

Special Issue Intersectionality

# FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,  
Tourism, Technology

*Guest Editors*

**Mariella Nocenzi**

*Università degli Studi di Roma "Sapienza"*

**Silvia Fornari**

*Università degli Studi di Perugia*



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Editorial manager: Carmine Urcioli

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# **Intersectionality and Sociology: Theories and Methodologies Applied to Studies of Gender and Sexuality in Italy. Dilemmas and Perspectives**

## **Introduction**

### *Why a Conference on Intersectionality in Italy?*

When in December 2021 the Gender Studies Section of the Italian Association of Sociology dedicated its end-of-term conference, held at the University of Naples Federico II, to the theme of intersectionality, the time was ripe in our country to make it the subject of a conference, the focus of the social sciences - and of sociology in particular - on its definition and application and also the term of comparison with scientific communities such as the American and British ones that had baptised it and were developing it for decades. Yes, because in Italy its initial manifestations in the first decade of the 2000s were too few to attract the attention of the scientific and public community and, in any case, too late compared to the affirmation, a few decades earlier overseas, of an approach, theoretical framework, method and vision of society that only recently has progressively taken on an Italian, and more broadly European, character. For those who know intersectionality from having encountered it in the headquarters of North American movements and colleges where, as early as the end of the 1960s, so-called black feminism claimed its own dimension with respect to the feminism of white women and the protests of black men, its arrival in European universities, and then in Italian universities, seems to have altered it. There are too many cultural differences between European societies and that of the United States, which owes the affirmation of an approach such as the intersectional one to some of its specificities, including multiraciality, links with the colonies and deep social inequalities, especially of an economic nature. Yet, especially in recent years, that gradual diffusion of the concept of intersectionality, to the point of becoming common to many human and social disciplines developed in the other West, has drawn its most recent configurations to be read, not only with the incredulity, if not the scepticism, of some purists, but with all the strengths and weaknesses it proposes as any vision of society.

The aim is to understand what intersectionality is today and beyond, the two priority dimensions in the opinion of the writer introducing the editorial project of this special issue. In fact, intertwined are a) the developments of intersectionality now a few decades after its emergence and subsequent institutionalisation, posing dilemmas that cannot fail to be answered as well (Anthias, 2021); b) the later experiences of theorisation and application outside the Anglo-Saxon world, focusing on the case of Italy (Corbisiero, Nocenzi, ed., 2022). It is no coincidence that the scientific project of the conference, from which this monographic issue also originates, set out to take stock of the contribution of our sociological community to these studies. And it has only been able to do so by taking into account that their application prospects cannot disregard the answers to those dilemmas that have emerged with the consolidation of the intersectional approach in societies subject to constant change

In order to argue these starting cognitive questions - and through these to read both the dilemmas and the extra-American contributions - it is necessary to dwell on those constituent elements of intersectionality that characterise it, but at the same time can allow us to outline its future perspectives today. Far from retracing its history - texts such as Crenshaw's (1989) or Lutz's (2014) are points of reference for those wishing to explore this aspect in greater depth

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- the earlier identification of the black women's movement at the end of the 1960s as one of its earliest manifestations sheds light on a founding element of intersectionality. Proposing an alternative vision to the already revolutionary vision of feminism and the African-American rights movement, in fact, has an innovative scope that goes far beyond the proposition of a further identity profile, social position or point of view in the society of the second half of the last century. Certainly, the mature age of modernity revealed the composite social stratification that had taken shape as a result of the process of industrialisation, urbanisation and technological innovation, thanks to the connection of which more and more subjects shared the same space and time, held diversified social and labour roles, could know and differentiate themselves from others, and had the possibility of publicising and disseminating their identity specificity. And an avant-garde society such as the North American one provided the objective conditions for this conjunction of processes and effects to take place sooner than elsewhere (McCall, 2005). But it is certain other dynamics connected to intersectionality that have hollowed out the theoretical framework of modernity from the outside and from the inside that have a bursting significance.

### *What epistemological challenges to/from intersectionality*

It must be said that part of the literature dedicated to intersectionality considers it a "consequence" of modern thought and some of its chosen themes (McCall, 2005; Carastathis, 2014), starting from that of social structure and position to that of the relations established between individuals and groups (Weber, 2001). Concepts such as class, class, power, social division of labour, state and rights constitute a basic dictionary common to that used by classical social science theories and to that referable to intersectionality (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Davis, 2018). They are so much so that an object of study such as Max Weber's identified in the area of overlap between the spheres of economics, politics and state order does not seem so different from that positioned at the intersection of the concepts of class, race and gender by black scholars analysing the condition of women workers in North American companies (Crenshaw, 1989). While confirming something more than a simple affinity of approach or method, the specificities of intersectionality also overcome this commonality and place alongside this continuity in the critical analysis of society also a point of caesura, manifested in several aspects.

The first relates precisely to the critical scope of intersectional analysis. It is not the writer's task to establish the level reached in Weber's analysis of modernity or the advanced modernity of the first black feminists who came to the forefront of the scientific community's attention. It is the approach of analysis that changes that is of interest in establishing that the fathers of sociology were moving within a theoretical and methodological framework of reference for the newly born sociology, based on the principles of Western rational science and according to a hierarchy of knowledge (Weber, 1920-21). Even when challenged, these fundamentals were updated to the transformations taking place, adopted a paradigm more shared than the previous one within the scientific community, but nevertheless remained within that framework. By attesting to the presence, the values, the position of another identity, which was not only feminine, but also the bearer of cultural heritages and existential approaches that were not indigenous, those who proposed an analysis of intersectional society demonstrated that another vision was possible, even without abandoning the scientific rigour and object of study of the social sciences (Hill Collins, Bilge, 2016). A vision in which objects were not studied in isolation from their context, taking one of their dimensions as characterising with respect to the others, for the sole purpose of "simplifying" the actual connections and connections in a linearity in which they were arranged by rational scientific rigour. An approach that managed - and still manages - to hold together the scientific method developed by the natural sciences and western culture in one of its elementary forms of representation.

The reference to non-Western cultures materialises with the coexistence of people of different races in a land of indigenous peoples conquered by Westerners and populated by them, by practising the slave trade, with African peoples, then becoming a destination for ethnic groups from all over the planet. Such a socio-cultural context became the ideal scenario when processes such as industrialisation developed there, reformulating the effects of the economy on society, as well as scientific revolutions such as those that opened up knowledge produced outside the academies. The time was ripe at the end of the 1960s to finally structure even the critique of the Western model of knowledge production, after having recognised equal rights to the black people freed from the yoke of slavery and having laid the economic, technological and political foundations of a process such as globalisation, effective a few years later (Spivak, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991). The confrontation with western culture, in fact, had long since taken off across the Atlantic: the imposition of the civilisation of the conquerors was only partly made more acceptable by the ecumenical character of the "American dream", already in its full phase, and then especially when it began to falter. It was in 1850 that the first Women's Convention was convened at Brinley Hall in Worcester, Massachusetts, which brought together almost a thousand delegates from the American states to demand not only the right to vote, but also the right to land ownership, to study, to family law reform and to equal pay for women. Demands that had already been made in similar social events, such as Seneca Falls in 1848, converged and intensified there, effectively proposing a paradigm shift in the observation, description and interpretation of the changing society. On the basis of these experiences, which were also multiplying in Europe in those years, the thought of Sojourner Truth-Isabella Baumfree, expressed in the well-known speech *Ain't I a woman?* on the occasion of the following Convention held in Akron, Ohio in 1851, marks an intersectional turning point: the black activist born slave added racial equality to the claim of female equality, but connecting them together and bringing them to a level of epistemological dignity, even before the juridical one, equal to that of the white male (hooks, 1981).

This became even more evident as the normative and political aspects of equality came to the attention of the public, jurists and policy makers, acquiring the much sought-after formalisation in laws and practice, but not without unexpected consequences that seriously challenged the cornerstones of American culture. More than a hundred years after Sojourner Truth's speech, in 1977 the Combahee River Collective Statement, the Manifesto of Thought of black lesbian activists gathered in Boston after similar experiences, posed one of these central questions (Combahee River Collective, 1982). The recognition of different identities, those of women and blacks, had paved the way for the demand for equal process in favour of other identities, starting with sexual identities, which, however, in turn suffered the same oppressions from those social groups that had been subordinated before, and the distribution of 'power' emerged as the key concept for understanding and analysing social structure and relations.

*As Black feminists we are constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires/requires among other things that they have a less superficial understanding of Black race, colour, history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition a job for white women to do, but we will continue to speak out and demand accountability on this issue. In the practice of our politics, we do not believe that the end always justifies the means. Many reactionary and destructive actions have been done in the name of achieving "correct" political ends. As feminists we do not want to mess things up in the name of politics, positioning ourselves above people. We believe in collective processes and a non-hierarchical distribution of power within our groups and within our vision of a revolutionary society. We are engaged in an ongoing examination of our politics as it develops through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice (Combahee River Collective, 1977, 8).*

The frontal critique of the scholars was not only of the traditional Western male-centric cultural system, but of its fundamental substratum placed in the distribution - or rather centralisation - of power.

*As soon as women, particularly [...] privileged white women, began to acquire class power without getting rid of the sexism they had introjected, the divisions between women became more intense. When black women criticised racism within society as a whole by drawing attention to the ways in which racism shaped and influenced feminist theory and practice, many white women simply turned their backs on the prospect of sisterhood, closing their minds and hearts. And this was equally true when it came to classism among women (Id., 10).*

A second element of intersectional specificity with respect to the theoretical framework of modernity is that of the re-signification of certain categories, essentially those that 'intersect' and, of all of them, precisely that of gender. The properties that each identity category brought with it, when analysed in their intersection with others, proposed conditions so articulated and connected with the properties of other categories that they could not be ignored in a rigorous scientific study.

This process was doubly bursting, however, as it also followed a different path from that of linearity as the supreme attribute brought by scientific rigour in the study of the object of research. It is possible to have an emblematic configuration of this in the development of studies on the representations of the gender variable, especially of the less advantaged. In analysing the phenomena of claiming equal rights, first political, then civil and social, the female condition has always been reduced to a unicum, despite the growing evidence, already reported, of the different conditions reserved for black women - intersectionality owes much to feminist and anti-racist history. However, it was the same essentialist representation of women that was called into question, which contributed to relativising, at least on a theoretical level, the sex/gender difference central to feminist thought (Butler, 1990, hooks, 2000). The outcome of theoretical and empirical studies on the feminine condition thus became not taken for granted within the acquisition of an alternative between opposition and parity with the other of the binary identities - the dominant male identity (Bourdieu, 1998) - and could prefigure a plurality of gender and sexually non-normative identities, the subject, for example, of queer studies, according to which queer history cannot and should not be analysed through contemporary perspectives that reduced, this time to a 'minority', all those who rejected heteronormativity - thus also heterosexual people (Bryson, de Castell, 1993; De Lauretis, 1999; Gibson, 2013; Mayo, Blackburn, 2020).

The re-signification of concepts and categories that intersectionality has promoted, starting with that of gender, recently defined (Rubin, 1975), has been - and still is - disruptive because it not only calls into question the existing paradigms that had delineated those concepts. It is the very sense and function of the paradigm for knowledge production that are being reconsidered. Although research and publications that explicitly manifest this are not frequent, intersectional studies punctually calibrate their critical view of society using content and methods established in the scientific community after updating them. It is a 'toolbox', in fact, in which only those tried and tested tools find a place, which are adapted, not without difficulty, to new 'interventions' to which the research is called. In this sense, the first image with which intersectionality was presented to the scientific community by Crenshaw was already effective: a crossroads where several cars converge, all potentially responsible for an accident, out of metaphor a case of discrimination; but

*It is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: sometimes braking marks and injuries simply indicate that these two events occurred simultaneously; saying little about which driver caused the damage (Crenshaw, 1989, 151).*

It was not only the certainty of science that was being debated, but also its reliance on cognitive paradigms from which only reference assumptions could be made and not all those other elements that social transformations and reflexivity of knowledge made emerge. Over the last few decades, this process has led to a redefinition of concepts and methods that has continued perhaps more because of its inevitability than because of any convinced action on the part of the scientific community to question the paradigms themselves in the face of the increasing protean nature of the object of their studies. The risk that scientists do not want to incur even today, besides being

banned as dystopian visionaries, has been courageously addressed by scholars such as Helma Lutz, who has envisaged a number of research results to the nth power: think of the declination and intersection of concepts such as geographical, demographic, global, translocal, transnational, post-colonial, and anti-capitalist difference (Lutz, 2014). In the potentially infinite intersections of dimensions that contribute to the discriminations traced by Lutz by adopting established and non-established perspectives of analysis, portions of reality, previously unseen or neglected, are represented: science may find itself adapting them to its long-proven tools or chasing them with the need to prepare new strategies when they impose themselves as objects of study.

This is the case with the more recent use of the intersectional approach by supranational decision-makers such as the United Nations and the European Union in equality policies and funding. As the EU Strategy for Gender Equality 2020-2025 demonstrates, this is a principle to be adopted that requires both an overall (horizontal) and in-depth (vertical) view of society for its application without sacrificing complexity in favour of a few prevailing elements according to the dominant theoretical perspective of the moment. In addition, the analytical vision to be adopted must be able to indicate in which times, places and situations intersections occur and which intersections lend themselves most to policy attention and development. It is, therefore, an approach that has always been required of decision making because it is based on social analysis, but only in recent years has it been institutionalised by extending to seemingly unrelated equality issues such as the transport system or sustainable development policies.

### *The most invigorating challenge: the definition dilemma*

Extraordinarily, intersectionality receives formal recognition from those who benefit from its application, while the scientific community still questions even its definition. Is it perhaps that the questions that are being asked and remain without shared answers are set according to an obsolete paradigm of study? While waiting for a clarifying answer - if one ever comes - scholars and scholars hesitantly discuss the mutual construction of categories such as gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, age, ability...: to which activity can this be ascribed? Maybe, to an analytical strategy that provides new insights into social phenomena? Or rather to a critical praxis underlying social justice projects? Or, finally, to a genuine field of study aimed at bringing to light the power relations that arise in social interactions? (Hill Collins, 2015).

You can first explain the extraordinariness of the lack of a shared definition of intersectionality in the scientific community by pointing out how, according to the traditionally adopted sense of paradigm, when one does not agree on a given element one recognises it when one sees it. In the absence of a definition or reference guidelines, the process of recognition is reversed and the answer to the question of what intersectionality is provided by interpretations, methods, practices, policy applications - for example the European ones already mentioned - in which intersectionality appears to be in the making even though an interpretative framework is lacking. From this set of practices manifested over more than four decades of scientific observation through an intersectionality-sensitive perspective, an initial element of theoretical consensus can be said to have matured: entities such as gender, class, race, age, ability and others cannot continue to be conceived as unitary and exclusive. On the contrary, they are mutually constructed, thus giving shape to plural constructions of social inequalities. These are precisely the ones that are at work in practice... in politics, for families, in social welfare programmes, in recovery communities, in hospitals, for legal defence, in the world of associations and, last but not least, also in the centres of knowledge production, academic and otherwise, that operate in those very fields (Collins, Chepp, 2013). In short, the last decades have not passed in vain to work in an increasingly systematic way on social asymmetries, knowledge has been produced to also give scientific rigour to policies and interventions against inequalities, but now the process is ripe for a shift from the recognition of intersectionality in its visible manifestations and in the evident

objective connected to a scientific consensus on its definition in more abstract terms, then, applicable to certain practices.

At this stage of maturation of the process, there are at least three elements that can justify the scientific community's 'wavering' and three results that could be arrived at in the search for the defining framework taking into account the current mode of knowledge production.

In order, what prevents the conceptualisation of intersectionality can be found in the following, and the sequence of argumentation is not coincidental:

1. In process of abstraction of practical knowledge of intersectionality could alter its meaning by making dynamics related to practices of one rather than other domains prevail, given the extreme complexity and variability of the field of application. Anyone who has embarked on an inductive process from practices to the defining framework has experienced the effect of a "short blanket" and the risk of knowledge asymmetry in not considering entities or axes of oppression that are mutually generated and under changing conditions. Something, therefore, difficult to represent within a circumscribed construct shared by the scientific community (Collins, 2019).
2. The determination of a defining framework is the highest of knowledge production projects precisely because of the objectives it must achieve, as described in the previous point. Applying this to intersectionality emphasises the criticality of such a process, which takes place in a global, changing dimension and is connected to the exercise of power by those who design, implement, manage and control social asymmetries. Attention to power relations and social inequalities is the focus of intersectional knowledge: it 'participates in the very power relations it examines and, consequently, must pay particular attention to the conditions that make its knowledge claims comprehensible' (Collins, 2015, 8). All these elements lead one to think that more correctly, intersectionality is an interrelated set of knowledge production projects that change with the transformations experienced by the very communities within which these projects are launched and within which the conditions for a defining consensus are established. One can therefore understand how knowledge production is plural, because it is determined by specific social contexts and actions, within which relationships of over- and under-ordination operate. Knowledge is also not freely produced, but within social relations regulated by the distribution of power in terms of availability of economic, intellectual, participatory resources; of social position and function; of prevalence of one cultural system over others. The explanation for the lack of generalised consensus begins to become apparent (Hancock, 2016; Hearn, Louvrier, 2016).
3. The "power" factor associated with knowledge production stimulates a reflection on the concept of paradigm and how this affects the definition of intersectionality. For the production of knowledge, in fact, it is considered indispensable to use a theoretical perspective shared by the scientific community on the basis of the previous acquisitions of science because it defines the relevance of the object of research and determines the processes of formulating hypotheses, the choice of methods and techniques of analysis, and the interpretation and presentation of results (Kuhn, 1970). This knowledge is evidently constructed, transmitted and reproduced in social contexts from which it is elaborated and in which there is a reciprocal influence with power structures, as understood in the previous point (Mannheim, 1953; Foucault, 1980). It is an influence that can lead to the exclusion of contributions to knowledge that come from those subjects and groups that do not access its production process even when their discriminated condition is recognised and scientifically studied. One can understand how the entry of 'other' interpretative communities than those entrusted by society with the production of knowledge - and not only when they are the object of scientific research, as in the case of theories of racial formation (Collins, 2015) - entails a radical revision of cognitive processes by bringing other perspectives to the observation of the object of research and thus differentiating the scientific community. It follows that not only will the object of research be interpreted according to a multiple and complex scheme, but also that

the scientific consensus on these findings may not be unanimous. Hence the reflection on a revision of the very concept of paradigm that is applied to define a knowledge production process which, as it stands, does not allow the defining framework of intersectionality to be delineated even from its consolidated empirical application (Nocenzi, 2023).

From these conditions of knowledge production relating to intersectionality derive three different frameworks within which intersectionality itself is defined which, in the opinion of the writer who has compared himself with the literature on the topic (see interview with Hill Collins in the special issue), does not they are exclusionary, can mutually influence each other (Collins, 2019) and legitimize current practices and possible future conceptualizations of intersectionality. Their interest lies in the state of progress to which they bring the original and socially constructed definition in the United States:

- *intersectionality as an object of investigation* which is the best-known meaning with which it is recognised, defined and practiced especially within the academic scientific community. It was precisely in the North American academy in the 1980s that it established itself, albeit without yet being so defined, as a perspective of studying society through the categories of class, race and gender. A process of knowledge production was thus proposed which quickly expanded to be a political project for the transformation of society itself and of the academy as its institution according to objectives of social justice and equity. As an object of study, therefore, intersectionality has had a significant revolutionary impact, as already anticipated at the beginning of this article, because the knowledge produced has followed transversal dynamics across many disciplines to the point of founding new fields of study in which the same they collected, compared, combined to create a common language (Cho et al., 2013; Andersen, Collins 2018). These processes were able to benefit from the consensus of the academic community first and, more extensively, of the scientific community, which accepted the political requests of scholars engaged in a wide-ranging knowledge project, allowing its widespread diffusion and substantially institutionalization. rapid in courses, research networks, publications. Despite the benefit that intersectionality has come from being conceived as an object of study, its public and formal recognition has been accompanied by effects that are not as positive, especially for those who were involved in the original project of affirming this new project of knowledge. The diversity of the fields of application and abstraction has led to a selection of some constituent elements over others in each of the different research experiences with intersectionality, which have also favored a contamination of theories and methods. The result has sometimes proven to be far from the initial intersectional purpose, betraying the internal coherence of a critical and transformative project of social structures, including academic ones, which could not fail to arouse mutual resistance and distancing among those who had initiated these studies, those who had continued them and the professionals of intersectional practices. Among these, Crenshaw herself has often complained about distorting readings of her cognitive project for a theory of racial formation within the cultural representations of social structures: for example, the line of studies on black feminism connected to the public recognition of the question of race uses the Crenshaw's thought to interpret contexts and dynamics not known to her and not finalized in her work. A pledge for the acquisition of the intersectional perspective in a wider part of the scientific community, as already identified in the first of the previous points

- *intersectionality as an analytical strategy* thanks to which it is possible to observe and question society, producing knowledge that is grafted onto that deriving from the application of different analytical perspectives. Potentially, all areas of research could adopt intersectionality as an analytical strategy because it brings their constituent categories into mutually defining relationships, but what can be identified as an added value is an analytical attention to these processes which are what really distinguishes it. Those who have shown this attention in their analysis using intersectional frameworks have done so above all in some thematic areas which have proven to be more relevant and more suitable in themselves, without however being so exclusively. In particular, research on social identity and the labor market is among the most frequent in inter-



sectional literature when it has served as an analytical tool. Its analytical scope, in fact, supports research that intends to describe and understand the processes that determine social inequalities based on given categories, such as social and national identification (Yuval-Davis, 2006), the organization of work and functions connected (Hearn, Louvrier, 2016) and, therefore, of all the areas thus structured, from the family to the school (Case, 2016) up to those phenomena whose reading through the categories requires a necessary integration: think of the identifying categories of perpetrators and victims of violence and, more generally, of deviance (Lombardo, Roland-sen Agustín, 2016). The analytical use of intersectionality, however, is not only that applied to the objects of study, but to intersectionality itself, both with respect to its epistemology and methodology. In the first case, the literature on intersectionality is littered with analytical proposals for its definition, already partly explored previously. We move from its identification as a type of analysis (Nash 2008), to a perspective (Steinbugler et al. 2006), from a concept (Knapp 2005) to a paradigm (Hancock 2007), underlining the distance of intersectionality from the outcomes of an analysis that is conducted according to traditional paradigms. But also, from a methodological point of view, his analytical contribution proceeded following a new use of cognitive categories compared to the already consolidated repertoire. The most sedimented case in the experience of intersectional studies is once again the North American one in which research on social stratification uses class as an analytical category (Dill, Zambrana, 2009). However, it is an acquisition also determined by the object of study, the context of investigation, the field of research which, by modifying themselves, preserve the critical potential of the intersectional analysis conducted. In Europe, certainly, the cultural dimension has prevailed more recently over the economic one and so in postmodern global contexts some central intersectional categories such as race are referred to in descriptive rather than analytical terms. Even as a strategy, therefore, intersectionality has developed over the decades, moving away from the original project, but not always for this reason abdicating its critical function

- *intersectionality as a critical practice*, traditionally connected with social justice objectives. These can be achieved with policies and interventions, but also with the theoretical and empirical knowledge that guides and feeds on intersectional practices. The mutual exchange is validated by practically all the studies in which intersectionality has supported intervention practice with research, especially where the objective of social justice could be achieved with the identification, understanding and removal of social asymmetries: poverty, illiteracy, violence, protection of human rights (Davis, 2011). Stakeholders in these processes of production and application of knowledge include operators and social workers, families, teachers, volunteers, but also decision-makers, jurists, as well as those who study and do research. These are therefore composite processes, as well as complex, due to the different contributions of knowledge made, but also due to the distinct levels in which the action for social justice is articulated - from the analysis of the case and the research field to the collection and selection of theoretical and methodological tools, up to deviant protection, contrast, reduction and prevention actions. Specifically in intersectional research experiences, one of the main problems that has made this meaning of intersectionality less popular is precisely the conciliation of strategies, languages and meanings between the different recipients, to the point of configuring real role conflicts for those who, especially as scholars, have seen strategies and analytical results welcomed by some groups and rejected by others. An inevitable outcome in a common scheme of opposition between different groups with respect to a project of social justice which, however, with its heuristic strength intersectionality intends to overcome.

In light of the composite path of intersectionality from its first public recognition in the scientific community up to its institutionalization, the questions that are currently open in this phase of its development have emerged: the first of the two points of these reflections, necessary to understand what added value the Italian experience can bring to the debate, equally and differently from the many others exogenous to the original North American context.

## *The Italian experience on intersectionality*

The structure of society and the analytical sensitivity of the intellectual class are factors that can determine the level of luck in the diffusion of intersectionality in a given scientific community. Certainly, in Italy they have delayed its introduction into the debate and scientific production together with other conditions characterizing our country which have ended up obscuring the rare attempts at reflection on the topic. Among these, we include those of Vincenza Perilli (2009) and Sabrina Marchetti (2013) and those associated with the research and social commitment experiences of Maria Laura Corradi (2003, 2018) are well known. Thanks to her doctoral studies conducted at the University of California in Santa Cruz, she had the opportunity to meet and collaborate with scholars of the caliber of Teresa De Lauretis and Angela Davis, and to work with Raewyn Connell (2014). His socialization with intersectionality occurred in a phase of progressive maturation in North American society in which he was already able to experience the risks of institutionalization as the emptying of his transformative charge and of academization as the "domestication of subversive knowledge" which also prefigures for the Italian reality (Bello et al., 2022).

The point of closest proximity between the work of research and social activation in Italy and intersectionality was, in reality, constituted by feminism which has centralized its attention on the category of gender for a long path of claiming the connected rights that have been achieved at an advanced historical stage. This is almost coincident with what in the United States between the Seventies and Eighties projected feminism to take on a self-reflexive attitude and open to intersections with multiple categories. There was, therefore, a temporal gap between the two cultures which was partially filled in Italy when the echo of North American and international studies spread to the more "sensitive" offshoots of the scientific community and the association world, providing new perspectives of analysis of a reality in transformation also in Italy.

Some phenomena have been more decisive than others in stimulating a production of knowledge that is no longer mono-categorical and in suggesting rethinking social structures and institutions through an intersectional approach. In particular, the arrival of migrant women and queer identity models combines "other" gender identities with the female one, for which factors such as race and sexual orientation pluralized the constitutive categories. It was a process that started from the bottom, from social facts, from their affirmation and from becoming an object of research for the scientific community which conducted studies on the identity representation of migrant women, on microcredit or on mixed associational life (Battistoni, Oursana, 2012). Sometimes, thanks to this research, debates have started on the definition of policies in favor of the empowerment of discriminated migrant women.

The last decade has certainly been the most significant in favoring the introduction of intersectionality not only in the scientific debate, but also in the dimension of political and social practices which, in a mutual process of construction, have encountered an unexpected cultural opening. Yes, because the degree of maturation - public recognition and institutionalization - of intersectionality in Italy has not had the sedimentation of its primordial place, the Anglo-Saxon one, but precisely from there it has received stimuli and models which it has grafted into a context almost completely devoid of useful experiences. Those of migrant women and the first queer identities were followed by the issues brought to public attention by specific discrimination against transsexual subjects and then by global feminist ones with movements such as *#MeToo* (2017) and *Ni una menos* (2015), one started from the United States, the other in Argentina more or less in the same years and capable of overcoming national borders with objectives of social justice and intersectional planetary languages. Connected to the demands of these movements are the environmental and sustainable development ones, even more recent, which have benefited from the awareness of the former by providing a platform of objectives for society whose key is the intersection between categories, the interdependence between living systems, the elimination of intersectional inequalities. These programmatic plans are inspired by

other more local projects such as the Green Deal or the Gender Equality Index in Europe and the PNRR in Italy which quickly forced research protocols to adopt intersectionality as an approach, perspective, concept, method and much more.

The accelerated institutionalization now seems to impose a phase in which to give substance to intersectionality by applying it in research and political and social practices with scientific rigor, with a declination that is inevitably adapted to the social context of reference, as demonstrated by the essays that make up this issue thematic.

### *Objectives and proposals of the thematic issue*

In the development of studies on the female condition, then on gender and sexuality in our country, sociology certainly had a role that was not decisive in the early stages, but increasingly significant as the epistemological and methodological questions gradually became articulated in the light of parallel transformations. and integrated systems of society and science. Today, the specific attention on the added value that can come from intersectionality brings gender and sexuality studies to a level of greater maturation by addressing development prospects while also dealing with the dilemmas that intersectionality itself, as we have seen, experiences within it. The six contributions that make up this thematic issue can be introduced precisely as some of the intersectional perspectives with which the Italian social science community observes, and then interprets, different phenomena and conditions in which the categories of gender, but also age, class, residence, skills, cultural level meet in a mutual construction at the basis of proposals for intervention projects; those that the authors advance as the objective of their essays.

Alina D'Ambrosio Clementelli is convinced of the critical and transformative impact of intersectionality in her essay *Mapping Safety through an Intersectional Perspective. The Case of Wher* analyzes the composition of the elements of sociological relevance in an app designed to offer services to women who live in urban spaces in order to guarantee safe use of them. The study of the factors that contribute to the production of insecurity in public space does not take gender as the only key category and does not intend all the others connected to it as descriptive variables - from nationality, to residence, from the level of education to digital literacy. In a cultural context represented through the contingent meaning given to those categories, the analysis of the relationship between urban space and gender violence presents the new meanings that the aforementioned categories acquire reciprocally and how these are the ideal ones for preparing the app.

The theme of gender violence also returns in other essays, starting with that by Angela Maria Toffanin, entitled *Intersectional Approach within Italian Anti-violence Centres. Challenges for Research and Policies* to underline the relevance that intersectionality can have for the study and practical intervention on a social phenomenon that does not seem to stop despite the amount of scientific research, funds invested, and action plans implemented. Toffanin uses an intersectional approach for the specific reading of the form of male violence against women in the identity representations of perpetrators and victims in the international literature on the topic. The aim of his work is to trace a possible intersectional profile which, especially for the victims, contributes to giving a different orientation to the intervention methodologies of the Anti-Violence Centres, especially for the aspects of the assistance models they adopt, and which have been ascertained as the most critical.

In *Symbolic Violence against Women as a Social and Cultural System* Milena Gammaitoni completes the analyzes dedicated to gender violence in this monographic issue, focusing on the form of symbolic violence against women to trace its deep roots in the cultural system of our society. To the related cognitive questions that she asks herself, inserting herself into a traditional and very rich line of studies on the specific topic, the Author contributes by bringing an intersectional gaze to read the construction of female identity in artistic and cultural forms, both past

and more recent. To determine and represent the condition of subordination of women through the symbols of art and literature, categories have been "re-signified" from time to time (from that of class to that of age and even race) in light of their intersection with that of gender in a co-formation process that becomes evident precisely thanks to intersectionality. And with it the aims of social control, still perpetrated and legitimized in the disciplinary processes of knowledge production.

Maria Francesca Fobert Ventro proposes in her essay *Gender and Age. The Myth of Eternal Youth in Advertising* is a sort of integration to the issues raised by the previous essay, reflecting on the forms of discrimination that other visible and public images and contents - those spread with the advent of mass media in the past and social media today - favor in advertising messages. In the clear intersection between gender and age, the expected social condition of showing an appearance that responds to certain canons is determined, from the analysis of which emerges the subordination that weighs especially on women. In this way, a sort of cultural oppression is defined which, thanks to the media, imposes itself on a global level through similar models that we recognize in the female images proposed and, therefore, also imposed. The categories they use, especially those of age and gender, intersect, attributing "re-vised" meanings, those actually at the basis of current stereotypes.

Just as for the phenomenon of violence, there is also a particular interest from the sociological community for that of identity and the body because these are recurring and central themes in the current cultural climate which bring to the surface questions that are equally relevant because they are often unresolved. This is the case of the object analyzed by Ester Micalizzi in her essay *Childlessness and disability: an intersectional analysis on access to motherhood for women with disabilities in Italy*, that of the absence of motherhood among women with visible and non-visible disabilities. Comparing the results of the analysis of the structural and cultural barriers that society opposes to the motherhood of these women with the model proposed by the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities from an intersectional perspective, the Author proposes the results of an investigation conducted by her. The self-representations of women with disabilities and without children fit fully into the profiles of marginality that social institutions prepare within relations of power which, precisely because of its exercise, put those women in a position to fight oppression by promoting change.

This last factor considered in the intersectional gaze, disability, inserts further ideas for epistemological analyzes into intersectional studies and, in the overview offered by the monographic issue, it seems to reserve little space for that category of class, so central to the original studies of intersectionality and which have always been such in Italy. Mara Sanfelici and Luigi Gui - incidentally the only scholar in this publication and among the not many who dedicate themselves to intersectional studies in Italy - recover Crenshaw's analytical perspective which starts from the category of class, dedicating themselves in *Intersecting injustices: understanding oppression and privilege through the perspectives of parents facing poverty* to families in conditions of economic deprivation. The authors assume that the role of parents is the one outlined in contemporary Western societies by cultural constructs and symbols that hold them responsible for building opportunities for their children and managing the associated risks. An intersectional analysis applied in a field investigation shows how axes of oppression/privilege insist on parents through role expectations that end up determining their identity with unprecedented construction processes because they are seen from a perspective that is not frequent for these studies.

At the conclusion of the introduction of this thematic issue, the contribution on intersectionality closest to its original project is presented, therefore apparently furthest from the Italian social science community, but certainly among the most qualified to respond to the dilemmas and prospects of intersectionality Today. This is the interview with Patricia Hill Collins, a reference source for many studies on intersectionality at an international level and a researcher engaged in her own self-reflexive analysis, right from the defining aspects.

These were, among countless others, the elements that brought Hill Collins closer to the Italian scientific community in this interview and, even before, in the Italian edition of his work *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019), edited for the types of UTET by Fabio Corbisiero and Mariella Nocenzi in 2022. This publication, in the opinion of those who contributed to editing it and writes here, has at least the merit of having brought a relevant work on intersectionality to a wider audience and of having promoted its knowledge in a cultural context progressively more and more sensitive. Collins' thoughts on the definition and application of intersectionality in that work are profound and articulated. This interview allowed us to delve deeper into some aspects and those that deserve specific reference here are certainly the centrality of politics and community.

Especially in light of the Italian experience, Hill Collins' reflections on the community as a "dynamic political construct" can trigger a debate that is now urgent with respect to the social transformations underway. Their rhythm is often followed, sometimes anticipated by individual and collective actions - think of those implemented in the face of the environmental crisis or the pandemic - and intersectionality can constitute a useful analytical tool for conceptualizing and building communities that are participatory and also democratic. For Hill Collins, community is a powerful concept because it exploits the power of emotions for political action, which is more necessary than ever in the current local and global scenarios dominated by sectarianism and exclusion. The commitment of this monographic issue towards expected results such as these can only be based on Hill Collins' assumption that "all knowledge is in some way political, because it is based on a social world characterized by social inequality".

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