

Trendy Theory, Coherence, and Coverage
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One of the most fruitful concepts of social analysis developed over the last several decades has been that of intersectionality, the idea that major systems of oppression are interlocking and that no one identity—race, class, gender, religion, ability, sexual orientation, and so on—should be considered apart from other identities, but is always materialized in terms of and by means of them. Intersectionality has also moved from academia to popular culture and activism. You can learn about it from a Khan Academy YouTube video, the Tumblr site “Intersectional feminism for beginners,” *People* magazine, *Teen Vogue*, and various feminist blogs and websites. “Intersectional feminist” is also how many young women—and some men—describe themselves on their Facebook pages, blogs, and Twitter or Tumblr posts, and with buttons, posters, T-shirts, and other merch. Sometimes they wear these in our classrooms. Sometimes we wear these in our classrooms.

I have been struck in reading discussions of intersectional feminism that have emerged since the word hit public consciousness by how static and presentist categories of identity appear in them, however, and how U.S. centric. Despite the fact that for thirty years scholars of gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and other categories of identity have stressed that these are culturally constructed and historically changing as well as intersecting, that’s not how they are generally discussed. Thus as people who actually know something about change over time and global differences, we world historians need to stress this more, and point out that such categories—as well as many other aspects of society and culture—varied in the past as well as the present.

So why not make intersectionality the central theme in a world history survey? We usually pick a small number of themes to give some coherence to our course, and this one is packed with what are often among those themes. Or perhaps combine intersectionality with movement and migration, as the social systems that are part of intersectional analysis change when people encounter others not like themselves, and those systems inspire migration and movement.

Not surprisingly, some of world history’s greatest hits lend themselves very easily to intersectional analysis. Take Hammurabi’s Code, which is in every world history textbook that I know. It divides Babylonian society into three groups—property owners, freed men, and slaves—assigning different financial values to their lives, eyes, and bones. So here’s social class. (And it’s actually more complicated than this.) It assigns different values to men and women. There’s gender. About a third of the laws relate to marriage, reproduction, and the family, including all kinds of laws about adultery, divorce, prostitution, and rape. More gender, plus sexuality. Marriage is different for property owners, freed men, and slaves, so here’s an intersection of gender and class. For example, a man is specifically allowed to bring a concubine into the household or have children with servants or slaves if his wife could not bear children. That’s sexuality, plus class, because poor men don’t have concubines, servants or slaves, and poor women *are* concubines, servants or slaves. There are laws about relations between fathers and sons, and fathers and daughters, and brothers and sisters, so here’s the hierarchy of age and

family position. Your textbook probably mentions boring laws from Hammurabi's code about workers being responsible for their products and farmers keeping irrigation ditches in repair, but here's one my students have found especially interesting: (137) "If a man betroth a girl to his son, but his son has not known her [this is known in the "Biblical" sense], and if then he [that is, the father] defile her, he shall pay her half a gold mina, and compensate her for all that she brought out of her father's house as her dowry. She may marry the man of her heart." So here we have age, family position, wealth, sex, and gender, all in one law. Plus a bit on the history of the emotions, and all the family drama you could want.

What's *not* in Hammurabi's code? Race. We talk in general in world history about how race has no scientific meaning and is socially constructed and historically changing, but here is a long law code shot through with social distinctions and there is nothing about skin color, place of origin, or anything else that resembles race. My students notice this. And they also notice that the only type of sex the law code is interested in is heterosexual reproductive, in which it's *very* interested.

Or take Confucianism, another thing that's in every textbook. What do we usually say about it? That Confucius saw society as based on five relationships: ruler and ruled; father and son; husband and wife; elder brother and younger brother; friend and friend. Four of these are hierarchical, and though as far as we can tell Confucius thought that hierarchy was good, we know that some of those who were subjects, sons, and younger brothers saw them as systems of oppression that buttressed each other. In other words, as intersectional.

As with any theme we choose, not everything we want to talk about can fit, but a great deal can, from the effects of Neolithic agriculture to the Yellow Vest Movement. Thus this would not mean adding "stuff," but viewing the stuff we already have in a different, and perhaps more coherent way. We have a tendency in introductory history courses to stay away from theory, leaving that to senior majors or even graduate students. But here's a theory—or you can call it a concept, if your students are skittish about the word "theory"—that some of them may have even heard of or identify with. We talk often about the difficulty of incorporating social history into world/global courses, and this would be one way to do this, while also emphasizing the dynamic nature of the past and connecting past and present.