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Intersectionality perspective: theoretical and social policies issues

The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; McCall 2005, Walby 2007), originating from black feminist theory, has become within the last decade a broad interdisciplinary heuristics for analyzing interlocking social divisions: race, class, gender and other differences are no longer seen in isolation or in cumulative models but in their mutual constitution and complex entanglements, especially looking at the migration processes and changing gender roles. It has been recognized as a critical tool that addresses the shortcomings of identity-based theories and advocates new avenues for empirical or quantitative research within politics, seeing intersectionality not only as a powerful normative theoretical argument but also as an approach to conducting empirical research that “emphasizes the interaction of categories of difference” (Hancock 2007, 63). This heuristics suggests that—and seeks to examine how—various socially and culturally constructed categories such as gender, race, class, disability, and other axes of identity interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic social inequality (Shields 2008; Alcoff 2006; Nash 2008). Intersectionality as an approach, in contrast with unitary and multiple research approaches, recognizes that categories matter equally but does not determine a priori the relationship between these competing/complementing categories. Furthermore, it recognizes that these categories are not static but that a dynamic interaction between individual and institutional factors is at play, a relation between structure, agency and reflexivity (Archer 2003, 2010). Surely, to adopt an intersectionality perspective allows a deeper way of analyzing different aspects taking in account social complexities of new life trajectories in the experience of people (migrants, transnational families, work-family balance, and so on). Nevertheless, difficulties arise due to the many complexities involved in making “multidimensional conceptualizations” (Browne and Misra 2007) that explain the way in which socially constructed categories of differentiation interact to create a social hierarchy. In my presentation the theoretical aim is to evaluate the possible connections among the intersectionality perspective and the study of differences in the EU political agenda especially in order to improve and to better explain in the perspective the hidden relevance of social differentiation, identity politics, agency and reflexivity.