

# Recent Feminist Outlooks on Intersectionality

*Sirma Bilge*

In anticipation of an intended special number for the new millennium, one of the most important journals in the field of feminist studies, *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*,<sup>1</sup> in the year 2000 asked 55 women researchers, former editors or members of the international review committee to give thought to the subject they would particularly wish to see highlighted in the new millennium. The response was telling: among the 55 submissions responding to the request, the nature of ‘intersectionality’ and the need to address theoretical, empirical and activist issues surrounding it came up many times, sometimes through associated terms such as complex inequality, difference or diversity. Furthermore, taking account of the intersections between race, class and gender was identified as being current ‘feminist best practice’ in academia (Weber and Parra Medina, 2003: 223–224). More recently, intersectionality has seen itself raised to the status of being the most important theoretical contribution to date of feminism (McCall, 2005: 1771), on the basis of its promising attempt to deal with the differences and complexities arising out of the generation of theory as well as to maintain the political impetus of feminism (Knapp, 2005: 254), or again as one of the four principal perspectives of the third wave of feminism, along with the post-structuralist and postmodern approaches, post-colonialist feminist theory and the priorities of the ‘young generation’ (Mann and Huffman, 2005: 57).

Intersectionality reflects a transdisciplinary theory aimed at apprehending the complexity of social identities and inequalities through an *integrated approach*. It refutes the compartmentalization and hierarchization of the great axes of social differentiation through categories of gender/sex, class, race, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation. The intersectional approach goes beyond simple recognition of the multiplicity of the systems of oppression functioning out of these categories and postulates their interplay in the production and reproduction of social inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000; Brah and Phoenix, 2004). It proposes apprehending ‘the social reality of men and women together with its associated social, cultural, economic and political dynamics as being *multiple* and determined *simultaneously*

Copyright © ICPHS 2010

SAGE: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192110374245

and *interactively* through various significant *axes of social organisation*' (Stasiulis, 1999: 345).

Arising out of the pioneering work of black feminists in the United States and Great Britain on the hierarchical interlocking of relations of dominance (race/gender/class<sup>2</sup>), intersectionality has become the preferred term in Anglophone academic and activist circles to designate the complex intertwining of multiple identities/inequalities.<sup>3</sup>

Where the early studies allowed the social locus of 'women of colour' to emerge from invisibility, a locus which was marginalized both within the feminist as within the antiracist movements, contemporary work is more and more directed towards the development of an intersectional *instrument* by which policies of social justice and mechanisms for fighting discrimination might be transformed. This project has elicited debate on two different levels: one relating to the generation of knowledge around intersectionality and to the way in which intersectional research should be undertaken (issues of theory and methodology), and the other associated with the ways in which this knowledge is or should be mobilized in political struggles for equality and how it might affect them. In this article I shall be limiting myself to the first of these areas of debate so as to draw out the points of tension which seem to me to be central in the current theorizations around intersectionality. This enterprise has a dual objective: to point to certain limitations in the explicatory power of intersectionality and to put forward other lines of research in the light of discussions already engaged in. In pursuit of this I will address four points: intersectionality as a paradigm for research, the question of the levels of analysis, the theoretical dispute over the ontological status of the categories of difference and the issue of the broadening of the theoretical reach of intersectionality.

### 1. Intersectionality as Paradigm

If Patricia Hill Collins, one of the key theoreticians of black feminist thought, was the first to refer to intersectionality in terms of a paradigm (Collins, 2000: 252, 297), it was the political scientist Ange-Marie Hancock who proposed how it might be formulated. For the latter, it is henceforth necessary to go beyond the conception of intersectionality as a content-based specialization, one which nevertheless did allow examination of the subjectivities of women who reside at the intersection of several difference and marginalization categories, in particular the case of black women, to a point where it can be envisaged as a paradigm, that is 'a body of normative theory and empirical research' (Hancock, 2007: 250–251). To do this, she proposes six basic presuppositions: 1. More than one category of difference plays a role in complex political problems and processes; 2. All pertinent categories of difference should be addressed, but the relationships between these categories are variable and remain an open empirical question; 3. These categories of difference are conceptualized as dynamic productions of individual and institutional factors, simultaneously contested and enforced at individual and institutional levels; 4. Each category of difference is characterized by a within-group diversity; 5. An intersectional research project examines categories at multiple levels of analyses and interrogates the inter-

actions between levels; 6. Presenting intersectionality as a normative and empirical paradigm requires attention to both theoretical and empirical aspects of the research question (ibid). For Hancock, this movement towards a broader level of analysis, while still adhering to the need to analyse concrete and specific situations, allows a more comprehensive answer to the questions of distributive justice, power and government (Hancock, 2007: 249–250). Her position finds favourable response from within intersectional research notably in the United States and Canada,<sup>4</sup> which marks itself off from European research by the emphasis it places on structural aspects, a point to be developed later.

For others who are coming from a perspective of the sociology of science, the aim of stabilizing intersectionality is not necessarily a good thing to the extent that the ambiguity by which this concept is surrounded is not altogether a disadvantage; to the contrary, the strength of intersectionality lies precisely in being sufficiently vague as to bring together two of the most important strands of contemporary feminist thought that have been, in different ways, concerned with the issue of difference: black feminist theory and postmodern/post-structuralist feminist thought (Davis, 2008: 70–71). As we will see a little further on, this ‘bringing together’ of these two strands around intersectionality has not been without a few bumps along the way: significant theoretical divisions are aligned within these two traditions of thought and sustain much ontological and epistemological discussion.

## 2. The Analysis Levels Issue

For a good number of authors, intersectionality should provide an analysis framework allowing both macrosociological as well as microsociological questions to be addressed. Intersectional analysis operates on two levels. On the microsocial level, through its consideration of the interlocking of social categories and of the multiple sources of power and privilege, it allows the effects of inequality structures on individual lives to be fully encompassed along with the ways their intersections produce unique configurations. On the macrosocial level, it questions the ways in which multiple systems of power are involved within the production, organization and maintenance of inequalities (Henderson and Tickmayer, 2009; Weber, 2001). Intersectional analysis thus goes ‘beyond seeing the integrated and fluid nature of social categories of experience’ by approaching them as ‘part of a broad framework of macro and micro relations, institutions and processes that are involved in the social construction of inequality’ (Hankivsky and Christoffersen, 2008: 277).

This macro/micro analytical duality which characterizes intersectional research is marked in Collins by a lexical distinction: she employs the term *intersectionality* to denote the particular forms taken by the complex of interlocked oppressions in the life experiences of individuals, and the term *matrix of domination* to designate their societal organizations (Collins, 2000: 18). Nevertheless, her approach goes further than just a two-level analysis by advocating the inclusion within it of four domains of power (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal), which, in her view, are to be found within almost all forms of oppression, notwithstanding the diversity of their intersectional configurations. This is a point I shall return to.

It may be noted that the debate around the macro/micro analysis levels is marked by a divergence of opinion: indeed, according to some authors, intersectional analysis may be concentrating too much on just one of the two. Thus, for the Danish psychologist Dorthe Staunæs, a reworking of the concept on intersectionality in the light of post-structuralist and social constructionist writing on the construction of the subject (subjectification) is necessary, in the sense that the paradigm of intersectionality may be compromised by its excessive dependence on structures, to the detriment of the analysis of the subjective dimensions of inegalitarian power relations (Staunæs, 2003: 101). In contrast, Collins (2009: ix) expresses the regret that in recent years intersectional analyses have become much too turned inward and are concentrating too much on identity narratives. While recognizing the material relevance that this trend is bringing to the process of apprehending intersectionality, Collins is unhappy about the retreat away from structural approaches in studies on social inequalities, which she attributes to the rise of post-structuralist theory, and asserts the urgency of recentring attention on the socio-structural analysis of inequality, and specifically on the organizational and institutional manifestations of power dissymmetries.

This cleavage between macro and micro approaches is not unconnected with the purported dual parentage of intersectionality which is itself a matter of controversy: if the descent relationship between intersectionality and black feminist thought seems broadly acknowledged (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000; Brah and Phoenix, 2004<sup>5</sup>), the link to postmodern/post-structuralist thought remains more contentious. Even within this particular trend there are potentially divergent readings: thus, for Kimberlé Crenshaw<sup>6</sup> (1991: 1244–1245, n. 9), intersectionality is a functional concept linking contemporary politics with postmodern theory, whereas for Patricia Hill Collins it constitutes an alternative paradigm to the antagonism between positivism and post-modernism which was part of the dichotomies structuring Western epistemology (Collins, 2000: 296).

This double theoretical affiliation for intersectionality shows different configurations according to national contexts. Whereas in the United States, the major scholarly productions around intersectionality are strongly influenced by black feminist thought, at the heart of which the neo-Marxist tradition remains predominant, in Europe, and particularly in the Nordic countries and in the Netherlands, intersectionality is positioned rather more on the postmodern flank. This association with post-structuralist thought and its associated tools leads in the best cases to an undeniable advancement of the intersectional paradigm, notably in the formation of original and highly relevant conceptual frameworks and their application in research using qualitative methods. Thus, in a very close analysis of the identity narratives of young Moroccan women immigrants to the Netherlands, Buitelaar uses the concept of 'the dialogical self' (Bakhtin, 1981; Hermans and Kempen, 1993) to examine their intersectional identifications in the form of dialogues between the multiple voices of the self, where each one of these voices is 'embedded in repertoires of practices characters and discourses informed by specific power relationships' (Buitelaar, 2006: 273) – a successful empirical demonstration of the ways by which 'particular identifications are always co-constructed with other categories of identity' (*ibid.*). One can also mention the work of Kofoed (2008) who successfully activates an intersectional

analysis framework in conjunction with a post-structuralist normality/deviance epistemology within the area of the sciences of education. Applying qualitative investigation methods (observation and interviews) in a Copenhagen primary school, the author interrogates the status of football as an institutional space for masculinity and examines the processes of inclusion and exclusion that mobilize intersectional categories in the selection of players in football teams. Her analysis reveals not only the nested character of the social categories most often studied such as race, gender and class, but also points up other less problematized axes of differentiation such as physical appearance and academic and sporting aptitude.

While the studies of Buitelaar and of Kofoed do show that intersectionality can be functionally linked with conceptual tools variously inspired by post-structuralism so as to better ground intersectionality as a research paradigm, the well-foundedness of such an association can still not yet be generalized. By way of example, certain perhaps over-hasty linkages of intersectionality with the work of Foucault appear to me problematic. Thus for Susanne Knudsen (2006: 61), a specialist in education and media studies, the question of power, inspired by Foucault, is at the heart of the concept of intersectionality. This perspective is shared by the sociologist of science Kathy Davis, according to whom 'intersectionality fits neatly into the postmodern project of conceptualizing multiple and shifting identities. It coincided with Foucauldian perspectives on power that focussed on dynamic processes and the deconstruction of normalizing and homogenizing categories' (2008: 71; see also Staunæs, 2003). But closely associating intersectionality with the Foucauldian conception of power and domination seems debatable to the extent that Foucault always refused to identify a principle of domination whatever it might be (class, race or gender) and to designate a subject or group of subjects as being at the source of power<sup>7</sup> (Hall, 1997); as a result, such a linkage calls for much greater in-depth theoretical consideration than is currently available in the literature.

As well, the link between intersectionality and postmodern thought needs to be perceived in longitudinal and non-static form, given that, as Vakulenko (2007: 185) remarked, the issues raised by postmodern thought such as identity essentialism and the reification of categories, initially considered as criticisms of intersectionality, have subsequently been incorporated into the definition and contemporary understanding of what constitutes the intersectional approach.

Finally, whether it is perceived as associated with postmodernism or set apart from it, one thing seems to me clear: the growth of intersectionality has been facilitated by the doubt cast on scientific truths and the critiques of positivism encouraged by postmodernism, which, in contemporary sociology, has led to the discarding of uni-dimensional explanations of social inequality and to a rise in interest in issues of complex inequality and of multiple discrimination (Therborn, 2000).

It is appropriate in this regard to pause briefly to consider the apparent differences in the understanding, use and receptivity of intersectionality in relation to national contexts. Certain trends are more pronounced in certain countries. The most obvious distinction can be observed between, on the one hand, published work from the Nordic countries where intersectionality is, as we have seen, more associated with post-structuralism and mobilized in analyses of the processes of subjectification, and on the other, North American research where it is used principally in structural

analyses of inequality. North American approaches regard intersectionality as 'an innovative emerging field of investigation which provides a critical analytic lens for interrogating social disparities linked to race, ethnicity, class, disability, age, sexuality and gender, and to challenge the current methods of accounting for these inequality structures' (Dill and Zambana, 2009: 1). Greater weight is therefore given to the analysis of the impact of the system or structure over analysis of identity formation. British scholarship, on the other hand, focuses on the dynamic and relational aspects of social identity (Prins, 2006: 279). These 'national' differences reflect, broadly speaking, the persistence of the tension between actor and structure in understanding and applying intersectionality as a research paradigm.

So how can the actor/structure impasse and that dividing micro and macro analyses be averted? Interesting ways forward have been proposed by several authors (Walby, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Knapp, 2005; Collins, 2000) to permit the trap of dichotomous arguments to be avoided and to broaden the theoretical reach of intersectionality. But before examining these, it is appropriate to give consideration to a theoretical conflict which underlines their suggestions.

### 3. Theoretical Conflict on the Ontological Status of Categories of Difference

If the interaction of categories of difference constitutes an area of consensus in the literature of intersectionality – as witnessed by the widespread use of terms alluding to 'mutually constitutive' categories/identities/processes – the ontological question (*what is it?*) and the epistemological question (*how do we view it?*) are subject to controversy. A certain fuzziness in fact surrounds the 'mutually constitutive' notion. What is thought to be mutually constitutive? Are we talking about the categories of difference/identity or the processes which underlie them? Does saying that they are mutually constitutive come down to implying that one cannot exist (or has never existed) without the other? Are these mutually constituted relationships symmetrical? Or can they be asymmetrical, with one relationship of domination superdetermining the others in certain contexts and under certain conditions?

While present-day literature on the subject has broken with the dogmatic posture rejecting all hierarchization (asymmetry of power) between the axes of social division,<sup>8</sup> even if it is empirically justified, they do not always project any ontological or epistemological light on what is 'mutually constitutive'. Indeed, a good number of texts make do with a statement in principle, reducing intersectionality and the idea of co-constitutive difference categories to a simple formula bereft of substance. The Canadian sociologist Daiva Stasiulis identified this problem ten years ago and deplored the tokenist attitude that consisted simply of drawing up a list of differences. Later, in the context of a much greater diffusion of the concept beyond the Anglo-American world, in particular to the Nordic and German-speaking world, the German sociologist Gudrun-Axeli Knapp generalized this critique, declaring that the remarkable popularity of intersectionality was not unrelated to the superficiality of some of its usages. For her, the reification of intersectionality 'into a formula merely to be mentioned, being largely stripped of the baggage of concretion, of context and history, has been a condition of possibility of its acceleration' (Knapp, 2005: 255).

In such circumstances, intersectionality becomes akin to a 'doxographic discourse', being a 'second-order or meta-theoretical discourse in which theories tend to move as taxonomic entities' (p. 254), whose durability and career in the 'quotation market' reposes on a secret imperative identified by Derrida (1990: 75) 'don't use that concept, only mention it' (Knapp, 2005: 252, 254).

Among the studies that are striving to conceptualize the relationships between the different categories of inequalities, a central debate concerns the ontological status of these categories. Are they phenomena possessing a certain degree of autonomy in relation to each other or are they inseparably interlocked with each other? Here, both ontological and epistemological questions intertwine, with some opting for definitions which bring together both the object of analysis and the way of seeing it. A certain number of authors emphasize the importance of 'maintaining analytical disassociations' between categories of difference (*how does one think it and how study it?*), while still recognizing that 'in the real world, individuals live these categories simultaneously' (*what is it about?*). This tendency is particularly marked in British studies in which there is a strong attachment to an important principle of sociological analysis: the specificity of a phenomenon within social systems (McAll, 1990: 216). They consequently emphasize the distinct and irreducible ontological bases of the different categories of social inequality and criticize research which fails to take account of their specific ontologies and histories (for example, Acker, 2006b; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Yuval-Davis, 2006). They also fear that the refusal to recognize a hierarchy of relations of domination may lead to relations being standardized among themselves and so generate decontextualized and ahistoric findings.

Thus, in their precursor research, Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) asserted that each axis of social division has an irreducible ontological basis and rebrought to mind that these axes are socio-historic constructions interlocked one with other. In a more recent article, Yuval-Davis revisits their conceptualization:

The ontological basis of each of these divisions is autonomous, and each prioritizes different spheres of social relations. [. . .] For example, class divisions are grounded in relation to the economic processes of production and consumption; gender should be understood not as a 'real' social difference between men and women, but as a mode of discourse that relates to groups of subjects whose social roles are defined by their sexual/biological difference [. . .]. Ethnic and racial divisions relate to discourses of collectivities constructed around exclusionary/inclusionary boundaries (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 200–201)

While the effort intended to make intersectional analysis attentive to the ontological bases of each axis of social division is considered 'a step in the right direction' (Walby, 2007: 454), it nevertheless suffers criticism for its weakness in theory. For the British sociologist Sylvia Walby, this approach, which she calls 'segregatory reductionism', is preferable to the others,<sup>9</sup> but it also lacks coherence on the level of theory, in that it lends to each axis/category of social inequality a distinct and irreducible ontological foundation and it considers these axes as mutually constitutive. How can these categories, having separate ontological bases, in theory mutually constitute each other, asks Walby (2007: 453), who suggests improving this approach in two ways. But given that these ways forward for the theoretical refinement of intersectionality are inscribed within the more general framework of debates on the

limits to the explicatory reach of intersectionality and on how this might be broadened, I shall analyse them in the following section.

#### 4. How Can the Theoretical Reach of Intersectionality be Broadened?

As mentioned above, the quest for solutions to transcend the binary oppositions between actor/structure or micro/macro analyses fits within the more general problematics of the explicatory capacities of intersectionality: is indeed intersectionality itself sufficient as a theory to analyse all that it aspires to address (Faber, 2005; Gimenez, 2001)? A number of authors emphasize the necessity of some theoretical refinement: for some, the levels of analysis need to become more complex (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Collins, 2000); for others, connections need to be made between intersectionality and more general social theories (e.g. Knapp, 2005; Walby, 2007).

Among the authors who wish to extend beyond the analysis levels most often discussed in the literature, notably the macro/micro division, can be numbered Patricia Hill Collins and Nira Yuval-Davis. In Collins's view, the intersectional method needs to take into account four domains of power: the *structural* (laws and institutions), the *disciplinary* (administrative and bureaucratic management), the *hegemonic* (cultural, ideological naturalization of relationships of domination) and the *inter-personal* (everyday interactions influenced by various hierarchies) (Collins, 2000: 18, 277–290). For Yuval-Davis, intersectional analysis must fit within a *constitutive approach*, one which is non-additive, through which social divisions should be analysed both in their macro and micro dimensions through the application of a four-level analysis framework: *organizational* analysis, relating to social, political and economic institutions and organizations, *intersubjective* analysis, to establish the relations of power and affect between concrete actors in informal or institutional situations; *experiential* analysis, which taps into the subjective experience of individuals, the perceptions they have of themselves and their attitudes towards others; and *representational* analysis, which refers to the level of the cultural representations of the social divisions present within the society (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 198). Going beyond the binary division between the material and the symbolic, that is found for example in the work of Maynard (1994), the parameters delimited by these two authors perceive the constitutive social relations of each of these four analysis levels as being produced/reproduced both materially and symbolically, and having both material and symbolic effects.

The other way ahead proposed for the theoretical refinement of intersectionality consists of integrating it with sociological theories of more general reference. Within this outlook, two different postures can be noted concerning the relationships between the axes of social divisions: the first approach sets up, though less explicitly than in the past, a certain hierarchy between these axes, by purporting the centrality of class-based inequalities in relation to other forms of inequality (Gimenez, 2001; Skeggs, 1997). The second approach refuses such presuppositions and treats the question of potential hierarchies existing between the different axes of social inequality as being an empirical issue that should be considered by situating the object of study within its socio-historical context.



Gimenez provides an illustration of the first of these approaches which promotes the broadening of the theoretical span of intersectionality by associating it with general theories of Marxist inspiration – those which accord primacy to class as the principal relationship of dominance. In Gimenez's view, the fact that intersectionality asserts the equivalence of all systems of domination – which would thereby occlude the centrality of class, as for example the demands of ethnic minorities or women are subordinated to economic constraints – prevents it from encompassing a broader theoretical reach.

A similar criticism is made by the British sociologist Bev Skeggs in whose opinion intersectionality sets up a series of equivalences between race, gender and class and thereby occludes the particular logic of class struggles (Gressgård, 2008: n. 6). For Skeggs, who studies in her research the mutual construction of gender, class, nation and sexualities, yet without situating herself within the intersectional school, intersectional analysis needs to be made more attentive to the historic specificities of social formations in order to avoid falling into the trap of reductionism. As we will see, authors identifying with the second approach, that which aims at broadening intersectional theory by integrating it with general sociological theory without necessarily setting up more or less implicit hierarchies between categories of inequality, are furthering the debate on reductionism and its multiple forms and offering various paths that might be taken to avoid them.

Thus, contrary to Gimenez's proposal to grant predominant status to relations of class, a status justified in her view by the fact the other social relations by which inequality is structured are subordinate to economic constraints – a proposition which in my view leads to a step backwards – the paths taken by Knapp, Acker, Walby and Hall offer the advantage of broadening the theoretical span of intersectionality without subsuming a type of social system (be it based around class, race or gender, to list just those) beneath a system thought of as being superdeterminant. Below I shall consider each of these paths.

A first proposal comes from Knapp. In her view, linking up intersectionality with the tool-kit of more general critical social theory would allow it to go beyond the microsociological analyses which are preponderant in the literature and so better understand the structural aspects of subjectification and structured subject positions (Knapp, 2005: 259). According to Knapp, feminist theory, even though it has brought to light the existence of multiple differences and inequalities, seems ill-equipped to consider them within a more general sociological framework, whereas equally the broad interpretive systems developed by social theories do not account for the multiplicity and coincidence of axes of inequality (Knapp, 2005: 360).

The perspective adopted by Acker (2006b) is somewhat ambiguous in the sense that, in some of her writings, she suggests a primacy for inequalities of class over the other forms of inequality and believes it necessary that these be combated first if one wishes to see the disappearance of the others. Elsewhere, however, she stresses that even if class remains at the core of her analysis – a position she justifies by pointing to the fact that class-based inequalities still can appear as legitimate on both social and legal levels in the early 21st century, whereas inequalities relating to gender and race are perceived as discrimination – this is but one dimension to be considered among others, such that the type of analysis that she privileges can equally well be

initiated from the standpoint of gender, race or sexuality (Acker, 2006b). Through her model – which could be described as concentric, in that it places one axis of social division at its centre and then examines the relations between this and the other axes – she reconceptualizes class by extending the meaning of its economic character, and examines how class is gendered and racized as well as the way by which gender and race/ethnicity as forms of social differentiation also traverse class relations and contribute to their production and reproduction. In summary, the model adopted by Acker seems on the formal level to follow the well-known sociological approach of Smith, which lodges gender at the heart of the analysis and attempts to apprehend it in all its complexity within a given context (Siltanen and Doucet, 2008), a method which at the end of the line brings out the interactions of gender with other systems of social inequality such as class and race. For Acker, initiating the analysis starting with one axis of social division and structuring it around that axis distinguishes it from a conception of these axes as mutually constitutive. Showing her reservation about the idea of social relations being mutually constituted, she asserts: ‘even if the concept of gendered and racized class relations represents class, gender and race as being intrinsically interconnected, these concepts also signify a difference which can be lost sight of in the effort to approach them as being mutually constitutive’ (Acker, 2006b: 51–52).

For her part, Walby recommends broadening the theoretical span of intersectionality by lodging it within a systems theory, revised and adjusted by the contributions of complexity theory which she defines as ‘a loose collection of work that addresses fundamental questions on the nature of systems and their changes’ (Walby, 2007: 449). In her view, it is possible to improve this ‘segregationary reductionist’ approach, which she examines from the work of Yuval-Davis (2006), by extending it in two directions. On the one hand, the linkage between different systems of social relations and the ways that these mutually affect each other might be better theorized by distinguishing between two types of social relations: institutional domains like economy, polity and civil society, and social relations such as class, gender and ethnicity (Walby, 2007: 454, 459). On the other hand, the specific ontology of each set of social relations (class, gender and ethnicity) needs to be theorized in a more complete manner. Instead of thinking that each set is grounded in a unique base (the economic for class relations, the discursive/cultural for gender relations, etc.), these specific ontologies need to be examined in greater depth, so as to include in each of the systems (class, gender, ethnicity), the totality of the institutional domains (economy, polity and civil society).

Walby’s approach to some extent recalls that of Stuart Hall, to which she does not refer. It is important to consider Hall’s theory of articulation, even if his influential work, which is difficult to classify, does not explicitly fit within the corpus of intersectional literature. Drawing on the work of Gramsci and Althusser, Hall posits a model of relative autonomy for the systems of gender, class and race, that is, their analytical dissociation. The idea of the intersectionality of social divisions can be found in his work, as demonstrated by this short extract:

The end of the essential Black subject requires the recognition that the central questions around race have always appeared historically in articulation, in formation with other

categories and divisions, and that they have never ceased to cross and re-cross categories of class, gender and ethnicity. (Hall, 2007: 207)

Hall's theory of articulation can constitute an interesting and even indispensable complement to intersectionality, not only because it allows the maintenance of a fluidity associated with social constructivism and postmodern theory (Collins, 1998: 259), but also because it demonstrates the relevance of analyses which direct their attention to the historical specificities of the social formations of race, class and gender, while yet recognizing and examining their multiple interdependence.<sup>10</sup> In Hall's view, the social positioning of the individual in the structures of power and social relations does not necessarily lead to ideological formations or specific political practices; as a result, account must be taken of the articulation of the different manifestations of social formation (economic, political, cultural) embedded within each social system of race, class and gender (Hall, 1985: 94–96). As Juteau pointed out (1994: 102–103), Hall's theory of articulation, developed by him in his published work of the 1980s (see Hall, 1980, 1985, 1986), enables the avoidance both of *horizontal reductionism*, that is, the inability to grasp the relative autonomy of the social systems of race, class and gender and to conceptualize them as analytically distinct, and of *vertical reductionism*, that is the smoothing out of all mediations between the different manifestations (economic, political and ideological) of social formations (Hall, 1986: 101).

## Conclusion

Intersectionality constitutes within feminist discourse a nodal point in the sense intended by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), that is, a sign whose meaning is in constant negotiation (Egeland and Gressgård, 2007). As we have observed through the debates on the genealogy of intersectionality, it is an area of contest marked by concurrent stories which involve different actors and points of view.

If there is general agreement among the authors in recognizing the significance of intersectionality for the advancement of knowledge on the complexity of social inequalities and identities, some nevertheless point up the limits of its theory and propose various paths forward by which this might be resolved. Hence the necessity for a theorizing which contextualizes and historicizes the structures of power that intersectionality aspires to analyse, in order to avoid all reified and ahistorical description. Given that the explicatory power of intersectionality is insufficient to render full account of all that it aspires to do, a linking of intersectionality with the tool-kit of more general sociological theories would furthermore seem necessary so as to broaden its theoretical reach. My own position in this theory debate is aligned more with the perspective of a relative autonomy of the systems of social inequality, which would recognize utility and accommodates analytical disassociations that are justified and historicized. I find particularly promising a linkage between the perspective of Walby, which enables in-depth theorizing of the specific ontologies of each social inequality system, and Hall's articulation theory, which sheds light upon the articulation of the different manifestations of social formation (economic, political, cultural) within each social system of race, class and gender.

Furthermore, I hold firmly to the necessity of having recourse to mediatory concepts around which intersectionality can become operational. As we have seen, the practical application of intersectionality to research requires such mediatory concepts, whether it be the 'dialogical self' implemented by Buitelaar (2006) or the forms of social capital theorized by Bourdieu which Skeggs (1997) brilliantly applies to analyse the intersections between class and gender in the process of the generation of subjectivities.

Finally, I would give emphasis to the importance of not reducing intersectionality to a process which is stabilized in a programmatic direction. As Davis pointed out (2008: 72), the ambiguity of a theory favours the work of synthesis, whereas its incomplete aspect leads researchers to test it in new fields of application. Faced with the great diversity of its uses in different fields of study and under different theoretical influences, it would be appropriate in this regard to treat intersectionality as a meta-principle which requires to be adjusted and rounded out in respect of the particular fields of study and research aims to which it is applied, and to accept the multiplicity of its usages.

Sirma Bilge

*Université de Montréal*

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

I would like to thank Olivier Roy, a Ph.D. Candidate of Sociology at the *Université de Montréal* for his valuable assistance in document research.

### Notes

1. The special number 'Feminisms at the Millennium', *Signs*, 25 (4), 2000.
2. This genealogy is not always unanimously accepted, as will be subsequently shown.
3. The duality of the intersectional object, whether it should be apprehended in terms of identity or structure, runs through the whole of the literature and constitutes a recurrent point of tension at national levels.
4. For a review of the work of Canadian feminists who in the 1980s addressed issues that today would be considered as intersectional, though without this term being used, see Denis (2008).
5. It should be noted that too close an association of intersectionality with African-American women has been criticized for its reductionism. According to Lykke, the linkage put forward by bell hooks (the professional name of Gloria Jean Watkins, *author's note*) which associates intersectionality with Black feminism, fails to recognize the contribution of socialist and Marxist feminists in Europe, who from the 1970s had been examining the intersection of gender/sex relations and relations of class. It is exactly in the sense of this criticism that it is possible to read the remark of Walby (2007: 450): 'intersectionality is a relatively new term to describe an old question in the theorization of the relationships between different forms of social inequality'. The efforts to make visible the feminist studies of the 1970s and 1980s which dealt with articulated social divisions reflect also a certain wish to bring out the possible multiple parentage of a 'paradigm' which seems to have become firmly established today in the literature.
6. A prominent figure of *Critical Race Feminism*, which arose in reaction to the ethnocentrism of the *Critical Legal Studies* school and to the indifference of those associated with *Critical Race Theory* towards gender inequality, the African-American professor of Law Crenshaw was the first to use the term intersectionality in 1989. Her approach distinguishes *structural intersectionality* (i.e. marginali-

- zation arising from structural barriers) and *political intersectionality* (i.e. marginalization arising from being situated in groups with conflictual political interests).
7. It can be observed in this respect that the analysis of power in Foucault's work aims to 'extract power relationships and the operators of domination in historical and empirical terms' 'instead of seeing powers as derived from sovereignty' (Foucault 1997: 38). His approach was to start from the power relationship itself and not from subjects, and thence to show how these relationships of subjection create subjects. The task would be 'to lay bare relationships of domination and to let them be revealed in their multiplicity, their difference, their specificity or their reversibility: *not to seek, in consequence, a sort of sovereign source for all powers; on the contrary, to show how the different operators of domination depend upon each other, in a certain number of cases reinforcing and converging upon each other, in others contradicting or tending to cancel out each other*' (Foucault 1997: author's emphasis)
  8. The categorical rejection of hierarchization of the axes of social inequality (race, gender, class) was particularly characteristic of the initial phase of intersectionality (from the 1980s to the mid-1990s). For its time, this rejection is understandable as a political act of resistance against the monist approaches to social dominance which I discuss elsewhere (Bilge, in press). These latter approaches subsume through ideological presuppositions the different relationships of inequality under an over-arching cause, a fundamental dominating factor (be it capitalist exploitation, patriarchy or racism) from which all the others were thought to flow. Today, the preponderant orientation leaves relationships between the categories of differentiation as an open question to be verified empirically (Hancock 2007).
  9. The other four tendencies that Walby (2007: 451–453) identifies in the intersectional literature are: the *criticism of over-generalizations* which conceal the internal divisions within the categories; the *reductionism to a single primary axis of social inequality* from which the other axes are purported to derive, which I have characterized as a monist approach (Bilge, in press); *micro-reductionism* which rejects any systematic conceptualization of social relations and privileges the ethnographic study of specific intersections – an approach which Walby imputes to a cultural reductionism and an inability to explain broader phenomena; the *rejection of all categories altogether*, on the basis that they can never represent adequately the lived world and are pernicious because of their potential calcification in practice – a problematic approach according to Walby as a radical deconstruction of categories which complicates all analysis based around distinctions between categories.
  10. It may be noted in this regard that Hall also conceives identification as being a process of articulation, a hinge-point at which the dynamics of multiple differences come together.

## References

- Acker, J. (2006a) 'Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations,' *Gender and Society*, 20(4): 441–464.
- Acker, J. (2006b) *Class Questions, Feminist Answers*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Anthias, F. and Yuval-Davis, N. (1992) *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour & Class and the Anti-Racist Struggle*. London: Routledge.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*. Austin: Texas UP.
- Bilge, S. (in press) 'De l'analogie à l'articulation: théoriser la domination sociale et l'inégalité complexe,' *L'homme et la société*.
- Brah, A. and Phoenix, A. (2004) 'Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality,' *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5(3): 75–86.
- Buitelaar, M. (2006) "'I am the Ultimate Challenge". Accounts of Intersectionality in the Life-Story of a Well-Known Daughter of Moroccan Migrant Workers in the Netherlands,' *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13(3): 259–276.
- Collins, P. H. (1998) *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP.
- Collins, P. H. (2000) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* [1990]. New York: Routledge.

- Collins, P. H. (2009) 'Foreword. Emerging Intersections. Building Knowledge and Transforming Institutions,' in B. Dill and R. Zambana (eds) *Emerging Intersections. Race, Class and Gender in Theory, Policy and Practice*, p. VII–XIII. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989) 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: a Black Feminist Critique of Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Practice,' *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 89: 139–167.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991) 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,' *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6): 1241–1299.
- Davis, K. (2008) 'Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful,' *Feminist Theory*, 9(1): 67–85.
- Denis, A. (2008) 'Intersectional Analysis: A Contribution of Feminism to Sociology,' *International Sociology*, 23(5): 677–694.
- Derrida, J. (1990) 'Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms and other Small Seismisms,' in David Carroll (ed.) *The States of Theory: History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, p. 63–95. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP.
- Dill, B. T. and Zambana, R. E. (2009) 'Critical Thinking about Inequality. An Emerging Lens,' in B. T. Dill and R. E. Zambana (eds) *Emerging Intersections. Race, Class and Gender in Theory, Policy and Practice*, p. 1–21. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP.
- Egeland, C. and Gressgård, R. (2007) 'The "Will to Empower": Managing the Complexity of the Others,' *Nora. Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, 15: 207–219.
- Faber, S. T. (2005) 'Towards an Intersectional Analysis of Gender and Class on the Basis of Bourdieu's Sociology,' Aalborg: Aalborg University, [www.ruc.dk/upload/application/pdf/dae84ec7/Faber.pdf](http://www.ruc.dk/upload/application/pdf/dae84ec7/Faber.pdf).
- Foucault, M. (1997) *Il faut défendre la société. Cours au Collège de France, 1975–1976*. Paris: Gallimard-Seuil-EHESS.
- Gimenez, M. (2001) 'Marxism and Class, Gender and Race: Rethinking the Trilogy,' *Race, Gender and Class*, 8(2): 23–33.
- Gressgård, R. (2008) 'Mind the Gap: Intersectionality, Complexity and "the Event",' *Theory and Science*, 10(1): 1–16 [theoryandscience.icaap.org/content/vol10.1/Gressgard.html](http://theoryandscience.icaap.org/content/vol10.1/Gressgard.html).
- Hall, S. (1980) 'Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,' in Coll., *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, p. 305–345. Paris: UNESCO.
- Hall, S. (1985) 'Signification, Representation and Ideology; Althusser and the Post-structuralist Debates,' *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2(2): 91–114.
- Hall, S. (1986) 'Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,' *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10(2): 5–27.
- Hall, S. (1997) 'The Spectacle of the "Other",' in S. Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 223–279. London: Sage/Open UP.
- Hall, S. (2007) 'Nouvelles ethnicités' [1989], in Id., *Identités et cultures. Politiques des Cultural Studies*, p. 203–213. Paris: Amsterdam.
- Hancock, A-M. (2007) 'Intersectionality as a Normative and Empirical Paradigm,' *Politics and Gender*, 3(2): 248–254.
- Hankivsky, O. and Christoffersen, A. (2008) 'Intersectionality and the Determinants of Health: a Canadian Perspective,' *Critical Public Health*, 18(3): 271–283.
- Henderson, D. and Tickamayer, A. (2009) 'The Intersection of Poverty Discourses: Race, Class, Culture and Gender,' in B. Dill and R. Zambana (eds) *Emerging Intersections. Race, Class and Gender in Theory, Policy and Practice*, p. 73–100. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP.
- Hermans, H. and Kempen, H. (1993) *The Dialogical Self: Meaning as Movement*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Juteau, D. (1994) 'De la fragmentation à l'unité: vers l'articulation des rapports sociaux,' *L'égalitarisme en question. Cahiers de recherche éthique*, 18: 81–108.
- Knapp, G.-A. (2005) 'Race, Class, Gender: Reclaiming Baggage in Fast Travelling Theories,' *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12: 249–265.
- Knudsen, S. V. (2006) 'Intersectionality – A Theoretical Inspiration in the Analysis of Minority Cultures and Identities in Textbooks,' in *Caught in the Web or Lost in the Textbook? 8th International Conference on*

- Learning and Educational Media*, [www.caen.iufm.fr/colloque\\_iartem/pdf/knudsen.pdf](http://www.caen.iufm.fr/colloque_iartem/pdf/knudsen.pdf).
- Kofoed, J. (2008) 'Appropriate Pupilness: Social Categories Intersecting in School,' *Childhood*, 15(3): 415–430.
- Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso.
- Mann, S. A. and Huffman, D. J. (2005) 'The Decentering of Second Wave Feminism and the Rise of the Third Wave,' *Science and Society*, 69(1): 56–91.
- Maynard, M. (1994) "'Race", Gender and the Concept of "Difference" in Feminist Thought,' in H. Afshar and M. Maynard (eds) *The Dynamics of 'Race' and Gender: Some Feminist Interventions*, p. 9–25, London: Taylor & Francis.
- McAll, C. (1990) *Class, Ethnicity and Social Inequality*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP.
- McCall, L. (2005) 'The Complexity of Intersectionality,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30(3): 1771–1800.
- Prins, B. (2006) 'Narrative Accounts of Origins: A Blind Spot in the Intersectional Approach?' *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(3): 277–290.
- Siltanen, J. and Doucet, A. (2008) *Gender Relations in Canada. Intersectionality and Beyond*. Toronto: Oxford UP.
- Skeggs, B. (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender*. London: Sage Publications.
- Stasiulis, D. (1999) 'Feminist Intersectional Theorizing,' in P. Li (ed.), *Race and Ethnic Relations in Canada*, p. 347–397. Toronto: Oxford UP.
- Staunæs, D. (2003) 'Where have All the Subjects Gone? Bringing Together the Concepts of Intersectionality and Subjectification,' *Nora. Nordic Journal of Women Studies*, 11: 101–110.
- Therborn, G. (2000) 'At the Birth of Second Century Sociology: Times of Reflexivity, Spaces of Identity and Nodes of Knowledge,' *British Journal of Sociology*, 51: 37–59.
- Vakulento, A. (2007) "'Islamic Headscarves" and the European Convention on Human Rights: An Intersectional Perspective,' *Social Legal Studies*, 16: 183–199.
- Walby, S. (2007) 'Complexity Theory, Systems Theory, and Multiple Intersecting Social Inequalities,' *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 37(4): 449–470.
- Weber, L. (2001) *Understanding Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Weber, L. and Parra-Medina, D. (2003) 'Intersectionality and Women's Health: Charting a Path to Eliminating Health Disparities,' in M. Texler Segal, V. Demos, and J. Jacobs Kronenfeld (eds) *Gender Perspectives on Health and Medicine: Key Themes*, p. 181–229. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006) 'Intersectionality and Feminist Politics,' *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(3): 193–209.