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Kristal S. Johnson | Essay | 04.07.2023

Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964)

Major Forerunner of Public Sociology and Black Feminist Thought



Anna Julia Cooper, Zeichnung von Nicole Holzhauser

Life

In the following, I will briefly present Anna Julia Cooper's biography, and I will give two examples of how Cooper has made important contributions to the history of sociology. In terms of social inequalities, she was one of the pioneers of intersectionality, Black feminist thought, and she contributed to conflict theory by addressing colonialism, racism, gendering, and the capitalist society as hegemonic instruments of power and oppression.

Cooper, a Black woman intellectual,¹ was born into slavery in 1858 in Raleigh, NC. Her mother, Hannah, was a domestic housekeeper and nurse, and after emancipation, Hannah continued domestic labor in Raleigh. Cooper's brothers were apparently much older and married. Cooper's mother was dedicated to her fulfillment and Cooper recognized her continual sacrifices, which enabled her to continue her studies. She was extremely

intelligent, which was recognized by obtaining tutoring and teaching positions, even in her youth, which supplemented her tuition scholarship. Cooper experienced sexism in the educational institution as she had to raise her voice in order to be allowed to take courses that were reserved for men. Cooper championed race and gender advocacy, as her life's work, with equal courage – one did not take precedence over the other, there was no ranking or playing of favorites.

In 1877, she married George A.C. Cooper but their marriage was short-lived as he died only a few months later. Even in this short time, it is obvious that her marriage had an impact on her life. She cared for and took in several relatives and adopted foster children. Despite this, she continued her educational, writing, and activist journeys and still had an unyielding commitment to pedagogy. Cooper advocated for human and civil rights for all people. Again, this was the foundation of her sociology. Cooper recognized and insightfully analyzed “the interlocking nature of race and sex politics and identities”,² building the precursor to Black feminist thought. Cooper confronted and spoke out against institutional discrimination and systemic racism. She delivered significant speeches on racial justice, education, and the importance of collective action in combating discrimination, advocating for equal education and the need for all women to have access to higher education. For instance, she held a speech at the World's Congress of Representative Women in 1893 in Chicago on “Women's Cause is One and Universal”, describing the progress of African-American women since slavery to a predominantly white audience.³ In 1896, she spoke at the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), an association she helped to establish, on issues related to racial uplift and women's rights, advocating for education and social reform, and gave a keynote at the Colored Women's Y.M.C.A. Jubilee Celebration in Boston in 1906 on “The Progress of Colored Women”, highlighting the achievements and challenges faced by African American women in the early 20th century.⁴ In addition, Cooper urged White women to abandon their exclusionary attitudes, to discard the adoption of racist practices against Black women, and to reimagine a broader platform for all women, thus inspiring liberation politics.⁵ She also advocated for social and political change.⁶

Cooper contributed to the culture through weekly salons in her home, which she shared with a friend, known as “Black Renaissance” salons, which were again, for the betterment of Black people, emphasizing intellect and talent.⁷ In addition, she is the author of numerous literary works, unpublished writings, books and other publications, symposia, memberships and organizations. She held various positions, such as peer educator, tutor and mentor, teacher, principal, professor, university department chair, university president. She believed in education and is often considered the founding mother of Black

education and Black feminism.⁸

Cooper's work was not without opposition. She received high praise and accolades for her leadership at the M Street High School, which at that time was Washington's only Black high school and the country's first public high school for Black people;⁹ again, Cooper was making moves for Black people, seeing the value in education beyond learning a trade. For about 8 years, Cooper was a teacher at the M School¹⁰ and her students were the best in the district by any measure. She eventually became principal and because of the value she placed on education, Cooper took the approach of preparing her students for college – the curriculum was advanced, practices that the school board found to be egregious.¹¹ The school board made dubious allegations against Cooper¹² and she was essentially forced to resign. White citizens and members of the school board sought to silence her, break down her efforts,¹³ and make a mockery of her position and authority at the M School as principal by insinuating unfounded indecency.^{14,15} Their aggressiveness speaks to the level of bureaucracy that is both racist and sexist. The remainder of Cooper's tenure was devoted to Frelinghuysen University, then a private historically Black university¹⁶ that offered adult education evening classes.¹⁷ Cooper supported the university as its president for about 10 years. She developed and founded a school at Frelinghuysen dedicated to the edification and enrichment of Black working people, in honor of her mother, named it the Hannah Stanley Opportunity School.¹⁸ She finished her career at Frelinghuysen in a semi-leadership advisory capacity, and even opened her home for classes and meetings, fulfilling a need the university had at that time.¹⁹ Dr. Anna Julia Cooper died in 1964.

Sociology

Anna Julia Cooper is considered a pioneer of public sociology,²⁰ Black feminist thought, and the intersectionality approach.²¹ As one of the first African-American women to earn a Ph.D., which she received from the University of Paris-Sorbonne in 1925, Cooper bridged the gap between academia and the public by linking academic scholarship to the pressing social issues of her time. Her goal was to make (her) research and ideas accessible to wider audiences, transcending the boundaries of academia. Her themes of social injustice also reflected what is now associated with public sociology. She recognized the multiple axes of oppression and domination that were very present in society, especially in the lives of Black women and men. Cooper believed in conducting research that actively engaged with marginalized communities and aimed to challenge societal norms. Rather than observing from a distance, she immersed herself in the experiences and struggles. As a result, her work was rooted in lived experience, allowing her to develop a nuanced understanding of

the challenges faced by marginalized groups.²²

Cooper made an indelible contribution to the discipline by articulating how society works. She examined racial domination in particular and, although she became an advocate for Black women's rights, she argued that any struggle for equality should be a struggle for both Black women and Black men, and for all people. She recognized the intersectionality of race, gender, and social class and understood that social hierarchies as well as inequalities were not simply based on a single dimension, but rather on interconnected systems of power. Her sociological approach acknowledged the complex realities faced by African-American women, moving beyond superficial analysis or making sweeping assumptions about experiences.²³ Cooper's sociology emphasized the importance of understanding the historical and social contexts in which inequalities were embedded. She also criticized analyses that ignored the historical legacies of slavery, discrimination, and oppression, arguing that they failed to grasp the complexity of racial dynamics and perpetuated harmful assumptions.

For these reasons, Cooper's sociology aimed to challenge and disrupt the status quo. She actively challenged the dominant narratives that justified racial hierarchy and that argued for racial inferiority. Through her writings, speeches, and activism, she encouraged critical thinking, dismantled stereotypes, and advocated for social justice and equality.²⁴ In doing so, Cooper recognized and captured what it meant to combine activism and scholarship, essentially praxis and theory. The sociology that Cooper envisioned was one of social activism as opposed to the idea of a "car-window sociology".²⁵ Car-window sociology, conceptualized by Du Bois (1903)²⁶, is that of disinterested, superficial, unattached, outsider, leisure-like observation that some sociologists and social scientists practice. This concept essentially Others²⁷ people, namely the research participants; a gaze with no intent to aid. Cooper predates car-window-sociology as a metaphor to critique a detached and distant approach to the study of society.²⁸ It implies a mode of observation in which the sociologist remains on the periphery, merely observing social phenomena from a distance without actively engaging with the lived experiences of the people being studied. Her critique also extends to certain theorists who approach their sociological work with a lack of personal investment or concern for the subjects being studied, resulting in an objective detachment that can undermine a deep understanding of the social realities. It also points to a lack of depth or thoroughness in the analysis, often involving generalizations or sweeping assumptions that fail to capture the complexity of social phenomena. Last but not least, she also criticized a lack of connection or engagement with the communities or individuals being studied, failing to consider their perspectives, struggles, and aspirations.

Cooper did not name specific sociologists, and her critique should rather be seen as a broader commentary on certain trends and approaches in sociology at that time. During this period, there were sociologists and theorists who adopted a detached perspective, relying on generalizations and superficial analyses that perpetuated racial hierarchies and arguments of racial inferiority. Some prominent sociologists and theorists of the time may have inadvertently contributed to these tendencies through their work. However, it is crucial to approach these discussions with historical context and avoid making assumptions about specific individuals without concrete evidence.

The described kind of sociology attempted to justify the racial hierarchy and intellectually argue racial inferiority; it does not challenge the status quo and instead makes surface, superficial, sweeping assumptions.²⁹ Cooper immersed herself in her activism instead of driving by quickly from a far distance.³⁰ This was during the classical period of sociology and though car-window sociology was ascribed to by many, Cooper remained steadfast in her approach as an active political, scholarly, social activist who sought real change and not mere observation. This approach derived from the utopian, colonialist empire³¹ that claimed to be the dawn of the discipline,³² which failed to acknowledge, and thus denies the voices of sociological contributors, spearheads of the discipline like Cooper.

Over her course of life, Cooper became increasingly aware of the intimidation and fear that society had towards educated Black women. In *Voice from the South*,³³ the centerpiece of her oeuvre and now recognized as one of the first, full-length Black feminist texts in which Cooper analyzed the position of and identified the anxiety created by modest, intelligent women. This did not arise because of their education but rather because of society and its views. Cooper articulated the struggles of educated Black women and addressed the societal anxieties that arose in response to their intellectual achievements and independent thinking. She examined the societal constructs that sought to undermine and marginalize them, shedding light on the oppressive forces they encountered within their communities and the whole society. Her analysis emphasized that the fear and intimidation that educated Black women faced were not inherent to their education or intellect. Rather, they were products of societal prejudice, discriminatory attitudes, and the desire to maintain existing power structures. Through her work, Cooper challenged these limiting views and advocated for the recognition and empowerment of educated Black women. By acknowledging and exploring society's fear of educated Black women, Cooper's work contributed to a broader understanding of intersectionality, race, and gender in the context of social oppression.³⁴

Cooper spoke truth to power³⁵ through her critical examination and interrogation of a male, Euro-centric patriarchy that marginalized the efforts and progression of Black men and Black women. Additionally, men feared that education would remove women from positions for which they were believed to be made for – sewing and cooking, “beneath a load of iron pots and kettles”.³⁶ But what was particularly true for women was ultimately true for all people. Undoubtedly, Cooper recognized the impact and power of an educated mind. Consequently, she epitomized dedication to her craft through a zeal to educate herself as well as her brothers and sisters, Black men and Black women. Even as a child, Cooper already expressed a passion for education and a commitment to helping others. She supported her peers by offering assistance and support to her teachers, demonstrating her intellectual abilities from an early age. As she grew older, she continued on this path, becoming involved in tutoring and mentoring activities. She took on the role of an educator, providing guidance and academic support to her fellow Black students through one-on-one tutoring and mentoring relationships.

Education has always been at the heart of Cooper’s work. She recognized the transformative power of education and its importance in uplifting the Black community. She actively promoted education as a vehicle for empowerment and social change. An important aspect of this was her advocacy for a broader, more accessible education and her fight against systemic barriers that limited educational opportunities for Black people, particularly women.³⁷ Cooper’s commitment continued throughout her life. She believed in the value of continuous learning and self-improvement. Her own pursuit of education, including a doctorate later in life, served as an inspiration. She also shouldered the development of a women’s club as well as the *Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)* and *Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA)* for Black people, since the established YWCA and YMCA did not accept Black people.³⁸

In sum, Cooper’s sociology produced, if not founded Black feminist thought through the letter. Through her scholarship, activism, and methodology, Cooper pragmatically and theoretically examined the social conditions affecting both Black women and men. She understood the power of research and practice in her work. By combining empirical observations with theoretical frameworks, she laid the groundwork for contemporary scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins or Kimberlé Crenshaw, who focus on institutional racism, intersectionality, and feminist legal theory. Today, Cooper’s sociology is considered as groundbreaking for its time, demonstrating a keen analytical awareness and emphasizing the importance of critical consciousness, agency, and enlightenment. Two important aspects of her work are explored below: intersectionality and conflict theory.

Intersectionality

Looking deeper, it is reasonable to argue that Cooper, particularly in her work “Voices from the South”, can be seen as a precursor to modern intersectionality and Black feminist thought. More specifically, Cooper pioneered the theorization of the sociological and interdisciplinary concept of intersectionality as a means of analyzing social inequalities. She introduced the notion of “accidents”³⁹ in which multiple aspects of a person such as race, gender, and color collide and are systematically used to organize and classify people. These accidents are systematically manipulated to categorize and stratify individuals in society. Cooper recognized the clash, in that race, color, sex, and condition are “the accidents and not the substance of life”.⁴⁰ In this, Cooper recognized systems of power in the struggle for human rights and justice as a cause for all men and all women. She found it irresponsible to deny people their humanity on the grounds of some intersection or another. Cooper understood that the Black women’s cause rests in the cause of humanity – when Black women are seen, respected, redeemed, then such is the same for every man and every woman who has suffered wrongly. Cooper rejected favoritism, partiality, and discrimination, recognizing these as an ethical issue, a human issue because if some are favored then some are denied, on the grounds of race, sex, color, sect, condition. She saw these social constructs as points of favoritism to advantage some and disadvantage some. Through this vision, Cooper recognized that the things that are called upon to differentiate people were accidentals, socially constructed, fashioned and molded, and indeed not innate.

Similarly, but distinctly, Kimberlé Crenshaw theorized the idea of “accidents”⁴¹ that occur at intersections as a myriad of vehicles, or axes of oppression, coming from different directions in which Black people, especially women, find themselves. For instance, in the context of intersectionality theory, a Black woman experiences “accidents” as the convergence of multiple systemic oppressions, distinctively shaped by her race and gender, that cannot be understood as just the sum of racism or sexism, but as a complex, intertwined system of oppression. As in the empirical world, these accidents are socially constructed complexities that blur lines of responsibility, guilt, or blame, further complicating the visibility and recognition of Black women’s experiences.

Both Crenshaw and Cooper use the concept of “accidents” as a tool to address intersectionality, but their perspectives differ in application and context. Crenshaw's intersectionality is about the unique oppression Black women experience due to the simultaneous interaction of their multiple identities. On the other hand, Cooper's

"accidents" revolve around the convergence of identities, and their manipulation for social organization and classification. In terms of intellectual chronology, it would be inaccurate to assert that Crenshaw drew directly from Cooper's work, as both scholars independently use the accident metaphor to illustrate their theories. However, the conceptual overlap can be seen as a testament to the continuing relevance of intersectional thinking in understanding systemic inequality.⁴²

Cooper promoted the idea that humanity, that is, being human should merit the right to "life, liberty, and [the] pursuit of happiness";⁴³ at the same time, these things should not be questioned or surrendered – they should be absolutes. Cooper highlighted the negative effects of separatism and individualization, noting how these mechanisms aggravate social issues, obscure discrimination, and render the experiences of Black women invisible. Marginalized to the periphery, Black women speak from there – Cooper and her *Voice from the South* spoke truth to power.⁴⁴ Cooper's work, then, is a call for action that asserts the power of marginalized knowledge and emphasizes the need to understand and learn from those voices that emanate from the margins of society.

Cooper articulated and witnessed the bonds of inequality evident through racism, genderism, ableism and a myriad of axes that sought to exploit and dominate Black men and Black women. She recognized the potential for insight within these intersecting axes of oppression, a catalyst for the emergence of Black feminist thought, an arena for the generation and dissemination of knowledge.⁴⁵ This understanding allows for the identification and examination of institutional racism, laying the groundwork for resistance.⁴⁶ Within this knowledge lies power, and Cooper's social thought can be seen as a source of empowerment for Black women, designed to counter oppression. These elements mark Cooper as an early influence in social and political activism for Black people and humanity as a whole.

Her work also critically evaluates the role of gender in shaping the subordination of women, particularly that of Black women.⁴⁷ Through Cooper's work, one can see how different experiences and different social identities are connected. Lived experiences and narratives provide a unique methodology for arriving at truth. Looking ahead, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Crenshaw⁴⁸ theorized these myriad axes by adopting the term intersectionality, a framework for identifying alliances of oppression and systems of power, and Cooper was clearly the trailblazer towards Crenshaw's work. Both Cooper and Crenshaw recognized the overwhelming intersection of oppression, history, and social factors that subjugate Black men and Black women.

Cooper lifted her voice throughout her scholarly and social activism against oppression, recognizing gender oppression, racial oppression to the equivalency of human oppression. She realized that the system is not only oppressive but unethical, as previously noted.

Conflict Theory

While not explicitly framed within conflict theory, Cooper's work embodies ideas and analyses that are closely related to this theoretical perspective.⁴⁹ A key aspect of her theoretical contributions is the notion of an "accumulative period".⁵⁰ This is marked by a period of growth and prosperity for some while contrasted with hardship and suffering for others – this is a prime concept of conflict theory. Cooper drew a striking parallel between the accumulation of goods by a privileged class and the adversity endured by marginalized groups, a concept that contains the central tenets of conflict theory: societal competition and conflict over resources, power, and social status.

Cooper was keenly aware that social advancement often came at the expense of marginalized groups. She noted this "accumulative period" as a time of sadness, the loss of life, bloodshed, and deadly wars.⁵¹ She witnessed the systematic control and violence against Black people during the transition from legal slavery to legal segregation. Cooper critiqued the dominant discourse of colonialism and whiteness, which used power to enforce a hierarchy that served their interests and relegated non-Whites to a lower class.⁵²

This is reflected in her concept of "internecine war",⁵³ a conflict within a group characterized by violence and struggle. She emphasized that class conflict leads not only to class struggle, but also, and fatalistically so, to intra-group conflict within the marginalized groups themselves. This war that Cooper theoretically incites is that of the patriarchal, capitalist hegemonic norm to which she was subjected, which sought to destroy Black people by creating conflict within. This hegemony, that Cooper identified, would actually end up destroying itself because after all, we are all equal – it is on this burden of truth that Cooper's sociology rests.

Her exploration of the intersecting oppressions faced by Black women in particular underscored the systemic conflict ignited by structural inequalities. In this context, she particularly emphasized the intensified struggles for power, recognition, and resources faced by Black women in a society dominated by white supremacy and patriarchy. Cooper identified a system of capitalist hegemony that fuels these struggles and produces subjugation, colorblindness, and racism.⁵⁴ However, she believed that such a system was

inherently self-destructive because of the irrefutable truth of human equality.

Cooper recognized the universal truth called equilibrium.⁵⁵ In spite of opposition, opposing forces, there can be harmony when there is equilibrium. She recalled this in her understanding of science, life, death, even in the air, the molecules in the air. Equilibrium speaks to balance and equality. Such forces will conflict – Cooper recognized conflict even in the planets and a force which cannot be traced causing one side to relinquish as a result of wariness. Furthermore, all humankind would not withstand if there were no balance in the atmosphere. While there are opposing forces in the universe, in the world, in nature, and even in the air, when there is equilibrium, there can also be peace.

While the formal development of conflict theory occurred several decades after Cooper's most active years, her focus on power, inequality, and social change, as well as her recognition of the inherent conflicts within a racially and gender-divided society, closely align her with the theory's core principles. In this perspective, Cooper can indeed be seen as an early influence on the development of conflict theory and one of its forerunners.

Conclusion

In this essay, we've explored the impactful life and work of Anna Julia Cooper, focusing on her thoughts on Black women's experiences, intersectionality, and conflict theory. Cooper highlighted the double marginalization Black women face due to race and gender, a perspective that continues to inform today's sociological discourse. Through her work, she exposed how power structures perpetuate inequality and championed the need for collective resistance to bring about change.

Her work isn't without critique, however, in that Cooper's work is often regarded as literature that focuses on social problems that befall Black women. Cooper recognized her own standpoint, which is contemporarily known as the author's identity, positionality and reflexivity; however, Cooper's works by and large echo the plight of humanity. Additionally, Cooper's work is also seen as 'before its time' in that it was written in a much different era (i.e., women's rights which did not obscure all women, racial advancement, human progress, equilibrium, etc.).

Nevertheless, Cooper's pioneering work and commitment to social justice have left a profound impact, and her legacy continues to inspire today's activists and scholars who aim to merge academia with public engagement for social change.

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