

CALL FOR PAPERS

“What Intersectionality Does – or Does not Do – to Activism”

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Keywords

identity, intersectionality, social movements, activism, mobilizations, political sociology

The notion of “intersectionality” is usually associated with legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work from the late 1980s (1989, 2005), yet by the end of the 1970s black feminist activists and scholars had already articulated an understanding of how different forms of domination (based on gender, race and class) interlock in a myriad ways (hooks, 1981; Taylor, 2017b). The concept has since thrived outstandingly, has become a reference in academia, particularly in gender studies (Harpert and Kurtzman, 2014) and has spread internationally, quite notably in France since the mid-2000s (Chauvin and Jaunait, 2012).

As an analytical framework, intersectionality highlights the dynamics that lead to exclusion within institutions and organizations, from the highest levels of power to the smallest activist groups. As such, it helps identify the processes and mechanisms through which different forms of oppression – be they based on class, race, gender, age, sexuality, ability, citizenship status and so on – aggregate within specific social spaces. But the concept has also been subjected to criticism. While some suggest combining intersectional analysis with material feminism (Juteau, 2016), others see in intersectionality an ahistorical concept, with its spatial metaphor of multiple roads intersecting isolating and decontextualizing the different forms of domination (Battacharya 2017, Larcher 2017), therefore erasing what Danièle Kergoat calls the “consubstantiality of social relations” (Kergoat, 2009; see also Chauvin and Jaunait, 2015).

The intersectional framework is increasingly being discussed within political science, in France as well as in other European countries. AFSP panels in 2011 and 2013 were dedicated to the issue, but it was examined through the lens of political theory and public policy rather than activism or contentious politics. For the past ten years, the European Consortium on Political Research (ECPR) has regularly organized panels on intersectionality, taken as an analytical and methodological tool to better comprehend domestic abuse (Glasgow 2014) or as a key factor to study issues relating to citizenship and multiculturalism (Uppsala 2015, Lausanne 2017). Recently, a 2018 ECPR workshop focused on what the framework could bring to social movement theory.

Despite of how valuable these theoretical and empirical debates have been, many aspects of intersectionality have yet to be further investigated. One of them pertains to its political use. More than a framework, intersectionality is a practical and dynamic tool whose definition remains unstable and contested (Hancock, 2016), and to which activists commit in different ways. In the United States, #Black Lives Matter has been described as the first social movement that explicitly claimed to be intersectional (Taylor, 2017a). In France, the Ni Putes Ni Soumises movement or the feminist collective from the Mouvement des Indigènes de la République have also unequivocally made their own some of the theories developed by intersectional feminism (Garcia 2012).

Despite the increase of organizations claiming its mantel, studies on the political uses of intersectionality have been too few and far between. The present panel aims to redress this situation. It will focus on what intersectionality does – or does not do – to activism, and on what in return activism does to the framework itself. Another goal of this panel is to bring into the conversation disciplines that rarely get to interact within francophone social sciences but that are nonetheless thriving, namely social movement-, gender-, and postcolonial studies as well as political sociology.

Call for Papers

The present panel welcomes papers on any kind of activist practice taking place in any national, cross-national or international context and that adopt methodologies specific to social sciences and to political theory. The panel will focus on two key research areas:

1. Activist appropriations of intersectionality: a sociological enquiry

A first line of inquiry will center on how intersectionality is used politically, how it has developed over time and expanded in different physical and social spaces and national or cross-national contexts (Fassin, 2015). Using the tools provided by the social history of political ideas (Hauchecorne and Matonti, 2017), contributions will investigate how the notion has and continues to spread, examine the key actors who contribute to its circulation, and identify the specific conditions supporting its reception. While such a project has already been undertaken within a North-American context, it has yet to be tackled within a French framework.

Growing out of academia, intersectionality has since been adopted by social movements (Larcher 2017). But what happened within the French context? Who are the actors driving this shift? In which ways are they connected to academia? Which activist groups and networks are responsible for this translation? How differently is intersectionality received in the activist circles that have adopted it, mostly the feminist and anti-racist movements? One could also examine the spaces where the notion has not taken hold. For example, why haven't political parties embraced it? Left-wing parties seem at first better positioned to receive and then disseminate the concept, yet to this day they have barely contributed to its diffusion (Keucheyan, 2017).

2. From theory to praxis: the activist production of intersectionality

A second line of inquiry will investigate social-movement organizations and the actions they produce and support. Which sociological tools can be used to analyze the different groups claiming to be intersectional? Where do these groups position themselves within the social movement arena? What activist practices does the term “intersectionality” actually encompass? How do these actions fit within established repertoires of contention? Do they alter or disrupt the groups’ internal power dynamics or political stance?

In the late 1960s feminist mobilizations demonstrated the critical role exclusive, women-only meeting spaces could play in liberating women’s voices and raising political consciousness (Jacquemart et Masclet, 2017). Too few sociological studies have examined how intersectionality is produced and performed and whether it leads to further empowerment within other activist subcultures (see however Germain and Larcher, 2018). How do groups and collectives manage to handle and acknowledge multi-layered oppressions? Are some deemed worthier than others? Does claiming intersectionality necessarily result in splitting all causes and fragmenting the different political struggles?

This panel will also consider the methodological challenges researchers face – to enter the field or conduct fieldwork– when they acknowledge that race, class and gender are always imposed in concrete context (Mazouz 2015). The intersectional paradigm can indeed fuel scientific investigations and methodologies beyond groups and actors claiming it (Dunezat et Picot, 2017). Should academics adopt the same tools of enquiry to study groups that claim intersectionality and to research those who ignore or reject it (Avanza et Della Sudda, 2017)?

Paper submissions (in English or French) should be no longer than 500 words. They should indicate the main material and bibliographical references used and include a brief biography of their authors. They should be sent to the organizers by December 12, 2018 at the following address: clement.petitjean@uvsq.fr.

Organizing committee:

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