# Episode #01 Intersectionality with Sophie Withaeckx

Language of Conversation: English

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**Darian**: Good morning, Constance.

**Constance**: Good morning, Darian and welcome to our podcast “Woke as Science”.

**Darian**: Thanks. It's nice to see you again after our last podcast experience with the DS Mindsets podcast. I'm excited to pick up the discussion again. We're running the show now, so maybe it makes a bit of sense to begin by explaining what we would like this podcast to be about.

**Constance**: Right. So, one might wonder as also did today's guest, why we would use the term “woke” in our title. Given all the problematic connotations it carries, and it also reproduces. So, we didn't pick the term “woke” lightly. It's a good example of a hijacked term. It was ripped out of its initial context, a call within the black community and later other marginalized communities for being alert to discrimination or exclusion and is now used as a derogatory umbrella term to label movements and individuals that address injustices as anti-freedom of speech, anti-science, anti-progress, or whatever. Labeling someone or a group as woke has become a rhetorical maneuver to justify ending a conversation before it basically can begin.

**Darian**: Yeah, it's really crazy and I think this has become now such a rhetorical tool, such a rhetorical weapon that we have climate science deniers saying that calls for action in response to climate science or in response to predictions about environmental degradation, catastrophe are super woke. And I think we should read that as meaning they're anti-capitalist and at the same time, they're calling wokeness anti-science. They're on the one hand saying that science or calls to act in response to science is woke or are woke. And on the other hand, wokeness is anti-science. So, I think no one ever accused the political right of being terribly conceptually consistent but sometimes I get the feeling that this is taking it to a new level of intentional confusion and weaponizing of terms.

**Constance**: Right. And next to all of this, we can also see that this umbrella term of woke has been taken over by those who consider themselves left, but distance themselves from the woke group whatever that group is, or however that group looks like. So recently I read an interview with left-wing moral philosopher Susan Neiman, and she said, and I quote, well, it's my own translation into English, the article was in dutch, “they, meaning the woke people have admirable emotions, but wrong theories”.

So, I guess the idea behind our podcast and using the title woke as science is to play with and explore exactly these associations of the term woke, and its associated expressions in all these discourses that we just talked about.

**Darian**: Okay. That's right. But I think it's also important to point out what Susan Neiman and people like her are saying, and I think it's a concern that's shared by many on the, let's say, broadly speaking, political left. Well, I think this expresses a concern about what we might call an identitarian or identity politics approach to political change or to political movements. What does that mean? Well, it's generally taken to be an approach that supposedly puts the claims or even the struggle for identity group interests over and above a general and indeed more universal struggle for human freedom or for human emancipation. So rather than situating the struggle for the rights of one group within the broader struggle for human emancipation, for human freedom, and seeing all of these struggles as deeply interconnected according to some on the political left, wokeness is really tied to a form of narrow identity politics and fragmentation of the political left in the face of a globally unified, far right threat of nuclear war, climate catastrophe, and other global or planetary threats and that's really where the danger. Of this sort of wokeness idea lies. Now, I think curiously, if we take these criticisms at their word, and I'm not sure that we should, then woke politics are really something different from the traditional universalist politics of the political left. And at best we can achieve something like allyship, right? So, kind of temporary alignment of interests and forces across identity groups in place of real coalitions and real unified movements that many people think are necessary to combat the challenges that we face today. Now, I'm sympathetic to the latter of this criticism, but I'm less convinced that this is what is happening.

So, I think in short, we have this idea of wokeness, which in the Netherlands and certainly within our university community, has fast become a focal point for a lot of contention and criticism. From both the left as we've been describing it, but also the right side of the political spectrum, and I think we want to try to unpack some of the underlying ideas and assumptions there.

**Constance**: Yeah. As we also set in our episode zero before, this is not about offering all the answers to the many questions that whoever uses the term woke raises, but to really take the time to unpack, but also work through some of these ideas that move our community. And for our first episode today, we want to talk about one of those ideas that is often misunderstood or used easily or lightly, or also hijacked maybe. And this idea is that of intersectionality.

**Darian**: All right, great. Let's get started.

**Constance**: Yes. Intersectionality has become a commonplace term when talking about social justice and D&I efforts in practice. So, plans that try to address anti-racism or gender equality are now also intersectional. An intersectional framing often as a solution to addressing social justice more holistically or fairly. But how does an intersectional lens really work? What insights does it offer? And how do these insights translate into social justice action, research, and concrete policy?

**Darian:** Okay, so these are some of the things we're going to talk about today and to help us with that, we have my excellent colleague from the philosophy department, Sophie Withaeckx. Sophie, you are a real expert when it comes to gender theory, feminist theory, and our topic for today, intersectionality. So, thank you so much for being here with us.

**Sophie:** I'm happy to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

**Darian:** Okay, Sophie, let's get right to it and start with the big question. What is intersectionality? Is it a method, a theory? How does it help us to see or to study the social world, to study questions of injustice? I think that there's quite a few things we need to try to explore today.

**Sophie:** Okay. Well, that's been a topic of discussion since some years. Like, what is intersectionality? Is it a theory? Is it a method? Is it a tool? But in fact, I think that's not the most interesting question. I think, as I will try to show also throughout this podcast is that intersectionality is especially something you do, a way of looking at things, a way of understanding identities and use that in a useful way, in the way you do research or in the way you practice policymaking as a way of recognizing the complexity of identities and making sure that no one falls through the cracks let's say.

**Constance:** Sophie, could you tell us maybe a bit more about the history of the concept?

**Sophie:** Okay. Yes. So, the word itself, intersectionality was coined as it is often said by Kimberly Crenshaw, who is an Afro American legal scholar, and she developed this word in the context of her criticism on anti-discrimination law in the United States. Her famous articles are in 1989 “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” and in 1991, she wrote another one “Mapping the Margins”. I advise everybody to read it because it's a bit complex, but it's actually a very clear introduction to what she meant with that concept. What she wanted to do in these articles is problematizing the tendency to treat race and sex as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis. So, at that time, she found important problems both in legal theory, anti-discrimination law, but also in activist movements.

So, there were the same kind of dynamics going on in both theory and activism that she wanted to address. And the basic problem was a kind of, Intersectional invisibility that occurred and that, eclipsed the experiences and specific positions, let's say, of black women. It was the case that she took, but of course you can apply to, other kinds of groups. She wanted to address that and that's how she started to, uh, develop intersectionality.

**Constance:** This intersectional invisibility or the eclipsing of experiences of people, can you give an example of that?

**Sophie:** Yes, so I will explain one of the legal cases that she described in her article. Um, a case called “DeGraffenreid versus General Motors”. What was this about? So General Motors was a company, an American company, who had only started to hire black women from 1964 when a Civil Rights Act was implemented and so no company could, uh, justify excluding certain categories of people. At that time there were already black men working at that company and they were already women working at that company. Then crisis hit, and the company was obliged to fire some people and they applied a seniority system, using the principle “Last in first out”. So those who were hired last would be fired first and that happened to be black women. So, the black women affected by these measures said well, this measure is disproportionately affecting us because we are black women, not just because we are blacks, because this is not affecting the men and not because we are women, because this is not affecting the white women. This is because of our specific position at the intersection of gender race.

So, they filed a complaint as black women, but the judge rejected the validity of such a suit on behalf of black women, um, precisely because when applying anti-discrimination law, the only tools they had was to say, well do we see any racism going on? No. Because the black men are still there. Do we see any sexism going on? No. Because this is not affecting the, the women and, but then the white women. So there occurred a kind of eligibility of these specific experiences that came together in that group of people. So this was a case and there were others then that Crenshaw used to say, well, this is not working if you use this single axis type of reasoning, you take identities as just composed of a kind of monolithic identity then some groups who combine multiple, identities, multiple marginalized identities, they will not be recognized in complex cases where these experiences come together and can not just disentangle them. So, these were the kinds of things that she wanted to denounce when developing this concept of intersectionality.

**Constance**: This also really shows how a policy that is created to protect a single axis group is not protecting every member of that group.

**Sophie**: Indeed. That was the issue and I think she was the first to raise that in a very clear way in the context of, legal theory and anti-discrimination law. But now the idea behind intersectionality, the idea that different aspects of identity and different systems of discriminations intersect in people's experiences, was not exactly new. So, Crenshaw was the one who called it intersectionality, but black women had been theorizing about this for decades, even before she coined the term. And so, in activist movement, the issue was in a similar way, that in the many identities based activist movements that had a reason since the 1960s, they were also organized according to one identity. You had a black anti-racist movement, you had a labor movement, which was mostly dominated by white men, you had a feminist movement, but the mainstream movement was also dominated by white women. And you saw the same kind of exclusions taking place because in the black anti-racist movement, for example, the prototypical experience of racism was one, taken from a black man's experience and women's specificity for example, the issue of sexual violence against black women was not something that was addressed. In the white women's feminist movement, you saw the same thing happening. They were fighting, for example, for the rights to gain access to the work floor. But black women said, well, we do not have to fight for that access because we have been forced to work for white women for decades. So, their kinds of desires and needs at that moment were very different than, the ones that were addressed by white women. All these claims and needs of course were important. It's not to discredit anyone's needs at that moment, but just to say, well, if you don't take those differences into account and then you will miss certain experiences and your activism will not benefit every member of that group.

**Darian**: Okay. So, I think that's clear, but just to ask a couple of questions for clarification. When you talk about a single axis, we are talking about something like a category like race or gender or class, for example. Am I getting that right?

**Sophie:** Indeed. Yeah. So, the fact of organizing according to one identity and then taking that identity to be kind of monolith, the kind of homogeneous whole, and the idea, that there's one agenda that will automatically benefit everybody, that was idea that was challenged by pointing to these differences of experiences.

**Darian:** And when we're talking about the intersection of these different axes, so the example you gave, which was a nice one I thought, was about the intersection of gender and race, for example, in a particular context relating to employment. Right? But you said also that we are always here talking about marginalized identities or marginalized categories or marginalized axes. If I think about it, of course, every identity in a way is intersectional, right? So, I am a middle-class male, or I'm a wealthy male on the global scale certainly. But are those not relevant categories when we're talking about intersectionality? Do you see what I mean?

**Sophie:** Yes. So, the initial idea is indeed, kind of that, basic insight and the initial attention is still there towards those who become most vulnerable through these kinds of exclusions. And so initially a lot of attention went indeed to those who are not heard at all. So black women or black queer women for that part. At a certain moment nobody really cared, nobody really heard them because the mainstream attention was so much focused upon those people who were more privileged but taught as being representative for the whole group. Now in further development of intersectionality, indeed this means that these kinds of complexities apply to everyone, of course. And in a way, it also complicates the positions of those usually thought as more privileged, because then you start to see that on certain axes of your identity, you can indeed be privileged but this does not mean that you will be privileged in every situation. So, take the example of the white heterosexual man. He might be the one benefiting most from the way the system is constructed now. But if that person is disabled or if he's not a heterosexual or a working-class man for example, of course he will not have the same benefits as any other white men. So, in a sense, it applies to everyone, and it helps you to see the complexity of every kind of identities, even privileged ones.

**Constance**: And it shows also that it's a lens to apply to a certain context, right? Because these axes of privilege might change in whatever context you find yourself. Whereas in one time and place you might be privileged through certain identities, but in others you are not.

**Sophie**: Yes, definitely. I can also give an example of how privilege can also create specific kinds of vulnerability. This shows for example in research on violence. So again, a lot of attention widely goes to how women are affected by violence because they are disproportionately affected. But then if you look at a situation of men who can become victim of domestic violence, you see actually a heightened vulnerability because on the one hand, they're privilege can help them to escape more easily this kind of situations, so they're less likely to become a victim. But at the same, some men can also become trapped in a certain way because if they say, “I'm being abused by my wife”, or go to the police and want to talk about it, of course you are less likely to be taken seriously because the ideal of masculinity makes it more difficult for people to accept you as a victim. That creates in a certain way a vulnerability for people who are otherwise very privileged. So, it's also important to take that into account when studying problems like violence or others.

**Constance:** That also reminds me of the research we did at UM into sexual assault in our student population, where you could see that the majority of victims are female identifying. But when you look into the male identifying group which is very small, queer men were more at risk, to experience sexual violence than queer women.

**Sophie:** Mm-hmm. . . Yeah, indeed. So, sexuality is definitely also an axis that creates additional vulnerabilities. But then look in situations of war and unfortunately such things are probably also happening now in Ukraine, for example. Sexual violence against women has become an issue of concern and has become more recognized. But what is still less visible is sexual violence against men and precisely against heterosexual men, because sexual assaulting them is like the way of taking away their masculinity from them and making a group very vulnerable. And it's very difficult for such men to talk about that of course. So again, you see how a privilege can, in a certain situation also become a specific point of vulnerability.

**Darian:** I can see that very clearly. So that's a great example about exactly as you say, how a privilege can become a point of vulnerability. But is that still a case where we would say we are applying an intersectional lens, or is there something different happening there?

**Sophie**: I think it is because you might look here at the intersection between gender and sexuality, for example and complicate the category of gender, which in the very binary understanding of it, it is usually masculinity that is taken to be powerful against femininity. But here when it becomes combined with sexuality and sexuality or assumed sexuality, it doesn't even matter how those people identify. But if you see how it becomes combined precisely to attack a certain group where they find themselves most vulnerable, then that's certainly an example of intersectionality. Now, an important thing is that not all research claims itself as intersectional when also applying an intersectional lens. And you don't have to do that either. I think it's just about, recognizing the complexity of any identity and trying to avoid that kind of monolithic thinking or just realizing that gender is not just only this understanding of it, but it has much more layers than is sometimes assumed

**Darian:** And key to this seems to be the idea of vulnerability.

**Sophie:** Yeah, vulnerability and invisibility. Indeed. Yeah.

**Constance:** I also read in one of your forthcoming chapters that, because of this debate, whether should all intersection counts, or should vulnerability indeed be foregrounded when we use an intersectional lens, you raised the point of intersectionality is an ethical commitment. It's a moral attitude. Can you elaborate a bit on that?

**Sophie:** Yeah. I wrote at article because intersectionality has become a very much used word, very popular. You see it popping up almost everywhere but not always in the sense that Crenshaw and other theorists intended it. So, you do have to be careful to see exactly how people understand it.

So that's one thing. But another thing is that within feminist, circles also there have been fierce debates about what exactly intersectionality should be like. And there are still these two branches, one saying intersectionality is a kind of lens. There are also attempts to develop it further or to improve it in a way.

But the idea is that you can apply it to any kind of identity. Of course, it's important to look at those, people who are still very much affected by racism and hetero was sexism and other kinds of discriminations. But you can also easily apply it to study white privileged women in politics, for example and it doesn't matter. It's so useful that you can just use it everywhere and we don't have to talk about race or black women at all if you don't want to. So that's one branch.

The second one, is a kind of criticism that emerged, especially from women of color. It's not that neatly divided, but there's a concern that intersectionality is completely divorced from its rooting in black feminist thought and it's now being taken away in a way that again, makes invisible the role of black feminist theories in developing that theory.

So in that branch, there's a kind of urgency to say, no, we cannot just take race out and say, oh, let's just talk about white men now and see how intersectional they are because this is precisely the point towards the ongoing violence and racism and marginalization that is still taking place and that is affecting some kinds of categories in much worse ways. You cannot just take this all away and ignore all that history.

So, these are the two positions that have a reason and that have also been named, by Jennifer Nash “The Intersectionality Wars” because the positions became so much entrenched and a lot of debates and theories and energy that was put into defending these two positions. My take on it, not only my take, but I think a way to get out of this and to not lose energy in discussions about who owns intersectionality and who is doing it the right way, et cetera, was to look at how you *do* intersectionality, and here I'm following, Crenshaw myself. So, you got these two strengths, let's say. One, advocating that intersectionality should be applicable to about everything. also making it into something more abstract, sometimes even divorced from actual people's experiences. So, the whole kind of theoretical musings some scholar called it about, well, intersectionality is not yet a complete theory, maybe we should make it into something more complete, we should improve it. It's not a good method. What should we do to make it methodologically better? So that was one issue. Another tendency is to focus on groups who are quite privileged. And in a sense, it's not wrong to study white women in politics, of course, because there are also issues of exclusion, but there are rightful concerns, I think when it only is about white women again, because then again, the question is, well, this was in initially meant to make visible the experiences of people who become even more marginalized if you only focus on certain aspects of identity and keep others out. These were the kind of discussions and questions and challenges that were taking place. So, Crenshaw formulated it like this: “My take on how to know intersectionality has been to *do* intersectionality. To assess what intersectionality can produce is to canvas what scholars, activists, and policy makers have done under this rubric. Does the invitation to measure and evaluate intersectionality as theory in abstract, has not drawn my engagement over the years?

[00:25:29] Indeed, in the 20 years since writing ‘De-marginalizing’, I have had neither occasion to debate whether intersectionality is an overarching theory of oppression, nor to prescribe or predicted limits. What I have done was to use intersectionality as a prism for examining a host of issues, conditions, policies, and rhetoric” end of quote.

And I completely subscribe to this way of seeing it because this is really about what can you do with it and that's not that complicated because when you're studying issues of racism and discrimination and violence, it's kind of obvious to see what you can do with it and how it can benefit people who are usually left out. So, for example, in a project on violence that I'm supervising, we start with a very broad question ‘what are experiences with violence?’. But we know as researchers that we must be very careful to be mindful of the voices that we do not hear. If you just launch a call, for example, to get victims of violence, to talk to you about your experience, you usually get the kind of more privileged people that can hear and see such calls and that are more eager to respond to your call. And indeed, even in this group, there are of course a very problematic experience that you should hear, but you know that you must do an extra effort to reach undocumented immigrants, for example, because they will not easily reply to this call. You must do an additional effort to get LGBTQAI people to respond to you. So, these are very obvious and concrete matters that come to mind when you just keep intersectionality in the back of your head, and you don't need a fully fledged theory about the world to do this kind of thing. So, in this sense it's simple. And that's what I really subscribe to when seeing intersectionality as something that you *do* rather than to keep on abstractly thinking about it, how we should develop it as a theory,

**Constance:** As someone who is writing policy this is interesting because for me, I can completely see how intersectionality is, as Crenshaw says, a prism for examining, for example, policies, right? To understand how a policy which is designed to counteract discrimination might foster discrimination because marginalized groups were not considered when designing the policy. So, I can see how it, after the effect, can help to examine the usefulness of a policy. And now to turn it around, how does it help in setting up the policy, and writing a policy, as you want a policy to cover all the experiences. You already gave some examples when you do work to prepare the policy, you would invite people who are knowledgeable on the experiences that you're trying to address with the policy. And you must do an active effort of inviting more people in. And now I'm interested in the next step. So, how do we write a policy? Because a policy is usually an overarching document. How do we write this still doing justice to these often overlooked, marginalized voices within the group that we are trying to support with the policy?

**Sophie**: I think the first thing that we should consider is like I said, intersectionality is used and interpreted in many ways that is not necessarily aligning with the way it was initially formulated. I have, proposed an understanding of intersectionality as something that is mainly ethical, so it's something that you do, but also with keeping certain values in mind. I think it's important for every kind of policymaking that wants to label itself as intersectional, to be mindful of where it comes from and what it is supposed to do. And what it was supposed to do is being mindful of this kind of intersectional invisibilities that are taking place and that affect people that are mostly marginalized. Intersectionality has also been very strongly connected to its activism, and it's a call for social justice. So, it's also not something that you can’t just do from a distance. This does not mean that every researcher must go on the street to protest. You can do that, but you don't have to. Of course, research can also be engaged in another way. But if you keep in mind the basic value of social justice, this means that you commit yourself to a certain goal and that you commit yourself as an institution, for example, to critically reflect on how your institution is responsible in reproducing inequalities, about recognizing these inequalities and then taking measures to do something about it. That means that it's not just something that you can write into a policy or that you can just broadcast to say ‘Hey, we are so intersectional”, this has serious consequences for yourself as an institution. And it asks for a lot of self-reflexivity. And often it happens that it's more something what Sirma Bilge called “Ornamental Intersectionality”. So, people in institutions like to align themselves with a label of intersectionality because it sounds good. You show yourself that you are with a good cause. But then when it comes to really addressing sexism and racism on the work floor, that's something else, or about calling out professors who are guilty of sexual harassment for example. There's still a lot of resistance to address these kinds of values. So, if you do take the label of intersectionality, remember that this is about values of social justice and that you should be able to really work on change and work on yourself and recognize that it's not enough just to have the label or just to put it in a report, you really will have to do something.

**Constance:** to, that is the moral responsibility that you were also talking about earlier.

**Sophie**: Yes. Yeah.

**Constance:** So that is it sort of accountability that if we jump on the intersectionality train, because it is on vogue at the moment that it comes with that responsibility and we have to take that seriously.

**Sophie:** Yes, indeed. Yeah. So that's the one thing. The second thing, and that's also an interesting dynamic, is that you often see that intersectionality when it is imposed top down, it often becomes a tool of disciplining and even of excluding certain emancipatory movements because you often see it now, not only in universities, but also on higher policy levels for example, governments who want to distribute funding to grassroots organizations. They put intersectionality as a criterion. You have to be intersectional, you have to show that you are intersectional or if not, you will not get funded. But then the kinds of interpretations that then are used to disqualify certain plans from getting funded are also often quite peculiar. What you often see and I have also lived through these kind of things myself, as a researcher you submit a funding application, focusing on racism, let's say, you say, I also am using an intersectional lens to be mindful of the kind of internal, differences and, and oppressions taking place. Then you often get the questions, okay, you're talking about race and gender, but what about disability? What about age and why are you not talking about class? Then it often happens that they take intersectionality as being about all kinds of differences, and you get punished because you focus on two or three axes of discrimination and not more. This is of course a very absurd interpretation of intersectionality. It has never meant now you have to study all kinds of discrimination at once. No, it's about when you focus on a certain problem, on a certain topic, which you should do as researcher or as policymaker, you cannot solve everything at once. But when you take this particular axes of discrimination that you are mindful of the other kinds of differences that can come into play within that particular dynamic. There's a scholar Matsuda who wrote also a much quoted article and who called that “Asking the Other Questions”. For example you are studying, studying gender inequality in a particular setting, and you ask the question ‘I'm mainly focusing on gender. I see there's a clear, problem with that but what has racism to do with it? What has class to do with it? What has sexuality to do with it?’ And from there you start to examine how race and gender in that situation are entangled with these other forms of discrimination. And you focus on those who are relevant in that case, so you don't have to do everything. But indeed, you do have that dynamic then that certain interpretations get used against you and again, that can result in research on race being discredited because it's not seen as being intersectional enough. That is also a kind of danger that diversity workers also should be mindful about when they are asked to do intersectional policymaking, like what does that mean for the people who, who ask you to do that?

**Darian:** Yeah. I want to ask a question about that. Do you think this danger of being denied funding or denied access or denied whatever, on the grounds of not being intersectional enough, is itself a kind of weaponization or political use of this idea of intersectionality? So almost a kind of distraction tactic that you have to take into account so many things that you would never actually possibly be able to take into account all of these things. And in the end, you just get caught up in trying to tick all the boxes or satisfy everyone. And what gets left behind was the actual initial impetus towards change or towards addressing some form of social injustice.

**Sophie:** Mm-hmm. Well, it is difficult to see how deliberate this is. Of course, I do not know if it's a complot to deliberately discard anti-racist institutions. For some people it may be that way that they think ‘we understand intersectionality better than those racialized people who actually invented it’. I do not deny that this can happen. Sometimes I think it can be done with good intentions, people maybe just want to do it well, but then are actually not familiar with what intersectionality actually is. And then you get this kind of distortions and misunderstandings. So, I would not always see it as done with bad intentions all the time, but I do think the top-down imposition, that's a problem. I think, again, in the spirit of where intersectionality comes from, it's a bottom-up thing. I don't think you, you don't even have to hold on to the label itself, but the basic principle was: Listen to those people who are most vulnerable, who are usually not heard and not seen, because there lies a lot of knowledge and wisdom in their experiences. And you need those experiences to understand how the whole system works. Because if you keep on ignoring these perspectives then you only listen to certain voices. You do things that might be beneficial for those persons, but again, the kind of exclusions will continue to reproduce themselves. So that's the kind of message that's important. I would advise also in case of policy making, when you get the message, you should work intersectionally, you start with listening to those people who are usually not listened to, whether you call it intersectional or not, but go to them and see what's their experience at university. You will learn a lot of things that will be so important for you to really change policies and to see where the problems are.

**Darian:** I think what you just said is so important because you made the point that it's not just a kind of political concept, it's also an epistemic concept, right? And in that sense, it's also a kind of scientific concept. So, it's not just a concept, not just a lens, a set of practices, however we want to think about it, that's relevant to political activity, but also to our epistemic activity, to the forms of knowledge creation, knowledge curation, knowledge transfer within the university, for example, as well. That's a really important point, and I think something that maybe gets often a little bit set aside or a little bit forgotten when we have these discussions. I mean, that's the way we framed it, we framed it initially is this political idea, but you make the point well that it's, it's broader than that. It's about listening and learning from those sources of knowledge, sources of information that you would normally not have access to or for whatever reason do not listen to.

Sophie**:** Yes, definitely. It has a very strong epistemological component, and in that sense it has aligned and developed alongside notions like standpoint theory and subjugated knowledge, which was also developed in Marxist theory, the idea that you can only understand oppression if you take into account all the perspectives and all the experiences and listen to those voices and those knowledges that were usually not seen as valid knowledge. It also implies a whole critique on western, euro-centric understandings of what proper knowledge is and what a proper knower is. There is also an ontological critique on the notion of identity, because the notion of identity that is being criticized is one that has assumed that identity is just unitary and a homogenic thing and that there is something as objectivity and neutrality. That's also the basic problem and also one of the central critiques of feminist theory. Of course, the kind of knowledge that that is sold to us as being mainstream and applicable to all has always been produced from one standpoint. So, you miss out a lot of things. It is not to say that knowledge is useless, not at all, of course, but to make it more complete and to make it more relevant for all people that are recognized as human beings, you need to take into account those other perspectives.

**Constance:** So basically, what I hear you say is that if we take intersectionality as an epistemic approach to understand what is happening in a given context in a given moment in time, that it feeds back in. Because my question is, can intersectionality and a single axis approach coexist? And what I hear you say is that if you take the time to listen to all the voices, you can distill a more complete picture that helps you in a single axis approach should you need one in a certain moment. Is that correct?

**Sophie:** Yeah. In a way it can still coexist because although there is a huge critique on identity politics and it's monolithic implications at the same time, there's also a recognition that you also need those groups. So, that's a bit paradoxical, of course but how have these kind of groups come about? How have these categories come about? They only come about in a dynamic of labeling, and not just labeling, but also then actively excluding and oppressing certain groups or denying certain of these groups humanity. So, the category of women, you could still say for white women at least, they're still humans. Although they're a different category of humans. But for black people of course, and indigenous people and other kind of racialized groups, they were even expelled from the category of humanity. Or the same for LGBTI people, they were also often seen as abnormal beings, not part of our normal, proper human community.

So, in a way such groups get and created through these kinds of systems, and in a way then organizing under the label of such groups becomes also a way to contest these kinds of oppressions and these communities also give a lot of strength, input and empowerment to people. So, it can become something that also brings people together and helps organizing. Intersectionality theory also recognizes the strength of these movements, it just warns against them, do not reproduce the kinds of dynamics that you want to denounce. So, there's a kind of paradox, but a kind of recognition that you also need those groups, and it's also okay to organize under the label of those groups. The notion of “Strategic Essentialism” as famously pronounced by Spivak, is a notion that very well explains how people try to deal with it. It's the idea that let's just accept that we need those groups, and we need those communities and do not deny their importance, but also be aware that this should be strategic. Always be aware that identity is more complex than just this one identity. And within those groups, people should be mindful towards each other and towards the differences that also make for different experiences. And if you manage to do that, then it can work, but it also implies that in the future we might not need those groups anymore. So, if you take the critique on identity seriously then that means that in the future where there's no exclusion at all based on these categories, maybe we might not need them anymore.

**Constance**: We have groups then.

**Sophie**: Who knows? Probably.

**Darian:** Yeah, I think that's so important, what you just said. Listening to the account and the descriptions of intersectionality that you've given up to now, I'm nodding, I'm agreeing with everything, and then I have this sort of old school single axis left itch in the back of my brain that's saying, wait a minute, if you think about we're facing a political right that is unified, that's willing to accept all the trade-offs, you look at the way Evangelicals vote for Donald Trump, for example, thinking we don't care what kind of actual person this is. He's going to advance the policies we care about. We see, when it comes for example to questions about environmental degradation, we see this enormous challenge. And then often, when we think about the political left, we think, it's just continuous infighting, continuous fracturing, continuous fragmenting. And, the classical thing, here we go we turn on ourselves again, we accuse each other whether it's Trotsky, it's versus the Stalinists and it's the same sort of repetition of this dynamic where we accuse each other and eat our own movement, basically. But I think the picture that you paint, which is really a hopeful one, is so much different from that, right? It's not a picture where a kind of, single axis, unified movement isn't possible, right? It's not a picture where at best we can be allies with each other for a moment in time but really what we're concerned about is our own interests. It's much different picture than that, I think. Am I right in my hopefulness? Please, tell me yes.

**Sophie:** Yeah, I think indeed it is hopeful, and I think a really nice way to look at it is, what Crenshaw called, look at identities as coalitions, not as unified wholes, but as coalitions. So, there is a kind of common unifier for example, blackness, people who have the experience of being discriminated because of their blackness or whatever. It is constructed, but it creates a common experience, so it is real in that sense. But keep in mind that this is a coalition of people who have this common unifier, but at other times also have differences, but still can find themselves in that unity. So, this is a coalition of men and women and queer people. This is a coalition of upper class people and lower class people. This is a coalition of young people and older people. This is a coalition of Afro Americans and people from the African diaspora. I found that a very useful way to think about it because you have the idea of a group that gets together, but at the same time understands that we get together here to address a certain issue, and we get together also here to recognize how we are also different internally and how we can overcome these differences to still, wage that struggle together.

**Darian:** Yeah, when I listen to you explaining this, what seems clear to me or what becomes much clearer to me, is that this isn't about finding the fishers or finding the fractures in the coalition and working in those and aggravating them. Actually, this is about finding the glue for the coalition. This is not about breaking up the coalition into all these little identity groups that maybe then come together, maybe then are allied at certain points or not? No, this is about finding a way in which this coalition with all its fishers, with all of its cracks in it, which we all know are there, can stay together and can find a way to express itself in a unified manner while still acknowledging all this difference that's within it.

**Sophie:** Yeah, indeed. That's also how I see it. Intersectionality is indeed sometimes seen as a kind of threat to the unity of the movement, but I also see it in a reverse way that precisely by recognizing the fishers and even sometimes by giving some time and space to subgroups who might need it at that moment. In a way, this is all meant to make the group itself stronger and to keep its unity in a certain way.

**Constance**: I think you're all hopeful.

**Sophie and Darian**: Yes.

**Constance**: That's good. That's very nice. But what I'm wondering is, it sounds all like the most useful approach, right? To find the moments, the coalitions necessary to advance social justice for a given, be it constructed identity group. How does it look like in practice? Because in the end, if we're talking about class struggles or, the struggles of blackness, how do we make sure that the ones that feel marginalized in the bigger picture, in that moment are being included? Because, theoretically it sounds wonderful, but how does that look like in practice? How do we convince a norm group that defines what is the identity issue that we are fighting with, that sets those norms having blind spots to those marginalized groups within the bigger picture. How do we do this in practice to also make sure that everyone is mindful of those marginalized experiences?

**Sophie:** Well, I think the feminist movement in its whole is a good example of how progress has been made in that sense. Because indeed, when the most important or loudest critiques were made against the feminist movement in the 1970s in the full second wave, that was still a difficult message to give and such things were usually then ignored or indeed seen as now you are dividing the movement. You should not be talking about lesbianism, or you should not be talking about race because this will divide us. We are all women point. So that was the starting point. But since then, a lot of progress has been made and there are a lot of efforts that have been made worldwide in the feminist movement to give actual space to these experiences and to put also issues on the agenda that were not necessarily the issues of the mainstream white women that were first more, visible or more audible in the movement. But we have realized that sometimes we have to take a step back. We must enlarge the agenda. We must give credit to those people who developed certain theories, which were so inspiring for us. So I do see an important evolution there. Look at the women's marches against Trump, for instance. That's often given as an example of how things had been changed because the ideas for these marches came from different places at once. So instead of people saying, no, it's my idea, there was immediately the reflex of let's just get together, give credit to those people who have taken initiatives in those different places, let's step together, give everyone their place. Not always the same voices that should be talking, et cetera. so, there was this reflex or it was seen as much more obvious to give space to those people who need it, who deserve it. Even in the Me-Too movement there were also some issues first that it became a thing when that actress started forwarding the hashtag, the hashtag itself had already been developed before by a black feminist activist in New York, I think. The reflex was also easily made, like let's be mindful that this did not start with Alyssa Milano, it did started before. And they were efforts made to go and find those women who had initially started it and give them their place in the movement. So, I do see a lot of progress and I think the same is also happening in the labor movement, for example, where more attention is given to the very specific situation of undocumented female immigrants, for example. These issues are taken seriously and people write about it, and people try to build more solidarity. So yeah, I do think it works in in certain ways.

**Constance:** Now I'm also hopeful. Thank you so much Sophie for all your elaborations and answers to our questions. I think what I take away from this are two things, that intersectionality as a lens offers us indeed a way to engage with social injustice, but also to analyze artifacts like laws or policies to really understand why a certain policy might not be as useful as we thought it was when it was created. The other thing I will take away is that it's also an epistemic approach to any sort of social injustice activity that we are busy with, and that it really asks a sort of moral attitude to be mindful towards voices that are often overheard in our activities. So, thank you very much for this.

**Darian:** Yeah, thanks Sophie. That was really great. I'm so glad we got to speak to you to get a better understanding of this important idea. And for me, I think what was maybe most enlightening things was this idea that intersectionality, despite how it's often depicted, isn't about smaller and smaller, narrower and narrower groups, but is actually the glue that holds the unified front for human emancipation, justice, however you want to put these, the broad, lofty, universal goals. We need a glue that holds all this together and intersectionality is a way of thinking about that. Thank you so much.

**Constance:** It should be the glue.

**Darian:** It can be the glue.

**Sophie:** It might be the glue.

**Constance:** Sophie, do you have any last words?

**Sophie:** Well, I want to thank you both for inviting me and thank you all for the interesting insights that you have drawn from this. I would just want to end for people who want to know about intersectionality, go and read. There's a lot of material out there. Go and read Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Bell Hooks Ange Hancock. And even outside of Black Feminist Theory you have people like Gloria Anzaldúa and many others. Sylvia Tamali for Africa, for example. There are many interesting things out there. So go and educate yourself, and then we can continue the conversation. Thank you.

**Constance:** We will add these references on the website so that people can find them more easily. Thank you!

**Darian:** Thank you Sophie!

**Sophie:** Thank you.

End of recording.