

Representing the Intersection in France and America: Theories of Intersectionality Meet Social Science

Alexandre Jaunait
University of Poitiers
alexjaunait@hotmail.com

Sébastien Chauvin
University of Amsterdam
chauvin@uva.nl

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Abstract

Forged in the United States in the 1980s, the notion of intersectionality sought to provide an umbrella name for the strategic and identity dilemmas faced by categories of persons suffering from combined forms of domination. This article retraces the comparative genealogy of the notion in the United States and in France since the 1970s, and describes how its appropriation in social scientific inquiry allowed reformulating what were normative problems specific to the politico-juridical sphere, into principles of empirical investigation. Increasingly used in France since the mid-2000s, the notion of intersectionality has led to the exploration of new objects and the development of new research agendas, especially within political science.

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Introduction¹

From the second half of the 2000s, the notion of intersectionality underwent a sudden and multifaceted import into France. Although the concept has appeared in a wide range of social science research since then, its first uses were closely tied to the history of minority political movements, most particularly to the bubbling cauldron of the 1970s. Coined by American legal scholar Kimberlé W. Crenshaw at the end of the 1980s in the wake of *Black Feminism*, the term sought to give a name to the strategic and identity dilemmas encountered in the American political space by categories of people subjected to combined forms of domination, chief among which were black women². The definition of a collective minority subject – at times a subject of struggles, at times a subject of law – was debated in two arenas in particular: the Civil Rights Movement on one hand, anti-discrimination jurisprudence on the other. In both cases, intersectional critique challenged the monopolies over the representation of certain subordinate groups (particularly blacks and women) wielded by members of these groups who, dominant in other respects, presented properties then perceived as the most “representative” (black men, white middle-class women).

At their core, theories of intersectionality addressed the hybrid question of “representation”, both as analytical description and as normative expression of specific interests. As a result, they have retained great semantic wealth, sometimes complicating the use of the concept of intersectionality in the social sciences³. Its history as well as the history of the work it has inspired demonstrate however that this infusion of the theoretical with the political has opened up new horizons for research, with regard to both approaches and subjects.

Retracing the strategic genealogy of intersectionality theories will provide clarification of their analytical scope. Rather than proposing a metaphor of intersectionality as a “black box”, and attempting to reduce confusion by offering a more accurate definition, this article considers the practical problems the concept has sought to resolve and the specific spaces in which they emerged. This approach involves a comparative international analysis of the concept’s uses and requires a methodological awareness of the contexts surrounding its deployment. In particular, as we will see, because the field of political and legal struggles has taken distinctive forms in different countries, the intersection of relations of domination was theorized differently. The term ‘intersectionality’ has been mobilized in the pursuit of heterogeneous objectives which have been contingent on the areas within which their promoters sought to intervene. Today, for instance, although it is mostly used in the United States as a critical alternative to the managerial discourse on “diversity”, in Europe it is

¹We thank Laure Bereni and Leslie McCall warmly for their critical comments respectively on the French and English versions of this article.

² Kimberle W. Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”, in *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, pgs. 139-167.

³ For recent syntheses, see Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality”, *Signs*, 30 (3), 2005, pgs. 1771-1800; Sirma Bilge, “Théorisations féministes de l’intersectionnalité”, *Diogenes*, 225, January-March 2009, pgs. 70-88; and Kathy Davis, “Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful”, *Feminist Theory*, 9 (1), 2008, pgs. 67-85.

more often invoked to actually support this discourse. Conversely, analogous problems were posed in parallel in the 1970s and 80s on both sides of the Atlantic, well before the notion of intersectionality itself came into circulation in continental Europe.

The article takes these parallel histories into account, going beyond terminological differences. It first retraces the genesis of intersectionality theories, focusing on the manner in which two specific national contexts, the United States and France, gave rise to analogous yet distinct formulations. Then, it demonstrates how social science in both countries appropriated strategic problems originating in legal and political space and turned them into research principles for the empirical study of overlapping axes of social inequality, thereby making it possible to formulate new research subjects and methods in political science and beyond.

Strategic Genesis of Intersectionality: a Comparative Perspective on France and the United States

Although the ambition of articulating various relations of domination with one another largely pervades today's social science research, it was initially explored in a political context with strong ties to the feminist movement. Black American women introduced this set of problems in the 1970s and 80s, taking issue with the fact that the movement was mostly represented by white middle-class women⁴. In the French context of the 1970s, contemporary reflections on the articulation between relations of domination were also born within the women's movement. Yet, the strategic contexts of French and American feminism differed. A comparison of the two reveals not only the different strategies deployed by competing social movements, but also the chronology and the manner in which theories of intersectionality emerged in the field of social science in France and in the United States.

With social movements as a starting point, strategies of representation quickly found a translation in the legal field, which has been the second main arena for theories of intersectionality in the United States. In her pioneering article, K.W. Crenshaw illustrates that the feminist movement's difficulty in representing women situated on the wrong side of several axes of domination found its match in the legal rationales of policies against discrimination and racism. Here too, comparing France and the United States will reveal the respective legal embeddedness of the concept of intersectionality in the two countries, as antidiscrimination law appeared precociously in the United States but late in France.

The American Context: Critiquing the Political Subject of Feminism

Theories of intersectionality emerged at the end of the 1980s, capitalizing on the critical reflections that *Black Feminism* had formulated since the 1970s. The movement contested the public representation of "women" as a political subject as it had been constructed by white feminists. "The

⁴ These questions had already been raised in the 19th century at the intersection of movements for the abolition of slavery and the suffragist movement Barbara Smith (editor), *Home Girls. A Black Feminist Anthology*, New York, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983. For a more recent approach, also see, Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Boston, Unwin Hyman, 1990. For a panorama in French of the principal contributions to the literature on *Black Feminism*, see Elsa Dorlin (director), *Black Feminism. Anthologie du féminisme africain-américain 1975-2000*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2008.

vision of Sisterhood evoked by women's liberationists, explains bell hooks, was based on the idea of common oppression. Needless to say, it was primarily bourgeois white women, both liberal and radical in perspective who professed belief in the notion of 'common oppression'⁵. In a 1979 text, Adrienne Rich denounced the "white solipsism" of a mainstream movement based on the universal identification of women with one of its most privileged categories – white women of the bourgeoisie⁶. According to the author, the political representation of gender domination through the exclusive lens of a subject who is socially situated in the privileged classes prevented reflection on the different forms of subordination inflicted upon women of color, lesbians, or working-class women, whose oppression cannot be reduced to the primary figure of the patriarchal enemy. For *Black Feminism*, on the contrary, it was necessary to consider how a complex power system structuring particular situations of oppression generated "multiple jeopardy"⁷ at the intersection of different axes of inequality.

The critique formulated by American *Black Feminism* succeeded in unsettling the representation of women as a homogenous group. It came as no surprise that it was a group of black women who brought the issue to the table: the political centrality of race in the United States is the key reason for the precocity with which American feminists debated the cleavages that cut through them. The ideal of a perfect sorority could hardly resist such an obviously divisive racial history. Thus race, which with the Civil Rights Movement had been the primary signifier of social mobilizations in the United States, to the point of inspiring the entire vocabulary of rights throughout the country, widened the critique of American feminism's political subject. The latter was progressively recomposed around the visibility, not only of women of color, but also of lesbians and working-class women.

However, the preeminence of race relations in the field of protest mobilization in the United States proved to be a double-edged sword. The strategic dilemma faced by black feminists was partially heard in the women's movement and set the latter's recomposition into motion. In contrast, despite the apparent symmetry, it failed in its critique of politics of representation within the Black Power Movement. To a certain extent, the political primacy of race protected the black liberation movement from reconsideration of its own subject of representation. This was reinforced by the fact that adhesion to the black movement did not imply family rupture. Adhesion to the feminist movement, on the other hand, could be experienced as treason or at the very least as a serious dilemma, as numerous feminists of color have reported. Furthermore, as Michele Wallace recalls from her experience as a feminist in the black liberation movement, the necessity of overturning white stereotypes on black inferiority required that "black men define their masculinity (and thus their "liberation") in terms of superficial characteristics – demonstrable sexuality; physical prowess; the capacity for warlike behavior". It thus "comes automatically to nationalist struggles to devalue the contribution of women", the author notes in retrospect, "as well as gays or anybody else who doesn't fit the profile of the noble warrior or the elder statesman"⁸. In this context, the demands of black women in the movement (who were marginalized in auxiliary roles, from the secretariat to

⁵ bell hooks, "Sorority: Political Solidarity Among Women", in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Boston: South end Press, 1984, pg. 43.

⁶ Adrienne Rich, "Disloyal to Civilization. Feminism, Racism. Gynephobia", in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence. Selected Prose 1966-1978*, New York, Norton, 1979.

⁷ Deborah King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology", *Signs*, 14 (1), 1988, pgs. 42-72.

⁸ Michele Wallace, "Introduction": *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, New York, Verso, 1999, introduction, pgs. XIX-XX.

housekeeping) found themselves either accused of weakening the collective struggle, or postponed until a later time.

African-American feminists felt the guilt of their double allegiance to the struggle for black liberation and the feminist struggle all the more strongly as the interests of the groups they belonged to were constructed as antagonistic⁹. The effects of this double allegiance did not appear historically symmetrical, however. The argument that one can simultaneously be dominant in one respect and dominated in the other could not be understood in the same way in the two liberation movements.

Even before K.W. Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, the “intersection” problematized by *Black feminism*, far from referring to a purely theoretical analysis of the different axes of domination, chiefly constituted a collective intervention in the political debate over strategies of liberation. While it was asserted that patriarchy is not the universal form that the oppression of women takes, the idea was essentially to shed light on the fact that certain women are not represented in the anti-patriarchal fight. This critique, advanced by women of color and bolstered by the centrality of the race issue, found its place much more easily in feminist movements than in black liberation movements. American theories of intersectionality, which conceptualize and denounce the way identities formed at the crossover of multiple power relations tend to be excluded by single-issue movements claiming to support their struggles, are thus inseparable from the U.S. national context and its dominant argumentative repertoires.

The Heritage of Marxist Thought in French Materialist Feminism

The themes of domination and the articulation of power relations also arose in the strategic context of Second-wave French feminism, which grew in the wake of worker and student mobilizations after May 1968. Yet the construction of the class/race/sex triptych in French feminism is very different from the American model developed during the same period; in the latter, the issue of diversity within the women’s movement was clearly brought up by women of color. In France, in the context of social mobilizations largely dominated by working-class struggles and Marxist thinking, materialist feminists insisted on the economic exploitation to which the domination of men over women gives rise, analyzing it as a power relation comparable to others and contestable in analogous terms¹⁰. While this critical reflection greatly enriched theories of domination, it did not leave a place for the question of the diversity of the class of women as explicitly as did the American feminist movement. The belated development of intersectionality theories in France has roots in this *analogical* conception of domination developed in the 1970s, which still weighs in today in the debates animating the French feminist movement¹¹.

⁹ “At the time, explains M. Wallace, the difficulty was that you weren’t supposed to talk about both racial oppression and women’s oppression at the same time” (*ibid.*, p. XVII). Also see Gloria Hull, Patricia B. Scott, Barbara Smith (editors), *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Are Brave. Black Women’s Studies*, Old Westbury, Feminist Press, 1982.

¹⁰ See notably Christine Delphy, *L’Ennemi principal 1. Economie politique du patriarcat*, Paris, Syllepse, 1998, and *L’Ennemi principal 2. Penser le genre*. Paris, Syllepse, 2001 ; Colette Guillaumin, *Sexe, race et pratique du pouvoir*, Paris, Cote-Femmes, 1992 ; Nicole-Claude Mathieu, *L’anatomie politique. Catégorisations et idéologies du sexe*. Paris, Cote-Femmes, 1991.

¹¹ Cathie Lloyd, “Rendez-vous manqués: Feminisms and Anti-Racisms in France”, *Modern and Contemporary France*, 6 (1), 1998, pgs. 61-73 ; Elsa Dorlin, Marc Bessin, “Les renouvellements générationnels du féminisme : mais pour quel sujet politique ?”, *L’Homme et la société*, 158, 2005, pgs. 11-25; Eléonore Lépinard, “Malaise dans le concept. Différence, identité et théorie féministe” in “Féminisme(s). Penser la pluralité”, *Cahiers du genre*, 39, 2005, pgs. 107-135, and “The

Whereas race has been the critical instrument dominating mobilizations in the United States, in 1970s France class represented the primary referent of liberation movements. French radical feminism has had an ambiguous relationship with Marxist thought, made of both rejections and appropriations¹². The main theorists of materialist feminism criticized the Marxist canon for making gender oppression a simple by-product of the capitalist system. In the context of the mobilizations they sought to join, feminists denounced theories of the “priority of struggles” that led to their subordination in the space of social movements. Criticizing the homogeneity of the political subject promoted by mainstream progressive mobilizations and underscoring the domination effects induced by its essentialization, French materialists presented gender as a power relation comparable to class and race oppression. In doing so, they justified the political dignity of an autonomous women’s struggle.

Ironically, as a consequence of its critique of the main subject figure proponed by Marxism and the left, the radical feminist movement in turn came to euphemize diversity within the class of women, merely considering it on a par with other equally distinct oppressed groups. Analogical reasoning – modeled on the Marxist matrix in order to contest the latter’s failure to consider women’s oppression – thus led to the homogenization of the class of women itself.

Yet, the effervescence of feminism in the 1970s in no way presented a unified front. Materialists prevailed, in particular in the struggle that opposed them to the feminism of “difference”¹³. However, other currents within French radical feminism criticized the idea of a common oppression of women in the face of a homogenous patriarchy. Considering that “lesbians are not women”¹⁴, Monique Wittig challenged the unified character of the “woman” subject in a far-reaching critique of the materialist current, which impacted the architecture of French feminism¹⁵. Wittig’s argument, and that of the radical lesbians whose position she expressed, took the essentials of materialist feminism, then radicalized its conclusions. For her, to understand the sexes as classes meant that sexual, amorous, and conjugal relations between men and women amount to class collaboration. In contrast, lesbians find themselves at the vanguard of the feminist struggle because like runaway slaves or renegades, they had managed to break away from their class. In a distinct critique, the French “class-struggle feminism” current insisted on the doubly subordinate position of working-class women, thereby extending the question of power relations to include those at play in the group

Contentious Subject of Feminism: Defining Women in France from the Second Wave to Parity”, *Signs*, 32 (2), 2007, pgs. 375-403.

¹² Francoise Picq, *Libération des femmes. Les années-mouvement*, Paris, Seuil, 1993; Claire G. Moses, "Made in America: 'French Feminism' in Academia", *Feminist Studies*, 24(2), 1998, pgs. 241-274; E. Lépinard, “The Contentious Subject of Feminism...”, cited; Laure Bereni, “Accounting for French Feminism’s Blindness to Difference: The Inescapable Legacy of Universalism”, report at the symposium on “Feminism/s Without Borders: Perspectives from France and the United States”, New York, New York University, 16 October 2009.

¹³ See on this point the critique of Christine Delphy of the current “Psycho et Po” in her article “The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move.” *Yale French Studies* 97: 166-197.

¹⁴ Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind*. Boston: Beacon Press Books, 1992.

¹⁵ The most well-known of these consequences is the rupture in 1980, between radical lesbians and the radical feminists constituting the editorial committee of the journal *Questions féministes*. This rupture led to the birth of the journal *Nouvelles questions féministes* of which we can read the first editorial on this topic: *Nouvelles questions féministes*, 1, March 1981. For a collection of enlightening texts on the content of debates of this period, see section 6 of Claire Duchén (editor), *French Connections. Voices from the Women’s Movement in France*, Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987, pgs. 78-110.

of women itself¹⁶. Although some research explored these currents, they did not enjoy the same theoretical posterity as materialist feminism. The latter's positioning in relation to the Marxist problematic drove it to universalize the cause and the class of women, neglecting the concrete question of the multiple forms of domination that the black feminists had succeeded in raising in the United States.

Thus, theories of intersecting dominations that developed in the United States and France after the 1970s did not inherit identical problematics. In France, the question of different relations of domination was formulated by materialist feminists in the form of a comparative model that initially was not meant to explain the overlap between different systems of power relations¹⁷. While it made these mutually intelligible by means of analogical representations, it tended to isolate them abstractly from one another. This way, it prevented taking into account specific configurations formed at the crossover of different structuring axes of inequality, as lesbians and feminists from the "class struggle" current had noted at the time. In the United States, the heritage of *Black feminism* made it possible to shift the critique from the external articulation between struggles to the internal question of a political subject of feminism. The U.S. context allowed for the emergence of interrogations over how to construct a subject of discourse, an actor of mobilization and strategies of liberation that would include the experience of all women and enable consideration of the whole body of relations of oppression that concern them¹⁸. In the context of a more precocious and extensive academic institutionalization¹⁹, the American feminist movement²⁰ established the basis for the questioning summarized today by the notion of intersectionality.

The Influence of Anti-Discrimination Law and Jurisprudence

Though they first emerged in the field of political movements, reflections on intersectionality also permeated the other large normative area in which, in contemporary societies, the question is raised of the definition of a "subject": law. As an heir to *Black Feminism*, K.W. Crenshaw analyzed through a painstaking study of American jurisprudence the construction of categories of public action that inform anti-discrimination policies and the fight against racism. She exposed the logic of categorization through which the standard case of a given discrimination is constructed around the

¹⁶ See, for example, "Femmes, genre, féminisme" in the collection *Les Cahiers de critique communiste (Communist Critique Journals)*, March 2007, notably the contribution of Josette Trat, "L'histoire oubliée du courant 'féministe lutte de classes'" ("The Forgotten History of the 'Class Struggle Feminism' Current").

¹⁷ In the introduction of her work *La matrice de la race*, Elsa Dorlin pays homage to the work of Colette Guillaumin who in *L'idéologie raciste* sets racism and sexism on equal footing. E. Dorlin proposes, however, to go beyond the comparative perspective by demonstrating that race and sex relations are "inextricably linked from a historical point of view" (Elsa Dorlin, *La matrice de la race. Généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la nation française*. Paris, La Découverte, 2006, pg. 12).

¹⁸ On the shift of strategic questions in the feminist movement, see Nancy Fraser, "Multiculturalisme, anti-essentialisme et démocratie radicale. Genèse de l'impasse actuelle de la théorie féministe" in "Féminisme(s). Penser la pluralité", *Cahiers du genre*, op. cit., pgs. 27-50.

¹⁹ For a chronological overview of the "academic sites" in which the problematic of intersectionality progressively developed, see Ann Denis, "Intersectional Analysis. A Contribution of Feminism to Sociology", *International Sociology*, 23 (5), September 2008, pgs. 677-694.

²⁰ The question of internal diversity within the feminist movement is not only put forward by *Black Feminism* but also by "chicano" feminism. Gloria Anzaldúa elaborates the concept of "mixing" to think about multiple identities in her influential work: *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, San Francisco; Aunt Lute, 1987. See also Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism. Black, Chicana and White Feminists Movement's in America's Second Wave*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004. For a philosophical approach to the question of the political subject of feminism, see Elisabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Women. Issues of Exclusion in Feminist Philosophy*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1988.

most privileged subjects of the category discriminated against, whose distinguishing features were all legitimate *except* that which is the object of discrimination. In her article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Class and Race”, K.W. Crenshaw describes how, during the trials regarding gender or race discrimination in the 1980s, American judges did not consider black women to be legitimately representative of one of the two groups of victims concerned (women, racial minorities). Precisely because they fell at the intersection of two potential discriminations whose effects the judges were seeking to evaluate in the separate languages of race or gender, they were not considered relevant legal cases. Their multifaceted and multicausal inferiorization could not be exclusively attributed to only one of the large, officially recognized legal categories of discrimination that could be formally invoked in court.

The search for proof of discrimination founded univocally on race or gender thus prevented black women from bringing evidence of the very discrimination that affected them. The height of irony, remarked K.W. Crenshaw, was that American constitutional categories conversely denied the benefits of specific protection for black women, as the judges considered that the Constitution “already” protected women on one hand, blacks on the other²¹. The problem confronted in the legal field thus echoed the political dilemmas encountered in social movements²²: any categorization of discrimination concerning “blacks”, “women”, etc. – runs the risk of excluding from the benefits of the legal instruments created those persons situated at the intersection of several forms of discrimination, whose disadvantaged position cannot be exclusively attributed to one among them.

One of the conditions that made the emergence of intersectionality theories in the 1980s possible in the United States is the precocious constitution of antidiscrimination law and affirmative action policy starting in the 1960s. African-American feminist activists entered the field of law bringing with them the same issues they had raised in the social movements in which they had taken part. Symmetrically, the late apparition of intersectionality theories in France also had to do with the French legal context, which was much less influenced by a tradition of antidiscrimination law. It was only under the injunction of European norms that France equipped itself with a framework to fight discrimination beginning in the 2000s²³. Besides, “the French invention of discrimination”²⁴ was rapidly integrated into a managerial discourse on “diversity” which largely euphemized legal constraints by fusing them with the register of economic interest²⁵. While the Anglo-American discourse on diversity does not act as a substitute but rather accompanies constraining public

²¹ Cf. notably *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* and *Moore v. Hughes Helicopter, Inc.* analyzed by K. Crenshaw in “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex...”, cited. Also see Ann Morning, Daniel Sabbagh, “From Sword to Plowshare: Using Race for Discrimination and Antidiscrimination in the United States”, *International Social Science Journal*, 57 (183), March 2005, pgs. 57-74.

²² Following the current of *Critical Legal Studies* that denounced the biased neutrality of law in the 1970s, the *Critical Race Theory* attacked the effects of naturalization of racist prejudiced by law in the 1980s. See notably: Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, Kendall Thomas (eds), *Critical Race Theory. The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, New York, New York University Press, 2001. See also the synthesis article by Christian Poiret, “Articuler les rapports de sexe, de classe et interethniques. Quelques enseignements du débat nord-américain”, (“Articulating Sex, Class, and Interethnic Relations. A few teachings from the North American Debate”), *Revue Européenne des migrations internationales (European Journal of International Migration)*, 21 (1), 2005, pgs. 195-226.

²³ Primarily: the law of November 16th, 2001 and the creation of the Halde (Haute autorité de lutte contre les discriminations et pour l'égalité, or High Authority Against Discrimination and For Equality) in December 2004.

²⁴ Didier Fassin, “L'invention française de la discrimination”, *Revue française de Science politique*, 52 (4), August 2002, pgs. 403-423.

²⁵ For a comparison of “diversity” and antidiscrimination, as well as for a comparison of the American and French legal systems, see the “Usages de la diversité” issue in the journal *Raisons politiques*, 35, August 2009.

policies against discrimination, the French repertoire of diversity seems to have weakened the implementation of a repressive legal and institutional framework²⁶.

Both social movements and law are sites where political subjects are constructed and become the focus of struggles and negotiations over the representation of collectives and the advancement of their interests. The existence of a tradition of antidiscrimination in American law participates in the genesis of intersectionality theories in the United States. These theories formed at the crossover of *Black Feminism* and jurisprudential action, and raised the question of the subjects of domination and the multiplicity of the latter's forms. This questioning appeared later in France, as much because of the history of the French feminist movement and the strategic constraints which weighed upon it, as for the weaker and more recent development of antidiscrimination law there.

Theories of intersectionality do not point to a merely mechanic effect by which, within certain movements, people endowed with more resources attain positions of power and representation to the detriment of others with fewer resources. Rather, they have brought attention to the distinctly symbolic exclusion by which those subjected to multiple forms of domination are marked as intrinsically not "representative" of their category. Though these questions were asked both in the United States and France, notably in the women's movement, they only partially concerned the same groups in the two countries (whereas working class women, lesbians, or black women) and found themselves articulated in distinct terms linked to different political traditions. The strategic responses formulated in turn fed the imaginary of the social sciences in each of these national spaces, privileging the race issue in the United States and social class in France.

Intersectionality in the Social Sciences: from Strategic Theories to Theoretical Strategies

The political and legal questions raised by reflections on intersectionality in the 1980s led to a renewal of sociological work dedicated to domination. This renewal furthers existing connections, between social analysis and political critique, in particular in the area of gender research, whose constitution as a disciplinary field is tied to the history and academic institutionalization of the feminist movement.

In the 1970s, debates around the "priority of struggles" laid the emphasis on those relations of domination that echoed the major fights thematized by social movements in political space. Groups and individuals prone to be simultaneously covered by distinct movements saw their position analytically represented as a mix of previously hypostatized social relations ("racism", "sexism"). The latter's effects were supposed to add up arithmetically, resulting in a "double oppression". Intersectionality theories claim to break away from this analytical matrix by shifting the view towards power configurations in which the social properties of individuals play out in more complex ways, allowing notably unexpected compensations. This ambition encourages a historical and contextual approach to domination, using concrete situations as a starting point. Thus Candace West and Sarah Fenstermaker propose to think of social relations as "situated accomplishments", meaning matrices

²⁶ See Laure Bereni, "Faire de la diversité une richesse pour l'entreprise". La transformation d'une contrainte juridique en catégorie managériale", *Raisons politiques*, 35, August 2009, pgs. 87-106.

in which the categories of race, class, and gender are constantly renewed and stabilize their meanings in situations of interaction²⁷.

Race and Gender in the Context of Slavery

In the United States, the simultaneous analysis of race and gender relations, as a departure from the arithmetic paradigm, played a major role in renewing the study of domination. Research in *New Slavery Studies* and especially *Southern Women's History*, on slavery and post-slavery society, cast light on configurations of domination that forced a break with classical feminist analysis of gender oppression²⁸. Following the work of Angela Davis and other African-American authors, Elsa Dorlin recently suggested that, in the American bourgeoisie of the late 19th century, femininity could not be understood as the simple “inversion” of masculine characteristics²⁹. The role, qualities, and attributes that characterized the white mistress of the house – including the lady of charity, who for a long time would remain the naturalized archetype of what a woman should be – did not construct themselves as much in opposition to the master of the household as to the black servant (*housenife vs. household*). Rather than simple opposition to the masculine norm, femininity represented the reverse product of racialized domesticity.

African-American feminist theorists such as Michele Barrett showed how the term “patriarchy” was profoundly ill-suited to an understanding of the world of slavery in the United States³⁰. Indeed how to describe the privileges of masculinity and the traditional features of patriarchy in a universe where men have practically none of the traditional prerogatives of masculine domination at their disposal? A man who is not an owner, who does not provide for the household and fails to control his conjugal relationship is a paradoxical dominant that cannot be subsumed under the overly general concept of patriarchy³¹. In the organization of American plantocratic society, men carried out sewing, cleaning, and cooking work that remained symbolically attached to feminine roles: “How then, in the view of all of this, can it be argued that black male dominance exists in the same forms as white male dominance? Systems of slavery, colonialism, imperialism have systematically denied positions in the white male hierarchy to black men and have used specific forms of terror to oppress them”. The role of women in the slavery world is no less paradoxical, revealing a partial reversal of their position as dominated subjects compared with male slaves. Angela Davis wrote in the early 1970s that by feeding their family, women produced the only form of non-appropriated work in a

²⁷ Candace West, Sarah Fenstermaker, “Doing Difference”, *Gender and Society*, 9(1), 1995, pgs. 8-37.

²⁸ *Southern Women's History* participated in the critique of the concept of “sisterhood”, which referred to solidarity and uniformity among the class of women understood based on common oppression by gender. A few years later, the work of black historians would allow critiquing this same concept *inside* the plantation home and the argument according to which female slaves and planters' wives were appropriated in the same way.

²⁹ Elsa Dorlin, “‘Dark Care’. De la servitude à la sollicitude” (From Servitude to Solitude), in Patricia Paperman, Sandra Laugier (director), *Le souci des autres. Ethique et politique du care (The Concern for Others. Ethics and Politics of Care)*, Paris, EHESS, 2005, pgs. 87-97. On this approach to plantocratic society as a configuration, see also Elisabeth Fox-Genovese's pioneer book, *Within the Plantation Household. Black and White Women in the Old South*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

³⁰ Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today*, New York, Verso, 1980.

³¹ See in particular Céline Bessièrre, “Race/classe/genre. Parcours dans l'historiographie américaine des femmes du Sud autour de la guerre de Sécession”, *Clio. Histoire, Femmes et Sociétés*, 17, 2003, pgs. 231-258; Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, New York, Random, 1981; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman. Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, New York, Norton, 1989 (1st edition: 1985); Hazel Carby, “White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood” in John Solomos (ed.), *Theories of Race and Racism*, New York: Routledge, 2000, pgs. 389-403.

society dominated by the planter³². By exhibiting her arms marked by labor and proclaiming that she was no less strong and had been no less mistreated than a man, militant abolitionist Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) could claim a position of equality with the class of men³³.

Lessons from these analyses of American plantocratic society are numerous. We can first underline that the specific configuration of slavery provided the conditions for a relative reversal of gender roles, with women escaping, imperfectly of course, patriarchal domination in its classical conceptualization founded on the experience of white middle-class women. In sociological terms, the lesson is even more important as it underlines the limits of the cumulative paradigm of domination developed in the 1970s: “Slavery and gender domination seem at first glance to mutually reinforce one another, but we can also to a certain extent show that slavery tempers the domination of men over women slaves, or that gender attenuates in part the pressure of slavery on black women”³⁴. The minute description of how a remorseless system of domination modifies ordinary social relations to the point of partially overthrowing them demonstrates that separate gender or race relations acting unilaterally according to a negative arithmetic do not exist, even were those absolutized entities eventually combined at a later analytical stage with other forms of domination.

Class and Sex, from the Factory to School

In France, numerous sociological studies on the articulation of gender and class relations have analyzed mechanisms of domination as complex configurations that resist descriptions in terms of a mere superposition of independent social properties. The classical work of Danièle Kergoat dedicated to female workers, notably, is particularly illustrative of a desire to escape the reduction to which Marxist theories of the 1970s subjected social relations between the sexes, considered as by-products of class oppression. D. Kergoat shows on the contrary that the condition of the workers forms an “integrated system” in which the effects of capitalism are not experienced in the same way by men and women³⁵. Class and sex do not add up as independent properties but mutually construct one another in capitalist wage society: “We see clearly here how the sexual division of labor shapes forms of work and employment and, reciprocally, how flexibilization can reinforce the most stereotyped forms of relations between the sexes”³⁶.

Work on gender and class relations at school also contributed to showing how certain social properties can reconfigure themselves in a particular institutional context. In their study of girls in the French school system, Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet retrace the way in which the “handicap” of the feminine condition at school was gradually subverted after the 1960s³⁷. Girls,

³² See A. Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves”, *The Massachusetts Review*, 13 (1-2), 1972, pgs. 81-100; and Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, *op. cit.*

³³ Cited emphasis from Elsa Dorlin's article “Corps contre nature. Stratégies actuelles de la critique féministe”, *L'homme et la société (Man and Society)*, 150-151, 2003-2004, pgs. 47-68.

³⁴ C. Bessière, “Race/classe/genre...”, cited, pgs. 244-245.

³⁵ Danièle Kergoat, “Ouvriers = ouvrières ?” Propositions pour une articulation théorique de deux variables: sexe et classe sociale”, *Critiques de l'économie politique (Critiques of Political Economy)*, 5, 1978, pgs. 65-97, and *Les ouvrières*, Paris, Le Sycomore, 1982.

³⁶ Danièle Kergoat, “Division sexuelle du travail et rapports sociaux de sexe” (“Sexual Division of Labor and Social Relations of Sex”), in Helena Hirata, Françoise Laborie, Hélène Le Doaré, Danièle Senotier (dir.), *Dictionnaire critique du féminisme (Critical Dictionary of Feminism)*, Paris, PUF, 2000, pgs. 35-44, especially pg. 43.

³⁷ Christian Baudelot, Roger Establet, *Allez les filles ! Une révolution silencieuse (Come On Girls! A Silent Revolution)*, Paris, Seuil, 2006 (1st edition: 1992).

brought up in their sex, found themselves in tune to the requirements of docility, conformity, and meticulousness of a school system that rewards submission to the demands of the institution. In contrast, the gender identity of boys, forged in the values of conflict, competition, even defiance in the face of authority, impeded their success as institutional demands and their construction of gender found themselves misaligned. However, the impact of social class moderated this disadvantageous position of boys in the school system: the higher the socio-economic status, the lower the culture of conflict with school seemed valued. For boys with a privileged socioeconomic status, masculine education's agonistic culture can even become a resource, whether it is invested in the scholastic game itself (exercises, exams, competition for grades, etc), or mobilized when negotiating career path choices. The case of the school system thus shows how the articulation of social relations can result in variable configurations involving differentiated mechanisms of compensation and success.

The Classes of Sexuality

Whilst we find numerous works on the intersection of class, race, and sex relations long before the formulation of intersectionality theories, studies exploring the articulation of different social relations with sexuality emerged primarily later in the early 1990s. Gender and sexuality historians notably sought to understand the formation of sexual identities in the context of economic, social, and urban transformations of capitalism³⁸.

In *Gay New York*³⁹, U.S. historian George Chauncey shows how, in the space of a few decades, between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the transformations of American capitalist society formed the matrix of shifting male identity constructs of class, gender, and sexuality that were tied to one another. In the 19th century, the middle class man was still defined by the fact of single-handedly providing for his family, by his belonging to an exclusively male workspace and by his independence from other men. This identity expressed both a sex, sexuality, and class identity, with masculinity remaining powerfully associated with the image of the independent and responsible worker. This very identity configuration found itself in crisis at the end of the nineteenth century because of radical transformation in the production system. Changes in American capitalism led the widespread introduction of the wage system which destabilized the ideal of men's independence and removed the middle class from work environments most directly linked to physical effort, while the entry of women into the labor force troubled male exclusivism. The gender identity of middle-class men consequently entered into crisis.

The working class did not experience these mutations as precociously as the middle class; indeed, the blue-collar working world remained exclusively male for a longer period of time. Men in that class could continue to rest upon a tradition of resistance to employers and cultivate an agonistic culture of the masculine, hence the time lapses between working- and middle-class shifts concerning the social acceptance and meaning given to sexual relations between men. If working-class men tolerated sexual relations with other men for longer than did middle-class men, it was in large part because those relations – on the condition however that their partners adopt a feminine position and

³⁸ For a synthesis, see Steve Vallocchi, "The Class-Inflected Nature of Gay Identity", *Social Problems*, 46 (2), 1999, pgs. 207-224.

³⁹ Georges Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, New York: Basic Books, 1994.

identity – did not challenge their virile identity. The same was not true however in the middle class, whose men saw their masculinity cast into doubt by the transformations of their work environment and invested into exclusive heterosexuality as the new cornerstone of their gender identity.

Intersectional Performance as an Object of Political Science

The epistemological questions developed around the concept of intersectionality have largely contributed to empirical work conducted in social and political science in recent years. Whether they breathed new life into classic themes by questioning entanglement of power relations, or developed new objects of study, approaches to intersectionality seem to have imposed themselves as a new toolbox for social science, to the point of partially redefining its methods⁴⁰. In the same way that the sociology of collective action inherited political questions developed by the actors of the social movements it studies, the analysis of public policy was notably enriched by the dilemmas of intersectionality as they were posited by antidiscrimination law activists. Studies on European public policy have taken the intersectional critiques expressed since the 1980s by groups mobilized around the representation of multiple dominations, and reformulated them into instruments of evaluation and analysis⁴¹. European antidiscrimination law as a whole found itself reassessed by the critique of public policy instruments and ways of approaching the fight against inequality⁴².

But intersectionality does not only refer to a fixed position or identity: it can also function as a political argument or mode of presentation of oneself. How is “intersectionality” then mobilized? Are the political rhetorics used different depending on the context? What are the effects of these “intersectional performances”, both in the successes and failures of emancipation movements and in the reconfiguration of hierarchies internal to political organizations? If political sociology has increasingly turned to the racial variable within more classical analyses of gender domination⁴³, recent studies have also pointed to the strategies of legitimation and conquest by which social actors convert originally handicapping sets of properties into political capital in public space⁴⁴. Contemporary debates around the definition of a legitimate political subject for immigrant women illustrate the diversity of new conflicts over the representation of intersectional categories. In recent years, a rich field of research studied which types of legitimacy the media, political, and legal spaces in Europe confer to intersectional minorities (for instance, women of Muslim background) according to the ways in which their identities are formulated (“veiled woman”, “ *beurette* ”, “queer of

⁴⁰ See the attempt to combine concepts of political science and gender studies proposed by Gary Goertz and Amy Mazur: *Politics, Gender, and Concepts. Theory and Methodology*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

⁴¹ Hae Yeon Choo, Myra Marx Ferree, “Practicing intersectionality in Sociological Research. A Critical Analysis of Inclusions, Interactions and Institutions in the Study of Inequalities”, *Sociological Theory*, 28 (2), June 2010, pgs. 129-149; Emanuela Lombardo, Petra Meier, Mieke Verloo, *The Discursive Politics of Gender Equality. Stretching, Bending, and Policymaking*, Oxford, Routledge, 2009.

⁴² Mieke Verloo, “Multiple Inequalities. Intersectionality and the European Union”, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13 (3), 2006, pgs. 211-228.

⁴³ For example: Catherine Achin et alii, *Sexes, genres et politique (Sex, Gender, and Politics)*, Paris, Economica, 2007.

⁴⁴ Regarding political sexualization of gender roles, see Catherine Achin, Elsa Dorlin, “Nicolas Sarkozy ou la masculinité mascarade du Président” (Nicolas Sarkozy or the Masculinity Mascarade of the President), *Raisons politiques (Political Reasons)*, 31, 2008, pgs. 19-45; or regarding the exemplary case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Somali feminist who built her career in the Netherlands, and resides today in the United States: Eric Fassin, “National Identities and Transnational Intimacies: Sexual Democracy and the Politics of Immigration in Europe”, *Public Culture*, 22 (3), October 2010, pgs. 507-529.

color”...) ⁴⁵. The sociology of social movements made ample use of these approaches, widening the specter of the race/class/gender triptych to sexuality ⁴⁶. Paying attention to multiple configurations of power relations has led scholars to interrogate the composition of mobilized groups and the construction of causes and claims in the strategies of social movements ⁴⁷. Furthermore, Joan Scott in the United States and Didier Eribon in France have shown how identification with one minority or another, rather than merely resulting from objective belonging grounded in pre-political nature, could be determined in part by subjects themselves, constantly negotiating their potential strategic affiliation to several groups or several experiences of domination depending on the historical configuration in which they find themselves ⁴⁸.

Intersectionality and the Political Sociology of the Dominant

For the past several years, empirical studies have considered an ever larger spectrum of relations of domination, carefully describing each configuration of power as specific. The class/race/gender triptych has been continuously extended to include the analysis of other social relations whose structuring nature is recognized today, both on the formation of identities and on the crystallization of collective antagonisms. This tendency is especially found in the accent placed on age or sexuality, as anthropological research has suggested that these two axes of power and differentiation could prove more determining, in certain configurations, than other properties such as class or sex ⁴⁹. But the path traced by the questioning of intersectionality theories can be further prolonged in one direction: the question of the study of the dominant.

Until now, research on intersectionality has primarily explored the position of the dominated, which it took as the fulcrum for thinking about the multiplicity of power relations, enlarge the notion of domination and envisage possibilities of resistance. The inlay of the theoretical into the political logically drove to exclude from the scope of the analysis the intersectional position of dominant: if each individual strictly speaking is situated at the intersection of social relations (a rich, heterosexual, able-bodied white man is no less “intersectional” than a poor, lesbian, and disabled black woman), only the dominated poles of these relations have essentially become the object of analyses in terms of “intersectionality”. Yet, in the same way that studies dedicated to race and ethnicity have progressively taken into account the necessity of analyzing “whiteness”, i.e. the dominant position ⁵⁰,

⁴⁵ See notably Nacira Guenif-Souilamas, Eric Macé, *Les féministes et le garçon arabe*, La Tour d'Aigues, L'Aube, 2004; Anastasia Vakulenko, “Islamic Headscarves” and the European Convention on Human Rights: An Intersectional Perspective”, *Social Legal Studies*, 16, 2007, pgs. 183-199.

⁴⁶ Around the concept of “sexual revolution” in particular, see Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi, Olivier Fillieule (dir.), *Résistances et protestations dans les sociétés musulmanes (Resistance and Protests in Muslim Societies)*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2003.

⁴⁷ For a synthesis, see Olivier Fillieule, Patricia Roux (director), *Le sexe du militantisme (The Sex of Activism)*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2009.

⁴⁸ Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience” *Critical Inquiry* 17(4), 1991, pgs. 773-797 ; Didier Eribon, *Retour à Reims (Return to Reims)*, Paris, Fayard, 2009.

⁴⁹ References dealing with the articulation of sexuality with other social relations are henceforth innumerable, in particular within the postcolonial literature. For age, refer to the special issue “La tyrannie de l’âge” (The Tyranny of Age) in the journal *Mouvements* (Movements), September 2009, and in particular the roundtable “Age, intersectionnalité, rapports de pouvoir” (Age, Intersectionality, Power Relations), with Christelle Hamel, Catherine Marry, Marc Bessin, Catherine Achin, Samira Ouardi, and Juliette Rennes, pgs. 92-101.

⁵⁰ David Roediger (editor), *The Wages of Whiteness. Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, London, Verso, 2007; Peter Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America”, *The Journal of American History*, 89 (1), June 2002, pgs. 154-173; Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters. The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993; Gabriele Griffin, Rosi Braidotti, “Whiteness and European Situatedness”, in

intersectionality theories may also be applied to the analysis of the situation of the dominant, defined by the intersection of privileged social properties.

Historian Robert Dean thus studied the place of masculine gender identity in the production of the ruling class in the United States in the 20th century and the manner in which it weighed on Cold War foreign policy⁵¹. In a recent work, Julian B. Carter explored the role of sexuality in the reconstruction of white American “normality” in the 20th century⁵². In Europe, comparing France and the Netherlands at the beginning of the 21st century, Eric Fassin showed the distinct ways in which the dominant “majorities” of these two countries have rested upon the stigmatization of ethnic and religious minorities to present themselves as the vanguard of a paradoxical sexual modernity, one which is both progressive and reactive⁵³.

As we have seen, in a break with analogical conceptions of domination, intersectionality theories have taken care not to consider the position of the dominated as a mere accumulation of handicaps and on the contrary insisted on contexts enabling compensations and reversals. One can further this analytical approach to study the dominant in a way other than as actors cumulating favorable positions. For instance, Shari Benstock analyzed how in lesbian literary and artistic circles of high society American expatriates in Paris during the first half of the 20th century the stigmatized sexual orientation of the protagonists interacted in contrasted ways with their social class, giving rise sometimes to active resistance to the rise of fascism in Europe (with Djuna Barnes, Sylvia Beach or Nancy Cunard), sometimes to open support for fascist causes (as with Gertrude Stein, Nathalie Barney, or Romaine Brooks)⁵⁴.

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Combining “issues” rather than mere realities, theories of intersectionality share with the rest of the feminist production an intertwining of distinct epistemological registers (the analytical and the normative) and different spaces of problematization: social movements and their strategic controversies, the legal debate and its practical implications, the academic microcosm and its often excessively self-referential conceptual epopees. This intertwining is not without confusion, nor misunderstandings. The injunction to analytically combine a plurality of relations of domination could seem redundant if it did only concern concrete realities, which are already “intersected” by definition – race being always already gendered, and gender always already racialized.

But all empirical research inherits previous probematizations and axes of analysis that come with them. Far from being epistemological interferences that the social sciences should eliminate in order to work rigorously, political disputes on complex dominations thus offer the opportunity for them

Gabriele Griffin, Rosi Braidotti (editors), *Thinking Differently. A reader in European Women's Studies*, London, Zed, 2002, pgs. 221-236; Ladelle McWhorter, “Where Do White People Come From? A Foucaultian Critique of Whiteness Studies”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 31 (5-6), 2005, pgs. 533-556.

⁵¹ Robert Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood. Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2001.

⁵² Julian B. Carter, *The Heart of Whiteness. Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880-1940*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007.

⁵³ E. Fassin, “National Identities and Transnational Intimacies..”, cited.

⁵⁴ Shari Benstock, “Paris Lesbianism and the Politics of Reaction, 1900-1940”, in Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, George Chauncey (editors), *Hidden from History. Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, New York, Meridian, 1989, pgs. 332-346.

to engage in a critical debate with their own history. Moreover, if previous scientific paradigms owed their sometimes overly arithmetic approaches to the way in which national fields of progressive political struggles were structured at the time of their formulation, inversely the success of contemporary research in converting intersectional intuitions into empirical research principles could well contribute to forging new alliances and fueling new emancipations.

Alexandre Jaunait and Sébastien Chauvin

Alexandre Jaunait is associate professor of political science at the University of Poitiers, adjunct professor at Sciences Po Paris, and co-editor-in-chief of the journal *Raisons politiques (Political Reasons)*. His dissertation focused on French medical deontology (*How Does the Medical Institution Think? An analysis of French codes of Medical Deontology*, Paris, Dalloz, 2005), and his current work explores the theory and sociology of gender, as well as sociology of law. He published (with Laure Bereni, Sébastien Chauvin, and Anne Revillard) *Introduction aux Etudes sur le Genre*, Bruxelles, De Boeck, 2012, expanded edition. (alexjaunait@hotmail.com).

Sébastien Chauvin is assistant professor of sociology at the University of Amsterdam, researcher at the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR), and director of the Amsterdam Research Center for Gender and Sexuality (ARC-GS). His publications include *Introduction aux Etudes sur le Genre*, Bruxelles, De Boeck, 2012, expanded edition (with Laure Bereni, Sébastien Chauvin, and Anne Revillard) and, *Sociologie de l'homosexualité*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013 (with Arnaud Lerch). His work also deals with the sociology of mobilizations, and immigration, labor, and social stratification issues (chauvin@uva.nl).