The Architecture of Hierarchy: Intersectional Feminism and Stratification Economics

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ABSTRACT

At first glance, it may seem that gender is to intersectional feminism as race is to stratification economics—a territorial division. However, both intersectional feminist theory and stratification economics challenge the individualistic assumptions of orthodox economics, insisting that group-based inequalities are structural and purposive rather than incidental or cultural. This paper argues that the two frameworks are not merely compatible but mutually reinforcing, sharing a deeper theoretical logic that neither has fully articulated. This logic is demonstrated through attention to the axes of stratification and the architecture of hierarchy — the categorical foundations of compulsory group assignment — by which dominant groups produce and maintain racial, gender, class, citizenship and other categories that pre-structure the terms on which economic and political cooperation proceeds. The resulting theoretical synthesis has direct implications for coalitional strategies: people often find themselves in contradictory positions, challenging other people's privileges but defending their own. Mounting inequalities of wealth and income magnify class differences. They also increase the potential payoff to a broad subaltern coalition while making such a coalition harder to form and sustain: Concentrated resources amplify dominant groups' capacity to deploy divide-and-conquer strategies.

Two of the most important challenges to orthodox economics' treatment of group-based inequality have developed largely in parallel, speaking to overlapping audiences but not always to each other. Intersectional political economy, rooted in both socialist feminist theory and the Black feminist tradition, holds that race, gender, class, and citizenship generate interlocking structures of advantage and disadvantage that cannot be analyzed one axis at a time. Stratification economics, founded in response to the profession's persistent reliance on cultural and individualist explanations for racial and ethnic inequality, holds that intergroup disparities are driven by dominant groups' rational collective interest in maintaining positional advantage rather than by deficiencies in subordinate communities.

These two frameworks share a deeper theoretical logic than has been made fully explicit. Both are, at bottom, theories of how axes of stratification are constructed, maintained, and contested — how dominant groups invest in producing and enforcing the very categories (such as race, gender, class, and citizenship) that structure who can cooperate with whom, on what terms, and with what economic consequences. This architecture of hierarchy provides the categorical foundation of compulsory group assignment; calling attention to its complexity strengthens both frameworks and reveals their essential complementarity. Many individuals and groups find themselves in somewhat contradictory positions, advantaged in some respects, disadvantaged in others, a factor that helps explain shifting political alliances.

Within the field of political economy, axes of stratification based on gender and race have often been acknowledged but treated as subsidiary to class dynamics. Consideration of salient efforts to challenge this subsidiarity sets the stage for better integration of feminist insights into stratification economics, a synthesis emphasizing the intersectional architecture of hierarchy. This extended framework generates an important political insight: on the one hand, rising wealth and income inequality increase the potential payoff to a broad subaltern coalition. On the other hand, it makes such a coalition harder to form and sustain, as concentrated resources amplify elite capacity to invest in institutional entrenchment.

Axes of Stratification

Important precursors of the larger project of stratification economics have called attention to the interplay of inequalities based on gender, race, and class, though usually in binary terms, such as class-and-gender, gender-and-race, or race-and-class. Inequalities based on age, sexuality, citizenship, and coloniality may enter the mix. One of distinguishing features of both intersectional feminism and stratification economics is the indirect influence of Marxian attention to the dynamics of appropriation, disempowerment, and exploitation, a commonality that emerges clearly from comparison with mainstream approaches to group identity, positionality, and collective conflict.

The Feminist Background

Liberal feminism—the variant most familiar to many scholars, as well as the wider public, focuses on relations between women and men with little regard for other troublesome inequalities. At another extreme, Marxist feminists tended (at least until recently) to blame women's economic vulnerabilities largely on capitalism. A socialist feminist discourse that emerged in the 1980s challenged traditional Marxist perspectives by calling attention to unpaid work and its indispensable contributions to social reproduction and suggesting that capitalism and patriarchy might co-evolve as "dual systems." Proponents of this view became increasingly aware of race dynamics largely as a result of Black feminist critiques that often noted, ironically, that feminism discounted race in much the same condescending ways as Marxism discounted gender.

This new awareness of "intersectionality" could also be explained as a delayed response to political movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The civil rights movement's primary frame was racial justice; the mainstream feminist movement's primary frame was gender equality. Black women's experience — shaped simultaneously and inseparably by race and gender, and further by class — fell through the gap between these two frames. This reflected an intellectual problem as well as a political inconvenience. The existing theoretical frameworks for understanding inequality were not equipped to analyze forms of oppression that could not be decomposed into separable race and gender components. Intersectionality emerged as the theoretical response — not simply as a call for inclusion but as a claim that the single-axis frameworks themselves were distorted by the standpoint privilege of those at the center of each movement.

One early intellectual intervention went largely unappreciated, perhaps because it brought class inequality into the picture. Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* (1981) is a foundational text for understanding intersectionality as a structural rather than additive theory. Davis's argument was not simply that Black women face both racism and sexism but that capitalism, patriarchy, and racism are codependent structures that mutually sustain each other — that the exploitation of Black women under slavery served simultaneously as the foundation of racial capitalism, the enforcement mechanism of patriarchal control, and the model against which white womanhood was defined as its idealized opposite.

Davis made three specific contributions. First, she showed that the construction of Black womanhood as ineligible for the domestic protection afforded to white women was not a cultural byproduct of racism but a functional component of the slave system — it justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved women and the denial of their maternal rights while simultaneously defining the boundaries of white femininity. Second, she showed that the domestic labor of white middle-class women was rendered invisible and unpaid by the same ideological system that rendered Black women's labor hyper-visible. Third, she showed that challenges to any one of these structures were systematically contained when activists failed to contest the others simultaneously.

Davis clearly implied that group-based hierarchies are not parallel structures that happen to intersect but a single integrated system in which each hierarchy reinforces and is reinforced by the others. This is the architecture of hierarchy argument in embryo — the categorical assignments that define race, gender, and class are not independent constructions but co-produced elements of a system designed to extract value from multiply subordinated groups while dividing them against potential allies.

Other Black feminists--including those who gave the concept of intersectionality its name—were less concerned about stratification per se than the legal and cultural consequences of ignoring its layered structure. Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational 1989 paper, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989) developed a legal theory with specific institutional implications. It addressed a specific legal puzzle: antidiscrimination law treated race and sex discrimination as separate categories, and courts regularly dismissed claims by Black women on the grounds that either their Black male colleagues or their white female colleagues were not discriminated against. The law literally could not see discrimination that operated specifically at the intersection of race and sex. Crenshaw's insight was that this failure was not accidental: single-axis antidiscrimination frameworks reflect the experiences of the most privileged members of each subordinated group — white women for gender, Black men for race — and treat those experiences as the template for discrimination as such.

Crenshaw's analysis reveals that the construction of single-axis political and legal frameworks is itself a mechanism of divide and conquer. When feminist politics centers white women's experiences and antiracist politics centers Black men's experiences, Black women's specific interests fall outside both frames — and the alliance between the two movements that would be most threatening to intersecting hierarchies of race and gender is systematically undermined. The categorical framework does not just fail to represent intersecting oppression; it actively subverts the coalitions that would contest it.

Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) introduced the concept of a matrix of domination — race, gender, class, and sexuality as interlocking dimensions of a single matrix of power relations in which each element is constituted through and by the others. She emphasized standpoint epistemology: those positioned at the intersections of multiple subordinated categories have a distinctive epistemic position from which the matrix of domination is visible in ways it is not from any single axis. The failure of mainstream feminist theory to see race and the failure of mainstream antiracist theory to see gender are not incidental — they reflect the positions from which those theories were constructed. This is a claim about theoretical knowledge, not just lived experience.

Collins also insisted that the matrix of domination is not only a structure of oppression but a structure of resistance — and that the forms of resistance available to those at the intersections differ from those available to those positioned along a single axis. Political strategies that demand equal treatment within an existing categorical framework are inadequate for those whose subordination is constituted by the intersection of multiple categorical axes. Their political challenge is to contest the frameworks themselves — to challenge the architecture of hierarchy rather than simply seeking better terms within it.

Precursors of Stratification Economics

The acknowledged precursors of stratification economics extend back to early twentieth-century thinkers who focused on collective jockeying for relative position—with occasional but less than systematic consideration of gender as an axis of stratification. In later years, they are an interdisciplinary bunch, spanning the fields of sociology, and psychology, as well as economics. As is often the case with the emergence of new paradigms, the genealogy of "stratification economics" is multipolar and uneven. The review here is far from exhaustive, but it demonstrates potential complementarity with intersectional feminist approaches.

Early influences are often traced back to two thinkers often considered "outliers" if not outlaws in the history of economic thought: Thorstein Veblen and W.E.B. Du Bois (Darity 2022). Veblen, well-known for his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), emphasized the psychological pleasure of displaying relative economic superiority; W.E.B. Du Bois (probably not directly influenced by Veblen) developed a parallel approach to the "psychological wages" of whiteness (Davis 2026).   Both thinkers treated relative position as socially and economically consequential —in their view what people care most about is not absolute welfare but position within a hierarchy, and this positional concern is the mechanism through which hierarchy is reproduced.

In Veblen's version, this operates through conspicuous consumption and invidious comparison--the leisure class sets standards that everyone else strives to emulate. In Du Bois's version, it operates through racial status as a compensatory benefit that white workers accept in lieu of class solidarity. Emphasis on relative position is sometimes interpreted as a substitute for emphasis on absolute position, but the two are related, and not mutually exclusive. Indeed, relative position is often a determinant and a signal of ability to extract future absolute gains.

Both men showed awareness of gender inequality without exploring it in much detail. Veblen argued that early acts of conquest, accompanied by the seizure of women as prizes, were the source of patriarchy — that the between-group comparison of conquerors and conquered antedates the within-group comparison among conquerors, and that the subordination of women was constitutive of the original hierarchical structure rather than derivative of it (Darity 2022:9). Much of Du Bois's early writing was infused with hope for redemption by exceptional men, but later he condemned women's structural oppression as mothers writing, in 1920: "Only at the sacrifice of intelligence and the chance to do their best work can the majority of modern women bear children. This is the damnation of women" (Du Bois 2004:59). Unfortunately Du Bois made little effort to credit the efforts of the Black women thinkers and activists of his day, many of whose contributions disappeared from sight (James 2014).

The relationship between race and class took center stage, where it was influenced by characterizations of the relationship between slavery and capitalism. Economic historian Eric Williams broke new ground in 1944, arguing that racial hierarchy was not incidental to the development of capitalism but constitutive of it. Where Du Bois had analyzed the political economy of race in the post-Civil War United States, Williams provided a global and historical account: slavery provided Britain with the surplus capital that financed the industrial revolution. Williams insisted that the motivations for abolition were economic rather than humanitarian — as the profits of slavery declined, so did British commitment to the slave trade. This demystification of abolitionist benevolence is structurally important for stratification economics, illustrating a hierarchical structure that was dismantled by the material interests of dominant groups rather than by moral progress.

Veblen's emphasis on positionality was significantly advanced by James Duesenberry (1949), who formalized the mechanism in terms more consistent with mainstream macroeconomics. William Darity Jr. has been explicit about his debt to this precursor, whose insights were largely displaced by Milton Friedman's insistence that individuals seek to maximize their lifetime income. The suppression of Duesenberry's framework in favor of the asocial individualism of the permanent income hypothesis is an instance of the pattern John Davis (2026) identifies: theories that center relative position and social interdependence are repeatedly displaced by theories that treat individuals as independent optimizers, because the latter are more compatible with the normative apparatus of neoclassical welfare economics. Here again, the fact that relative income is likely to shape ability to compete for lifetime income goes unnoticed.

Another early influence identified by Darity is Herbert Blumer's 1958 essay, "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position." Blumer argued was that race prejudice resides in a sense of group position rather than in a set of feelings which members of one racial group have toward the members of another. For Blumer, dominant group outlooks exhibit four features: a feeling of superiority, a belief that the subordinate group is intrinsically different and alien, a sense of proprietary claim over certain rights, statuses, and resources, and a perception of threat from members of the subordinate group who harbor a desire for a greater share of dominant group advantages.

Blumer's essay reframes racial prejudice as functional rather than pathological — not an irrational deviance from market behavior but a rational collective strategy by the dominant group to protect its positional advantages. As Darity has said in interviews, Blumer's argument is "very much stratification economics, without the label" (Darity 2018). The architectural implication is significant: if prejudice is positional defense rather than individual irrationality, then it cannot be eliminated by information, education, or contact between groups without also threatening the material position those attitudes protect.

Neither Blumer nor the social psychologists who built on his research applied the four features of dominant groups to relations between men and women. Cecilia Ridgeway (2011) came close, with her attention to the way gender status beliefs are reproduced in face-to-face encounters. Her work addresses the possibility that men might have an instrumental interest in maintaining gender hierarchy, explicit in much of the feminist literature reviewed in the previous section. Men can have a sense of group position relative to women even when they also form close collaborative relationships with them. From this perspective, prejudice against women who violate gender hierarchy — the backlash against female leaders, the hostility toward women in male-dominated occupations — is a defensive positional reaction, analogous to white racial prejudice in Blumer's framework and also to other dimensions of group conflict.

Charles Tilly's *Durable Inequalities* (1998) provides a systematic sociological account of how categorical boundaries are produced and maintained as instruments of resource extraction. Tilly's central insight is that durable inequalities are almost always categorical — organized around assigned group distinctions rather than individual attributes — and that the durability of categorical inequality is not a product of its efficiency or naturalness but of the mechanisms through which categorical boundaries are actively maintained.

Tilly identified four such mechanisms: exploitation, through which dominant groups use categorical boundaries to hoard valued resources; opportunity hoarding, through which subordinate groups use categorical solidarity to protect access to valuable niches; emulation, through which organizational forms embedding categorical distinctions spread across institutional contexts; and adaptation, through which daily routines become organized around categorical boundaries in ways that make them appear natural. Categorical inequality is durable because those who benefit from it invest in maintaining the boundaries that sustain it.

Antecedents in Marxian and Neoclassical Economics

Both stratification economics and intersectional feminism build on some aspects of the Marxian analysis of class conflict, extending it to other dimensions of socially-assigned group identity. Marxian influence is also apparent in attention to the role of force and violence in the establishment of social institutions, the intergenerational reproduction of inequality, and the stabilizing impact of ideological power. In this reading, both stratification economics and intersectional feminism inherit the materialist logic of Marxian political economy while deliberately migrating it into a framework more legible to mainstream economics and quantitative sociology.

Mainstream economists have become more willing to reject the thin rational actor of standard economics and consider the ways that that social identity shapes economic behavior, but they remain reluctant, for the most part, to acknowledge group-based processes of aggrandizement. For instance, George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton (2000) explain the formation of group identity as a process of preference formation, suggesting that preferences may be partially endogenous and that groups, as well as individuals are economic actors. They are concerned primarily with how internalized social categories such as gender norms, racial identity, and workplace roles shape individual utility functions and therefore choices. They don't ask where norms come from or why they take the content they do. They explain conformity and norm enforcement based on group identity, but don't ask why some group identities carry privilege and others subordination.

By contrast, William Darity Jr., a central figure in modern stratification economics, asks how dominant groups construct and maintain group boundaries in order to preserve material advantage (Darity 2005, 2022). Likewise, Nancy Folbre's research emphasizes the ways in which patriarchal institutions shift a disproportionate share of the costs of producing, developing, and maintaining human capabilities onto women (Folbre 2020, 2021, 2026a). In both instances, the causal arrow runs from material interest to identity enforcement, not from internalized identity to general behavior. Prejudice and discrimination are not utility-affecting deviations from some neutral baseline — they are rational collective strategies for sustaining a favorable position in an economically consequential hierarchy. They violate norms of fair play and economic justice, and are often challenged, with varying degrees of success.

Acknowledgement of contestation and moral travesty, is missing from most modern economic accounts of positionality. Robert Frank, like Darity, draws on Veblen and Duesenberry to make a case for the motivational importance of relative, rather than absolute income. He argues persuasively that positional competition is pervasive and wasteful, In his view, competition creates a coordination problem — an arms race in which everyone spends more on houses, cars, and credentials to maintain relative standing, with the result that the aggregate outcome is collectively worse than if everyone had agreed to spend less (Frank 1985, 1999). Yet Frank doesn't ask why some people occupy the top positions, whether those positions were achieved through fair competition or through exclusion, or whether the gap between top and bottom reflects extraction from subordinate groups. There are no bad actors in his story—just a collective action problem that smart institutional design could solve.

Darity's use of relative position is structurally different. For him, positional advantage is not primarily the emergent result of a neutral arms race; it is something that dominant groups actively construct and defend through discriminatory practices, exclusionary credentialing, and boundary maintenance. The relative position that matters is not an individual's position on a continuous income distribution but their own and their group's position in a categorical hierarchy — and that position is maintained because it delivers material rents to those at the top. The inequality is not merely a coordination failure; it is also a distributional outcome that benefits specific groups at the expense of others, and those groups have rational interests in perpetuating it.

Nancy Folbre's interpretation of intersectional feminism puts less direct emphasis on relative position as distinct from absolute position, but the bargaining model that she applie to both the household and the labor market treats relative fallback positions (or "next-best" alternatives) as a major determinant of the bargaining outcomes that determine the distribution of gains from exchange or other forms of cooperation. Building on Amartya Sen's concept of cooperative conflict (Sen 1990), and Marjorie McElroy's attention to the ways social institutions such as legal rules, social policies, and asset ownership affect fallbacks (McElroy 1990), this framework offers a conceptualization of exploitation as unfair advantage (Folbre 2020, 2021). Just as capitalists can extract surplus value from employees who have no viable alternative to wage employment, groups in superior fallback positions are often in a position to extract benefits unrelated to their actual contributions.

The threat of violence often represents an asymmetrical fallback. While most economists working in the neoclassical tradition confine their attention to purely voluntary exchange, The school of "conflict theory," closely associated with Jack Hirshleifer's classic essay, "The Dark Side of the Force" (2001) applies a game-theoretical perspective that emphasizes physical prowess. Indeed, Hirschleifer argues that when two groups encounter each other for the first time, they will engage in voluntary exchange if and only if neither party enjoys decisive military dominance. Outright appropriation of resources can be the more "cost-effective" choice for the stronger party.

This insight, in and of itself, is consistent with the stratification economics approach. Yet Hirshleifer's analysis remains abstract: the two groups in question differ only in terms of the resources they can commit to appropriation or defense; the extent to which they identify or align with the group does not come under consideration, and the consequences of an initial expropriation—which typically alters the bargaining power of both groups—go unexplored, despite obvious implications for the institutionalization and reinforcement of economic hegemony. Hirshleifer's simple contrast between appropriation and exchange ignores the possibility that appropriation can *lead* to unequal exchange.

Axes of stratification such as race, gender, and class cannot be taken as a given. They are actively designed, constructed, and legitimated. Consideration of their common precursors and political parallels suggests that intersectional feminist theory can contribute to the larger project of stratification economics, providing a more complete picture of the architecture of hierarchy. Nonetheless, some conceptual tensions between these two frameworks invite careful attention.

The Architecture of Hierarchy

Early on, the emerging paradigm of stratification economics called attention to group-based inequalities, including those based on gender while focusing on race (Darity 2005). Darity's more recent work explicitly discusses multiple identities and the relationship between race and gender stratification (2022). As another overview of stratification economics puts it, "Understanding the persistence of extreme inequality and the pivotal roles that race and other group identities such as gender, disability status and sexual orientation play in forging political alignments and economic division should be core to our mission as economists (Chelwa, Hamilton, and Stewart 2022:396).

However, relatively little attention has been devoted to the implications of incorporating specific feminist insights or exploring differences in the dynamics of inequality among different groups. A big theory should ask big questions: What does a complex hierarchy look like? Which economic activities and resources does it shape? How does it legitimate its authority? Attention to differences in the ways in which intersectional feminism and stratification economics address these questions moves the larger theoretical enterprise forward.

Complex Hierarchies: Pyramids, Matrices or Ladders?

The stylized Marxian image of hierarchy is a pyramid, with ruling class on the top, working class on the bottom and a middle class and/or a professional-managerial class in the middle. As indicated by the preceding discussion, this is far too simple. Intersectional feminism often pictures a matrix that allows for multiple binary intersections, such as race/class, race/gender, and race/citizenship. In other words, a person of a specific race also has a specific class and a specific gender—and a vector of other socially-assigned identities. This suggests a different kind of positionality than stratification economics, one based on multiple identities as well as relative economic position.

This perspective complicates efforts to visualize inequality by sorting individuals based on one group identity. Darity's influential visualization of stratification economics, designed to emphasize its racial consequences, uses the image of a ladder to locate Blacks at the top rung of a group that stands well-below those at the top of the White ladder, a pattern that holds at every level of the distribution. The image applies to gender as well. Many Black women occupy lower rungs on the Black ladder than Black men; other group loyalties and affinities further complicate the picture.

An alternative visualization features pyramidal structures rather than ladders, triangles rather than lines. A pyramid picturing class differences among Black men sits below a pyramid picturing class differences among White men, with pyramids picturing class differences for each race by gender also superimposed. This image drives home the complexity of group-based differences, but fails to capture interactions among class, race, and gender that affect a specific individual. It also leaves open the question of what the organizing principle of the separate pyramids should be—based on class but sorted by race and gender, or based on race and sorted by class, etc.

This complexity helps explain why many empirical efforts to sort effects related to multiple group identities rely on multivariate statistical analysis utilizing interaction terms (McCall 2005). Even this approach is a simplification, since many of the control variables often used in such analysis, such as years of schooling and occupational category, are themselves affected by group membership. Also, the devices that economists like to deploy in order to explore causality, such as random assignment to experimental groups or difference-in-difference analysis of the effect of exogenous shocks, can seldom be practically applied.

As a result, descriptive analyses, including historical accounts and cross-country comparisons, attain greater importance. The matrix of intersectionality may be less relevant to an analysis of stratification *outcomes* than to *strategies* of coalition formation and effective political mobilization, while the ladder/pyramid images reach beyond depictions of relative income or wealth to highlight collective locations within them.

Activities and Resources: Social Reproduction

The generational transmission of wealth plays a key role in stratification economics, bringing families into the picture. Yet stratification economics has typically defined wealth in terms of financial resources alone, overlooking the distribution of the costs of producing, developing, and maintaining human capabilities outside the market. Herein lies an important feminist insight: the uneven distribution of care responsibilities generates systematic inequalities that are not captured by mainstream economics: women bear a disproportionate share of the financial and temporal costs of caring for children, persons with disabilities, and the frail elderly (Folbre 2021, 2026). This, itself, is a mechanism of stratification.

This mechanism does not operate through the extraction of surplus value, the accumulation of financial wealth, or the hoarding of opportunities. Rather, it takes the form of free-riding on commitments to care for dependents—commitments crucial to the process of social reproduction. Whether in unpaid or paid domains of work, men are more likely than women to engage in activities that yield personal and fungible benefits that increase their individual bargaining power, leaving women and children more vulnerable to poverty. Women's traditional care responsibilities lower their individual access to income, reduce their relative bargaining power, and leave them vulnerable to both violence and poverty.

The traditional focus on wealth and income as measures of living standards is far too narrow. Families and communities are sites of significant transfers of both time and money. Family structure has a significant impact of family income. For instance, in 2022, among full-time year-round employees, Black women earned about 86 cents for every dollar earned by White women—a significant gap.[1] However, the family income gap is nearly twice as large, due to White women's greater rates of marriage to higher-earning White men, and Black women's greater rates of heading households alone.[2] As stratification economist Patrick Mason observes, the economic marginalization of Black men limited their role as providers, making economic exclusion the cause of family structure changes rather than the reverse (Mason 2023).

In sum, the family is a primary institution through which categorical advantage is transmitted intergenerationally, and family transfers are shaped by patriarchal institutions that assign reproductive labor to women, as well as by other dimensions of inequality. Intra-family transfers of time and money are an important aspect of the architecture of hierarchy— one that can simultaneously transmit racial and class advantage and reproduce gender-based subordination.

The Role of Norms and Preferences: Causes vs. Mechanisms

Most neoclassical economists take norms and preferences as exogenously given — whether God-given, genetically encoded, or culturally inscribed. These are often taken to generate hierarchical architecture. For instance, women may take more responsibility for children than men because they enjoy them more and therefore end up earning less (Fuchs 1988; Goldin 2021), or Black men may earn less than other men because they have inherited cultural norms that affect their behavior in unfortunate ways (Sowell 1994).

Both intersectional feminism and stratification economics point, instead, to arrows that point the other way: hierarchical systems often condition norms and preferences that reinforce the status quo. However, feminist scholars have typically put more emphasis on this circular causality than stratification economists such as Darity and Mason. Their insistence that cultural values are not the *cause* of racial exploitation diverts attention from them. By contrast, feminist researchers have explicitly labeled some norms and preferences a form of "internalized oppression" that cannot be reduced to "blaming the victim" (England and Browne 1992). Likewise, Cecilia Ridgeway's emphasis on "gender status beliefs" calls attention to their economic consequences (Ridgeway 2011).

This circularity harmonizes with perspectives that emphasize the ways in which social norms shape personal preferences, undermining the putative autonomy of "rational economic man" (Sen 1977). In *Development and Freedom* (1999) Sen argues that people often adapt their preferences to accommodate their circumstances. Martha Nussbaum (2000) develops this point further, arguing that preferences formed under conditions of deprivation, limited information, and constrained alternatives cannot serve as a normative baseline for evaluating wellbeing., People may reconcile themselves to oppression unless they see a clear and achievable alternative to it.

Put in these terms, the tension between stratification economics and feminist perspective dissipates. Darity's and Mason's rejection of cultural determinism operates at the level of ultimate or distal causation: hierarchies of race and gender originate in structural processes of exclusion and differential resource allocation, not in the cultural deficits of subordinated groups. Feminist theory does not contest this but directs attention to a different causal level—the proximate mechanisms through which hierarchy reproduces itself once established. Internalized norms, adapted preferences, and culturally transmitted valuations do not generate inequality from scratch, but they sustain and reinforce it.

Concepts such as self-reinforcing dynamics and path-dependence are also relevant here. One can reject norms and preferences as *explanations* for subordinate group outcomes but see them as *mechanisms* through which structural hierarchy is reproduced and legitimated. The architecture of hierarchy features load-bearing walls that are both material and ideological.

Contradictory Locations and Strategic Implications

Both intersectional feminism and stratification economics look beyond "interest groups" that people may choose to join, identifying socially-assigned group memberships that constrain their choices. Yet individuals have some scope for strategic decisions regarding potential alliances that can challenge structural constraints. Such decisions are remarkably complex, because people often find themselves in contradictory positions, privileged in some respects, disadvantaged in others. Furthermore, their positions change over time as economic dynamics lead to the polarization of differences in wealth and income. Indeed, the increasing significance of class has led some to led some to predict both the declining significance of race (Wilson 1978) and the declining significance of gender (Blau et al. 2006). This prediction overlooks the ways in which class differences can become a mechanism for reinforcing other dimensions of inequality.

Complexity itself is daunting. The tendency toward what Chicana feminist Elizabeth "Betita" Martínez called the "Oppression Olympics" emerged not as an external critique of intersectional theory but as a concern raised from within the movements that gave rise to it (Martínez and Davis, 1994).This tension--between an framework that reveals the multiplicity and interaction of hierarchies and a political practice that sometimes treats those hierarchies as competing claims — is not merely a tactical problem. It reflects a deeper theoretical issue. If the purpose of identifying overlapping axes of stratification is to produce a more accurate map of how inequality is structured, then the appropriate political response is coalition: a recognition that groups differentially positioned within the architecture of hierarchy share an interest in dismantling the structure itself, even when their immediate vulnerabilities differ.

Mapping the architecture of hierarchy is not an exercise in ranking suffering but a precondition for identifying where alliances can be built and where the dismantling of one form of domination is likely to weaken, rather than simply displace, the others. Speaking at a 1993 forum on coalition-building among people of color, Martínez argued that no "competition of hierarchies should prevail" — that the impulse to rank forms of oppression against one another, to establish whose subordination is most severe or most deserving of political priority, was self-defeating precisely because it reproduced within progressive coalitions the logic of ranking and exclusion that those coalitions existed to contest. Angela Davis, in the same exchange, drew the practical implication: effective political work requires flexibility about how groups come together across difference, rather than insistence on a single axis of solidarity as the legitimate one.

The Marxian tradition, prone to asserting the unified interests of the working class, nonetheless provides important insights. Erik Olin Wright's concept of contradictory class locations, developed in *Classes* (1985) and related work, was designed to address the problem of the middle class within a Marxian framework: certain positions in the social structure — managers, supervisors, semi-autonomous employees — occupy contradictory locations because they simultaneously share interests with both capital and labor, exercising authority delegated from above while remaining exploited themselves.

The concept is structural rather than psychological; the contradiction resides in the position, not in the consciousness of its occupant. Wright confined this analysis to class relations, but the structural logic extends naturally to feminist intersectionality. Women have some collective interests as women, but they also collaborate—and often pool income with—men. As they tend to partner with men of a similar race and class, they typically share interests not only with their partner, but also with the common groups (such as those based on race and class) to which they belong. This explains why the growth in non-marriage and divorce over time in the U.S. has accentuated the political gender gap: single women are far more likely than married women to vote for the Democratic Party, which advocates more strongly than the Republican Party for both women's rights and public policies to support families and communities (Edlund and Pande 2002). A countervailing factor has been increased earnings inequality among women, which has demonstrably weakened the feminist movement, even generating backlash against it (Folbre 2026).

Class differences inflect racial, as well as gendered dynamics. The Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. increased access to the educational credentials necessary for admission to the professional-managerial class —elevating those individuals able to gain access to "human capital." As a result a subset of Black Americans embraced ideological positions that reflected their own class trajectory—emphasizing individual achievement, skepticism of welfare, and opposition to race-conscious remedies—in ways that diverged sharply from the experience of those left behind. Class advancement can produce ideological alignment with the dominant racial group. For instance, in 2023, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas accused his fellow Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson of holding a "race-infused world view," and characterized affirmative action as "government-imposed racism" (Thomas 2023).

These examples go beyond the observation that people hold multiple identities to emphasize structural tensions—potentially conflicting material interests and political tendencies. This has direct implications for coalition politics: groups that share subordination along one axis while diverging along another face real, not merely perceptual, obstacles to solidarity, and a political strategy adequate to that complexity cannot dissolve structural contradictions by asserting a common identity but must instead build alliances that acknowledge and work through them.

The theoretical framework developed here speaks to the current political moment in the U.S. The architecture of hierarchy is buttressed by its very complexity, making "divide-and-conquer" a potent strategy for those at the top. Because those in dominant class positions are disproportionately White and male (as well as citizens of the U.S.), they gain direct positional benefits from racial and gender inequality, as well as indirect benefits from the fragmentation of class-based opposition. Rising wealth and income inequality has paradoxical political consequences: it simultaneously increases the potential payoff to a broad subaltern coalition while making such a coalition harder to form and sustain, as concentrated wealth amplifies dominant groups' capacity to invest in institutional entrenchment.

Yet no architectural construct can withstand every earthquake, hurricane, or rising tide. Pillars, rafters, and bulwarks can give way. A better picture of the ways they fit together can both reveal vulnerabilities and improve blueprints for reconstruction. Stratification economics is evolving in ways that clarify both the difficulty and the possibility of transformative political coalitions.

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Notes

[1] U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2023 ASEC, Table PINC-05, "Work Experience — People 15 Years Old and Over by Total Money Earnings in 2022, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Sex." Available at census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/cps-pinc/pinc-05.html.

[2] U.S. Census Bureau, *Income in the United States: 2023*, Current Population Reports P60-282 (September 2024), Table A-1 and Figure 2. Available at census.gov/library/publications/2024/demo/p60-282.html.