



Revista Katálysis

ISSN: 1982-0259

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Serviço Social e Curso
de Graduação em Serviço Social da Universidade Federal
de Santa Catarina

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Revista Katálysis, vol. 21, no. 3, 2018, September-December, pp. 438-440

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Serviço Social e Curso de Graduação
em Serviço Social da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

DOI: 10.1590/1982-02592018v21n3p435

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EDITORIAL

Social Work: Gender, Race/Ethnicity, Generations and Sexuality

Contemporary critical thinking has affirmed the centrality of the articulation between gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, generations and other social categories to understand inequalities, oppression, violence and social experiences in general. In short, to figure out the dialectic of oppression and resistances. The starting point is the limit of seeking a comprehension about contemporary inequalities from a single social marker or matrix of difference.

Feminism (in academia and movements), the anti-racist thought and struggle and the black movement, anti and post-colonial movements and theories, LGBT movements, and studies, among others, denounced the paradox of modernity. On one side, there is the cult of the universal Human, as the subject of reason, of the political subject and the subject of right, and of the psychological Self. On the other side, there is the production of differences and hierarchies of all kinds that show differentiated and asymmetrical access (and sometimes the complete no access) to the position of being considered human, to the goods and wealth produced, to recognition as a subject of rights or as a political subject¹.

This paradox has been and is, part of the strategies of domination, which emphasize the idea of universality and equality, at the same time producing and exploiting differences as a device of power and exploitation. Thus, in the political and social arrangements that gave rise to capitalist modernity, women were removed from political and public life and stripped of their rights, with the justification of biological sexual difference. Likewise, slavery and racial oppression were justified by racial theories and the discourse of white and Western supremacy.

Therefore, the same discourse that worshiped the idea of a universal subject, holder of rights (human), naturalized and ontologized the differences, ignoring that historically they are fundamentally constructed differently.

On the other hand, throughout history, the recognition of the multiple oppressions and the way they cross and articulate have become an essential instrument of the organization, struggle, and resistance.

The literature on articulations and intersections between different forms of oppression points out the first moment of criticism on the various meanings of social experience and inequality in social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The criticism is found in the black feminism in the United States, which denounced the white, middle-class and heteronormative character of hegemonic feminism at that time²; in the left-wing feminism in several countries, which sought to articulate the struggle of women for the class struggle; in the lesbian women's movement, which questioned heterosexual hegemony in feminism and called for a link between feminism and women's rights and gay and lesbian rights, among other demands. In social movements as well as in academic works and reflections, articulating the different oppressions has become central to understand social inequality and to elaborate strategies of resistance and emancipation. This was particularly important through the three dimensions – class, race, and gender³ – in the first moment, and more contemporaneously with the observation of other markers of difference, such as sexuality, ethnicity, generations, and disability.

In 1989 black jurist and scholar Kimberly Crenshaw (1989) formulated the concept of intersectionality to give centrality to the relation between race and gender and to think of these two experiences in a theoretical and articulated way. For a black woman, the experience of being a woman could not be seen independently



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from the experience of being black, but rather from the interactions between one and the other. Since its initial formulation, the concept of intersectionality has had a dense history, extending beyond gender and race to other social categories. It has been used, along with other concepts, to understand the multiple and crushed oppressions, but also approach different social experiences of subjects located historically, socially, politically, and culturally. It has become a widespread concept in several areas of knowledge and various social theories, to refer to approaches that seek to discuss and understand the articulation between multiple oppressions and inequalities.

Among the criticisms toward the concept of intersectionality that are at the base of new theoretical and conceptual formulations, are: a) that this is very focused on subjects and identities, not on relationships; b) in the difficulties of the concept in considering the asymmetry between the various markers of difference; and c) specifically, on the part of some Marxist theorists and activists, the fact that it removes the totalizing character of the concept of social class. However, this criticism has often been made not in the sense of creating a new concept, but of complementing and making the intersectional paradigm more complex.

Other concepts, such as consubstantiality (Kergoat, 2015) and agency (Puar, 2013) were formulated or used not only to understand the multiple forms of domination and oppression to which the same subject or group are exposed, but to observe how gender, race, class and other social categories are, basically, relationships, rather than attributes of subjects or collectivities.

The concept of intersectionality has maintained its effectiveness in theorizing the difference and describing the complexity of the articulations between social differences. It has also demonstrated great semantic plasticity for its history and its uses in the various fields of research and social struggle, incorporating criticism and new meanings. The intersectional approach, or the articulations and intersection between different oppressions and different forms of resistance, gained its own space in the field of social theory, used by several areas of knowledge and theoretical currents.

The articles published in this issue of *Katálysis* are examples of such studies and approaches, thematizing critical questions to understand the many and articulated inequalities and marginalization involving gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and generations.

In Brazil, the intersectional or multiple oppressions approaches has been comprehensive, prolific and creative in understanding social inequalities in various areas of knowledge. To know, for instance, how gender, race and class articulate, has proved essential for the elaboration of social policies aimed at those who are the most exploited: black and poor women. With the current political context of loss of rights and decline of democracy, the situation of vulnerability and extreme poverty of these women is worsening. Based on this example, if the intersections and articulations between gender, race, and class are inseparable during the exercise of understanding inequality, they are also indispensable for resistance and the emancipatory struggle.

Sônia Weidner Maluf, Florianópolis, 18 July 2018.

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Notes

- 1 For Stuart Hall, this decentering of the universal subject is already present in Marx's thought, by locating the subject in history and in concrete conditions, which would represent, for the Marxist interpreters of the mid-twentieth century, a critique of the abstract notion of human.
- 2 Noting that black feminism was already manifesting in the early days of the women's struggle and the abolitionist struggle, with activist Sojourner Truth and her eloquent speech at the Woman's Rights Convention met in Akron in 1851 (Ohio, USA): “Ain't I a woman?”, which sought to highlight the oppression of the black woman (and poor, enslaved, working).
- 3 Such as the work produced in 1984 by Angela Davis (2016), which brings a history of the connections between race, gender and class in the United States, extending the analysis of abolitionist, suffragist, and women's movements, to communist women, and to the black movement of the 1970s. The later chapters of the book provide an accurate analysis of racist and gender violence, the way birth control policies have affected black women.

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