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INVISIBLE INK: INTERSECTIONALITY AND POLITICAL INQUIRY

DARA Z. STROLOVITCH*

This brief article is a tribute, of sorts, to interdisciplinary inquiry and social justice scholarship, one that focuses on the debt owed by political scientists who are concerned about inequality and marginalization to *intersectionality*, a framework that originated in and has long been central to critical race theory, feminist legal scholarship, and critical race feminism. More specifically, the article reflects upon some of the ways in which intersectionality helps political scientists who study marginalization to question disciplinary boundaries, to move beyond single isolable causal mechanisms, and to “unmobilize biases” within political science so that we more accurately understand and address social, economic, and political inequality.¹

I begin below with a brief review of some of the central insights of intersectionality, particularly as they apply to political science. I then discuss some of the ways in which intersectional approaches highlight the value of interdisciplinarity and the importance of understanding the multiple, dynamic, and enduring sources of inequality. Some of what follows might admittedly seem to recapitulate standard refrains about the roles of race, class, gender, and sexuality in political science, the academy, and the political world. But

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¹ See E. E. SCHATTSCHNEIDER, *THE SEMISOVEREIGN PEOPLE: A REALIST'S VIEW OF DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* (1975).

while perhaps not entirely novel, I think that they are ideas that merit repeating and reinforcing in the first issue of this exciting and important new journal.

I. INTERSECTIONALITY

It is beyond the scope of this short article to engage in a detailed discussion about intersectionality, much less to enumerate the many ways in which issues such as race, class, gender, and sexuality matter for politics and scholarship about it. Briefly stated, however,

[T]heories of intersectionality were developed initially by feminists of color who were frustrated with a feminist movement that privileged and essentialized the experiences and positions of white women, representing these experiences as those of ‘all women,’ and also with a civil rights movement that similarly privileged and essentialized the experiences and positions of black men.²

As many readers know, theories of intersectionality contend that groups can be marginalized along many axes within what Patricia Hill Collins has called the “matrix of domination.”³ From an intersectional perspective, these multiple forms of marginalization—including race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability—do not function as “separate, fixed, and parallel tracks,” but are rather dynamic, simultaneous, and mutually

² DARA Z. STROLOVITCH, AFFIRMATIVE ADVOCACY: RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN INTEREST GROUP POLITICS 22–23 (2007).

³ PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT (1990). For other foundational articulations, *see generally*, ALL THE WOMEN ARE WHITE, ALL THE BLACKS ARE MEN, BUT SOME OF US ARE BRAVE (Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott & Barbara Smith eds. 1982); Combahee River Collective, *A Black Feminist Statement*, in THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK: WRITINGS BY RADICAL WOMEN OF COLOR, 210, 210–18 (Cherríe Moraga & Gloria Anzaldúa eds., 1981); Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*, 1989 U. CHI. LEGAL F. 139 (1989) [hereinafter Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing*]; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, 30 FEMINIST REV. 61 (1988).

constitutive.⁴ Intersectional approaches also typically object to “either/or” approaches that regard economic and social injustices as distinct or mutually exclusive.⁵

While intersectionality has a long lineage, the term itself was coined and developed by critical race feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, and derives from a “traffic” metaphor she employed to illustrate the functioning and impact of multiple forms of marginalization.⁶ Race, gender, and other forms of discrimination, she explains, are “roads” that structure the social, economic, and political terrain.⁷ These roads, though often framed as distinct and mutually exclusive, in reality overlap and intersect, creating what she calls “complex intersections” at which multiple “disempowering dynamics” meet.⁸ Those situated at the juncture of multiple “roads” of oppression and disadvantage (such as those based on race, gender, and economic status) are subject to injuries by “the heavy flow of traffic” traveling simultaneously from many directions and along multiple roads.⁹

The effects of the injuries resulting from these manifold forms of discrimination are compounded, exponential, and unique products that are different from and far greater than the sum of their parts, creating unique dimensions of disempowerment and differently situated subgroups.¹⁰ Because these injuries are mutually constituted, it is impossible to

4 STROLOVITCH, *supra* note 2, at 24.

5 *Id.* at 23.

6 See Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing*, *supra* note 3, at 149.

7 KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW, THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF RACE AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION, 9 (2000).

8 *Id.*

9 *Id.* at 11–12.

10 See Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing*, *supra* note 3.

understand or address specific forms of disadvantage in isolation.¹¹ Since all forms of subordination are interconnected, understanding each one requires doing what legal scholar Mari Matsuda describes as “asking the other question.”¹² For example, when we see something that “looks racist,” she says, we should also ask, “[w]here is the patriarchy in this?”¹³ When we see something sexist, we need also to look for the heterosexism in it.¹⁴ When we see something homophobic, we must also understand the class interests embedded in it.¹⁵

More generally, intersectional theories “reject the notion that one particular form of domination or social relation—be it race, class, patriarchy, or heteronormativity—is the primary source of oppression.”¹⁶ While not denying the importance of categories such as race, gender, class, or sexuality, proponents of intersectional frameworks insist that “what makes a group is less some set of attributes its members share than the [class, gender, race, nationality, religion, etc.] relations in which they stand to others.”¹⁷ As a consequence,

11 STROLOVITCH, *supra* note 2, at 25.

12 Mari Matsuda, *Beside My Sister, Facing the Enemy: Legal Theory out of Coalition*, 43 STAN. L. REV. 1183, 1189 (1991).

13 *Id.*

14 *Id.*

15 *Id.*

16 STROLOVITCH, *supra* note 2, at 23.

17 IRIS MARION YOUNG, INCLUSION AND DEMOCRACY 90, 100 (2000). Young is referring here most specifically to the category of “women.” Applying Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of “seriality” to theorize women’s structural position, she argues that the gender position of being a woman does not itself imply sharing social attributes and identity with all those others called women. Instead, “women” is the name of a series in which some individuals find themselves positioned by virtue of norms of enforced heterosexuality and the sexual division of labor. Both the norms and expectations of heterosexual interaction and the habits developed in certain social activities such as caring for children will condition the dispositions and affinities of people, without constituting their identities.

while acknowledging important inequalities that persist *among* racial, gender, or economic groups, intersectional approaches “highlight the ways in which social and political forces manipulate the overlapping and intersecting inequalities *within* marginal groups.”¹⁸ They also emphasize the consequent unevenness in the effects of the political, economic, and social gains made by marginalized groups since, and as a result of, the social movements and policy gains of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁹

These many forms of oppression and disadvantage are not static or rankable, and they do not operate along single axes in simple or additive ways.²⁰ Instead of functioning as separate, fixed, and parallel tracks, they are at once dynamic and structural, and they create cumulative inequalities that “define, shape, and reinforce one another in ways that constitute the relative positions and opportunities of differently situated members of marginalized groups.”²¹ For example, low-income women, disadvantaged both economically and by gender, are an intersectionally disadvantaged subgroup of women and of low-income people. The effects of these multiple forms of discrimination are compounded, exponential, and unique products that are different from and far greater than the sum of their parts, creating unique dimensions of disempowerment for differently situated subgroups.²² Most central for analytic purposes, and, as I have written elsewhere, is

18 STROLOVITCH, *supra* note 2, at 23.

19 Leslie McCall, *The Complexity of Intersectionality*, 30 SIGNS J. WOMEN CULTURE & SOC’Y 1771 (2005).

20 STROLOVITCH, *supra* note 2, at 24.

21 *Id.*

22 Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing*, *supra* note 3, at 57.

that because they are mutually constituted, specific forms of disadvantage and privilege cannot be understood, much less addressed, in isolation.²³

II. WHAT THINKING INTERSECTIONALLY HELPS POLITICAL SCIENTISTS SEE

As I have discussed at greater length in previous work, over the last several decades, political scientists have trained intersectional lenses on analyses of marginalization in a wide range of social, economic, and political realms.²⁴ As a result of this work, we know a tremendous amount about the constitution and effects of intersectional marginalization in realms including public opinion, legislative politics, interest groups and social movements, and public policy.²⁵ Examinations that focus on a single axis or cleavage, such as race, gender, union membership, poverty status, or sexuality continue to be the norm in political

23 STROLOVITCH, *supra* note 2, at 25.

24 *See generally id.*; Dara Z. Strollovitch, *Intersectionality in Time: Sexuality and the Shifting Boundaries of Intersectional Marginalization*, 8 POL. & GENDER 386 (2012). *See also* McCall, *supra* note 19; Ange-Marie Hancock, *When Multiplication Doesn't Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality as a Research Paradigm*, 5 PERSP. ON POL. 63 (2007).

25 *See* MICHELE TRACY BERGER, *WORKABLE SISTERHOOD: THE POLITICAL JOURNEY OF STIGMATIZED WOMEN WITH HIV/AIDS* (2004); CATHY J. COHEN, *THE BOUNDARIES OF BLACKNESS: AIDS AND THE BREAKDOWN OF BLACK POLITICS* (1999); SHARON KURTZ, *WORKPLACE JUSTICE: ORGANIZING MULTI-IDENTITY MOVEMENTS* (2002); DARA Z. STROLOVITCH, *AFFIRMATIVE ADVOCACY: RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN INTEREST GROUP POLITICS* 24 (2007) [hereinafter STROLOVITCH, *AFFIRMATIVE ADVOCACY*]; S. LAUREL WELDON, *WHEN PROTEST MAKES POLICY: HOW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS REPRESENT DISADVANTAGED GROUPS* (2011); Ange-Marie Hancock, *When Multiplication Doesn't Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality as a Research Paradigm*, 5 PERSP. ON POL. 63 (2007); Carol Hardy-Fanta, Pei-te Lien, Dianne M. Pinderhighes & Christine Marie Sierra, *Gender, Race, and Descriptive Representation in the United States: Findings from the Gender and Multicultural Leadership Project*, 28 J. WOMEN PUB. POL'Y 7 (2007); Mary Hawkesworth, *Congressional Enactments of Race-Gender: Toward a Theory of Raced-Gendered Institutions*, 97 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 529 (2003); Evelyn M. Simien, *Race, Gender, and Linked Fate*, 35 J. BLACK STUD. 529 (2005); Wendy Smooth, *Intersectionality in Electoral Politics: A Mess Worth Making*, 2 POL. & GENDER 400 (2006); Dara Z. Strollovitch, *Do Interest Groups Represent the Disadvantaged? Advocacy at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender*, 68 J. POL. 894 (2006) [hereinafter Strollovitch, *Do Interest Groups*]; Erica Townsend-Bell, *What is Relevance? Defining Intersectional Praxis in Uruguay*, 64 POL. RES. Q. 187 (2011).

science. However, intersectional scholarship in political science has provided strong evidence that marginalization occurs along multiple intersecting and overlapping axes such as gender *and* race *and* poverty.²⁶ And because, as I have argued elsewhere, intersectionality takes as one of its starting points the insight that marginalization is not static, it is also attentive to the historical processes and contexts in which marginalization is constituted.²⁷ Intersectionally oriented research in political science has consequently served also as an important corrective to what Paul Pierson calls “snapshot” analyses of the political causes and consequences of marginalization, revealing a great deal about the dynamic intersections between race, class, gender, and sexuality.²⁸

These contributions of intersectional approaches in political science research also underscore the crucial role of intersectionality’s epistemological origins and of the importance of interdisciplinarity in studies of inequality. At their best, disciplines provide angles or “ways in” to problems, giving scholars ways to position their scopes and structure their conversations. From this perspective, boundaries and divisions can be helpful in trying to bracket questions, isolate processes, make the scope of a question manageable, and focus the lens in ways that enable us to examine some questions in detail. But disciplines and their incentive systems can also interfere with our ability to bring the scope back out again in order to study what we need to study to understand politics. Originating as it does outside

²⁶ See *supra* note 25.

²⁷ See Strolovitch, *Do Interest Groups*, *supra* note 25, at 896.

²⁸ PAUL PIERSON, *POLITICS IN TIME: HISTORY, INSTITUTIONS, AND SOCIAL ANALYSIS* 48 (2004); see also JULIE NOVKOV, *RACIAL UNION: LAW, INTIMACY, AND THE WHITE STATE IN ALABAMA 1865–1964* (2008).

of political science—mainly in critical race legal scholarship, ethnic studies, gender studies, and sociology—and entering political science through political theory, intersectionality exemplifies the intellectual vibrancy and critical political insights that can come from transcending disciplines and engaging instead in interdisciplinary conversations. In particular, its incorporation into political science has allowed political scientists interested in race, class, gender, sexuality, and other axes of oppression and marginalization to engage in conversations with scholars of race and gender from these other disciplines. In particular, it has encouraged us to engage with scholars of legal studies, ethnic studies, and gender and sexuality studies—disciplines in which theories and conceptualizations of categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality are typically more central, more incorporated, more constructivist, and more nuanced.²⁹

Intersectionality is not, by any means, the only example of the value of cross-fertilization, but it is a particularly compelling one, encouraging empirically- and quantitatively-oriented political scientists to question the implications of what it means to, for example, operationalize “sex” as a biologically based, socially and politically meaningful, and binary concept that can be controlled using what quantitative researchers call “dummy variables.”³⁰ Rather than treating race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and

²⁹ See Hancock, *supra* note 24, at 64.

³⁰ Dummy variables make it possible to manipulate nominal scale data (i.e. “qualitative” measures) as independent variables as if they were interval scale data (i.e. “quantitative” measures) so that multiple regression and other forms of quantitative analysis may be performed. Each category on a nominal scale is assigned a dummy variable which can take only two values, 0 or 1. One category is “omitted,” and its value is

the like as variables for which we can fully account by including them as variables in multivariate analyses, intersectionality and related concepts ask that we treat the roles of these and other forms of marginalization as constructions and formations that are simultaneously foundational for and constituted by political, economic, and social processes.³¹

At its most basic level, intersectionality is a shortcut articulation of something that scholars across many disciplines have come to acknowledge—that inequality, like most social, political, and economic phenomena, is complicated.³² Many scholars have also come to acknowledge that inequalities are cumulative across time and space—both domestically and internationally—as well as over economic, political, social, and cultural spheres of life in ways that can rarely be isolated into single mechanisms or locations.³³ And many have also come to accept that categories such as race and gender are not constants that inhere in nature but are instead constructed through social and political processes and contestations. But while many scholars are sympathetic to and even persuaded by such claims, the divisions of labor within the academy make it difficult to conduct research that addresses that complexity and can instead create hurdles or impose costs on work that attempts to do so, feeding a fragmentation in the ways in which we study power by fueling incentives to

represented by the intercept, which is the value of the dependent variable when all other variables are zero; P. MCC. MILLER & M.J. WILSON, *A DICTIONARY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE METHODS* 34 (1983).

³¹ See Hancock, *supra* note 24, at 70.

³² *Id.* at 64.

³³ See Rita Kaur Dhamoon, *Considerations on Mainstreaming Intersectionality*, 64 *POL. RES. Q.* 230, 230–31 (2011).

stay within narrow areas—to pick a “niche” or a “thing” and define “what we are.”³⁴ These incentives can, in turn, interfere with our ability to understand inequality, which intersectionality suggests cannot be understood as uni-dimensional.³⁵ That is, as Ange-Marie Hancock explains, focusing on single causes leads to attempts to “treat multiple diagnosis problems with a single magic policy prescription,” thereby creating a permanent set of marginal groups who remain unaided by the proposed solutions.³⁶

In this light, intersectionality's emphasis on the centrality—and the co-constructedness—of multiple, dynamic, and enduring sources of inequality consequently reminds political scientists about the pitfalls of trying to identify single, isolable causal mechanisms for complicated inequalities. It reminds us that we cannot understand American politics, economics, or society without foregrounding and connecting multiple and co-constituted forms of inequality, oppression, and marginalization because they are “deeply embedded in the basic fabric of American institutions, law, and legal thought.”³⁷

To use an example that I have elaborated elsewhere, trying to understand and address the effects of gender without taking race and class into account obscures many issues that are unique to or that disproportionately affect disadvantaged subsets of women.³⁸

Gender discrimination in the labor force, for instance, “intersects with other forms of

34 Hancock, *supra* note 24, at 69.

35 *See id.* at 70.

36 *Id.*

37 Paul Frymer, Dara Z. Strolovitch & Dorian T. Warren, *New Orleans is not the Exception*, 3 DUBOIS REV. 37, 42 (2006).

38 *See* STROLOVITCH, AFFIRMATIVE ADVOCACY, *supra* note 25.

subordination based on race, sexuality, or class and cannot be effectively understood or addressed without addressing all of these dimensions.”³⁹ As such, if we treat the concentration of low-income women of color in low-wage and unsafe jobs in the United States purely as a function of gender discrimination, we ignore its racial, ethnic, and class determinants.⁴⁰ On the other hand, if we treat this concentration as a function solely of racial discrimination, without acknowledging its disparate impact on men and women, “we obscure the gendered nature of racial discrimination and class structures.”⁴¹ Both of these possibilities lead to piecemeal, and therefore incomplete understandings of and inadequate solutions to, “the many vulnerabilities that conspire together to create and reinforce one another through these labor force inequities that concentrate some women, but not all women, in jobs such as these.”⁴² Neglecting the multiple dimensions of this concentration also obscures the ways in which “intersecting forms of domination produce *both* oppression *and* opportunity” for differently situated subgroups such that more privileged women and people of color might, in fact, *benefit from* or *contribute to* such inequalities.⁴³

In my 2007 book *Affirmative Advocacy*, I show that such “single-axis” approaches are quite common among the advocacy organizations that represent women, people of

39 *See id.* at 25.

40 *Id.*

41 *Id.* at 25–26.

42 *Id.* at 26 (emphasis omitted).

43 Maxine Baca-Zinn & Bonnie Thornton Dill, *Theorizing Difference From Multiracial Feminism*, 22 FEMINIST STUD. 321, 327 (1996).

color, and low-income people in U.S. politics.⁴⁴ Instead of working on issues affecting intersectionally constituted concerns directly, officers at these organizations often assume either that *other* organizations will address them or that representation for disadvantaged subgroups will occur as a by-product of their efforts on other issues and that the benefits of their other efforts will “trickle down” to intersectionally-disadvantaged constituents.⁴⁵ When organizations *do* work on issues affecting intersectionally-disadvantaged groups, this work tends to be more symbolic and less vigorous than it is when it comes to other issues.⁴⁶ The net result of these dynamics is a paucity of attention to the issues that affect intersectionally marginalized groups—and a great deal of attention to issues that affect disadvantaged subgroups—by the interest groups that claim to speak for them.⁴⁷ As a consequence, the benefits of the policy gains made possible by their advocacy are distributed unevenly among members of these groups, with members of constituencies who are privileged “but for” one axis of disadvantage reaping the greatest benefits of their efforts. Such disparities serve, in turn, to amplify many inequalities *within* the populations represented by these organizations, further heightening stratification.⁴⁸ Conversely, organizations that demonstrate a commitment to an intersectional framework of representational redistribution that I call *affirmative advocacy* are more likely recognize the

44 See STROLOVITCH, *AFFIRMATIVE ADVOCACY*, *supra* note 25, at 26.

45 *Id.* at 27.

46 *Id.* at 121.

47 *Id.* at 126.

48 *Id.* at 27.

need to elevate issues affecting disadvantaged subgroups on their agendas and more likely as well to advocate extensively and effectively on their behalf.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

Writing in the mid-twentieth century about the state of “pressure group politics,” political scientist E. E. Schattschneider argued that through the process that he termed the “mobilization of bias,” the concerns of weak groups were “organized out” of politics by elites who manipulated the agenda toward their own interests.⁵⁰ As a consequence, he asserted, the interests of weak groups were not merely opposed but were actually excluded from the political agenda.⁵¹ Taken together, the ways in which intersectionality promotes interdisciplinarity and complicates our research about inequalities serves in turn to “unmobilize biases” within political science.

A full consideration of the debts owed by political science to feminist and critical race theory in general and to intersectionality in particular is, of course, impossible in this short article. Instead, I hope that the abbreviated examination that I have offered here makes clear some of the ways in which intersectionality’s interdisciplinarity has encouraged political scientists who study inequality to engage new frameworks, to bring a critical interdisciplinary lens to our research, and to push beyond single-axis analyses. In these and other ways, intersectional approaches have led to deeper understandings about systems of

49 *Id.* at 10.

50 *See* SCHATTSCHNEIDER, *supra* note 1, at 30.

51 *Id.* at 35.

marginalization and about the ways in which analyses and remedies that fail to address issues and inequalities that fall between the “standard categories” of race, class, and gender can serve to *compound* marginalization even as they may attempt to alleviate it.