

French Feminists and Intersectionality: Critical Perspectives

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Abstract: During the 1990s, the mainstreaming of intersectional theory marked a paradigmatic shift in Anglo-American feminisms. This paper examines the engagement and critique of intersectionality by French feminists. It highlights the voices of French feminists who align with diverse factions of feminism and whose scholarly contributions address the complexities of difference among women in theoretical, research, and analytical contexts. Through their writings and insights gathered from a series of interviews, it becomes evident that the concepts and identity categories prevalent in French feminisms stem from specific theoretical frameworks of difference, with a distinct historical trajectory compared to the Anglo-American feminisms where intersectionality is predominantly emphasized. The analysis presented herein is informed by a literature review coupled with interviews conducted with a selection of scholars across various feminist trends, all residing in France and recognized for their significant contributions to the discourse on differences within French feminisms. These interviews, which were conducted in-person and recorded using a semi-structured questionnaire, were subsequently analyzed through thematic coding to extract common and salient themes. The findings of this analysis pinpoint three primary critiques of intersectionality articulated by the interviewees: (1) its foundation in predominantly Anglo-American contexts, (2) the prioritization of race-related issues modeled on the U.S. experience, and (3) a hegemonic framework that neglects concepts and analyses emerging from other contexts. Furthermore, the interview data illuminate the power dynamics that influence the construction of intersectionality. The anglicization of intersectionality has allowed this theoretical approach to take root in academia and normalize from an understanding that, although specific, is never clearly identified. The Anglophone identity, like many other dominant identities, goes unnoticed and remains invisible. The insights gathered through this research indicate that French feminists challenge the universalizing assertions of intersectionality, proposing alternative frameworks that resonate more closely with their intellectual heritage for understanding differences and systems of oppression. They ask for tools and theoretical approaches that are better aligned with the unique histories and cultural contexts from which they emerge.

Keywords: Feminism, Francophonie, Intersectionality, Language

1. Introduction

During the 1990s, the spread of intersectional theory opened the door to a shift in Anglo-American feminisms; quickly after the circulation of founding texts, intersectionality emerged as a crucial concept and acquired the status of a paradigm in these feminisms (Hancock, 2007). What is the status of intersectionality in French feminisms? This text examines the openings and critiques formulated on the subject of intersectionality by a sample of French feminists, which they apprehend with a mixture of enthusiasm and resistance. Through writings and words, it is revealed that the identity concepts and categories that predominate in French feminisms are grounded in a specific history, local experiences and French intellectual traditions.

The analysis presented in this text is based on a literature review and on interviews conducted with a sample of feminists who identify with various trends of feminism. They all live in France and they have written important texts on differences in French feminisms. The interviews were conducted in person and recorded. Prior to each interview, participants were presented with a consent form that allowed them either to request confidentiality or to consent to the disclosure of their identity in publications following data collection. All individuals quoted in this text consented to the disclosure of their identities. The data collection design and the consent form for interviewees were approved by the Research and Ethics Committees of the institution with which the author is affiliated. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. They were coded using thematic analysis for analytical purposes and for the identification of common and meaningful themes.

The findings illustrate a critical relationship with intersectionality; interviewees do not reject the idea of multiple intersecting oppressions, but for many it is rather the compelled understanding of oppressions within the intersectional framework, its prescriptive grammar and invisible hierarchies that they question.

2. Literature Review

Intersectional thinking took root in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, following the abolition of slavery in the United States. More than a century ago, thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois spoke of the complexity of systems of oppression based on the lives of African Americans (Hancock 2005). At least four distinct dimensions can be identified in an intersectional analysis. These may be identities, such as French-speaking women, categories of difference such as race and gender, processes of differentiation such as racialization or finally systems of

domination such as racism, colonialism, and sexism; these dimensions can be considered simultaneously or separately (Dhamoon 2011: 233).

The power relations produced by specific racial identities are placed at the center of intersectional analysis, in relation to the origins of this approach in Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal text (1989). Intersectionality must be understood from the trajectory of Black Feminism (Hill Collins, 2015); since the theory of intersectionality first emerged around issues related to race and in the context of the United States, the experience of Black women in the United States and Black Feminism must be the central referents (Carastathis, 2016). But this is also precisely one of the reasons why several feminists, in France and from the South, express reservations about this prescriptive grammar: because it is inscribed in the very specific history and dynamics of race relations in the United States, far from universal resonance.

By wanting to establish itself as the dominant paradigm of current feminism (Hancock, 2007), is intersectionality a reincarnation of universalist feminist theories? Many feminists, postcolonial, decolonial, from the South or from different Francophonie spaces, express reservations about intersectionality seen as relating to American experiences, more specifically those of African American women, as experiences with universal resonance. Jasbir Puar (2007) sees intersectional theory as another way of imposing Western theoretical models on the rest of the world. When examining intersectionality, Puar is critical of attempts to situate intersectionality within the genealogy of Black feminist thought. For her, giving Black Feminism a generative status in intersectionality theory could obscure the deployment of the variety of interpretations of intersectionality. Puar also questions the capacity of the categories privileged by the intersectional analysis to cross national and regional borders. This journey may constitute another instance of epistemic re-colonization. To the extent that privileged categories of intersectional analysis are the product of colonial agendas and regimes of epistemic violence, the global journey of intersectionality may signal the imposition of a Western Euro-American epistemological formation.

Elsa Galerand and Danièle Kergoat (2014) bring intersectionality and materialist feminism into dialogue. The latter oppose to the concept of intersectionality that of the consubstantiality of social relations, developed in 1978 by Kergoat, a French scholar, more than 10 years before the appearance of the term intersectionality (Kergoat, 1978) and which allows to take the materialist character of the processes of domination and oppression into account, which is rarely, they write, highlighted in intersectionality. For French theorist Nelly Quenemer, the notion of intersectionality, as defined and deployed by Crenshaw, is only one attempt among many others to understand the overlapping of gender relations, of class and race and the constitution of subjectivities around several axes of differentiation (2020).

Martha Gimenez (2001) articulates a Marxist critique of intersectionality which concerns the absence of an explanatory theory of power in this framework. What are the mechanisms that produce inequalities? She opposes to the principle of non-hierarchization of oppressions, common in intersectional frameworks, the centrality of class, which, according to her, is not equivalent to race or gender. Soumaya Mestiri (2020) pleads for a post-intersectional feminism, that is to say going beyond intersectionality. She draws on the analyzes of Latin American decolonial feminists to propose a framework based on a new epistemology of relations of domination which would come from strains other than the referent produced by the colonial process and the imposition of notions and values such as the rule of law, equality, or even the authority of the State.

3. Reception of Intersectionality in France: Three Critiques

A series of interviews carried out with a sample of feminists who live in France and who have published on feminisms and issues of race, identities, and/or differences among women made it possible to identify a set of critiques formulated on intersectionality. A first critique targets the centrality of race in intersectionality and its understanding of the category of race that is part of one national history, that of the United States. Such a posture does not translate the specific history of France, the complex and difficult experience of race in France, where the history of the 20th century has favored the radical delegitimization of racial categories and where colonization and decolonization have been experienced in a specific way. France has also been shaped by a long tradition of social movements aligned with Marxism and a specific focus on social classes as explanatory factor for social inequalities.

Several interviewees share a critical posture that designates the imperialism of American categories. Houria Bouteldja identifies as a decolonial scholar (2023) and anti-imperialist activist involved with the Indigenous Peoples of the Republic movement in France. Bouteldja recognizes the interest that Black women in France have in the writings of Black American feminists of color, because there is a similarity in the condition that she sees

as that of racialized people within a white space and at the heart of the Empire. However, the question of race is not central for feminisms of the South and for Islamic feminisms: *“Southern women don’t live in Western societies and their conditions are not quite the same. Islamic feminists are more interested in what is happening in Iran, Morocco, Tunisia. Through the prism of Islam, we are no longer within the strict borders of the Empire. These feminists rarely use the question of race. Their prism is the non-patriarchal reading of the Koran”*.

For Magali Bessone, a philosopher who works on questions of race in France (2013), there is great difficulty in using the word race in France, for a set of historical reasons. She pleads for a reversal of perspective in order to include race in the public debate: *“In France, we see the idea reappear periodically that the word race should not be used in the constitution, legislation, on the grounds that race does not exist and that the texts of law do not have to consecrate the non-existent”*. She notes a strong resistance to talking about race in France, which she attributes to the experience of the Second World War: *“So, we can clearly see that there is still something very resistant about race, I think that in France, there is a legacy of the Second World War and the Holocaust there, which is, which seems indisputable, race is the Holocaust, and therefore we do not speak of race by endorsing the term race because that would mean that we forget that in the name of an alleged and supposed race we were able to put in place the policy of systematic massacre of certain types of populations, Jews or gypsies. I think that’s the fiercest resistance”*. Bessone nevertheless wants a change and an opening towards the integration of perspectives around race in the French context, a strategy that would make it possible to go beyond universalism as well as the history and the constructions that made the Holocaust possible.

Sociologist Laure Bereni (2024) locates in the mid-2000s the dissemination, in France, of work on the intertwining of power relations and intersectionality, thought beyond the class and gender analogy that has been developed previously in French feminisms: *“I would say that it is from the mid-2000s in France, that the framework of intersectionality and the intertwining of power relations really made its entrance, beyond analogy. That is to say truly as a way of approaching social relations as intertwined with each other”*. Bereni remains skeptical about the deployment of intersectionality in feminist research in France, which would be more a sprinkling enterprise than a theoretical project that would achieve consensus in the French context. Like Bessone, Bereni argues that one of the difficulties with intersectionality is at the level of the integration of race, a posture which, because of the French history of the last century, proves difficult to defend.

For sociologist Anne-Marie Devreux (2022), tackling the question of race remains difficult in the French context: *“Intersectionality is the need to take the intersection of social relations of sex and race into account in our analyses. We say class, so as not to forget it, but I believe that what causes friction between us, what possibly causes conflict, is sex and race”*. Devreux denounces the superficiality with which intersectional theories approach the articulation of multiple oppressions: *“I denounce the fact that we say: sex-race-class in many papers as if we had said it, therefore we had treated. It is much more complicated than that and it is not enough to say that it is necessary to consider: sex, race and class to have dealt with them, to have analyzed them”*. She identifies a similar process when it comes to integrating race: *“It is not because we say “race” that we have dealt with race... Besides, it’s funny, maybe it has been disappearing for a year or two, in France, authors often put quotation marks on race, without putting any on sex, in the social relation of “race”, social relation of sex... because race does not exist. So, the same could be said for sex that does not exist like that”*.

Sociologist and feminist activist Françoise Picq (2011) comments on her reluctance to prioritize race over other categories in feminist analysis in these terms: *“This is something that annoys me. That I find that the Indigenous people of the republic have a racist reading. Everything is seen around this prism. This question must be taken into account. Society has all of this within it, but we cannot read the whole of society from that. (...) I don’t like at all the word racialized which is used a lot in these circles and which I find offensive. I think that Black feminism is an American story”*.

A second critique of intersectionality pits Marxism against intersectionality. At the center of this critique lies the idea that in France, social class analysis is part of a long tradition in social sciences and is still central. Contrary to Marxism, intersectional theory does not provide an explanatory framework for oppression. In a word, the theory of social classes is identified by many as being the paradigm which has dominated the social sciences, in France, and which has by extension crossed and continues to cross feminism. Similarly, intersectionality is criticized for its lack of articulation of the trilogy of categories at the base of intersectionality, namely the categories of race, class and gender.

For Laure Bereni, who has also identified arguments linked to race in her analysis of the French context, related in the previous section, the history of social movements in France has been articulated around Marxism and the class struggle, which has had the effect of making the question of social classes unavoidable in French feminisms.

The latter makes the analysis that there have been a number of proposals in French feminist theory on the intersection of oppressions, mainly around a gender and class articulation and more specifically in the work of Danièle Kergoat: *“There was Danièle Kergoat and others who have problematized the articulation between gender and class. Because French social movements are dominated by the class paradigm and French sociology is so dominated by the class paradigm, in a way, this articulation had to be done”*. Bereni notes a tendency that has been present in French feminisms to establish an analogy between the oppression of women and the oppression of the proletariat, rather than to consider the intertwining of these oppressions. According to Bereni, French feminists have been forced to justify the legitimacy of their approach to the object of woman in relation to the dominant class paradigm: *“It is the idea that we legitimize the object of woman and the analysis of male domination in the social sciences, in particular by comparing this object to the proletariat, to the workers, to the popular classes and by comparing male and patriarchal domination to class domination. So we use analytical schemes from Marxism and move them towards the object of woman and male domination and in a way we use this structure to legitimize the object of woman”*.

For sociologist Armelle Testenoire (Palomares, E. & Testenoire, A. 2010), if the issue of racism has not been explored in depth in French feminist analyses, it is because the theme of the articulation of gender and class has taken center stage: *“The question of racism, if we compare it with the Anglo-Saxon world, or at least with the United States, more precisely, the question of racism is almost the social classes in France. It is the major social question of the 20th century, it is what has animated history. It is still the great social question in the United States. And in France, historically, the big social question has been classes”*. The issue of racism, ubiquitous in the United States, has remained largely ignored in France: *“and racism, well, we ignored it knowing that the United States was racist. So, I think that (in France) there is this non-recognition of racism which means that the question that arises all the time (...) is inequalities”*.

In a third critique of intersectionality, the concept is perceived as the Trojan horse allowing Anglo-American hegemony to impose itself in the Francophonie to conceal the work that has been done in French feminist theory on the different forms of oppression. Through the authors who constitute the base on which it unfolds, the intersectional theory confirms the position of subalternity of France and the Francophonie in the field of feminist theories. For Nacira Guénif, a sociologist close to postcolonial theories (2006), intersectionality brings the whole of Anglophone hegemony into the French space in an extremely powerful and somewhat uncontrollable way. Such an undertaking risks making invisible the different modes of analysis that would be used by women in France to describe their situation: *“What I see in all that is that there is a sort of predominance of an American paradigm which imposes itself and which in fact reduces to silence other expressions, other modes of expression and also establishes a hierarchy”*.

Guénif identifies intersectionality as a process that allows race to be obscured and all differences not to be named, much like the term diversity does: *“Intersectionality is beginning to take place in a certain academic discourse, so as not to name the breed outright. Because what is interesting about intersectionality is that it does not name all the differences from which it operates. So, there are some for which it is very comfortable. It's kind of like diversity replacement. We talked a lot about diversity... (Diversity is) the cache-sexe that allows us not to talk about sexism or racism, and about different components. Now intersectionality allows that. For what? Because it is part, you could say, of a very Western, very white semantics”*. Guénif perceives intersectionality as a hegemonic term. In her analysis of the French context, Guénif identifies the process of designation that results from identification with post or decolonial identity categories: *“It allows us to understand how, in France today, there is a vocabulary which is that, for example, of women who call themselves racialized, or of feminist struggles who call themselves decolonial, and what they say very clearly is that they position themselves in a form of differentiation, they distinguish themselves from certain currents to assert others”*.

For Sam Bourcier, sociologist and queer activist (2022), intersectionality is a term that is used by academics as an injunction. This is an obligatory approach in American universities: *“if a trans person works on decolonial issues and not on intersectionality, they will not be accepted.”* On intersectionality, Bourcier explains feeling annoyance: *“I didn't understand the annoyance I had with this term intersectionality. I very quickly saw that there was this word which was a bit like a keyword, but that the big problem was that it was impossible to do. Intersectionality (...) it's difficult to do, it's difficult to implement, I think, as a policy”*. Bourcier perceives the call for intersectionality as a tool that could be used to intimidate: *“I clearly saw that it was a speech of intimidation, and that it was bad people in general, rather the white academic, who, to speak of everyone will say yes, we need an intersectional (analysis)”*. Bourcier also notes that the term intersectionality is not used at all in some contexts, such as Italy. Finally, he observes that intersectionality has been appropriated by academics who are not involved in anti-oppression activism: *“As soon as it passed into the university as an official or academic*

political discourse (...) at that point it was taken up by academics who appropriated the tool and who ultimately did not denounce things”.

4. Prescriptive Grammars of Intersectionality and Feminist Decolonial Theories

Language has been and continues to be a source of oppression and domination whose geometries are complex. Despite the fact that the first theorizations of intersectionality proposed by Crenshaw (1989) denounce monolingualism as constituting a significant obstacle for many non-English-speaking American women, it is clear that her invitation to theorize language did not find its echo neither in the development nor in the institutionalization of intersectionality. The anglicization of intersectionality has allowed this theoretical approach to take root in academia and normalize from an understanding that, although specific, is never clearly identified (Baril, 2017). The Anglophone identity, like many other dominant identities, goes unnoticed and remains invisible.

Soumaya Mestiri (2025) pleads for a decolonization of feminism leading to a post-intersectional feminism, that is to say going beyond intersectionality and its prescriptive grammars. She draws on the analyzes of Latin American decolonial feminists like Maria Lugones to propose a framework based on a new epistemology of relations of domination which would come from strains other than the referents produced by the colonial process and the imposition of notions and values such as the rule of law, equality, or even the authority of the State.

In her book *Pour un féminisme décolonial*, Françoise Vergès refers to the need to understand France through its own narratives of colonialism and slavery. She writes: *“I therefore remain surprised by the stubbornness to forget slavery, colonialism and “overseas”*. For Vergès, it is imperative to understand the causes of this erasure within the specific context of France. On this, she uses the term ‘French innocence’: *“What is the purpose of such repression, if it is not to maintain the idea that all this – slavery, colonialism, imperialism – has certainly arrived but always outside of what constitutes France? We thus minimize the links between capitalism and racism, between sexism and racism, and we preserve French innocence. Thus, French feminism displays restraint in the face of heritage colonial and slavery. It is to be believed that, from then on that women would be victims of domination masculine, they would have no responsibility to with regard to the policies pursued by the French State”* (Vergès, 2019).

Decolonial feminism as imagined by Vergès rally a wide spectrum of women’s struggles, including Indigenous women, Black women, enslaved women, subaltern women and women in national liberation struggles. Southern women and their movements are leading voices in decolonial feminisms. There is also insistence on the need to revisit the European narratives of the world and to include perspectives from the South: *“To erase South-South transfers and itineraries of liberations, to obscure internationalist experiences anti-colonial forces, suggests that the decolonization would have only been independence in the law, and even a decoy. The ignorance of the South-South movement of people, ideas and emancipatory practices preserve hegemony of the North-South axis; but South-South exchanges have been crucial for the dissemination of dreams of liberation”* (Vergès, 2019). Vergès rallies to the concept of multidimensionality, which provides an alternative to the limits of intersectionality; decolonial feminism performs multidimensional analyses of oppression and it refuses to define race, sexuality and class as mutually exclusive categories.

5. Conclusion

The comments collected on intersectionality through a literature review and interviews with French feminists have revealed a complex relationship. In the sample of interviewees, feminists who reject intersectionality identify with different feminist approaches and their arguments against intersectionality lie mostly in the rejection of an imposed model built on the basis of specific experiences grounded in the American context. What emerges from the thematic analysis is a common desire among interviewees to think about intersecting oppressions with original tools, more in line with French specificities. Intersectionality is seen as one of many theoretical tools but not the only one and not as the perfect one. In this sample, a shared position is not to deny the existence of multiple, intersecting oppressions, but to move beyond the constrained reading of oppression imposed by the intersectional framework, whose prescriptive grammar tends to produce its own invisible hierarchies.

What comes out of this sample of feminists interviewed is a set of critical perspectives on intersectionality, the questioning of a hegemonic vision of feminism, defined from a center which fails to clearly identify itself and imposes a specific model for understanding differences. Likewise, another dimension that is called into question

is this idea that we can only talk about the differences between women from a single framework, that of intersectionality, and this, despite criticisms formulated on the subject and primarily around the lack of representation of Southern women's perspectives. Feminist claims of decolonial thought push further the debate on the principles which must animate feminisms with an authentic aspiration to the decentered representation of subjects. Beyond the criticisms leveled at intersectionality, there is no single way of thinking about enriching analyzes to make room for the multiplicity of experiences and points of view. French feminists who have shared their perspectives in this research project have identified other tools and theories that are more in line with intellectual traditions and theories produced by their specific histories.

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