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Coexisting inequalities and other pitfalls of the debate on Intersectionality.

PLEASE DON’T QUOTE WITHOUT PERMISSION

Intro
A year ago, during the US primaries election campaign, Democratic Party voters - feminists among them - were asked to decide between two candidates who could be seen as representatives of historically disadvantaged groups, women and blacks. In the power structure of the United States as well as in the majority of countries in the industrialised world, both groups are still poorly represented in the upper echelons of the political arena; both groups have brought forth important social movements and in the long run important social theory debates on the mechanism and working power of exclusion and discrimination. If we stick to the classic mono-categorical attribution of identity politics, we can characterize their candidature as a long-term effect of the civil rights movement (Obama) and the second wave of the women’s movement (Clinton). Both candidates were often represented as advocates of one collective, either women or blacks. However, these collectives are not homogenous and therefore, in the course of the primaries the dispute about the meaning of gender and race divided feminists in the US and elsewhere. While some (e.g. Robin Morgan), took the classic feminist position that ‘a vote for Hillary is a vote for ourselves’ meaning that women are foremost women, that being a female comes before being black, working class, lesbian or anything else, others discarded this standpoint of identity politics because it once again forced black women into the position to choose between gender and race and because it also assumed that in a world of patriarchal power white women’s loyalty per definition cannot be with a black man. [The ‘feminists for Obama’ took the stance that they would vote for a candidate who can best lead and rehabilitate a country that has lost so much credibility over the last decade.]

In her most recent editorial for the European Journal of Women’s Studies Kathy Davis (2008) analyses this debate as one of concern for scholars on both sides of the Atlantic; “We need to use theories of intersectionality to critically analyze and deconstruct the identity politics embedded in political controversies“ (3). Davis shows that it is important to investigate in which way various categories of difference “have been mobilized to establish or tarnish the respective candidate’s credibility” (loc. cit.). This implies that drawing on one category alone (be it gender, race, class, religion or age etc.) is not enough to understand the complexity and ambiguousness of the representation of the social in the modern world. Moreover, the fact that
Obama, the son of a white American mother and a black African father, is categorized as black can be regarded as a rather convincing example that these social divisions are not just natural but rather socially constructed. Nevertheless they are pervasive and their impact on people’s lives is immense.

**The American context**

By using this example, I have already arrived at the core of the debate on intersectionality. What is this intersectionality? Is it a theory, a concept, a heuristic device, a method or a methodology, or is it a reading strategy for analysis? (see also Davis 2008: 68). During the coming two days different answers to this question and various definitions will be given. Kimberlé Crenshaw who has come to this conference directly from the Obama inauguration festivities in Washington, coined the concept in 1989 – and we feel very honoured to welcome the ‘mother of the concept’ for its birthday celebration and for reflection here in Frankfurt.

A short look into the history of intersectionality shows that it came into being via the so called ‘race-class-gender’ debate which received its main impulse from US black feminism and anti-racist activism in the nineteen seventies. One early documentation of this is the manifest of a Boston based black lesbian feminist organisation, the ‘Combahee River Collective’ which in 1977 highlighted the futility of privileging a single dimension of oppressive experience:

„The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions“


Their plea for a “development of integrated analysis and practice, based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking”, (1997: 272) was followed, echoed and elaborated in black feminist scholars’ work, starting with Angela Davis and bell hooks, Valerie Smith, Gloria Hull, Patricia Hill Collins and many others over the following years. Through them it made its way into the American and eventually into the British academic debate. From its conceptualisation as ‘triple oppression theory’, in which race-class-gender are portrayed as not just adding up together, and not originating from the same source, but instead focussing on special moments of oppression, race-class-gender was by and by amended with nationality (Anthias and Yuval Davis 1992), sexuality (McClintock 1995) and religion. Thus, by the early 1990s the awareness had evolved that three categories may not be enough to understand societies in the modern world and that the three categories race-class-
gender are not distinct and isolated realms of experience but on the contrary, they come into existence through contradictory and conflictual relations to each other (McClintock 1995). In some way, and this I say without any intention to vilify the originator, the coining of ‘intersectionality’ in 1989 was ‘something in the air’, the result of a lively debate on both sides of the Atlantic.

However, I am convinced that the fact that the originator, Kimberlè Crenshaw is not a social scientist but a jurist and a political activist, had a major impact on its rapid dispersion. The debate on human rights and global justice was not only carried out in various committees of the United Nations but also in many countries around the world. The European Parliament as one example was in need of a methodology that could facilitate the implementation of measures for multiple discrimination when it discussed the Anti-Discrimination Legislation which was eventually adopted and then ratified by the member countries of the European Union. It is obvious that Kimberlè Crenshaw’s intervention was absorbed quickly in a wide field of disciplines and has inspired transatlantic exchange over the last twenty years. So far, the concept has made its brilliant career first and foremost in Women and Gender Studies. But, it is not restricted to this field and has been adopted by migration researchers and by those studying social inequality.

The American sociologist Leslie McCall has made the following statement: “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,” (Leslie McCall, 2005: 1771).

Three approaches

In a review article McCall evaluates the use of intersectionality and distinguishes between three main approaches which she calls: the anti-categorical, the intra-categorical and the inter-categorical. The anti-categorical approach, heavily influenced by post structuralism and favoured by post feminists, focuses on the socially constructed nature of gender and other categories; its aim is “the deconstruction of master categories as a way to unpack inequality”. Thus, for anti-categorical thinkers any use of categories is suspect; what does this mean? For clarification I use again the Obama example: Barack Obama’s self-identification as a ‘post-racial candidate’ can be seen as a critique of broad and sweeping acts of categorisation and as a dismissal of the category in toto. However, many ‘realists’ disagree with such a standpoint by alluding to racism as an everyday experience of black people which does not disappear by a pure act of anti-essentialism through the invocation of a new mode of being. (They argue
that it is not just language that creates categorical reality but power relations and patterns of domination).

I want to make this aspect even more complex, by pointing out that in an intersectional twist one should ask another question (Mary Matsuda 1991) namely: whether it would have been possible for Hillary Clinton who has often been accused of un-female, emotionless and manly behaviour, to coin herself as a ‘post-gender’ person - without being pronounced mad? The answer is rather no.

This example shows us that the categories gender and race as well as class are not homogenous. They have (completely) different origins, in spite of the fact that they are equally pervasive and relevant for everyday practices and ideologies.

Coming back to Leslie McCall’s evaluation scheme: The proponents of the *intra-categorical* approach do not deny that categories are socially constructed but they argue for the necessity of keeping them; their aim is the fine-tuning of the categories and they identify internal inconsistency as well as their complexity. Finally the advocates of an *inter-categorical approach* look for overlaps and mutual amplification by reducing the analysis to one or two inter-group relationships at a time. They do not wish to repudiate or deconstruct the use of categories but rather focus on what they have in common – without falling back into simplistic deduction or the declaration of the primacy of one category above others.

According to McCall qualitative researchers seem to be in favour of the first and second approaches, the inter-categorical approach is embraced by quantitative intersectionalists like herself.

Whether or not this classification is helpful, will be a question to be discussed during this conference.

**The German debate**

The German debate on intersectionality, which started relatively late, but is in full swing at the moment, is characterised by some peculiarities which I want to talk about briefly. As Myra Marx Ferree will show us in her lecture, German feminists have rather dealt with the relation between gender and class than with the relation between gender and race. Race in fact is a much rejected and detested category, one that seems to have been disposed of in(?)/ debate – outside of our constitution it is hardly used at all. Though there are indeed many good reasons for getting rid of a category that has proven to be a scientific error, researchers like myself argue that we still need the category as an analytical tool, because of its deep embedded-ness in German history - including the Fascist and the much underestimated colonial part. As early as 1955 Theodor Adorno observed that in Post World War II. Germany
the much frowned upon category ‘race’ had been replaced by the “elegant word culture” – notwithstanding the fact that despite its conceptual change its former meaning and assertion was kept.

It may therefore not be a surprise that - as Axeli Knapp (2009) has noticed – in Germany, intersectionality was first picked up by feminist researchers dealing with racism, colonialism and migration and was only slowly making its way into the heart of Gender Studies.

However, a widely spread objection here is the fear that taking on board intersectionality will foster the decrease of Gender Studies (Knapp 2001): the fear that gender will become a decentralised category and therefore be made superfluous in the academia, is often voiced among German scholars. In some universities in Germany Gender Studies’ Chairs are being challenged and some have even been abolished which shows that after many years of fighting for the establishment of academic Gender Studies there is no guarantee that this field of expertise will receive credit for its merits and in times of major changes will hold its ground in academia. In my view, this has little to do with whether or not intersectionality is integrated into the debate.

Another major demur in our debate here is the feeling that intersectionality cannot capture the social developing processes of race, class and gender because of its positioning on the subject level. The social philosopher Cornelia Klinger writes: “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” (2003: 25). She questions the suitability of intersectionality outside the analysis of identity formation (see also Soiland 2008 from the perspective of feminist economists). While Klinger and Knapp adhere to the primacy of no more than three categories (gender, class and race) others have argued for the amplification of the triad by either body (Degele et al) or nationality (Lenz).

In my own work, (Lutz 2002) together with my colleagues Leiprecht, Wenning and Krüger-Potratz I developed a list of 14 interacting axes or social divisions: gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, class, culture, religion, able-bodiedness, age, sedentariness, property ownership, geographical location: North-South/East-West; status in terms of tradition and development, all of which are relevant for the analysis of social inequality, depending on the respective context. They can be diversified into body-oriented, socio-spatial (sozial-räumlich) oriented and economy oriented (Lutz & Wenning 2000). The openness of this list has been problematised as endlessly expandable and therefore not useful for any kind of sound analysis (see the intervention of Butler1990 in the American context). We have reacted to this by
saying that in the context of studying social inequality we need theory oriented concepts and that in the context of the Western world as a ‘minimum standard’ at least three categories race- class- gender are needed for an intersectional analysis. We have also stressed that next to theory we need empirical research; the latter may require other categories to be added depending upon the context and the specifics of the research question. (Leiprecht and Lutz 2006). However, we do not wish to say that every difference makes a relevant category and that we would include trivialized divisions like smokers/non-smokers or spectacle wearers in our model. In their multiple level analysis model which seems to be inspired by Floya Anthias’s 1998 model, Degele and Winker (2008) differentiate between three levels, the structural level (including institutions), the level of identity construction and the representational level. While on the identity level they wish to deduce the relevant categories, which can come to 14 or more inductively on the basis of the empirical material; on the structural and representational they use the triad plus the body.<

Another proposal in the German debate comes from Katharina Walgenbach (2007) who pleads for redefining gender as an interdependent category, that in itself is already interwoven with other categories of social division and therefore these other categories are to be absorbed by gender as long as one defines it in a multi-faceted, ambiguous and non-essential concept. In my view one can summarize the German debate among social scientists and educationalists so far by saying that the political impetus, which clearly is represented in the texts by the Anglo-Saxon scholars, is almost absent in the German debate. Black and Migrant organizations have hardly been able to raise their voice in the political arena, let alone in the academy. While in England and the US many feminist researchers identify themselves as both activists and scholars, this tradition is very rare in this country.

Thus, I could distinguish between four strands of the debate:

1. The first strand is composed by feminist jurists dealing with ‘anti-discrimination-legislation’ in which intersectional discrimination is one of the categories applied, struggling with the selectivity of this category (Beer et al.. xx)

2. The second strand (Knapp and Klinger as main proponents) wishes to build a sound and maybe ‘grand’ theory on the structural level which not only is able to identify by what and how race, class, gender as separate categories are constituted as social categories but also how the Big Three are positioned to one another in an inter-categorical approach.

3. The third strand is outspoken in rejecting this objective by saying that it makes no sense to theoretically construct three self-contained categories as mega-structures only
to identify their interwoven-ness later. Instead they rather wish to identify the
interwoven-ness and mutual dependency between the categories from the beginning
on all levels (Degele & Winker 2008; Walgenbach et al 2006; xx). As we will see in
this conference, their idea comes close to the “transversal intersectionality” (a model
for thinking across differences) which is advocated by Nira Yuval-Davis (Anthias and
Yuval Davis 1992; Yuval Davis 2006).

4. The fourth strand consists of proponents for the openness and inclusiveness of the
categories and pleads for ongoing redefinition and amendment of intersectionality’s
categories. This group consists of those who are mainly using intersectionality as a
heuristic device in the analysis of identity and representation. Here, social actors are
no longer assigned to exclusive status groups or collective identity categories but the
question of domination and oppression is the outcome of a complex analysis. For lack
of a better one, I use the quote of the American philosopher Nancy Fraser for its
exemplification: "Rather, individuals are nodes of convergence for multiple, cross-
cutting axes of subordination. Frequently disadvantaged along some axes and
simultaneously advantaged along others, they wage struggles for recognition in a
modern regime." (Fraser 2003: 57)

Taking this approach serious means that Intersectionality has come a long way from an
interlocking system of oppression to one that discerns between strands of discrimination/
domination and strands of agency. In my opinion, today, one must argue against the classical
clear cut in the study of social inequality where a distinction is made between vertical
inequality (with the primacy of class and sometimes gender) and non-vertical or horizontal
inequalities in which we find all other categories of differentiation. Coexisting inequalities
often cut across each other and thereby amplify their effects; but as axes of difference they
can also compensate for or cushion each other. In this way, in my own work I feel obliged to
empirically investigate gender as a category of discrimination and as a resource for social
actors, always in combination with other markers for discrimination and difference.
This conference is a birthday celebration for Intersectionality. However, when theories or concepts are celebrated, it is never without a critical note; appreciation as well as criticism and challenge are two necessary components of every serious academic debate. This is why the title of the conference carries a question mark.

Within the next two days we will hear scholars from both sides of the Atlantic discuss the question whether or not we – as gender studies scholars – need Intersectionality. And it is quite clear that not just one, but many – sometimes contradictory - answers to this question will be given.

Expression of gratitude
I would like to finish this lecture by confessing that this conference is my dream come true. This is the conference I always wanted to organize and I am thankful for the support of so many institutions and people who helped me to realize it. First of all I am indebted to the Goethe university and the department of social sciences that appointed me to one of Germany’s most prestigious Gender Studies Chairs. Hopefully I will be able to live up to their high expectations during the coming years. Moreover, I thank the Cornelia Goethe Centrum for providing me with an institutional backing and lots of dedication for this project. And together with my colleagues at the Institute for the analysis of society and politics I hope to collaborate on many innovative studies and events. Without the financial support of the Hessian Ministry of sciences and art, and here I want to thank in particular Dr. Monika Völker, and the money from sponsors like the ‘Friends and Promoters of the Goethe University’, the Consulate General of the Netherlands, the Friends of the Cornelia Goethe Centre, and from the Steering Committee of our University as well as from the Deanery, we would not be here today. I also want to express my deepest gratitude to the wonderful team of organizers, Linda, Lotte, Maria Teresa, Greta, Nele, Barbara, Stefan, Anke and Stefanie. Last but not least I want to thank full heartedly the speakers who followed my invitation so enthusiastically and the large audience who came to Frankfurt from all over the world to listen to them and discuss their thoughts.

This conference can be seen as a follow up of an earlier event which was organized by the European Journal of Women’s Studies some years ago in Amsterdam and I am thrilled that the editors and almost the complete board of associate editors is present today. My humble wish is that the conference will carry us all along in a spirit of solidarity and reflexivity.