

Situated Intersectionality and Social Inequality

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In this article¹ I introduce and discuss some of the ways situated intersectional analysis can help to describe – and even explain – different kinds of social, economic, political and personal inequalities. As I have been working on intersectionality for many years – both before and after the issues discussed under this term were to be so labelled, I shall focus primarily on my own version rather than conduct a review of the literature.

The paper starts by discussing the ways sociological studies traditionally describe inequality focusing on issues of class. It then introduces intersectionality as a theoretical framework that can encompass different kinds of inequalities, simultaneously (ontologically), but enmeshed (concretely). The latter part of the article examines the ways different kinds of systemic domains provide multiple grounds for the production and reproduction of these inequalities.

Stratification, class, situated intersectionality

Traditionally, sociological studies of inequality privileged economic inequality and labelled it as “class structure”.² While in their theorizations of class Marxist sociologists focused on relations of production and sometimes reproduction, with the feminist turn especially, Weberian approaches to stratification differentiate between three different axes, those of economy, power (political, but also as backed by the physical) and status. Many theoretical debates were issued regarding the relationship and exchangeability between these axes of power, as well as the extent to which the distribution of people along these stratification axes necessarily congeal into fixed separate classes, between which the conflict is so central in the Marxist approach. Generally, however, the overall effects of people’s

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented at an ISA plenary in Yokohama, Summer 2014.

²The sociological literature on these approaches to stratification is too vast to mention here in detail. For overviews, see, for example, Fiona Devine & Mike Savage, “The cultural turn, sociology and class analysis”, In Fiona Devine, Mike Savage, John Scott, Rosemary Crompton (eds.), *Rethinking Class: Culture, Identities and Life Styles*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 1-23, 2005; Gøsta Esping-Andersen (ed.), (1993), *Changing Classes: Stratification and Mobility in Post-Industrial Societies*, London: Sage, 1993; Anthony Giddens, Anthony, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: an Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim & Max Weber*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971; Rhonda F. Levine, *Social Class and Stratification: Classic Statements and Theoretical debates*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998; Frank Parkin, (ed.), *The Social Analysis of Class Structure*, London: Tavistock, 1974.

differential stratified locations have tended to be seen as resulting in people's differential "life chances". In Britain, at least, this was transformed for the purpose of census into a list of categories based on people's occupations.³

More recently, we have seen what many call "the cultural turn", largely affected by Bourdieu⁴ who highlighted the crucial importance of symbolic power as well as the different kinds of capital – social, cultural, as well as economic and political – which people use to differentiate and distance themselves from other, inferior, class groupings. Indeed, the latest issue of the journal *Sociology*⁵ is focused around the recent study of class in British society⁶, inspired by Bourdieu (although with an additional theoretical contribution), which used the BBC Great British Class Survey Experiment: it has been hailed as the new definitive contribution to both class theory and contemporary class structure in the UK. Other important feminist contributions in this vein have been Diana Reay⁷ and Beverly Skeggs⁸.

However, in a recent sociological symposium on "Living with the cuts", which took place at the British Library on May 30, 2014, when Mike Savage presented his study and I was asked to be the discussant, he was either too polite to disagree with me or actually agreed when I pointed out to him that the clusters he and his colleagues found, which are supposed to describe the new class structure of Britain, are actually intersectional clusters – as they were characterised not only in terms of specific economic positions but most of them also clustered around specific regions of residence, age and/or gender. This is why in my writings⁹ I have argued that intersectionality should be "mainstreamed" by sociological theory that, until

³John H. Goldthorpe, Catriona Llewellyn, Payne Clive, *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980; Rosemary Crompton, *Class and Stratification*, Cambridge: Polity, 1998.

⁴Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984; *Cultural Theory: Critical Investigations*, London: Sage, 1997.

⁵*Sociology*, "Class Debate", 48 (3), 2014, p. 427-462.

⁶Led by Mike Savage, Fiona Devine & Niall Cunningham, "A new model of social class? Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey Experiment", *Sociology*, 47 (2), 2013, p. 219-50; see also Tony Bennett, Mike Savage, Elizabeth Silva, Alan Warde, Modesto Gayo-Cal & David Wright, *Culture, Class, Distinction*, London: Routledge, 2009.

⁷Diana Reay, "Rethinking social class: qualitative perspectives on class and gender", *Sociology*, 32 (2), 1998, p. 259-279.

⁸Beverly Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender*, London: Routledge, 2004.

⁹Nira Yuval-Davis, "Beyond the recognition and re-distribution dichotomy: intersectionality and stratification", In Helma Lutz, Maria Teresa Herera & Linda Supik (eds.), *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.

recently, has tended to ignore it: it should be considered as the most valid theoretical approach to study social stratification.

What is intersectionality? Lesley McCall¹⁰ and others argue that intersectionality is “the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies in conjunction with related fields has made so far”. Indeed, the imprint of intersectional analysis can be easily traced to innovations in equality legislation, human rights and development discourses. Given its multiple and multi-disciplinary history, intersectionality is not a unified body of theory but more a range of theoretical and conceptual tools.¹¹ As such, however, it is similar to all other major theoretical perspectives that have been developed by more than one theorist or space/time context, from Marxism to Neo-Liberalism to feminism, let alone sociology. This does not mean that we cannot debate what should be the right theoretical framing using intersectionality for particular analytical and political purposes. I call my particular version of intersectionality theory “situated intersectionality”, which is quite different from some of the other versions of intersectionality that have been popularized.

While originally developed as a counter to identity politics that emphasize (as well as homogenize and reify) unidimensional versions of identity, some of these intersectional approaches have become a kind of fragmented identity politics, in which the focus is no more, for instance, women or Blacks, but Black women. Fundamental to my approach to situated intersectionality analysis (which I started to develop with Floya Anthias¹² in the early 1980’s, before the term intersectionality was invented by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989), is that intersectional analysis should be applied to all people and not just to marginalised and racialised women, with whom the rise of intersectionality theory is historically linked.¹³ Our

¹⁰Lesley McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality”, *Signs*, 30 (3), p. 1771-1800, p. 1771.

¹¹For a debate about the nature of intersectionality see e.g. Helma Lutz, Vivar Herrera, Teresa Maria & Linda Supik (eds.), *Framing Intersectionality: Debates On A Multi-Faceted Concept In Gender Studies*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, and the special issues on intersectionality of *The European Journal of Women’s Studies* (13 (3), 2006) and of *Signs (Intersectionality: theorizing power, empowering theory*, 38 (4), 2013).

¹²Floya Anthias & Nira Yuval-Davis, “Contextualizing feminism: gender, ethnic and class divisions”, In *Feminist Review*, 15, 1983, p. 62-75; *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the Anti-Racist Struggle*, London: Routledge, 1992.

¹³Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, University of Chicago, 1989; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, New York: Routledge, 1990; see also Avtar Brah & Ann Phoenix, “Ain’t I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality”, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, vol.5 (3), 2004, p. 75-86.

contention is that while the political, professional, and disciplinary interests of those who use intersectionality analysis might vary, only such a generic approach to intersectionality analysis could ultimately avoid the risk of exceptionalism and of reifying and essentialising social boundaries. As critical race and ethnicity studies point out, not only black people are racially constructed, and feminists do remind men they too have a gender.

Intersectionality analysis relates to the distribution of power and other resources in society and therefore it constitutes what in sociology is known as stratification theory. Stratification, or, rather, social stratification, relates to the differential hierarchical locations of individuals and groupings of people on society's grids of power. Intersectionality is the most valid approach to the sociological study of social stratification because it does not reduce the complexity of power constructions into a single social division, including class, as has been customarily the case in stratification theories. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that I do not see the different social divisions which construct power relations as additive¹⁴, cross-cutting¹⁵ or interlocking¹⁶, but rather as mutually constituted (although ontologically irreducible to each other), forming the particular nuanced and contested meanings of particular social locations in particular historical moments, within particular social, economic and political contexts in which some social divisions have more saliency and effect.

However, as Floya Anthias and I have always emphasized, although in concrete situations the different social divisions constitute each other, they are irreducible to each other – each of them has a different ontological discourse of particular dynamics of power relations of exclusion and/or exploitation, using a variety of legitimate and illegitimate technologies of inferiorizations, intimidations and sometimes actual violence to achieve this. For example, class relations are constructed around notions of production and consumption; gender – those of sexuality and reproduction; race/ethnicity as constructed by particular phenotypical or cultural boundaries; ability around the notion of “the normal”, etc. Social inequalities thus amount to much more than the mere lifestyle “distinctions” of the culturalist approach to

¹⁴Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie & Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, London: Virago, 1985.

¹⁵Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, *op. cit.*

¹⁶Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, *op. cit.*

stratification.

Intersectionality as the theoretical approach to study social inequality can be described as a development of feminist standpoint theory which claims, in somewhat different ways, that it is vital to account for the social positioning of the social agent – the researcher or the researched – and challenge “the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere”¹⁷ as a cover and a legitimisation of a hegemonic masculinist “positivistic” positioning. Situated gaze, situated knowledge and situated imagination¹⁸, construct differently the ways we see the world. However, another irreducibility in my approach to intersectionality analysis¹⁹ is that I consider as crucial the analytical differentiation between different facets of social analysis – that of people’s positionings along socio-economic grids of power; that of people’s experiential and identificatory perspectives of where they belong; and that of their normative value systems. These different facets²⁰ are related to each other but are also irreducible to one another. They need to be studied autonomously rather than automatically implied by each other, as identity politics tend to do. And yet, the meanings of these different facets can only be understood in relation to each other. People positioned in the same social locations would often develop different identifications, meanings and normative attitudes and attachments to them.

Situated intersectionality analysis, therefore, in all its facets, is highly sensitive to the geographical, social and temporal locations of the particular individual or collective social actors examined by it, contested, shifting and multiple as they usually are. Therefore, in the intersectionality approach presented here, we also highlight the central importance in the analysis of issues of translocality – i.e. the ways particular categories of social divisions have different meanings – and often different relative power – in the different spaces in which the

¹⁷Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women, The Reinvention Of Women*, London: Free Association Press, 1991, p. 189.

¹⁸Marcel Stoezler & Yuval-Davis, “Standpoint Theory, Situated Knowledge & the Situated Imagination”, *Feminist Theory*, 3 (3), 2002, p. 315-334.

¹⁹Nira Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*, London: Sage, 2011, chap.1.

²⁰I used to refer to these different analytical dimensions as “levels” until Cass Balchin drew my attention to the fact that this term assumes a hierarchy. And indeed I do believe that it is a remnant of the old Marxist infra- and super-structural levels. For this reason I am using the term ‘facets’ here and am grateful to Balchin for alerting me to this, as I do not want to assume here a presupposed hierarchy.

analyzed social relations take place; of transcalarity – i.e. the ways different social divisions have often different meanings and power when we examine them in small scale households or neighbourhoods, in particular cities, states, regions and globally; and of transtemporality – i.e. how these meanings and power change historically and even in different points in people’s life cycle.²¹

Therefore, unlike in traditional social stratification theories, it is of vital importance that any comprehensive contemporary theory of social inequality includes global and regional, as well as national and local, orders of stratification. While some²² would like to see the boundaries between them blurred in this transcalar analysis, I would argue that especially when examining the identificatory and normative facets of intersectional analysis it is important to consider the spatial multi-locational as well as a transcalar examination.

The transcalar spatial context, however, is especially important when we discuss the non-linear nature of social and political changes in global and local contexts, and this is where adopting chaos and especially complexity theory can add an important element into our analysis of intersectional power. Bauman’s discussion of “post-panoptic power”²³ and Urry’s analysis of “islands of social order within an ocean of social disorder”²⁴ are especially important. Similarly, such an examination also needs to have a clear temporal dimension. Feminist theorists²⁵ have been at the forefront of critiques of linear assumptions of time, arguing that narratives always include contextually framed intertwining traces of imagined

²¹Floya Anthias, “Hierarchies of social location, class and intersectionality: towards a translocational frame”, *International Sociology*, 28 (1), 2012, p. 121-138; Nira Yuval-Davis, Kathryn Cassidy & Georgie Wemyss, “Beyond a situated intersectional everyday approach to bordering”, paper presented at the conference of the Association of Border Studies, Joensuu, Finland, June 2014; for a somewhat different but also global intersectionality approaches to the study of inequality see Christine Bose, “Intersectionality and global gender inequality”, *Gender & Society*, 26 (1), 2012, p. 67-72; Sylvia Walby, “complexity theory, systems theory and multiple intersecting social inequalities”, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 37 (4), 2007, p. 449-470; *Globalization and Inequalities: Complexity and Contested Modernities*, London: Sage, 2009.

²²Jan Aart Scholte, “Reinventing global democracy”, *European Journal of International Relations*, 20 (1), 2014, p. 3-28.

²³Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

²⁴John Urry, “The Complexity Turn”, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 22 (5), 2005, p. 1-14.

²⁵Elisabeth A. Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, London: Routledge, 1999 [1995]; Susana Radston, *The Sexual Politics of Time: Confession, Nostalgia, Memory*, London: Routledge, 2007; Green, [??????](#), 2009.

pasts, present and future. Whilst Derrida sees spaces as “dead time”²⁶ or in which time is stopped, Massey argues that space is entirely lively, constituting a “simultaneity of stories so far’ intrinsic to being located²⁷ – although I would argue that situated imagined futures are also intrinsic to these locations.²⁸

Intersectionality and inequality

Having elaborated the theoretical framework of situated intersectionality, we need to ask: in what ways can adopting it promote our understanding of social inequalities?²⁹ Firstly, as stated at the beginning of the paper, is the obvious point that intersectionality is a more comprehensive way to describe, understand and analyse social inequalities – not only does it go beyond the automatic privileging of the economic, as stratification theories based on class do, but it also goes beyond the dichotomy promoted by Nancy Fraser³⁰ and others of the redistribution and recognition dilemma.³¹ Rather, it aims to explore the ways multiple axes of social power constitute particular (shifting and contested) social positionings, identifications and normative values, focusing on some rather than others, depending both on the research (or political) questions driving the analysis as well as the particular social divisions which are important in particular space/time locations and/or for particular people or groupings.

Secondly, it combines in the exploration of inequalities the inter-categorical and intra-categorical methodologies described by Lesley McCall.³² The first methodology concerns comparisons between the distributions of inequalities of particular social divisions (e.g. gender, class or race) in different locations; the second focuses on the meaning of these categories in particular social and historical contexts. (Somewhat similarly, Rosemary

²⁶Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a nutshell: a conversation with Jacques Derrida*, edited by John D. Caputo, New York, Fordham University Press, 1997, p. 68.

²⁷Doreen Massey, *For Space*, London, Sage, 2005, p. 12.

²⁸Nira Yuval-Davis, Kathryn Cassidy & Georgie Wemyss, “Beyond a situated intersectional everyday approach to bordering”, *op. cit.*

²⁹Before doing this, I want to emphasize that although in this paper I discuss inequalities in generic terms, I agree with Goran Therborn (*The killing Fields of Inequality*, Cambridge: Polity, 2013) who differentiates between vital, existential and resources inequalities and considers them all as different facets of social inequalities. Vital inequalities relate to the actual life chances of babies to be born, survive infancy, grow to maturity and old age and with healthy, rather than stunted bodies. Existential ones relate to people’s abilities to live full and fulfilled lives, with dignity, social engagement and a sense of belonging. Resources inequalities relate not only to access to economic resources but also to those of cultural and other kinds of social capital.

³⁰Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus*, New York: Routledge, 1997.

³¹Yuval-Davis, 2011 ??? *op. cit.*

³²Lesley McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality”, *op. cit.*

Crompton and John Scot³³ have differentiated between variable-oriented and case-oriented studies – but they spoke only of studies of class). The translocality, transcalarity and transtemporality of situated intersectionality allows us to avoid the vernacularity of many studies of inequality (especially those affected by the Bourdieusian approach) as well as the simple universality of others which just assume, rather than enquire, the different meanings of these social divisions in different locations. Mignolo has called it epistemological pluriversality.³⁴

Thirdly, however, situated intersectional analysis does not homogenize or reify boundaries of localities or groupings. It takes into consideration the situated gazes of particular people in relation to their own social locations and social well-being. Focusing on these situated gazes enables us to incorporate minority and non-conformist perspectives of social actors rather than assume that all people in particular social category even in the same geographical and social locations would necessarily share the same meaning of social relations of power in their own society or community in general and their own positionings in particular. Rather, we need to add to the pluriversal epistemology a dialogical inclusive one in which as many as possible of the participants in a particular social encounter would take part, as the only way to approximate the truth (although “the truth” would ever remain elusive³⁵). And there can be no social justice without attempting to approximate the truth as much as possible.

When we discuss issues of politics and domination, however, there is another kind of dialogical epistemology that developed as a feminist political tool especially since the 1990s but has existed for much longer. This is what many of us call a transversal dialogue.³⁶ The aim of these transversal dialogues is to create a common epistemology of particular practices,

³³Rosemary Crompton & John Scott, *Rethinking Class*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

³⁴Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledge and Border Thinking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

³⁵Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, *op. cit.*

³⁶Cynthia Cockburn & Lynn Hunter, “Transversal Politics and Translating Practices”, *Soundings* (special issue on Transversal Politics), 12 (Summer), 1999; Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, London: Sage, 1997; “Human/Women’s rights and feminist transversal politics”, In Myra Marx Ferree & Aili Mari Tripp (eds.), *Transnational Feminisms: Women’s Global Activism and Human Rights*, New York: New York University Press, 2007.

often conflictual, across borders and boundaries. The difference between transversal dialogue and Patricia Hill Collins' inclusive dialogue is that this dialogue has clear boundaries based on shared normative (in the feminist case, emancipatory) values, although with different identifications and social locations. Using the tools of what Italian feminists have called "rooting" and "shifting", i.e., being self reflective regarding one's own positioning and yet attempting to understand the situated gazes of the other participants, the resulting common transversal epistemology is used as a basis for a political solidarity.

I would like here to briefly mention four kinds of domains that are important to the understanding of social inequalities. The genealogies and dynamics of production and reproduction of each kind are very different and thus they cannot be reduced to each other. Yet they are all interrelated and embedded in one another and contest each other, producing more or less blurred or permeable boundaries in different temporal and spatial locations. Before doing this, however, I would also like to enrich our understanding of what is social inequality.

The first domain that produces social inequalities relates to the borders of states, from local to national to supra and international. These borders delineate the boundaries of legitimate governance. As we can see, for example, in what is happening at the moment in Libya and Syria, inability of States to govern, to gain legitimacy for their governance and to control State and non-State competing political actors, can crucially affect the quality of lives and the resources available to the people living within those boundaries.

The second domain relates to the boundaries of the multi-scalar zones in which differential levels of different kinds of economic, social, cultural and political resources are produced, reproduced and are distributed (or not) to the people living within these boundaries (which can vary from a particular neighbourhood in a city to a whole construction of "the West and the Rest"). Data relating to vital inequalities are especially revealing in this regard. Apparently, the average life expectancy differs significantly not only between, for example, Northern and Southern England, but also within the neighbourhoods in which different tube stations in London are located.

The third domain relates to the boundaries constructed by different kinds of political projects of belonging (such as nationalism, racism, religion, cosmopolitanism and more)³⁷. People can be citizens of the same states, live in the same neighbourhood and even work in similar occupations and yet their social positionings and access to different kinds of social capital – existential but also vital and economic – can vary hugely.

Last – but not least – domain relates to the production and reproduction of social inequalities within – and between – the boundaries of intergenerational, familial and informal communities and networks aimed at social, biological and symbolic reproduction. Stage in the life cycle, gender, generation and membership in particular kinds of kinship and/or vocational, friendship, religious and local communities greatly affect access to different kinds of social resources and can act as a buffer or as an enhancement of the structures and processes which produce and reproduce social inequalities.

Conclusion

The argument of this paper might seem paradoxical. I argue, on the one hand, that situated intersectionality should be adopted as the best theoretical approach to social stratification. On the other hand, I also argue that situated intersectionality – let alone other theories of social stratification – is not really useful in explaining social inequalities, as it tends to reflect a snapshot of differential positionings along different axes of power, rather than how they are produced and reproduced. To explain the latter, I introduced four different domains of states governance, economic zones, different projects of the politics of belonging and those of intergenerational familial and interpersonal networks. The systemic edges of these domains encounter and construct each other.

This interplay among the different domains is complex, contested and constantly shifting and different kinds of social inequalities are being constructed, maintained and challenged. They are where the full relationships between different kinds of inequalities and different kinds of power and domination can be fully explored, using the tools of situated intersectionality as its methodological guide. But this involves a lot of work, as studying either macro global structures or micro social encounters is not enough. We need both, and we need them both to interrelate with each other and be understood by one another.

³⁷Nira Yuval-Davis, 2011: *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*, London: Sage, *op. cit.*

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Résumé

Abstract