

Ambivalent Intersectionality

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Debates about whether states can act intersectionally have resulted in mostly negative responses (Kantola and Nousiainen 2009; Koldinská 2009; Lombardo and Verloo 2009; Skjeie and Langvasbråten 2009; Squires 2008). Notably, most of the theorizing on this concern is situated within a European context in which scholars are grappling simultaneously with the questions of whether states can act intersectionally, and what intersectionality itself means within local contexts outside of its U.S. genesis. That is, scholars are asking both whether states can be committed to acting intersectionally and whether and how the theory travels in the first place. Similar concerns are relevant to the Latin American case, where, as is true for Europe, there is some promotion of intersectional action at the level of academic theorizing, state, and civil society, alongside some ambivalence about whether and how the concept is meaningful at the local level. States like Uruguay are open to fostering a more inclusive environment because of the commitment of its own state actors, what might be termed diffuse support at the international level, and the work of local actors who see the need — and some of whom have pushed for — greater insertion. But this openness is accompanied by a lack of clarity around, and ambivalence about, intersectionality even within the context of the state, much less among the organized community. I focus here on said ambivalence and the incomplete elaboration of intersectionality within the National Women's Institute (Inmujeres), which is exemplified by distinct approaches to intersectionality within the Institution, distinct approaches to the question of difference, and a lack of civil society insertion.

The degree of ambivalence about intersectionality in Uruguay is unsurprising given the traditional constraints that beset all states operating on a liberal individual model, combined with imbalanced international support, historic state antagonism, and continued antipathy to recognition of categories like race and sexuality as relevant markers of difference — all of which encourage support for looser kinds of inclusion. Indeed, that the state should embrace a vision of intersectionality is far from a foregone conclusion. Intersectionality's U.S. genesis is one in which black and other women of color relied on

their experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion in the context of a large, heterogeneous country with a hegemonic world status, and explicit attention to race and race difference, to undergird an elegant and cohesive theorization of intersecting oppression. Recognition of intersectionality's foundation is critical, and should not be uprooted from the concept, even as it travels.

Oppositely, Uruguay, like much of Latin America and — indeed, if its claim to whiteness is to be believed — Europe, is small, relatively egalitarian, and homogeneous, which leave some skeptical as to the need for, and applicability of, intersectionality in that context. Nonetheless, contemporary state actors do have a commitment to, and interest in, equality and furthering that where possible (Castiglione 2010; Ravecca 2010). Openness at the state level and dialogue at the international level, combined with local pressure, have helped create the conditions for a great deal of inclusionary action by the Uruguayan government, some of which, such as a recently completed bank of black female head-of-household apartments, is intersectional in nature. Various activist groups, including LGBT and gender advocates, now attend to the issue of differentiated subject positions, though women of color have been the most consistent about theorizing the qualitative difference they experience as a result of the intersection of race and gender discrimination.

These same women-of-color activists have been the only ones to approach the state with an intersectional vision. Members of the Afro Women's Support Group (GAMA) were successful in lobbying for the creation of a Department for Afro-descendant women within Inmujeres. This request, granted in 2005, eventually led to the appointment of the Department's first director, Beatriz Ramírez (2005–2010), as director of the Inmujeres for the 2010–2015 presidential cycle. During Ramírez's time in office, Inmujeres has adopted a clear interest in intersectionality, first under the Department, and now within several of Inmujeres' departments and programs. But said interest has not translated to clarity on how intersectionality is integrated and understood throughout the institution, much less its integration throughout the broader state apparatus. Work on intersectionality under the Department for Afro-descendant women, and now under Ramírez, focuses considerable attention to intersections of race and gender, with very implicit attention to class.

Yet, unsurprisingly, some gender activists, including other women-of-color groups, emphasize the equal or greater importance of a number of other gender intersections, including sexuality, class and migrant status,

ability, class, and race and class, where class is explicit. Moreover, the ruling leftist coalition has been consistent in its emphasis on poverty as *the* defining concern; as such, the state tasks Inmujeres to emphasize and prioritize the intersection of gender and poverty. Nevertheless, the Secretariat retains clear attention to race and gender and possibilities for affirmative action, while another of the ten departments of Inmujeres, the Department of Multiple and Aggravated Discrimination, emphasizes four issues: women with HIV and AIDS, female prisoners, lesbian visibility and lesbophobia, and the intersection of gender and poverty. Though its name implies a variety of approaches to questions of difference and equality, the Department's introductory description of its responsibilities indicates interest in an intersectional approach. It describes itself as "seek[ing], from an intersectional perspective, to elucidate the different realities and situations that women in our country live," and "proposes to, in turn, support the design of public policy specifically for the collectives of women that are made invisible and whose marginalization thus creates a system of discrimination" (Departamento de Discriminaciones múltiples y/o agravadas). This language of systematic discrimination is followed by a thoughtful elaboration of the department's five lines of action, in which conditions like seropositivity "constitute a cause of discrimination that once intersected with gender produces a double discrimination," and a departmental technical assistant serves as a member of the National Rehabilitation Center's team, with the purpose of bringing a gender lens to the team's work with incarcerated women. That is, programs that, though well-meaning and important, are not strictly intersectional.

Other programs and organizations of the Ministry of Social Development (MIDES, under which Inmujeres falls), like the National Disability Program (PRONADIS), have recently expanded their attention to difference, attending to the relationship between gender and disability. The National Institute of Older Adults, also under MIDES, worked hard to promote successful legislation for low-income seniors and more flexible access to retirement benefits for stay-at-home mothers, a particularly important concession given Uruguay's upside age pyramid. Thus, a significant amount of action has occurred, though it is unclear whether it is understood as intersectional. This lack of clarity exists in large part because these actions have been uncoordinated and nonoverlapping. It is immediately obvious that intersectionality is most often considered dyadically in Uruguay, and further investigation indicates a mix of intersectional and multiplicative approaches, which do

not always translate to visible, meaningful, or consistent action. For instance, Inmujeres conducted a series of diagnostic reports about the situation of women in several departments (provinces) throughout the country. Five reports have been completed thus far, all under the directorship of Ramírez, and four of the five were conducted under the coordination of the same investigator. Laudably, the intersections addressed vary by report, in consideration of the issues most important to the local context. However, one departmental report ignores the issue of intersectionality all together, devoting just one page to a general discussion of domestic violence. The other reports include sections on “aggravated discrimination” and do integrate attention to gender-based domestic violence in most cases. They also devote considerable attention to intersections of gender and poverty, though not in a consistently differentiated manner. But in contrast to the explicit policy emphases of two Inmujeres departments, none of the reports address sexuality, and attention to age and health is inconsistent. Only one of the reports addresses intersections of gender and racial-ethnic discrimination, a surprising oversight given that two of the five departments covered have the largest population of Afro-Uruguayans in the country — a point that the Artigas report notes explicitly. In that case, the intersection of racial-ethnic discrimination and gender is treated without attention to class or poverty. In addition, a language of “double” or “added” discrimination is apparent across some of the reports, while a more integrated language of intersection, confounding variables in combination, and the like, appear in the remainder, indicating a mixture of multiplicative and intersectional approaches.

Of course, intersectionality in Uruguay, as in many locations, is still in development, with the result that action and definition may take a phrased approach. The first, and very significant, hurdle was to garner recognition of inequality on a broad spectrum (Townsend-Bell 2013). Indeed, obstacles to recognition continue in some locations, joined by approaches to intersectionality that mix dyadic and multiplicative action, which will ideally be followed by a more cohesive and overlapping application of intersectionality. Given that “doing intersectionality” is hard, it is obvious that states, or any interested actors, will struggle with definition and implementation, and missteps should not necessarily be taken as a lack of, or as partial, commitment. Development over time is certainly reasonable for a concept still in flux.

But it’s the flux that calls the attention. A second possible interpretation is that intersectionality is incompletely elaborated, and that this

underdevelopment results from a lack of clarity on definitions, which, though difficult, is an issue that cries out for serious dialogue and consideration if the mainstreaming-like language noted among the various departments and programs of MIDES is to be taken seriously. If real policy insertion, like that noted by both the Department of Aggravated and Multiple Discriminations and the Department of Afro-descendant Women, were really pursued, the need for such a conversation would be obvious and unavoidable. But rather than broad and public debate over the definition and application of intersectionality, what we see is a silence that seems characterized by three issues. First, each department and program takes a different approach to intersectionality, foregrounding a different, predominant understanding of the central intersection. Gender is significant in all cases but is joined by race in some instances, class or sexuality in others, and more specific forms of intersection (such as health status, or ability) in yet more cases. And the majority of departments attend to no intersections at all. As noted earlier, a dyadic approach to intersectionality is not necessarily unreasonable, but at no point is it clear whether these intersections are understood to speak to one another theoretically, leaving aside the question of practical application. Second, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the same lack of clarity about the approach to difference routinely noted in descriptions of other states' attempts to institutionalize intersectionality are apparent in Uruguay. It does seem that institutional actors have moved beyond additive approaches, but what they term intersectionality actually mixes multiple and intersectional approaches. Finally, a global view indicates that such mixture may be simply a professional hazard, but it may also reflect the limited set of voices included in the debate. There is a notable lack of insertion by civil society. In fairness, there has not typically been a large role for civil society within *Inmujeres* (or *INAMU*, as it was previously known), and a considerable portion of civil society has professed little, or late, interest in intersectionality. But it remains the case that there has been neither much effort by intersectionally oriented groups to insert themselves into the dialogue, nor an effort by the state to curry those voices, an odd occurrence in a case where the relationship between state and civil society has historically been very tight.

The result is an incomplete elaboration of intersectionality. Supposedly strategic programs are relegated to a theme, one – contrary to the mainstreaming-like language of each program – that is inconsistently applied, even within *Inmujeres*. What is notable, indeed remarkable, is

the significant gains that advocates of intersectionality have made, particularly in Inmujeres and, more broadly, the state. However, what is equally notable is the inconsistent and somewhat limited footprint of intersectionality thus far. No broad dialogue on what intersectionality means, what its contours include, or how it might best be promoted by the state has been forthcoming in Uruguay. Discussion over what groups constitute the most marginalized members of society and how state and nonstate actors ought to engage with and prioritize the needs of society is minimal. It is not clear that such dialogue would, or should, result in full consensus. Moreover, it would not necessarily or automatically produce more positive outcomes. Nonetheless, it is a noteworthy circumstance given the relatively high degree of state attention to intersectionality.

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