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# Intersectionality's amazing journey: toleration, adaptation and appropriation

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## **Intersectionality's amazing journey: toleration, adaptation and appropriation**

by HELMA LUTZ

### *1. Introduction*

In an article published in 2013, Maria Carbin and Sara Edenheim argued that the popularity of «the intersectional turn» in feminist theory owed its success to the absence of any consideration of the concept's ontology and epistemology. «Intersectionality promises almost everything: to provide complexity, overcome divisions and to serve as a critical tool. However, the expansion of the scope of intersectionality has created a consensus that conceals fruitful and necessary conflicts within feminism» (Carbin and Edenheim 2013, 233). This argument is very much in line with Myra Marx Ferree's important argument that «the idea of intersectionality as a moment of resistance to mainstream erasure of inequalities has been converted into the idea of 'diversity' understood as a positive, albeit neoliberal approach to social inclusion» (Ferree 2013, 11). These authors are echoed in the concerns of many pioneers and proponents of intersectionality, who ask what has happened to the concept and how it has changed its meaning by leaving the original context in which it was developed and from which it has been traveling and expanding (see for example Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013; Kennedy-Macfoy and Lewis 2014; Lewis 2013). Above all, Kimberlé Crenshaw has expressed her bewilderment with the «misreading» of her concept:

There is a sense that efforts to repackage intersectionality for universal consumption require a re-marginalising of black women. This instinct reflects a fatal transmission error of «Demarginalising's» central argument: that representations of gender that are «race-less» are not by that fact alone more universal than those that are race-specific (Crenshaw 2011, 224).

This fear of witnessing the erasure of «black women» in the process of the transnational traveling and appropriation of intersectionality is a concern that needs to be addressed. I will do this by focusing on intersectionality's journey from the US to Europe, and will consider the question of gains and losses. I will finish by mentioning some future lines of debate.

## 2. *The traveling of theory*

Although many feminist scholars refer to Edward Said's seminal essay on *Traveling Theory* (1983), only a few look at it in more detail. Said argues that rather than treating an original (theoretical) text as a *cultural dogma*, we should follow up the transformations of interpretation and meaning through its travels (1983, 247). He distinguishes four stages in the traveling of texts:

*First*, there is a point of origin, or what seems like one, a set of initial circumstances in which the idea came to birth or entered discourse. *Second*, there is a distance transversed, a passage through the pressure of various contexts as the idea moves from an earlier point to another time and place where it will come into a new prominence. *Third*, there is a set of conditions – call them conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances – which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be. *Fourth*, the now full (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated) idea is to some extent transformed by its uses, its new position in a new time and place [emphasis added, H.L.] (Said 1983, 226-267).

I will elaborate intersectionality's transatlantic journey through these four stages, as I consider them crucial for an understanding of the concept's changing applications and of what some consider its metamorphosis.

## 3. *Point of origin – multiple foundations*

When in 2005 the US sociologist Leslie McCall wrote: «One could even say that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far» (McCall 2005, 1771), she paid tribute to a concept that was coined in 1989 by the black US

legal expert Kimberlé Crenshaw and spread quickly beyond the United States, first and foremost in the field of gender studies. Notwithstanding the term's relatively short history, it does have a legacy which is closely related to black Women's struggles for equality, human rights and recognition. As a way of conceptualizing what was previously described as the «*gender, race and class nexus*», intersectionality has several forerunners and founding narratives. Some authors consider as an early reflection of black Women's struggle against slavery, subordination and discrimination the speech from 1851 by Sojourner Truth, a former slave and anti-slavery activist:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps me any best place. And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm. I have plowed (sic), I have planted and I have gathered into barns. And no man could head me. And ain't I a woman? I could work as much, and eat as much as any man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne children and seen most of them all sold into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman? (Truth quoted in: Brah and Phoenix 2004, 77).

With these words Truth addressed the exclusion of black women from the collective of *Women* during a meeting of the burgeoning Women's rights movement in Akron, Ohio. Her plea for the consideration of «race» and «racism» as important markers of difference and inequality between women has proved relevant for the Women's Movement up to this very day.

More than 100 years later, in 1977, the manifesto of the Combahee River Collective, a Boston-based black lesbian feminist organization, renewed this request. It highlighted the futility of privileging a single dimension of oppressive experience: «We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously» (The Combahee River Collective 1981, 213). This is an early manifestation of challenging heteronormativity simultaneously in the Women's and in the black Movement. The demand for a «development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking» (*ibidem*, 210) was followed, echoed and elaborated

in Black feminist scholars' work, for example in Angela Davis' famous *Women, Race and Class* from 1981. Strongly influenced by Marxism and the Frankfurt School, Davis insisted on the importance of «class» as a crucial category for the analysis of black women's inequality which intersects with gender and race. Davis revived a theme that had been fiercely discussed in the European Women's Movement at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Marxist feminists as Clara Zetkin (1896) and Alexandra Kollontai (1918) clashed with the representatives of the bourgeois feminist movement over their disregard of class differences between women<sup>1</sup>. While these earlier concepts of race-class-gender in which the categories were portrayed as markers of difference and exclusion and were added up to the «triple oppression theory», intersectionality established a new agenda for women's and gender studies:

Intersectionality is a conceptualization of the problem that attempts to capture both the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more axes of subordination. It specifically addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create background inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes, and the like. Moreover, it addresses the way that specific acts and policies create burdens that flow along these axes constituting the dynamic or active aspects of disempowerment (Crenshaw 2000).

Crucial for Crenshaw's framing of the concept is the interaction of the macro level (inequality structures functioning as social positioning) with the micro level (subjective experiences of discrimination and identity formation as an excluded group).

In summary, it was the analysis of the specific socioeconomic situation of black women in the US which made it possible for the first time to speak of the simultaneity and mutual co-constitution of different categories of social differentiation, and to emphasize the specificity of the experiences shaped by these interactions.

<sup>1</sup> Marxist-feminist theorists of the 1980 revisited this debate in their analysis; see Barrett and McIntosh (1982).

#### 4. *The ongoing journey through time and space*

Crenshaw's metaphor *intersectionality*, suggesting an imagery of a black woman being positioned in the very dangerous middle of an intersection, became a dazzling success; it was adopted in gender studies in more or less all English-speaking countries from the start (Davis 2008, 68f.), and has made its journey into mainland Europe from the early 2000s onwards. It is now also used by gender studies scholars from/in Africa and Asia (Haq 2013; Purkayastha 2012).

In the UK the question of the interpenetration of «race», class and gender had already been discussed as «intersection» by Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1983). As a result, intersectionality received considerable attention from the mid-1990s onwards in the critical debate about racism and nationalism (Lutz *et al.* 1995). In some countries of continental Europe, for example the Netherlands, the concept was welcomed as previous critical debates about migration, nationalism, ethnicity, and post-colonialism had paved the way for it (Buitelaar 2006; Lutz 2002; Prins 2006; Saharso 2002; Verloo 2006; Wekker 2004). Mieke Aerts and Sawitri Saharso had already provoked heated exchanges in 1994 with an article in which they suggested that a conceptualization of *gender as ethnicity* could help to decenter the former (Aerts and Saharso 1994). Their recommendation was taken up by Scandinavian scholars emphasizing the need to extend gender to include sexuality and pay attention to heteronormativity (Bredström 2006). Other scholars from Scandinavia focused on marginalized ethnicities. Susanne Knudsen (2006), for example, used Judith Butler's work in arguing that «ethnic trouble» has the subversive potential to place in question powerful images of belonging and «home». In the process of expanding the categories aimed at decentering gender, scholars like Nina Lykke (2010) and Dorte Staunæs (2003) emphasized the need for a simultaneous deconstruction of power relations, knowledge, and self-positioning. From the way intersectionality was received and developed at different times within Europe<sup>2</sup>, one can conclude that a significant division shaped the reception of the concept: countries in which the English-language literature is more widely

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the dissemination of intersectionality in other parts of continental Europe, see Lutz, Herrera Vivar and Supik (2011, 4ff.).

read or where English has become the most important academic language, intersectionality was included more quickly. Germany was a latecomer to the debate (see Lutz 2001); initially, the embrace of intersectionality was limited to researchers focusing on gendered racism, ethnicism and nationalism.

### 5. *Conditions of acceptance*

«“Intersectionality” addresses the most central theoretical and normative concern within feminist scholarship: the acknowledgement of differences among women. This is because it touches on the most pressing problem facing contemporary feminism – the long and painful legacy of its exclusions» (Davis 2011, 45).

According to Kathy Davis, by the end of the twentieth century there was finally room in feminist theory to address differences between women.

Gradually, the ubiquitous and universal feminist imagination as a «We» lost ground because scholars associated with the black women’s and the third world women’s movements were able to demonstrate its partiality (see Ahmed 2000; Behabib *et al.* 1995; Collins 2000; Narayan 1997). However, the result of this insight was often dreaded, as Axeli Knapp writes: «The presupposed generalized ‘We’ functions like a regulative idea: it has substantive effects, but it cannot be positively defined with reference to a collective with a substantial identity of experience and interest» (Knapp 2005, 253). Contrary to many black and postcolonial feminists who embrace the multiplicity of *feminisms*, Knapp is of the opinion that the «indeterminatedness» of the «We» is a useful expression of an aporia: «The aporia lies in the simultaneous indispensability and impossibility of a foundational reference to an epistemic or political subject» (*ibidem*). In addition, poststructuralist critics argued for the abolition of categories in gender studies (see the debate about anti-categorical approaches in McCall 2005).

In a situation where some were holding up the feminist «We» while others wanted to multiply it, and still others were insisting on an anti-categorical ontology, intersectionality came to be seen as a concept of reconciliation, the remedy for fragmentation.

Kathy Davis (2011) explains the eager adoption of the term as follows:

Intersectionality takes up the political project of making the social and material consequences of the categories of gender/race/class visible, but does so by employing methodologies compatible with the poststructuralist project of deconstructing categories, unmasking universalism, and exploring the dynamic and contradictory working of power (Davis 2011, 48).

Davis goes even further, by arguing that intersectionality owes its enormous success to the (metaphorical) power of a concept that seems vague and ambiguous, but can be taken up exactly for these reasons: the concept is useful for the further development of feminist theory and practice because of its theoretical, methodological, and political advantages of the concept for gender studies (*ibidem*). Even though younger gender studies scholars, in particular, agree with this position, there are also the warning voices mentioned in the beginning of this article; their concern is that when painful divides between feminists are no longer addressed by the evocation of identity politics, the material bed-rocks of oppression are made invisible and disappear altogether.

## 6. *Appropriation and resistance*

Over the last 20 years, intersectionality has clearly released new energy as an answer to the search for a satisfying theorization of the interactions between different social structures and identity positions. The concept is developing in many and different directions; a plethora of research fields and works bear witness to this.

Nevertheless, a number of *controversies* have dominated the debate (see also Davis 2008).

*First*, various researchers have contributed to the *amendment of the categories* beyond the race-class-gender triangle by adding nationality (Anthias and Yuval Davis 1992), sexuality (McClintock 1995), able-bodied-ness/disability (Meekosha 1990), and age (Williams 1989). The argument for the recognition of markers of positionality like religion, citizenship status (different «belongings»), sedentariness (vs. nomadism)<sup>3</sup> and geo-political location («the West» vs. «the Rest») has led to further expansions of the concept (Krüger-Potratz and Lutz 2002; Lutz 2001) and an attempt to summarize these categories as embodied, socio-spatial and economic diversifications (Lutz and Wenning 2001). This search

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the current debate about the Roma people in Europe.

for an *inclusive conceptualization* of multidimensional inequalities (open to further amendments) argues for the embedded consideration of more than one category (Leiprecht and Lutz 2005) by emphasizing the analysis of the categories' contradictory and conflicting relations to each other, instead of focusing on distinct and isolated realms of experience (see McClintock 1995). The amendment protagonists have been accused of arbitrariness (the «etc.» reproach), and Alice Ludvig (2006), justifiably, considers this multiplicity as the «Achilles heel of intersectional approaches» (*ibidem*, 247). Indeed, the question of which positionalities are the most salient requires an answer. One suggestion is to consider «race, class, gender» as minimum standard which can be extended by the addition of other categories, depending on the context and the research problem (Leiprecht and Lutz 2005).

*Second*, an ongoing dispute concerns the *meaning of the categories «race» and «class»* and the different conceptualizations in the US and in Europe (Ferree 2011; Knapp 2005). Many European researchers regard «ethnicity» as a more appropriate category than «race», as «race» is first and foremost connected to Nazi racial ideology and practice and is considered baggage that cannot be used in a positive way. As a result, not only is the term «race» avoided but «racism» as an analytical category is often dismissed altogether. Recently, a growing number of researchers have claimed that «ethnicity» carries a similar baggage of hierarchization and – in connection with «culture» – has become a powerful tool of (symbolic, political and social) exclusion (Lutz *et al.* 2011, 10 ff.). Whether the answer should be a reintroduction of «race» into the European debate is currently the subject of heated discussions (see Crenshaw 2011; Lewis 2013). Likewise, scholars have warned against equating the meaning of «class» in the US context with the European meaning of the term (Ferree 2011).

*Third*, intersectionality's conceptualization as theory, method, or heuristic device, analytical tool for textual analysis or as a living practice has been the subject of multiple controversies.

Contributions to these debates include the following: while Davis (2008; 2011) regards intersectionality as a theory that goes far beyond its appearance as a *buzzword*, Katharina Walgenbach (2010) considers it as a *new paradigm* for the scientific community. Cornelia Klinger and Axeli Knapp (2005) embrace intersectionality's potential for the building of «grand» theory, but argue that on the structural level the term is unable to identify how and

by what means race, class and gender as separate categories are constituted as social categories. I will elaborate on this critique later. Moreover, authors like Knapp and Klinger are concerned with the negative consequences of intersectionality's argument for the decentering of gender – which, they claim, could easily be politically misused to abolish gender studies altogether.

Another answer to the question of what kind of concept intersectionality is comes from those who consider the concept as a *heuristic device* for detecting the overlapping and co-construction of (in)visible strands of social inequality (Lutz 2001).

Also, some intersectionality proponents (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013) have argued that it is more important to ask what intersectionality *does* than to argue about what it is, pointing to the political legacy and goals of the founding «mothers» in the US. Insisting that intersectionality is first and foremost a tool for making visible various strands of discrimination, these authors reject the now popular use of intersectionality in a managerial context where it is purely considered as an addition or replacement to/of gender mainstreaming.

Finally, Crenshaw (2011) cautions against the misuse of «her» concept which, as she puts it, has been taken far from its original meaning; she considers the disappearance of the «black woman» from the center of intersectionality a result of the journey which produced an «avatar». While she insists on «race» as a master category of intersectionality, in her recent visualizations of intersectionality the category of «class» has disappeared (see her website).

Although Crenshaw's criticism is comprehensible to a certain extent, it falls into the trap of not only sanctifying her original text (against which Said warns) but also denying the variations of social divisions in other parts of the world. Intersectionality was indeed not only accommodated and incorporated in new times and places, but also transformed, and perhaps – as in the context of some diversity policies – disfigured beyond recognition. But it has also brought about an incredible multifaceted debate among scholars all over the globe, who have adapted it to specific regional and local contexts where the priorities and master categories of the original context need to be revised. Nira Yuval-Davis (2011) rightly notes: «I find it problematic, for instance, that the construction of “black woman” is automatically assumed, unless otherwise specified, to be that of a minority black woman

living in white western societies. The majority of black women in today's world are black women in black societies. This has major implications for a global intersectional stratification analysis» (Yuval-Davis 2011, 162). Implicit in this statement is the conviction that debates about intersectionality and social inequalities can no longer reduce the analysis of gender, class and race to *oppression and discrimination* but need to consider the «*privileged*» positioning within and between them – an opinion that is heatedly contested, as many intersectionality scholars dismiss the integration of privilege as contrast to oppression. In my opinion, however, a sophisticated intersectional analysis needs the observation of the interplay between privilege and discrimination, an insight deriving from critical whiteness and postcolonial studies.

It is true that in a concept which is globally appropriated changes and twists will always result in a metamorphosis of the original. This can be experienced as painful, but in the case of intersectionality I cannot detect a misuse of such gravity that we should regret it.

Following Said's four stages of the travelling of theory, it seems that the appropriation of intersectionality has met with huge enthusiasm as well as criticism and objections. There are those who never believed in taking it on board in the first place, and those who complain about the way it has been appropriated. The latter group is right when they argue that in many western societies debates about racism are unaddressed, and that indeed the «race» category is often undertheorized or dropped from the operationalization of intersectionality altogether (see Lutz 2013). But a condemnation of research that questions the priority of one master category (be it race, class or gender) seems out of place. Holding race, class, gender and other social positioning together is, as Candace West and Sarah Fenstermaker (1996, 357) as well as Donna Haraway (1991, 129) write, a complicated exercise; only very few empirical and theoretical works on intersectionality cannot be accused of neglecting/omitting a relevant category. Theoretical sensitivity, a readiness to critically question conventional approaches and a genuine search for «invisible» explanations seem to be the remedy against blindness in certain fields and spots<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Intersectional methodology is helpful as a way of achieving this aim; see Davis (2014); Lutz and Davis (2005); Lykke (2014).

## 7. *Future lines of investigation*

It is now evident that intersectionality has moved beyond the field of gender studies; it is used in sociology, education, anthropology, psychology, political sciences, law and literary studies, health studies and social work and many other (sub)disciplines dealing with social inequalities and identities. A myriad of divisions among intersectionalists have already been mentioned. In this final part I want to mention some future lines in the sociological debate.

Agreeing with those critics who want to see intersectionality embedded in the broader theoretical frame of inequality research, I argue for the use of theoretical tools that go beyond a pure assessment of the co-construction and mutual constitution of categories of social positioning. But not all categories of difference are equally salient; moreover, their impact on social positioning can be extremely dissimilar. It is therefore important to investigate differences in the context of power relations and to analyze in detail which of all possible differential facets makes the difference, creates unequal identities. Yuval-Davis (2011) suggests that social stratification theory may be helpful here. Social stratification «relates to the differential hierarchical locations of individuals and groupings of people on society's grids of power» (Yuval-Davis 2011, 162). The reduction of most social stratification theories to configurations within the container of the nation state needs to be overcome by consideration of the continually shifting «orders of stratification» on the global and the regional as well as on the national and the local level, and we should likewise «reject the naturalisation of any constructions of social divisions, and challenge the prioritisation of any of them, such as class and gender» (*ibidem*, 166). This statement is in line with Anna Amelina's (2016) concept of intersectionality as assemblage, introducing «space» as a category that needs to be included in the context of global migration. As mentioned before, scholars like Knapp and Klinger argue for an intersectional theory of social stratification for which the separation of the macro and the micro level is required: «It makes no sense to hint at the superimposing and intersecting aspects of class, race and gender in the worlds of individual experience without being able to specify how and by what means class, race and gender are constituted as social categories» (Klinger 2003, 25; translation

H.L.). They argue that the majority of intersectionality studies analyze identity formations and thus are not able to meet the requirements of a stratification theory. I consider this not only a rigid and conventional view of knowledge production, emphasizing the binary between high theory and low empiricism, but also one that ignores a whole strand of research that adapts a multi-level analysis. Anthias (1998), for example, has suggested a multi-level analysis that works on four levels: a) the level of discrimination (experience); b) the actors' level (inter-subjective praxis); c) the institutional level (institutional regimes); and the level of representation (symbolic and discursive). Using this approach in her work on belongings (Anthias 2002), she demonstrates the interrelation between social positionality and the narratives of collective identity. Likewise, in an intersectional biographical analysis Kathy Davis and myself (Lutz and Davis 2005) have demonstrated the reciprocal effects between structural resources and structural discrimination. Although I agree that more and new research needs to be done in this direction, I continue to believe that a mono-level research design should be avoided. In this I follow Nora Rätzhel's (2004) conclusion: «In feminist research the term intersectionality serves as a perspective which avoids on the one hand the reduction of social positions to subjective identity, and on the other hand the presentation of social structures without individuals who either produce them actively or repel them» (Rätzhel 2004, 253, translation H.L.).

A third debate that I finally want to mention is the one on the adequacy of the metaphor. Many criticize «intersection» as a too rigid visualization, one that ignores the fact that stratification is better depicted as a matter of relations rather than categories. Whether this can be Lykke's botanical image of a «rhizome», underground plant stems that move horizontally in all directions and bear both roots and shoots (Lykke 2011, 211), or her earlier idea of a nodal point, or something completely different, is still an open question.

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### **Intersectionality's amazing journey: toleration, adaptation and appropriation**

In this paper, I take issue with proponents of «intersectionality» which believe, that a theoretical concept cannot/should not be detached from its original context of invention. Instead, I argue that the traveling of theory in a global context automatically involves appropriations, amendments and changes in response to the original meaning. However, I reject the idea that «intersectionality» can be used as a free-floating signifier; on the contrary, it needs to be embedded in the respective (historical, social, cultural) context in which it is used. I will depict some of the current debates engaging with the pros and cons of the global implementation of the concept by dealing with a) the controversy about master categories; b) the dispute about the centrality of «race»; and c) the dispute about the amendment of categories. I will show how «gender», «ethnicity», «race» and «class» are invariably linked to structures of domination, but can also mobilize or deconstruct disempowering discourses, even undermine and transform oppressive practices. I will finally map themes and questions for future lines of investigation.

*Keywords:* intersectionality, traveling theory, appropriation, resistance.

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