

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

Intersectionality

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This journal, *Politics & Gender*, rests on the presumption that gender, like race, class, and ethnicity, exists as a discrete category of political identity and political analysis. We can learn things about politics, in other words, by focusing on the ways in which the differences between men and women become relevant to politics. Research on gender, like research on race, class, and ethnicity, has earned independent standing within political science. For many scholars, gender constitutes the primary focus of their research. Looking through a gendered lens has given birth to a large body of scholarship. Gender has its own research sections in our professional associations and its own journals. Political scientists can and regularly do consider the effect of gender independently from other variables in their research.

At the same time, viewing gender as a stand-alone factor necessarily distorts reality. Gender never really operates independently from other aspects of political life, and so it is misleading to think of gender as an autonomous category of analysis. Instead, gender differences must always be understood within a particular context and in connection with other aspects of identity, both individual and collective. While we tend to think in ways that require us to titrate gender out from other aspects of identity, in so doing we risk misrepresenting the ways in which various parts of our identities are connected to one another. The integrated, mutually constitutive nature of identities is the central premise of *intersectionality*.

In this issue of “Critical Perspectives,” five scholars present their views on intersectionality. Each of the authors investigates what it means to use the concept of intersectionality in academic research and in political life. These five pieces began as presentations delivered at the APSA annual meeting in 2006, on a theme panel organized by our editorial board colleague Laurel Weldon of Purdue University (see her “The Structure of Intersectionality,” published in *Politics & Gender* 2 [June 2006]).

Ange-Marie Hancock makes a persuasive argument for reconceiving intersectionality as a research paradigm. Intersectionality does not refer solely to the experiences of African-American women or Latinas, or to any particular marginalized groups. By envisioning intersectionality as a general approach, Hancock shows how it constitutes a conceptual bridge that can link a wide range of substantive topics. Intersectionality makes more sense as a conceptual framework from which to understand and articulate the multiple oppressions that all marginalized groups face.

If we rethink intersectionality as a framework or a paradigm, what does that mean for how we might do intersectional research? Not surprisingly, given the focus on multiplicity, there is no one methodology associated with the concept. Evelyn Simien's essay provides a crisp and precise description of the wide range of methods that have been developed to capture and portray intersectionality, methods that transcend the conventional treatment of identity as dichotomous variables. In her own work, Simien delves into history to show that thinking in terms of intersectionality has deep roots; African-American women from the past understood the degree to which multiple identities shaped their lives in terms that we would identify as intersectional.

Lisa García Bedolla gives us a concrete example of how one might use intersectionality as a tool for empirical analysis. Her essay demonstrates how the concept of intersectionality can help us better understand inequality. Specifically, intersectionality can help us see "how marginalization and privilege express themselves across different dimensions in American society" and sometimes "coexist within [the same] individuals." By understanding the positions of identity-based groups relative to one another, she argues, "our work will be more true to people's actual lived experience." And thus our policy prescriptions will prove more effective in achieving equality.

Julia Jordan-Zachery reminds us that intersectionality is not merely academic but deeply and inextricably personal in the way that it depicts the multiple oppressions under which people live every day. Her analysis underlines the logical impossibility of separating the different aspects of our identities from one another. She shows us this by posing a simple but unanswerable question: "When you look at me, what do you see, a woman who is black or a black woman?" By reflecting upon the inseparability of identities in her own life, she eviscerates decades of research that have started from the opposite assumption.

When people think of the concept of intersectionality, they generally think “race, gender and class.” In many studies, however, the “class” part of this triptych is invisible, silent, acknowledged as important but rarely systematically addressed. Julie White’s analysis of Appalachian hollows and urban ghettos as intersections of racialized and classed space is distinctive among these essays in the prominence it devotes to class.

The authors concur on a couple of general points. First, the relationship among categories of identity is not fixed; it is not ever the same, and thus cannot be reduced to a formula. What constitutes categories themselves is not predetermined but also the result of historical processes, or what Hancock terms “dynamic productions of individual and institutional factors.” Second, intersectionality takes “within-group diversity” into account. What it means to be Latina, for example, refers to a range of experiences. As García Bedolla suggests, what it means to be African-American depends on the relevant comparison group: Is a particular individual marginal or privileged relative to another? Acknowledging differences within ostensibly fixed identity groups has “allowed us to stop essentializing differences,” which Julia Jordan-Zachery sees as the primary value of intersectionality. Finally, intersectionality is a strategy for achieving liberation from oppression. If an intersectional perspective on political life helps us better understand the nature of oppression and inequality, then it will help us more effectively to dismantle the practices and institutions that sustain them. These essays provide a good guide for how to begin that process.

Intersections of Inequality: Understanding Marginalization and Privilege in the Post-Civil Rights Era

Lisa García Bedolla, University of California, Irvine

Intersectionality as a Normative and Empirical Paradigm

Ange-Marie Hancock, Yale University

Am I a Black Woman or a Woman Who Is Black? A Few Thoughts on the Meaning of Intersectionality

Julia S. Jordan-Zachery, Howard University

Doing Intersectionality Research: From Conceptual Issues to Practical Examples

Evelyn M. Simien, University of Connecticut

The Hollow and the Ghetto: Space, Race, and the Politics of Poverty

Julie Anne White, Ohio University

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The post-civil rights era has left an important dilemma in U.S. politics. Despite the fact that the United States has become more integrated across racial and gendered lines since the 1960s, inequality, particularly economic inequality, has grown. Although much of that inequality continues to fall along racial, gender, and class lines, the opportunities afforded by the “rights revolution” have also created an important heterogeneity of privilege within marginal groups. As social scientists, how best can we identify the sources and results of this inequality? More specifically, how can we better understand the crosscutting political effects of both marginalization and privilege within and among groups in U.S. society? I contend that intersections theory may be a useful place to begin, and that the idea of intersectionality could provide a fruitful framework with which to understand issues of inequality in the post-civil rights era. Such a framework would help address some of the theoretical problems that sometimes arise within empirical work on marginal groups in political science and, ideally, allow scholars to understand better how experiences of marginalization and privilege affect the shape and character of American political life.

Introduction

In 2002, the Council of the American Political Science Association, in an effort to “enhance the public relevance of political science,” convened a Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy. The charge to its members was to “review and assess the best current scholarship about the

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