

INTERSECTIONAL DYNAMICS OF RACE, CLASS AND GENDER IN BRAZIL

DINÂMICAS INTERSECCIONAIS DE RAÇA, CLASSE E GÊNERO NO BRASIL

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the interrelations among race, class, and gender as constitutive and inseparable dimensions of social structure, with particular emphasis on the Brazilian context. Drawing on classical Marxist theory alongside contemporary contributions from feminist thought, Black feminism, and critical race and decolonial theories, the analysis challenges reductionist approaches that privilege a single axis of inequality. The study argues that social hierarchies are produced through the dynamic articulation of economic exploitation, racialization, and gendered power relations, all of which are historically rooted in colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. By mobilizing the concept of intersectionality, the research demonstrates that these categories do not operate additively but relationally, generating qualitatively distinct forms of inequality and lived experience. Furthermore, the decolonial perspective highlights the persistence of coloniality in shaping modern social formations, emphasizing the role of epistemology, culture, and ideology in reproducing domination. The study also explores cultural representations and social practices as sites of both reproduction and resistance. Ultimately, it contends that a comprehensive understanding of contemporary inequalities requires an integrated analytical framework capable of capturing the complexity and historicity of social relations, while also recognizing the transformative potential of countercolonial practices and marginalized epistemologies.

Keywords: intersectionality; decoloniality; social inequality

RESUMO

Este estudo examina criticamente as inter-relações entre raça, classe e gênero como dimensões constitutivas e inseparáveis da estrutura social, com ênfase particular no contexto brasileiro. Baseando-se na

teoria marxista clássica, juntamente com contribuições contemporâneas do pensamento feminista, do feminismo negro e das teorias críticas da raça e decoloniais, a análise desafia abordagens reducionistas que privilegiam um único eixo de desigualdade. O estudo argumenta que as hierarquias sociais são produzidas pela articulação dinâmica da exploração econômica, da racialização e das relações de poder de gênero, todas historicamente enraizadas no colonialismo, no capitalismo e no patriarcado. Ao mobilizar o conceito de interseccionalidade, a pesquisa demonstra que essas categorias não operam de forma aditiva, mas relacional, gerando formas qualitativamente distintas de desigualdade e experiência vivida. Além disso, a perspectiva decolonial destaca a persistência da colonialidade na formação das estruturas sociais modernas, enfatizando o papel da epistemologia, da cultura e da ideologia na reprodução da dominação. O estudo também explora as representações culturais e as práticas sociais como espaços tanto de reprodução quanto de resistência. Em última análise, argumenta-se que uma compreensão abrangente das desigualdades contemporâneas requer uma estrutura analítica integrada capaz de captar a complexidade e a historicidade das relações sociais, reconhecendo também o potencial transformador das práticas anticoloniais e das epistemologias marginalizadas.

Palavras-chave: interseccionalidade; decolonialidade; desigualdade social

INTRODUCTION

The analysis of contemporary social relations requires moving beyond unidimensional approaches that privilege only a single axis of inequality. In this sense, the categories of race, class, and gender must be understood as constitutive and inseparable dimensions of

social structure, historically articulated within social formations marked by colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. Rather than operating in isolation, these categories constitute a complex relational field in which economic exploitation, symbolic domination, and social hierarchization are simultaneously produced.

Classical Marxist tradition, for example, granted centrality to the category of class as the structuring principle of society. As Marxist literature argues, class analysis seeks to understand social phenomena through the relations between groups positioned differently within the productive process. However, as contemporary critiques—particularly those emerging from feminist theory and critical race theory—demonstrate, reducing the totality of social life to the economic dimension proves insufficient for capturing the complexity of inequality (Marx, 2011).

Within this context, the emergence of intersectional and decolonial perspectives represents a fundamental epistemological shift. Thinkers such as Lélia Gonzalez (2020) and Beatriz Nascimento (2018), alongside figures such as Fanon (1963), demonstrate that Brazilian and Latin American social formations cannot be understood without considering the centrality of structural racism, the coloniality of power, and the historical experience of the African diaspora.

This dissertation therefore aims to critically analyze the relations among race, class, and gender by articulating classical and contemporary theoretical frameworks within an intersectional and countercolonial perspective. It seeks to demonstrate that these categories do not merely coexist but mutually constitute one

another, producing specific forms of inequality, subjectivity, and resistance.

1. SOCIAL CLASS: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY REINTERPRETATIONS

The concept of social class constitutes one of the pillars of modern social theory. Within Marxism, class fundamentally refers to the position individuals occupy in relations of production. However, as Erik Olin Wright (2005) observes, class analysis does not imply that all social phenomena can be explained exclusively by this variable, but rather that it operates as a generalized social cause that traverses multiple dimensions of social life.

This perspective allows class to be understood not as a fixed datum but as a relational and dynamic analytical principle. In Marxist tradition, exploitation—understood as the appropriation of surplus produced by one class by another—constitutes the core of class relations. Exploitation forms the objective basis of social antagonisms and class struggle.

Nevertheless, the work of E. P. Thompson (1963) introduces a decisive shift by conceiving class as a historical category formed through social processes and collective experiences. For Thompson, classes do not exist as abstract entities; rather, they emerge insofar as individuals recognize shared interests and develop forms of collective action. This approach breaks with rigid structuralist interpretations and emphasizes the cultural and experiential dimensions of class formation.

This historical conception is reinforced in Thompson's analysis of English society, in which class appears as the result of social struggle

rather than a preexisting structure (1963). Class struggle is therefore not merely a consequence but also a condition for the existence of classes.

Contemporary debates, however, reveal important limitations in the exclusive centrality of class. The emergence of new social configurations, such as the precariat described by Guy Standing, reflects transformations in the class structure of global capitalism. The precariat is characterized by chronic insecurity and fragmented collective identities, challenging traditional forms of political organization and class consciousness.

Moreover, scholars such as Erik Olin Wright (2015) propose expanding the concept of class to incorporate multiple dimensions, including gender and other forms of social differentiation. In his “conceptual menu,” Wright argues that class and gender relations interact in diverse ways, and sexual difference may operate both as a mechanism of exploitation and as a relatively autonomous process (2005). Thus, although class analysis remains fundamental, it must be articulated with other categories in order to fully understand contemporary social dynamics.

2. RACE AND THE CRITIQUE OF THE MYTH OF RACIAL DEMOCRACY

The racial question constitutes a structuring axis of Latin American societies, particularly in Brazil, where the legacy of slavery and colonialism produced specific forms of inequality and domination. For much of the twentieth century, the idea of “racial democracy” prevailed, according to which Brazil would be a society characterized by harmony among races.

However, this interpretation has been widely criticized by authors such as Florestan Fernandes and later by contemporary intellectuals (2008). As the literature emphasizes, racial democracy should be understood not as empirical reality but as an ideology that conceals racial inequalities and legitimizes the social order.

More than a form of false consciousness, the myth of racial democracy operates as a set of values that influence social practices and hinder the recognition of structural racism. In this sense, it plays an active role in reproducing inequality.

Historical analysis reveals that the inclusion of the Black population in Brazil occurred in a subordinate manner, through policies designed to integrate the popular classes without significantly altering power structures. This process resulted in incomplete citizenship marked by economic, political, and symbolic exclusion.

The decolonial perspective deepens this critique by demonstrating that racism is not a residual phenomenon but a constitutive element of modernity. Frantz (1963), for example, shows how colonialism produces racialized subjectivities in which the Black subject is placed in a position of ontological inferiority.

Within the Brazilian context, Lélia Gonzalez proposes the concept of “amefricanity” to highlight the specificity of Black experience in Latin America, articulating race, culture, and resistance (2020). Beatriz (2018), in turn, emphasizes the importance of memory and quilombos as spaces for the construction of identity and practices of autonomy.

3. GENDER, PATRIARCHY, AND THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOR

The category of gender emerges as a fundamental analytical tool for understanding power relations that structure society. According to Joan Scott, gender should be understood as a historical category that organizes social relations and symbolizes relations of power.

Within capitalist societies, patriarchy operates as a system of domination that articulates economic exploitation with gender oppression. Heleieth (demonstrates that women's oppression cannot be dissociated from class relations, as it forms a constitutive element of a system based on exploitation.

The sexual division of labor constitutes one of the primary mechanisms through which this inequality is reproduced. By assigning women responsibility for domestic and reproductive labor—often unpaid—the capitalist system ensures the reproduction of labor power at low cost.

Furthermore, patriarchy manifests itself through gender-based violence, which, far from being an isolated phenomenon, forms part of a structural logic of domination. This violence becomes even more intense when articulated with other axes of inequality such as race and class.

Contemporary feminist critique, particularly within Black feminism, emphasizes the need to consider the intersectionality of these oppressions. As scholars such as Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins demonstrate, the experiences of Black women cannot be understood through isolated categories but require an analysis that simultaneously articulates race, class, and gender.

4. INTERSECTIONALITY AND DECOLONIAL CRITIQUE

The concept of intersectionality, developed within the context of Black feminist thought, represents one of the most important theoretical contributions to the analysis of contemporary inequalities. It enables an understanding of how different forms of oppression intersect and reinforce one another.

In the Latin American context, this approach is deepened by decolonial theories, which highlight the persistence of coloniality within contemporary social structures. The coloniality of power, as proposed by Aníbal Quijano, refers to the articulation between capitalism, racism, and Eurocentrism.

From this perspective, race, class, and gender are not merely analytical categories but constitutive dimensions of colonial modernity. Economic exploitation, racial hierarchization, and gender domination are interdependent processes reproduced on a global scale.

The concept of countercolonialism, in turn, emphasizes forms of resistance and the production of alternatives emerging from the margins. Cultural practices, social movements, and intellectual productions by subordinated groups therefore constitute spaces of contestation and social transformation.

5. INTERSECTIONALITY: STRUCTURAL ARTICULATION OF INEQUALITIES

Intersectionality emerges as a fundamental critique of approaches that treat race, class, and gender as independent spheres. Initially developed within Black feminist scholarship, this perspective demonstrates that forms of oppression not only coexist but mutually constitute one another, producing specific social experiences.

Rather than following an additive logic, intersectionality proposes a relational and structural reading of inequality. A working-class Black woman does not simply experience the sum of racism, sexism, and class exploitation; her experience is qualitatively distinct, resulting from the interpenetration of these structures.

This perspective resonates with the Marxist tradition when the latter is interpreted in non-economistic terms. As E. P. Thompson argues, class must be understood as a historical formation involving cultural, symbolic, and political dimensions, not merely economic ones. Such an approach opens space for incorporating other dimensions of inequality into social analysis.

Erik Olin Wright (2015) contributes to this debate by proposing a multidimensional approach to class that recognizes the significant influence of gender and other social differences on class relations. In his theoretical framework, class does not operate in isolation but interacts with other mechanisms of stratification.

Within Black feminist thought, this articulation is further developed by demonstrating that racism structures the functioning of patriarchy and capitalism themselves. Historically, Black women have been inserted into specific positions in the labor market—often associated with domestic work and informality—revealing the interdependence of race, gender, and class.

In Brazil, Lélia Gonzalez shows that racism and sexism intersect in the construction of a social hierarchy that places Black women in a position of structural subordination. Her analysis reveals how Brazilian culture reproduces racial and gender stereotypes that naturalize exploitation (Gonzalez, 2020).

Intersectionality should therefore be understood not only as an analytical tool but also as a critical perspective that challenges the epistemological foundations of traditional social theory and proposes a reconfiguration of how reality is interpreted.

6. RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN BRAZILIAN SOCIAL FORMATION

Brazilian social formation is marked by a profound articulation among race, class, and gender resulting from the colonial process and slavery. Unlike other social formations, Brazil constructed a structure of inequality based on the racialization of labor and the naturalization of social hierarchies.

During the colonial and imperial periods, slavery constituted the central axis of economic and social organization. The Black population was incorporated as an exploited labor force, while white elites monopolized the means of production and political power. This structure left deep marks that persist in contemporary society.

Even after the formal abolition of slavery, the Black population continued to occupy subordinate positions in the labor market, demonstrating the continuity of racial inequalities. Sociological studies indicate that the integration of Black people into Brazilian society occurred in a subordinate manner, without the implementation of effective reparative policies.

The ideology of racial democracy played a central role in this process by concealing inequalities and preventing the recognition of structural racism.

Regarding gender, Brazilian society developed within a patriarchal logic that assigns women subordinate positions. However, this

subordination does not manifest uniformly. Black women, for instance, have historically been inserted into labor relations marked by intensified exploitation, particularly in domestic work.

Heleieth Saffioti (2013) demonstrates that gender oppression must be analyzed in articulation with class relations as part of a broader system of domination. In the Brazilian case, this analysis must also incorporate the racial dimension due to its centrality in social organization.

Brazilian social formation can therefore be understood as a system in which race, class, and gender operate interdependently, producing a complex and persistent structure of inequality.

7. CULTURE, IDEOLOGY, AND THE REPRODUCTION OF INEQUALITIES

The reproduction of social inequalities does not occur solely at the economic level but also within the symbolic and cultural sphere. Culture plays a fundamental role in the naturalization of social hierarchies through the production of representations, values, and practices that legitimize the social order.

The ideology of racial democracy provides a paradigmatic example of how culture operates in the reproduction of inequality. By asserting the absence of racism, this ideology delegitimizes claims of discrimination and hinders political mobilization.

Marxist tradition already emphasized the importance of ideology in maintaining domination. Contemporary approaches expand this analysis by incorporating racial and gender dimensions into ideological production.

E. P. Thompson (1963), by emphasizing experience and culture in class formation, demonstrates that social relations cannot be reduced to economic structures alone. This perspective makes it possible to understand how cultural values and practices contribute either to the reproduction or contestation of inequalities.

Within gender relations, patriarchal culture establishes norms and expectations that regulate women's behavior and reinforce their subordination. These norms become internalized and reproduced in everyday life, making domination appear natural.

Regarding race, the production of stereotypes and negative representations of Black populations contributes to their social marginalization. Such stereotypes not only justify inequality but also affect individual subjectivity, influencing life trajectories and opportunities.

8. SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: CINEMA, LITERATURE, AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

The analysis of race, class, and gender relations can be enriched by considering cultural productions such as films and literary works that express and problematize these inequalities.

The work *Quarto de Despejo* by Carolina Maria de Jesus (1960) constitutes an emblematic example of the articulation between race, class, and gender. By narrating her experience as a poor Black woman living in a favela, the author reveals the multiple forms of oppression structuring her daily life. Her writing exposes both the materiality of poverty and the symbolic dimension of exclusion.

In cinema, the film *The Second Mother* (2015), directed by Anna Muylaert, examines class and gender relations in the context of domestic labor. The character Val, a domestic worker from Brazil's Northeast, occupies a subordinate position normalized by social relations. The arrival of her daughter, however, challenges this order and exposes the contradictions of the system.

Another relevant example is the film *City of God* (2002), which portrays the reality of Brazilian urban peripheries marked by violence, inequality, and social exclusion. Although centered on class dynamics, the film also reveals the presence of structural racism in the organization of urban space.

Such cultural productions do not merely reflect social reality; they also contribute to its critical understanding by making visible experiences that are often marginalized.

9. COLONIALITY, DECOLONIALITY, AND COUNTERCOLONIALISM

The decolonial perspective offers a profound critique of the epistemological foundations of modernity by demonstrating that colonialism is not merely a phenomenon of the past but a structure that continues to shape contemporary social relations.

The concept of coloniality of power refers to the articulation between capitalism, racism, and Eurocentrism that establishes global hierarchies and determines which forms of knowledge are considered legitimate. Within this framework, colonized populations are frequently represented as inferior, thereby justifying their exploitation.

Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonialism demonstrates how colonial domination produces subjectivities marked by alienation and internalized inferiority (2008). His work reveals the psychological dimension of racism, complementing structural analysis.

In the Latin American context, decoloniality proposes the valorization of the knowledge and experiences of subordinated peoples as a means of resisting Eurocentric hegemony. This perspective involves a critique not only of social structures but also of the forms through which knowledge itself is produced.

The concept of countercolonialism emphasizes practices of resistance that emerge from the margins. Quilombos, social movements, and cultural productions represent forms of organization that challenge colonial logic and propose alternatives.

The analysis of race, class, and gender relations must therefore be articulated within a critical perspective that recognizes both structures of domination and possibilities for social transformation.

10. EPISTEMOLOGICAL DEBATE: POWER, DOMINATION, AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The analysis of relations among race, class, and gender necessarily involves epistemological reflection on the forms through which knowledge is produced within the social sciences. Analytical categories are not neutral; they are historically situated and shaped by power relations.

Marxist tradition already indicated that the dominant ideas within a society tend to be those of the ruling class. Contemporary

approaches extend this critique by demonstrating that knowledge production is also shaped by racial and gender hierarchies.

Michel Foucault's analysis of the relationship between knowledge and power demonstrates that knowledge does not merely describe reality but actively participates in its constitution (2014). Scientific discourses can therefore contribute to legitimizing social hierarchies by naturalizing differences and inequalities.

Pierre Bourdieu emphasizes the role of symbolic capital and social fields in the reproduction of inequality (1984). For Bourdieu, domination is exercised not only through coercion but also through the internalization of dispositions—the habitus—that guide practices and perceptions.

These contributions are essential for understanding how race, class, and gender operate not only as material structures but also as symbolic categories that organize perceptions of the social world.

Decolonial theories introduce an even more radical critique by exposing the Eurocentric character of knowledge production. Throughout modernity, knowledge produced outside the European axis was systematically delegitimized and classified as inferior or unscientific.

This critique is particularly relevant for the analysis of racial relations, since scientific racism played a central role in legitimizing colonialism and slavery. Overcoming inequality therefore requires not only social transformation but also epistemological transformation.

II. METHODOLOGY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE ANALYSIS

The articulation of race, class, and gender requires a methodological approach capable of capturing the complexity of social relations. Social science research must therefore adopt perspectives that combine structural analysis with attention to the concrete experiences of social actors.

Marxist tradition contributes tools for analyzing economic structures and relations of exploitation. However, as demonstrated by E. P. Thompson, it is essential to incorporate historical and cultural dimensions into analysis, recognizing that classes are formed through concrete social processes.

Similarly, incorporating the category of gender requires examining the power relations that structure the sexual division of labor and social organization. As indicated by Saffioti (1976, 2013), these relations are deeply intertwined with the logic of capitalist exploitation.

The racial dimension demands consideration of the historical specificities of social formation as well as contemporary forms of structural racism. Critiques of racial democracy highlight the importance of questioning discourses that conceal inequality.

An adequate methodological approach should therefore be:

- Historical, considering social formation and long-term processes;

- Relational, analyzing the articulation between different categories;
- Critical, questioning the epistemological foundations of knowledge;
- Empirical, attentive to the concrete experiences of social actors.

12. THEORETICAL SYNTHESIS: THE INSEPARABILITY OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER

The preceding discussion demonstrates that race, class, and gender constitute inseparable dimensions of social reality. These categories do not merely coexist; they mutually constitute one another, forming an integrated system of domination.

Class, although fundamental for understanding economic exploitation, is insufficient on its own to explain social inequalities. The racial dimension reveals how capitalism historically developed through the exploitation of racialized populations, while gender highlights the central role of the sexual division of labor in the reproduction of the system.

The intersectional perspective makes it possible to understand how these dimensions interact in producing specific social experiences. At the same time, the decolonial approach demonstrates that these relations are embedded in a global structure of power marked by coloniality.

Social analysis must therefore move beyond reductionist approaches and adopt a perspective that recognizes the complexity and historicity of inequalities.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of relations among race, class, and gender reveals the complexity of inequalities structuring contemporary societies, particularly within the Brazilian context. These categories, far from operating independently, form an integrated system of domination reproduced both materially and symbolically.

Marxist tradition provides essential tools for understanding economic exploitation but must be articulated with contributions from feminist thought and critical race theory in order to grasp the totality of social relations. Intersectionality emerges as an indispensable perspective for understanding how different forms of oppression intersect.

In the Latin American context, the decolonial perspective deepens this analysis by highlighting the central role of colonialism in shaping contemporary inequalities. The concept of coloniality of power demonstrates that race, class, and gender are constitutive dimensions of modernity rather than secondary elements.

At the same time, the notion of countercolonialism underscores possibilities for resistance and social transformation, demonstrating that subordinated subjects are not merely victims but also agents of change.

Understanding the relations among race, class, and gender is therefore not only a theoretical exercise but also a fundamental step toward the construction of a more just and egalitarian society.

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