Gustavo Borges Mariano
PhD candidate in Human Rights in Contemporary Societies, CES-UC

The becoming-intersectional assemblage analysis of violence

Jasbir Puar, in "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess': Becoming-intersectional in assemblage theory", reviews critiques on intersectionality, its first intentions, and offers the appropriate uses for this concept and for "assemblages", proposing the former as a becoming. Thus, the text reveals the limits of intersectionality by highlighting the differences with assemblages. Furthermore, the article opens new possibilities to analyze discriminations, inequalities and injustices. The author does not leave the concept intersectionality behind, but she discusses novel possible advances of conceptual analysis.

The author comments on intersectionality and its first uses as a way of keeping identities in a grid and not questioning the movements that induce positioning (Puar, 2012, p. 50). Her intention is to outline "the changed geopolitics of reception [...] as well as a tendency toward reification in the deployment of intersectional method" (Puar, 2012, p. 53-4). As Crenshaw (1991, p. 1244) presented three forms of intersectional analysis (structural, political and representational), Puar argues that the concept maintains "gender" as the primary category which is crossed by others, such as race and class, since authors use "intersectionality" to discuss gender issues in the forefront. "Nation", for instance, is a category that has not been theorized. Intersectionality, then, is not dynamic enough. It produces an Other because it is usually used to qualify "women of color" (WOC) as a specific difference marked by resistance, subversion and articulating a grievance (Puar, 2012, p. 52). Difference, then, is self-evident, not an infinite process of splitting.

On the other hand, assemblages do not assess the constitution of the subject, but to the bodily matter as its focus is on the relations of patterns, forces and resonances (Puar, 2012, p. 57). Puar suggests that the question must be: what do assemblages do? And she answers with four points: assemblages "deprivilege the human body as a discrete organic thing", because "we are enmeshed in forces, affects, energies, we are composites of information"; human bodies are not the only possible bodies as "multiple forms of matter can be bodies—bodies of water, cities, institutions, and so on"; "signification is only one element

of many that give a substance both meaning and capacity"; and categories such as race, gender and sexuality "are considered events, actions, and encounters between bodies, rather than simply entities and attributes of subjects" (Puar, 2012, p. 57-8).

Following this thought, Puar reads Crenshaw's metaphor of intersectionality (discriminations are like a car accident in the intersection of streets, it may be impossible to determine who caused the harm) and argues that "identification is a process" and "identity is an encounter, an event, an accident" (Puar, 2012, p. 59). Nevertheless, identity is still in the forefront, not the pattern of relations.

Jasbir Puar turns to her proposition of assemblages exemplifying it. The example comes from Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual*, and it highlights how dimensions can fold in one event-space and intensify affects, senses and energies in the body. He creates this scene where a man is watching Super Bowl and it reinforces codes of a violent masculinity, which is connected to the asymmetrical heterosexual (cisgender) relationship in that home. Her analysis outlines the patterns of relations through concepts like *affective conditions*; the *significance* as *sense*, *value* and *force* (e.g. the bodily force and energy); the *placements* that may be unaltered; the "*intensified relations*" that "give *capacities* to the entities"; "*matters with force*" or "*affective conductors*" (e.g. the TV); the *sense of potentiality*, a *becoming* (Puar, 2012, p. 60-1). All these tools may be used to analyze scene-events, or events-potential, which is not a way of theorizing on causality between images and violence (outside the images), but to analyze "affective intensifications" and the interplay between affect and identities in the meeting of technology, "bodies, matter, molecular movements, and energetic transfers" (Puar, 2012, p. 62).

In the end, the author acknowledges both the concepts, highlighting that assemblages "encompass not only ongoing attempts to destabilize identities and grids, but also the forces that continue to mandate and enforce them". Thus, the concept is for both doing and undoing of grids, identities and positionalities. However, intersectionality still is appropriate to the uses of discipline and punishment as the primary apparatus of power (she exemplifies with "them statistical outliers, or those consigned to premature death, or those once formerly considered useless bodies or bodies of excess" (Puar, 2012, p. 63).

Since the text was an attempt to differentiate the content, utility and deployment (Puar, 2012, p. 50), I will outline the first two elements according to Puar's account of them:

1) Content
   a. Intersectionality: grids constitute identities in the form of exclusion and "all identities are lived and experienced as intersectional—in such a way that identity categories themselves are cut through and unstable—and that all subjects are intersectional whether or not they recognize themselves as such" (Puar, 2012, p. 52). The focus is on the entities themselves.
   b. Assemblages: focus on patterns of relations, how matter is a doing, which is potentialized by forces and folded by different dimensions.
2) Utility
   a. Intersectionality: the analysis is structural, political and/or representational. As Crenshaw (1991) did, the cases are concrete and they investigate many aspects that interact (such as what is visible or not in the media, statistics, research on violence). The theory rethinks "identity politics from within" (Puar, 2012, p. 51). It "attempts to comprehend political institutions and their attendant forms of social normativity and disciplinary administration" (Puar, 2012, p. 63).
   b. Assemblages: unfold an event-potential and the becomings. "[A]ssemblages, in an effort to reintroduce politics into the political, asks what is prior to and beyond what gets established" (Puar, 2012, p. 63).

I would like also to further these utilities and (new) deployments of assemblages. For that purpose, first, I present the category of "intra-action" from Karen Barad, which is still within the framework, and then I turn to possible dialogues with Grada Kilomba and Rita Segato. My question here is: to what extent can this concept reach and how does it really address injustices? Jasbir Puar argues that the relations between intersectionality and assemblages produce new roadmaps to assess the relations between discipline and control, however this text does not totally clarify this point and that intention of "reintroducing politics into the political".

I concur with Ásta (2018) on the aim of theorizing about categories: "it is not an attempt to theorize about people's experiences directly, but rather an aspect of their social environment that influences that experience […] its aim is a deeper understanding of various social mechanisms that contribute to injustice" (p. 5). Theorizing is not important just for abstraction, but to explain reality in an academically performative way.

That is why Barad (2003) argues that the researcher (the "knower") is not exterior to the natural world. The observer may have an agential separability that (re)configures the "world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted" (Barad, 2003, p. 828). Agency is a "doing", a "being" in its intra-activity, which means that the components of a phenomenon are configured by an agential cut that enacts a causality among them: "On my agential realist elaboration, phenomena do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of "observer" and "observed"; rather, phenomena are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting "components."" (Barad, 2003, p. 815). This thought is implicit on Puar's account because she does not keep the separation between representation and entities to be represented (Barad, 2003, p. 804). The components from Barad may be read as the forces, conductors and senses, for instance. Assemblages may seem to be about identities, but it is not. Identities still rely on the metaphysical representationalism. This approach clarifies that the materialization of all bodies are intertwined with discursive practices – one is not prior to the other. Identities only seem stable, but intra-activity breaks this notion. As Barad (2003) states: "it is through specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter—in both senses of the word. The world is a dynamic process of intra-activity in the ongoing reconfiguring of locally determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and patterns of marks on bodies" (p. 817). Puar remarks that by focusing on patterns of relations.

However, intersectionality still seems more objective to discuss discriminations. How can discrimination be explained grounding on assemblages? If the problem for Puar is the focus on entities, how may patterns of relations add to analyze injustices? Once a colleague, a white woman, told me that her friend, a white woman, was racially discriminated in the workplace in Brazil. According to the Law, she could sue their black coworkers. How could we respond to this situation? Grada Kilomba and Rita Segato offer, in different manners, an explanation on how racism and sexism work, and this is the answer to why a white person may not suffer racism in Brazil.

For Kilomba (2019), the scene of violence is formed by the victim, the perpetrator and the public that represents the consensus on violence. This "third part" represents the social dimension of violence: white people do not speak when racism occurs and this silence hold the consensus. Rita Segato (2003, p. 33) also understands that violence against women (specially rape) perpetrated by men has a communitarian dimension: it is about subordinating

women and the feminine; it is a necessary act to enhance the man's personal symbolic economy aiming an "ideal of man"; and it is a demonstration of strength, virility and power to the community. Therefore, this violence is an act of communication to women, feminizing and subordinating their positions, and to men (the communitarian dimension), because it is a demonstration of the ability of dominance. These two examples of triangulation can be extended to other situations, but it should be noted that these are practices through which "boundaries are constituted, stabilized, and destabilized" (Puar, 2012, p. 57).

Drawing on these reflections (including Puar's), it could be argued that: (a) injustices related to race, class, gender, disabilities, nature, and others, are historical patterns of relations and they are structurally and discursively sustained by a consensus that acts through both silence and encouragement, therefore the consensus is an affective condition; (b) there is not a sense of potentiality to commit racism against white people or sexism against men in a community if the community does not have a historical consensus (they can be acts of violence, but racism and sexism are not traits of these acts).

This theorization explains both how discrimination is systematically supported and how privileges are preserved. Whereas Crenshaw focused on the experiences of subjects with intersectionality, assemblages may go beyond by revealing the affective conditions that sustain all the material positionalities marked by discursive boundaries. This theory invites to think about whiteness, masculinities, cisgenderism, heteronormativity as systems, discourses, and privileges.

Crenshaw (1991) states a solution to biased policies, for example: "women of color occupy positions both physically and culturally marginalized within dominant society, and so information must be targeted directly to them in order to reach them" (p. 1250). Puar (2012, p. 61), on the other hand, asks for what can prevent violence. Therefore, these are two different political tasks that may be tackled by the becoming-intersectional assemblage analysis.

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