

**from “The Intersectionality Wars”**

by Jane Coaston, *Vox* (May 28, 2019)

The current debate over intersectionality, a legal term coined by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is really three debates: one based on what academics like Crenshaw actually mean by the term, one based on how activists seeking to eliminate disparities between groups have interpreted the term, and a third on how some conservatives are responding to its use by those activists.

Crenshaw has watched all this with no small measure of surprise. “This is what happens when an idea travels beyond the context and the content,” she said. “Intersectionality is a prism to bring to light dynamics within discrimination law that weren’t being appreciated by the courts,” Crenshaw said. “In particular, courts seem to think that race discrimination was what happened to all black people across gender, and sex discrimination was what happened to all women. If that is your framework, what happens to black women and other women of color is going to be difficult to see.”

But then something unexpected happened. Crenshaw’s theory went mainstream, arriving in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2015 and gaining widespread attention during the 2017 Women’s March, an event whose organizers noted how women’s “intersecting identities” meant that they were “impacted by a multitude of social justice and human rights issues.”

When you talk to conservatives about the term itself, however, they say the concept of intersectionality—the idea that people experience discrimination differently depending on their overlapping identities—isn’t the problem. Because, as David French, a writer for *National Review*, told me, the idea is more or less indisputable.

“An African American man is going to experience the world differently than an African American woman,” French told me. “Somebody who is LGBT is going to experience the world differently than somebody who’s straight. Somebody who’s LGBT and African American is going to experience the world differently

than somebody who’s LGBT and Latina. It’s sort of this commonsense notion that different categories of people have different kinds of experience.”

What many conservatives object to is not the term but its application on college campuses and beyond. Conservatives believe that it could be (or is being) used against them, making them the victims, in a sense, of a new form of overlapping oppression. To them, intersectionality isn’t just describing a hierarchy of oppression but, in practice, an inversion of it, such that being a white straight cisgender man is made anathema.

In a 2018 clip for Prager University, an online platform for conservative educational videos, pundit Ben Shapiro described intersectionality as “a form of identity politics in which the value of your opinion depends on how many victim groups you belong to. At the bottom of the totem pole is the person everybody loves to hate: the straight white male.” At the end of the video, Shapiro concludes, “But what do I know? I’m just a straight white male.”

In an interview, Shapiro gave me a definition of intersectionality that seemed far afield from Crenshaw’s understanding of her own theory. “I would define intersectionality as, at least the way that I’ve seen it manifest on college campuses, and in a lot of the political left, as a hierarchy of victimhood in which people are considered members of a victim class by virtue of membership in a particular group, and at the intersection of various groups lies the ascent on the hierarchy.”

And in that new “hierarchy of victimhood,” Shapiro told me, white men would be at the bottom. “In other words, if you are a woman, then you are more victimized than a man, and if you are black, then you’re more victimized than if you were white. If you’re a black woman, you are more victimized than if you are a black man.”

I had sent Shapiro Crenshaw’s 1989 paper prior to our conversation. The paper, Shapiro said, “seems relatively unobjectionable.” He just didn’t think it was particularly relevant. “I first started hearing about this theory in the context of a lot of the discussions on campus,

the ‘check your privilege’ discussions. That was the first place that I came across it, and that’s honestly the place that most people first came across it in the public eye.”

Crenshaw said conservative criticisms of intersectionality weren’t really aimed at the theory. If they were, and not largely focused on whom intersectionality would benefit or burden, conservatives wouldn’t use their own identities as part of their critiques. (Shapiro’s tongue-in-cheek disclaimer of “I’m just a straight white male,” for example.) Identities simply wouldn’t matter—unless, of course, they actually do, and the people at the top of our current identity hierarchy are more concerned about losing their spot than they are with eliminating those hierarchies altogether.

“When you’re going to sign on to a particular critique by rolling out your identity, exactly how was your identity politics different from what you’re trying to critique?” Crenshaw said. “It’s just a matter of who it is, that’s what you seem to be most concerned about.”

There’s nothing new about this, she continued. “There have always been people, from the very beginning of the civil rights movement, who had denounced the creation of equality rights on the grounds that it takes something away from them.”

To Crenshaw, the most common critiques of intersectionality—that the theory represents a “new caste system”—are actually affirmations of the theory’s fundamental truth: that individuals have individual identities that intersect in ways that impact how they are viewed, understood, and treated. Black women are both black and women, but because they are *black women*, they endure specific forms of discrimination that black men, or white women, might not.

But Crenshaw said that contrary to her critics’ objections, intersectionality isn’t “an effort to create the world in an inverted image of what it is now.” Rather, she said, the point of intersectionality is to make room “for more advocacy and remedial practices” to create a more egalitarian system.

In short, Crenshaw doesn’t want to replicate existing power dynamics and cultural structures just to give people of color power over white people, for example. She wants to get rid of those existing power dynamics altogether—changing the very structures that undergird our politics, law, and culture in order to level the playing field. Still, as Crenshaw told me, “plenty of people choose not to assume that the prism [of intersectionality] necessarily demands anything in particular of them.”

The conservatives I spoke to understood quite well what intersectionality is. What’s more, they didn’t seem bothered by intersectionality as legal concept, or intersectionality as an idea. (I asked Shapiro this question directly, and he said, “the original articulation of the idea by Crenshaw is accurate and not a problem.”) Rather, they’re deeply concerned by the practice of intersectionality, and moreover, what they concluded intersectionality would ask, or demand, of them and of society.

Indeed, intersectionality is intended to ask a lot of individuals and movements alike, requiring that efforts to address one form of oppression take others into account. Efforts to fight racism would require examining other forms of prejudice (like anti-Semitism, for example); efforts to eliminate gender disparities would require examining how women of color experience gender bias differently from white women (and how nonwhite men do too, compared to white men).

This raises big, difficult questions, ones that many people (even those who purport to abide by “intersectionalist” values) are unprepared, or unwilling, to answer. Once we acknowledge the role of race and racism, what do we do about it? And who should be responsible for addressing racism, anyway?

Intersectionality operates as both the observance and analysis of power imbalances, and the tool by which those power imbalances could be eliminated altogether. And the observance of power imbalances, as is so frequently true, is far less controversial than the tool that could eliminate them.