

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

The Theory and Politics of Intersectionality in Comparative Perspective

Introduction

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This Critical Perspectives series aims at exploring intersectional politics and political practices outside of the U.S. context and contributing to the growing body of literature that operationalizes the concept. Indeed, the genealogy of intersectionality as a concept must be firmly rooted in the American context, though it has traveled extensively. With travel comes the need for reflexivity and contextualization. The authors in this series use their awareness of this American genealogy to fashion new intersectional lenses to capture the dynamics of the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2012) and inclusion in various national and transnational contexts. Power relations of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and religion are being refashioned as a result of such developments as global financial crises fueling cuts in social spending, rising anti-immigrant sentiment in European countries combined with Islamophobia, and the rise to power of many left-wing parties in Latin America alongside public displays of frustration over corruption and inequity. These changes produce processes of inclusion *and* exclusion for multiply disadvantaged groups that intersectional lenses can capture.

In each of their case studies, the authors map how intersectionality makes visible this changing politics of belonging and inclusion. They examine different social actors to assess whether and why they have adopted intersectional frames to guide their actions. Actors under scrutiny here include civil society organizations and political parties in the European Public Sphere (Siim), feminist organizations in France (Lépinard), NGOs in the UK and France (Bassel and Emejulu), and governmental agencies and feminist social movements in Uruguay (Townsend-Bell).

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Three themes emerge from these reflections. First, authors explore the challenges and opportunities of institutionalizing intersectionality (Verloo 2006). Birte Siim suggests that for social and political actors across the European Union, institutionalizing intersectionality is a work in progress: civil society organizations, as well as European institutions, are involved in a learning process that might yield the benefits of greater inclusion of multiply disadvantaged women. Erica Townsend-Bell shows that the partial and ambivalent institutionalization of intersectionality in newly created Uruguayan governmental institutions raises the question of intentionality—do political actors have to be aware of intersectionality to act in an intersectional way?—and of choice—what type of intersectionality will prevail over others? Both contributions therefore underline how projects of institutionalization necessarily perform both the exclusion and the inclusion of marginalized groups.

Second, the contributions in this series remind us that adopting intersectional lenses challenges existing political projects and social movements. Éléonore Lépinard's contribution illustrates how French intersectionality challenges the mainstream emancipatory feminist project inherited from the Second Wave. The racialization of religious identities in France creates new political dynamics for intersectional groups, which confronts many French women's rights organizations with the limits of their secular and liberal political project.

Leah Bassel and Akwugo Emejulu analyze how, under austerity in France and the United Kingdom, an intersectional lens reveals how solidarity between nongovernmental organization actors can be formed or fail to be formed because of the rise of "enterprise culture." The shifting contours of third-sector politics may have negative consequences for minority women's concerns and activism and for future solidarities across multiple axes of social justice. Through intersectional lenses, therefore, new challenges to the politics of belonging and inclusion are made visible.

Third, these insights enable reflection on method as well as conceptualization. For example, how do we fashion intersectional lenses that can encompass contextual variations? Each contribution underlines the recognition that context matters: the intersections that are salient and the possibilities for intersectional action and inclusion vary. Even good intentions may not be enough. The commitment and openness of the Uruguayan state to fostering a more inclusive environment may not result in effective intersectional programs.

Analyses of intersectionality must encompass transnational flows. The frames that shape the possibilities for intersectionality in Europe are not restricted to a national scale when the politics of gender and religion and austerity play out *across* European countries as well as in the European public sphere.

These reflections have important implications for intersectional, comparative method and for a concept of intersectionality that travels while remaining aware of its American genesis. The aim of these contributions is, therefore, dual: to make visible the new contours of the politics of belonging and inclusion using intersectional lenses outside the United States and to reflect on the implications of these lenses for intersectional politics and praxis.

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Political Intersectionality and Democratic Politics in the European Public Sphere

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The European Union (EU) consists of 27 nation states, and its motto "united in diversity" refers to the right of EU citizens to cross borders and work and live legally in another EU country as well as to the accommodation of national minorities. In spite of this common fate, "diversity" issues have increasingly been associated with conflicts between citizens and noncitizens about integration of new migrant groups. At a time of rising populism in Europe, it is important to assess