form a critical realist perspective will be *of* intersections but the philosophical clarity underpinning the work will mean that the work is capable of contributing to the wider research programme. The work of identifying particular mechanisms is grounded in a general philosophical model of explanation in the social sciences, based on the twin ideas of 'retroduction' and 'retrodiction' (Bhaskar 1986, 68). Theoretical explanation is retroductive and involves identifying and analysing the causal powers, underlying mechanisms, and the entities that possess them. Retrodiction involves the analysis of concrete phenomena through the analysis of the multiple causal forces operating in the messy open systems of the social world. Retrodiction is of particular significance for intersectional analysis because, as Mirza (2009) indicates, this involves charting how different forms of oppression create 'specific and varied patterns of inequality' (2009, 3), thereby using abstraction and knowledge of multiple mechanisms to reconstitute the concrete.

As Davis (2008) points out, the political aims influenced by the idea of multiple oppressions and poststructuralism appeared to share the common goal of deconstructing the unified concept of woman. But poststructuralism, at its extreme, deconstructs all sorts of difference including those which gave rise to the need to theorise intersectionality in the first place. The danger is that the structures and experiences

referred to by Crenshaw and Mirza are reduced to the merely discursive and to the fluidity of unfixed identities. However, this presents particular problems for sustaining the idea of agency in the critical realist sense, which is necessary in order to understand and theorise the collective mobilisation involved in political projects. This problem is produced within poststructuralism by a deconstruction of the subject such that agency and voice are reduced to subjectification, the on-going process of producing a 'self' which lacks ontological status.

This is illustrated in the arguments of Davies (1997, 2004), where, following Foucault, she describes the unfixity of the subject as the ongoing process of the constitution of the 'self'. While she defines the subject as fictional (note the scare quotes around 'self'), she nonetheless recognises the power of these fictions as central to the feminist project of bringing about change. So the central contradiction Davis (2008) identifies with movement activists is glossed over into a feminist subject discursively brought into being. What is important to note from a critical realist perspective is that, in this account, the powers accorded to PEPs disappear from view as a subject to be analysed at the empirical and philosophical level, while distinctions between epistemic and judgemental relativism are simply collapsed.

In order to meaningfully address issues of identity, we need a proper theory of persons. This is central to the task of analysing experiences and identities from a critical realist perspective. This would allow us to tease out people's concerns in their relations with the natural, practical and social order, to consider how the causal powers of human beings come to be exercised, and how as strong evaluators people come to understand the salience of race and gender, for example, as key aspects (or not) of their personal and in some circumstances political identity. This is not a simple or singular exercise and involves understanding how people come to deliberate on their circumstances and reflexively identify themselves (or not) as, say, a black woman. In relation to the emergence of new political subjects, critical realism would suggest that it is within the context of people's emergent powers and the possibilities that the development of corporate agency can be understood.

Furthermore, an analysis of social movements and the conditions under which they flourish is essential. In the exchange between Harding (1999, 2003) from a standpoint theorist perspective, and Lawson (1999, 2002), from a critical realist perspective, Harding makes important arguments about why powerful insights are produced by differently positioned groups of actors. Harding's account of why feminists historically chose to struggle on the epistemological front is one such explanatory account, but that does not foreclose the ontological argument about the stratified nature of reality as emphasised by Lawson. In some of the writing on intersectionality corporate agency has been strategically deployed not to argue the case for sectional interests (specifically the interests of black women or women of colour) but to extend the case to developing a more universal set of claims about social justice. Hill Collins (2004) in her book *Black Sexual Politics* argues that she is dealing with a local manifestation of more general global phenomena and extends the commitment to social justice to all human beings. So the sorts of corporate agents she imagines are defined not only in terms of their personal characteristics, but by virtue of their values and commitments to social justice.

These commitments are best analysed within a view of social science which is alive to human values and flourishing. Concerns with social justice constitute a key element of

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critical realist thinking. An important part of critical realism's Bhaskarian legacy is the connection between critical realism and concerns with human emancipation (Bhaskar 1986). He argued that if we can identify the underlying mechanisms which are producing injustice or suffering, then we can show under what conditions it could be otherwise. In these circumstances, the argument becomes that *ceritus paribis* (other things being equal) we should change it. Sayer in his book *Why Things Matter to People* (2011) deconstructs and shows the inadequacy of the fact-value separation which has plagued much philosophy and social scientific thinking. This separation is closely related to the historically gendered separation between reason and emotion (Clegg 2013) and the denial of a relation between two. This dichotomisation and its detrimental consequences have been the target of much feminist scholarship (eg Boler 1999) and Archer (2000) has argued that emotions are important for the personal commitments people make to the things that matter to them and are thus central in understanding human agency. Sayer's (2011) naturalistic grounding of claims about the conditions for human flourishing are important for the broader political projects articulated by Hill-Collins (2004) and others. They are not the only theorists to do so; critical realists share much common ground with other sorts of critical theory. Normative reasoning and conclusions are central to any political praxis as is the power of deconstruction, and I am not arguing that critical realists have the only claim to these traditions. In *Bodies That Matter* Judith Butler, for example, argues that:

> To call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it; rather, it is to free it from its metaphysical lodgings in order to understand what political interests were secured in and by that metaphysical placing, and thereby to permit the term to occupy and to serve very different political aims (1993, 30).

Although she eschews an explanatory account of how these metaphysical lodgings came to exercise their hold, the emancipatory logic is clear. I am claiming, however, that radical politics, and this includes the motivating force behind all intersectional theory, is better served by analyses which can impute agency to actors. The tensions between poststructuralist accounts of selfhood as subjectification (Davies 1997, 2004) and the aspirations of activists for a better world cannot be simply reduced to the charge of essentialism against the early women's movement (although there are examples of this in speech and writing designed to mobilise). Nor is it to deny that many analyses of particular situations were inadequate because they failed to take account of the complexity of the ways structural features of race, class and other oppressions operate. Explanatory analysis is difficult and always incomplete. However, substantive analyses would be better if not hobbled by inadequate accounts of structure and agency, and the flat ontologies of both poststructuralism and empiricism.

This is why a morphogenetic account is important: it neither reduces society to individual experience, nor experience to society. Furthermore, and most importantly, it does not conflate the two in an endless and amorphous present. Rather, it offers the analytical tools to analyse the historicity of emergence. All this means nothing, however, if our theory of persons is too thin to account for first, our capacity to act in the world and second, our reasons as strong evaluators, powered by first and second order emotions and reflexivity, for doing so (Archer 2000). Of course there are differences between critical realists in relation, for example, to the relative importance of habitual action and reflexivity and how to theorise these. No theory is or can be complete, but because I am not a judgemental relativist I think some theories are better than others. Critical realism both acts as an under-labourer for science and, as we have

seem in Archer's case, offers substantive propositions about the nature of the internal conversation and situated reflexivity. It brings both of these benefits to the analysis of intersectionality, enhancing the possibilities for its research programme. A philosophical approach which cannot adequately theorize human agency and the possibilities for corporate agency seems inadequate to the task of both analysis and politics. By articulating agency and exploring historical emergence and the morphogenetic cycle, this work can ground radical normative aims. While Davis's (2008) argument about the productivity of intersectionality as a research programme is sociologically insightful, a research programme underpinned by a philosophy that clearly explicates its relation to human practice has even more potential.

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