

The Discursive Politics of Feminist Intersectionality

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As critical frame analysis has shown, even when concepts are expressed in the same words, they may have different meanings (Verloo 2007). Intersectionality is itself one of these contested terms within feminist thought. In this chapter, I take up the challenge of considering what feminists talk about when we talk of intersectionality.

Because intersectionality as a concept derives from the activist critiques that women of color in the US and UK made in the 1970s and 1980s about overly homogeneous political discourse in which “all the women are white and all the blacks are men” (Hull, Scott and Smith 1982, Crenshaw 1989, Brah and Phoenix 2004), it is important to consider how its meaning changes when it is stretched to cover other inequalities and exclusions. I begin by adopting the dynamic and institutional understanding of intersectionality suggested by McCall (2005) and Hancock (2007). Rather than identifying *points* of intersection, this approach sees the dimensions of inequality themselves as dynamic, located in changing, mutually constituted *relationships* with each other from which they cannot be disentangled (Glenn 2002, Walby 2007). Categories (like women and Black) and the dimensions along which they are ordered (like gender and race) are not therefore deemed “false” or “insignificant” even though they are imperfect, variable and contested.

I then develop this argument to suggest how historically realized social relations in any place or time have an irreducible complexity in themselves, from which the abstraction of any dimension of comparison is an imperfect but potentially useful conceptual achievement of simplification, not an inherent property of the world. I offer a model of political discourse that is equally dynamic, and use it to illustrate how structurally anchored discursive opportunities in continental Europe differ from the

frameworks for political discourse on which US and UK women of color originally drew. I argue that across different political contexts, various actors engage in trying to “shrink” the meaning of intersectionality and limit the areas in which it can be applied, to “bend” it to better fit with other issues on their agenda, and to “stretch” it to meet emergent needs (Lombardo, Meier and Verloo, 2009).

Intersections, systems and discourses

The dynamic version of intersectionality insists that it cannot be located at any one level of analysis, whether individual or institutional. The “intersection of gender and race” is not any number of specific *locations* occupied by individuals or groups (such as Black women) but a *process* through which “race” takes on multiple “gendered” meanings for particular women and men (and for those not neatly located in either of those categories) depending on whether, how and by whom race-gender is seen as relevant for their sexuality, reproduction, political authority, employment or housing. These domains (and others) are to be understood as *organizational fields* in which multidimensional forms of inequality are experienced, contested and reproduced in historically changing forms.

This is what Prins (2006) defines as a constructionist rather than structural understanding of intersectionality, but I prefer to call it “interactive intersectionality” to emphasize its structuration as an ongoing historical process from which neither structure nor agency can be erased (Giddens 1990). Walby (2007) introduces complexity theory to develop further this idea of intersectionality as an active system with both positive and negative feedback effects, non-linearity of relations, and non-nested, non-hierarchical overlaps among institutions. In such a complex system, gender is not a dimension limited to the organization of reproduction or family, class is not a dimension equated with the economy, and race is not a category reduced to the primacy of ethnicities, nations and borders, but all of the processes that systematically organize families, economies and nations are co-constructed along with the meanings of gender, race and class that are presented in and reinforced by these institutions separately and together. In other words, each institutional system serves as each other’s environment to which it is adapting.

To McCall’s dynamically interactive view of intersectionality and Walby’s notion of co-constructed systems, I add an emphasis on *discourse* as a political process by which

this co-creation occurs. My approach rests on understanding the co-formation of knowledge and power, stresses the historical development of institutions that shape consciousness and practice, and identifies discourse as a crucial arena of political activity (Foucault 1977). Two of the central processes of discursive politics are categorizing and ordering. These human actions have political consequences in themselves because of the inherent reflexivity of the social world; that is, we use categories and ranks not only to understand but control the world. Feedback from the environment to the system comes in terms of information about success and failure (Espeland and Sauder 2007). As lists, ranks, metaphors and distinctions proliferate, they guide our understanding of who we are and with whom we are more or less related. Thus, for example, when the dimension of “race” is constructed and “fixed” in national censuses, it generates meaningful and contestable categories (such as “Asian”) which can always be further decomposed, but which serve to distribute real resources and recognition in response to which identities and activities become oriented.

The understandings of all forms of inequality are mutually stretched and bent as they encounter each other. Like other forms of social reflexivity, the relatively new framing of intersectionality in Europe is being done in a social world that already incorporates intersectional relations in historically specific and yet contestable and changing ways (Knapp 2005, Verloo 2006). By bringing attention to discourse as a central political concept for understanding both intersectionality and social change, and arguing that rights are better understood as a discourse than as a single “master frame.” I suggest that there are concrete struggles involved in making intersectionality a useful concept. I then apply this web of meaning approach to illustrate some ways in which intersectionality is differently controversial and radical in Europe than in the US, and conclude by suggesting that the agency involved in choosing one’s struggles will shape the future meaning of intersectionality in each context.

Frameworks and framing work

Framing means connecting beliefs about social actors and beliefs about social relations into more or less coherent packages that define what kinds of actions are necessary, possible and effective for particular actors. The point of frames is that they draw connections, identify relationships, and create perceptions of social order out of the

variety of possible mental representations of reality swirling around social actors. By actively making links among people, concepts, practices and resources, frames allow for a coordination of activity for oneself that also is open to interpretation by others (Goffman 1974). Drawing a relationship or connection, not the individual element, is the key unit for *framing work*. Framing creates the known world: it actively gives concepts meaning by embedding them in networks of other more or less widely shared and practically relevant meanings (Benford and Snow 2000, Snow 2004). Although Benford and Snow both emphasize framing as a process of attaching ideas to given meaning structures, I stress mutual transformations of the structures and ideas promoted by movements. The institutionalized networks of meaning are what I call *frameworks*.

Frameworks in politics can be understood in part by analogy to how systems of meaning work in other areas. For example, scientific disciplines have histories that privilege certain ways of knowing and direct those who would be productive within them to follow certain practices rather than others. Rather than by a disciplinary canon, the framework for political debate is given by *authoritative texts* such as constitutions, laws, judicial decisions, treaties, administrative regulations. Such texts never “speak for themselves” but need to be interpreted, implemented, and enforced. But they offer a discursive structure – an institutionalized framework of connections made among people, concepts, events – that shapes the opportunities of political actors by making some sorts of connections appear inevitable and making others conspicuously uncertain and so especially inviting for debate.

Such frameworks will be variably useful or constraining to speakers, thus it makes sense to speak of them as discursive *opportunity* structures (Ferree 2003). As critical frame analysis emphasizes, the authoritative texts in any particular context have themselves been created by fixing their meaning in a network of strong connections with other concepts, a process that always takes political work to accomplish and, once achieved, shapes future political work (Stone 1988, Bacchi 1999). A discursive opportunity structure is thus open, dynamic and imbued with power, not just something that exists passively as texts “on paper.”

Looking at a discursive opportunity structure as a set of authoritative texts (e.g. laws), in other words, should not obscure how their authority fits in a wider system. A

given law is a part of a wider legal culture, and each such text also provides a resource over which politically mobilized actors struggle by offering interpretations and drawing out implications for actions. By its very nature, law is a system of dispute; if there were no opposing interests, there would be no need for treaties, regulations or decisions. Laws, constitutions, treaties and directives thus form policy frameworks that are historically constructed, path-dependent, opportunity structures for the discursive struggles of the present time.

Framing work is the term describing the ever-present struggle over political meaning by diverse social actors. All social movements challenge the prevailing frameworks for politics: they try to de-institutionalize some texts and bring other laws or principles of governance into force. Some social movements are discursively radical; these are the ones that name new rights (freedom from sexual harassment) and recognize new social actors (naming them citizens). Other so-called reform efforts extend the enforceability of nominally existing rights. The framing work in which movements engage is an essential means to the end of claim legitimacy for their ways of defining right and wrong, justice and injustice.

Frame analysis gains an important dimension of agency when it attends to the historical political processes by which contemporary authoritative texts were created, interpreted and used as resources for mobilization. Studies of policy development, such as Pedriana (2006) offers with regard to equal employment law in the US and Zippel (2006) provides for sexual harassment law in Germany, the US and the EU, provide an important window into these processes. These studies indicate the reflexive impact of securing, institutionalizing and applying new ways of thinking about rights, making them real in their consequences.

Pedriana (2006) shows, for example, that the framework of “equal rights” provided in US law had to be actively connected to a specific practical meaning in its interpretation, application and enforcement. Inclusion of “sex” as a category to be protected from discrimination by law, although a political accomplishment, did not itself mean that courts would understand this as disallowing protective legislation or even the “customary” segregation of jobs by sex. Only after contests in and out of court around the scope of meaning that the literal words of the law should carry, did the equal rights

frame become the “self-evident” understanding of this language in the US. Paradoxically, this stretching of meaning to protect women “like Blacks” from discrimination created a discursive connection to “de-segregation.” This allowed the opposition to frame the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution as threatening to abolish women’s restrooms and women’s colleges (Mathews and DeHart 1990) and blocked the continued expansion of women’s legal rights that had seemed “self-evident” only a decade before (Mansbridge 1986).

The relationality and fluidity of meaning carried in and to frames even in institutionalized texts challenges the more familiar idea of a “master frame” (Snow 2004). Although there is a strong consensus among many scholars that “rights” is an exceptionally powerful idea in the United States, what “rights” means is contested on an ongoing basis in the courts, legislature and executive branch and shifts over time in its application. For example, “equal rights” claims made in the Civil Rights movement were “shrunk” over time to no longer imply any but the most formal legal rights, separated from the concept of “social justice” and tied instead to the idea of “diversity” which was in turn carefully restricted to imply that no “special rights” could be considered (Edelman, Fuller and Mara-Drita 2001). Because frames are not isolated concepts, but *connections* to other concepts that provide the meanings of words-in-use, framing spins a web of meaning in which self-references and cross-references are inherently multiple.

Thus rather than thinking of US political discourse as providing “rights” as a singular master frame that exists outside of or above the web of meaning in which more particular frames are being constructed, it is useful to consider rights as one of the more centrally located and densely linked ideas in a network of political meanings. Rights discourses draw on one or more of the particular connections available to the concept of rights and thus “stretch” it in some particular direction or another (e.g. to include gay marriage or not, Hull 1997). The density and stability of the cross-referencing system of meaning at the core of American thinking about “rights” offers a rich and diverse periphery of potential interpretations to actors in a variety of positions along its “edges” (Skrentny 2006). Seeing rights discourse as a framework in which rights is centrally located highlights both how all the elements in it are shaped by the ways they are linked

to each other, but also emphasizes how the concept of “rights” itself is defined by its links to other ideas.

This network of meaning is a *rights discourse*. Specific rights discourses vary in different contexts, which is why intersectionality enters into these frameworks in different ways. By contrast, “rights” as a singular master frame would be the one most important element and carry a one fixed definition. It would then connect hierarchically to a range of abstract and interchangeable elements like “equality,” “difference” or “protection.” These subordinate concepts would be thought to have stable definitions regardless of the local framework in which they are found, and vary only in how likely they are to be embraced, rather than taking their meaning from the discourse in which they are used. The “women” who have these understood rights would also constitute a category of known membership, rather than “woman” itself being a contested object of political debate in which women of different ethnicities, sexualities, ages and occupations are more or less included. Intersectionality as a concept is often used to stretch the concept of woman to include marginalized groups, however they might be understood in a specific socio-historical context. Attempts to list all such possible exclusions are therefore bound to fail, defeated by the fluidity of power relations in practice.

Intersectional framing and institutionalized rights discourses

Thinking of rights discourses as multiple, historically produced frameworks for feminist struggles over power highlights that challenges that traveling concepts like intersectionality face when they arrive in new contexts of meaning. Using the interactional definition of intersectionality, “race” and “gender” take operational meaning in any given situation in part from the multiple institutions in play (such as family or nation) and in part from the other dimensions of inequality that are also engaged in giving meaning to each other and to the institutional context. This is what Walby (2007) means by avoiding the “segregationary reductionism” that places class, race and gender each into just one key institutional “system” (economy, state or family). She instead looks for the interpenetration of meaning and action in systems that are not “saturated” by one concept alone. Similarly, in the dynamic definition of discourse, there is an equally complex (i.e. non-nested and non-saturated) system of meanings being referenced when political actors speak of “rights” in the US or the “rule of law” (*Rechtsstaat*) in Germany.

Rights discourse is both a discursive environment for systems structuring national, economic, familial and other social relations of power and a system of meaning embedded in an environment of material inequality. These terms reach across a variety of institutional contexts.

Each of these dynamic models specifically rejects the emphasis on generating long lists of diverse “frames” and of “axes of inequality” that has been part of the study of both intersectionality and framing (and critiqued by McCall 2005 and Benford 1997, respectively). Instead, both discourse and intersectionality can be more productively approached through the study of *configurations*, a term McCall (2005) uses to describe attention to patterns, interactions among elements that have paradoxical and conflicting meanings depending on the specific context as a whole. Such configurations – both of discourses and of intersectionality in both discursive and material aspects of the social order – have stability but also change. It is an empirical matter in any given context to see what concepts are important to the configuration of inequalities in discourse and in practice.

This means “rights” (or “women”) is not a master frame that has a “real” meaning that could ever be fully known or “correctly” used, but is a more or less meaningful and discursively powerful way of speaking depending on the panoply of meanings attached to it. Unlike the way that Benford and Snow (2000) talk about “frame amplification” or “frame extension” as if it were an operation performed on a single conceptual claim, I contend that actors who make political claims that “stretch” the meaning of a concept are not “extending” their single ideas to apply to new groups or new elements that were simply missing before, but rather “stretching” their whole web of meaning to encompass people or practices that were connected in different patterns. They thereby change the shape and structure of the web as a whole. What “women” are and want and need is meaningfully different depending on who is included in that concept.

To argue, as contemporary transnational feminist organizations do, that “women’s rights are human rights” is to stretch the concepts of *both* “human” and “rights” to mean something different than they did before, not just to extend their stably existing meanings to a new group, “women.” Because gender equality is framed in the discursive structure of a political system through its relationships to other ideas, actors

and actions, some actors' frames for gender will embrace many of these existing connections (Ferree 2003), while other (radical) efforts will aim to transform the very framework in which the idea of gender equality is embedded.

The differently institutionalized relationships among gender, race and class in the frameworks of the US and Europe offer opportunities for pragmatic gains and prospects for radical transformation in different discursive dimensions. The European social model constructs social equality in terms of economic relations, institutionalizes processes of class representation (parties and unions), and views the redistributive role of the state as legitimate. Class mobilizations were successful in constructing this framework, and women's mobilization for their rights both drew on the ideas of citizenship and justice that were institutionalized through this class struggle. By contrast, US women's struggle for democratic citizenship was intertwined with the claims of racialized minorities, especially enslaved Blacks, to be recognized as fully human individuals. Thus the framing of "rights" formed by class-centered meanings of social citizenship dominated in Europe, but race-centered attributions of personal inferiority to legitimate exclusions from "rights" were historically central to the US (Ferree 2008).

As a consequence, placing race and gender together as forms of social inequality appropriately recognizes that these struggles are fundamental to American understandings of rights as political recognition, but to place gender with "race" (ethnic heritage, language, skin color or religion) rather than with class in Europe is to wrench gender out of its existing framework of meaning. Because feminists are suspicious that defining gender as a form of "diversity" will place it in a lower tier of rights, the alliance of white feminists with persons of color in Europe is problematic for them. Unlike US feminists, who could benefit by the gender-race analogy, many feminists in Europe see little to gain for themselves in terms of rights by alliance with immigrant groups. At the same time, the active framing work of European politicians to define gender equality as (already) characteristic of this region undermines European feminist critiques of their own countries and aligns the supposed interests of (white) women against "immigrants" (Brown and Ferree, 2005, Rottmann and Ferree, 2008). In a quite different, but no less significant way, if gender is defined intersectionally as "like class" in the US, it becomes a matter of competitive achievement in which trying to be part of the elite is a moral duty.

The rights discourses that frame feminism are therefore stretched in quite different directions in different frameworks. Which particular feminist claims are going to radically challenge this configuration thus will be different too. In both regions, full citizenship for all women remains a goal rather than an achievement, but the available discursive tools for the necessary activist framing work that movements in both contexts pursue differ. By beginning from an analysis of social inequality that is already understood to be intersectional in a dynamic sense, the frameworks that connect race, class and gender with rights and citizenship can be examined for *how* they empower and disempower people in different structural locations.

Conclusion

The meaning of gender inequality is not simply different across countries or contexts but is anchored in a history in which the boundaries and entitlements of racialized nationhood, the power of organized class interests to use the state and the intersection of both of these with the definition of women as reproducers of the nation have always been part of politics (Yuval Davis 1990). Recognizing gender as part of a system of intersectional inequality that cuts across institutions, reflects historical struggles, and depends on the meanings that categories carry in context makes clear that intersectional analysis will never be able to be simplified into a just a list of oppressions.

Instead, the institutionalized frameworks for understanding even the most fundamental political terms such as rights, security, power, freedom and democracy should be addressed as the products of historical struggles. Feminist efforts have always been part of that long process of state-making, and feminist framing work is integrally part of contemporary struggles to shift boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within the category called “women” as well as between women and men. This applies not only to rights discourses specific to particular nation states, but also to the choices feminists make about their relationship to EU and global discourses (Hellgren and Hobson 2008). For example, the framing of “national security” today, no less than that of “human rights” is in need of feminist stretching and bending, particularly in the US. The weak connection of social class and economic inequality with American understandings of gender and race as individual traits constitutes the central challenge of communicating a feminist discourse of intersectionality within the US framework.

People make categories to understand the world, and do so from the standpoints that we occupy, but the point of our understanding this world of inequality and injustice is to change it. Descriptions of inequalities feed back in both positive and negative ways into the continued existence of these configurations of inequality. Positive feedback reinforces the status quo in the classic vicious circle expressed as path-dependencies in systems. However, the institutionalization of certain patterns with their inherent contradictions also allows for negative feedback, in which small changes multiply and drive a system further and further from its previous, precarious equilibrium. This potential instability – whether noted as Marx’s “dialectic” of class, Myrdal’s “dilemma” of racial exclusions, or Wollstonecraft and Scott’s “paradox” of gender difference and equality – affects all forms of inequality and gives mobilizations to transform frameworks of inequality their hope for success.

But transformatory politics will not be identifiable by some list of their particular characteristics or target groups, any more than politically significant frames or social inequalities can be captured in a list, however long. A system-based view of intersectionality recognizes the inherent potential of reforms, however modest, to be the “butterfly wings” that begin a longer process of radical change that is difficult for even its advocates to foresee. Politics is the action of taking risks in a future that is unknowable because it is being co-determined by all the other actors with whom one must necessarily struggle (Zerilli 2005). Feminist “identity politics” actively construct the meaning of “feminism” by the choices of with and against whom feminists engage politically.

Feminists today, as in the past, have no special claim on insight or ability to find the one correct analysis. Feminist actors can never predict how their actions will ultimately be understood or how the process of struggle will unfold, since they are not the only actors engaged in contests over meanings, resources and power. Yet, uncertain as the ends of a framing process must be, framing cannot be avoided if action is to be taken at all. A modest claim to limited, fallible but strategically useful framing might open the door to dialogue with others, who have developed their own frames from their own circumstances, allowing a reflexive approach to finding alliances with which feminists can more broadly challenge the frameworks of inequality that enmesh us all.

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