



White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy

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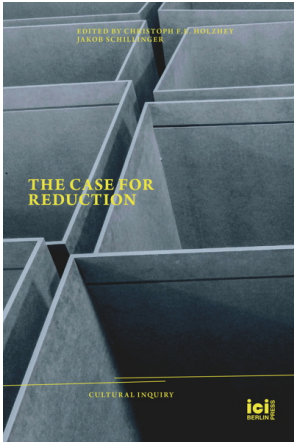
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ABSTRACT: This short essay offers thoughts on bell hooks's use of the list form in the phrase 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy'. While this list suggests that the social forces it contains work together in one unified direction, we can also look to instances in which they pull in opposing directions. However, the function of the list may not be to faithfully map the complexities of social life, but, rather, in its reduction and simplicity, to enable us to believe that social transformation is possible.

KEYWORDS: System; Oppression; Social complexity; Rhetorical simplicity; Social transformation; Rhetorical criticism

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BEN NICHOLS

Sometimes lists have a peculiar rhetorical force. When bell hooks writes, as she famously does, of ‘white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’, or ‘imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’, she employs the list as a powerful way of evoking an integrated system in which a range of forms of oppression work together in tandem: each one intensifies the effects of the others in one unified direction.¹ The lists to which hooks often returned continue to have currency and have more recently been expanded. In a conversation between hooks and actress Laverne Cox from 2014, for example, Cox gives us a longer list to consider: ‘cisnormative, heteronormative, imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.’² We could expand the list even further: ableist, anthropocentric, ageist, and so on. The list form here has a crucial role in evoking how disparate phenomena work together as part of what is basically the same systemic force.

What do such lists enable and what do they foreclose? On the one hand, the rhetorical force of lists like these can perhaps get in

1 bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), p. 51; bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), p. 46.

2 The New School, *bell hooks and Laverne Cox in a Public Dialogue at the New School*, online video recording, YouTube, 13 October 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oMmZIJijgY>> [accessed: 8 July 2022].

the way of certain kinds of understanding. For example, in ‘Capitalism and Gay Identity’ (1983), a famous and formative essay written in an early moment of US-based lesbian and gay studies, the historian John D’Emilio offers an account of how some of the forces in the lists above can also pull against each other or in different directions.³ D’Emilio argues that it was actually historical developments brought about through capitalism that allowed for the formation of modern homosexual identities and communities in the early twentieth-century US. Rather than upholding heteronormativity, then, capitalism could be seen to have undermined it. The reason for this is that the spread of wage labour played a role in eroding the centrality of family units to human subsistence. Previously, D’Emilio argues, people’s lives had been largely defined by subsistence farming, which took place primarily in the context of family units and homes. But the increasing availability of wage labour enabled people to seek employment outside the family unit. This in turn enabled them to act on, and build their lives around, desires in new ways. So, while we can’t deny that capitalism and heteronormativity often work in tandem in insidious ways, D’Emilio’s analysis shows that sometimes they can work against each other too. However, this does not necessarily happen in isomorphic ways: for example, if capitalism undermines heteronormativity, this does not mean that heteronormativity undermines capitalism. Nevertheless, the picture can be more complex than the list form would suggest.⁴

But perhaps the point of the lists that I’ve been discussing is precisely to shield us from this kind of complexity. Both hooks’s and Cox’s

3 John D’Emilio, ‘Capitalism and Gay Identity’, in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), pp. 100–13.

4 Critics of ‘homonormativity’, ‘homonationalism’, and ‘queer liberalism’ would of course not be surprised by the idea that homosexuality and advanced capitalism (‘neoliberalism’) could go hand-in-hand. The extent to which they would then seek to dispute the explanatory force of a list like the one given by Cox, which links heteronormativity with capitalism, is however unclear. See Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2003); Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

lists conjure an integrated system to show the need for systemic upheaval or transformation. Their lists are basically shorthand for the fact that everything needs to change. Such a process could only ever be overwhelmingly complex: it would involve unpicking every assumption, rebuilding every institution, and recalibrating all social norms. It would be such an enormous undertaking that the desire for it is almost self-defeating: how could it ever succeed? This is where the neatness and coherence of the list offers some solace or encouragement. How could we bear the complexity of actually thinking about everything in the way that hooks's lists seem to encourage us to do without the reduction that they themselves perform? The list gives us a false sense of simplicity, but without it we would arguably not be able to bear the enormity of the task that it points to.

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