

Introduction

Critical perspectives on gender, politics and violence

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1. For a discursive approach to gender-based violence

Among scholars and practitioners alike, gender-based violence against political actors is increasingly recognized as a global phenomenon of interest, to be problematized and theorized vis-à-vis traditional definitions of ‘violence in politics’ or ‘violence against politicians’ (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2019). In particular, there is growing awareness and evidence that, as women advance into a traditionally male-dominated political arena, they are targeted with instances of violence which are distinctive for both their sheer quantity and vitriolic quality (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018).

Existing social and political perspectives on the phenomenon are characterized by different (and often competing) conceptualizations of the role played by gender in determining the forms, motives and impacts of violence against political actors (see Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo 2019 for an overview). This is partly because the very dyadic relationship between politics and violence has often proven difficult to disentangle, and partly because the literature on political violence has only recently taken on a gendered focus (ibid.). Gender-based violence has been explored from a traditional perspective on political violence, showing how the phenomenon differentially affects men and women (see Davies and True 2019) as well as from perspectives more firmly grounded in gender and politics, where it is commonly labelled “Violence Against Women In Politics” (VAWIP) (Krook 2017, 2020; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016, 2019).

This Special Issue contributes to the current debate by offering a complementary perspective: through current international case studies, it investigates consolidated and emerging discursive practices which characterize gender-based violence against political actors as an increasingly mainstream phenomenon. In particular, it explores a vast array of forms of “semiotic violence”, an umbrella-term recently introduced by Krook (2020) to refer to the forms of gender-based

violence which mobilize semiotic resources to injure, discipline and subjugate women. As part of a broader continuum with other forms of (physical, sexual, psychological and economic) violence, the proliferation of semiotic violence contributes to the delegitimization of women's political actions and their ultimate exclusion from the political arena. Being one of the most widespread and trivialized forms of violence against women in politics (henceforth, WIP), it fosters a broader and transversal reinforcement of gender stereotypes and gendered social roles which affect women as a whole (ibid.).

This discursive outlook on gender-based violence is grounded in a conceptualization of language use not only as responsible for constructing and reproducing social identities, but also as constitutive in creating systems of knowledge and belief. In this respect, this Special Issue aims at exploring critically how discourse produces, enforces and 'naturalizes' ideologies that preclude the equal participation of women in the political sphere. While not myopically regarded as the only ingredient of social practice, discourse represents a crucial meaning-making element which "internalizes all the other elements without being reduced to them, because social relations, social identities, cultural values and consciousness are in part semiotic" (Fairclough 2001, 231).

In particular, this Special Issue explores the central role played by the new affordances of digital media as established sites for the (re-)formation and consumption of information, values and worldviews. With ordinary users being empowered to the level of "prosumers" (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) in the context of 'democratized' and loosely censored digital environments, we have been witnessing an ever-growing number of bottom-up discourse formations characterized by a high prevalence of violence, hostility and abuse (KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018). This also means that digital media platforms have come to represent authentic data hauls for the investigation of such discursive phenomena across the Social Sciences.

Against this backdrop, this Special Issue advances a critical conceptualization of gender-based violence, which does not dismiss the phenomenon as a mere Internet trend or a simple consequence of the new social media communication paradigm and its affordances. On the contrary, the phenomenon is approached as a consolidated techno-social issue, where digital communication technologies have facilitated the replication and extension of pre-existing hierarchical gender and power relations.

Furthermore, both the discursive approach to gender-based violence and the focus on the facilitating role of digital and social media represent a call for transdisciplinarity. Contributions to this Special Issue are characterized by conceptualizations of the phenomenon at a complex intersection between political science, digital media scholarship, discourse theorisation and critical feminist explica-

tion. In the same vein, they showcase innovative and integrated methodologies which account for multimodality as an intrinsic feature of the social media communication paradigm, as well as for the complex multi-directional processes of recontextualization which characterize the production and consumption of digital content.

By introducing a critical discursive perspective on gender, violence and politics, this Special Issue hopes to open new prospects for the in-depth investigation of a pervasive phenomenon with a devastating impact on democracy. Grounded in a conceptualization of gender-based violence as discourse, it also aims at bridging the existing gap between the macro aspects of socio-political critique and the micro aspects of linguistic analysis in the investigation of complex social phenomena.

On the one hand, the plasticity of discursive approaches in social scientific fields other than linguistics is yet to be explored to its fullest potential. A more rigorous and thorough discursive turn in fields such as sociology or political science, for example, could cast a more inductive light on social issues requiring urgent attention. This discursive turn would also support the in-depth investigation of gender-based violence as well as other forms of prejudice, such as discrimination and exclusion based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or religion, among others. This requires departing from the descriptive analysis of a limited number of data sources to engage in more comprehensive explorations of the dialectical relationship between language in action and the construction and negotiation of social identities. Further, it entails engaging in exhaustive mappings of discursive topics, discursive strategies and their related linguistic forms of realisation (Reisigl and Wodak 2015) as well as in diachronic explorations of the discursive shifts which support the enaction, perpetration and normalisation of ideologies with a devastating impact on social cohesion and equality (Krzyżanowski 2020).

On the other hand, some recent research trends in linguistics have been characterized by new forms of transdisciplinarity which seemingly almost aim at reconfiguring the field as a 'hard science'. With corpora becoming larger and larger, partially under the growing social importance of digital communicative practices and their investigation, we have witnessed a growing inclination towards quantitative, statistical and software-based approaches. Such methods can support our efforts in painting a much bigger and more comprehensive picture of language use in our 'always-on' contemporary world, where data keeps piling up on itself by the second. These are valuable and thrilling prospects which allow us to answer research questions that we would not have even dared to formulate only a decade ago. Yet, these approaches can easily translate into a self-congratulatory parade of methodological prowess and an anaemic exhibition of data, if the investigation does not primarily aim at addressing social scientific research questions

and is not appropriately integrated into a critical exploration of the social semiotic value of such communicative practices.

While the association between Critical Discourse Studies and Corpus Linguistics tools has come to be firmly established as a “useful methodological synergy” (Baker et al. 2008), there is an urgent need for more of such integrated approaches, able to merge the thrilling prospects of emerging software-based methodologies (such as Sentiment or Social Network Analysis) with a socially-oriented, critical afflatus (see Downing and Ahmed 2019). Striking this balance is both the challenge and the potential of any social scientific investigation intended to have a contemporary perspective, a scientific purpose and some social relevance.

This Special Issue is grounded in a “continuum thinking” (Boyle 2019; see also Kelly 1987 and Bjarnegård and Zetterberg forthcoming) in the investigation of gender-based violence, to be regarded as a political, digital and gender issue at the same time. Such a continuum thinking fosters a conceptualization and critical explication of the phenomenon as rooted in long-standing gendered infrastructures proper of our societal and political systems. At the same time, with gender-based violence proliferating at the highest volume and velocity in an unregulated cybersphere, theory and methods for its investigation should aim at connecting the dots between such instantiations of violence and the (largely unacknowledged) gendered nature of the Web 2.0. As such, more compelling results are likely to emerge by means of synergic incorporations of more quantitative views on the magnitude and spread of gender-based violence and more qualitative approaches able to critically explicate it as a techno-social and cultural phenomenon as well as a gender equality issue to be mitigated and prevented.

2. Glass ceilings and gatekeepers: Triangulating violence, gender and politics

The late modern Western era is largely regarded as having put the last nail in the coffin to the exclusion of women from power roles and active public citizenship (see Phillips 2018). In particular, the modern crystallization of gendered dichotomies around public and private spaces (such as politics and home, state and family) actively contributed to women’s relegation to the domestic sphere as the site of female cultural expression par excellence (see McKeon 2005; Staub 2018).

It goes without saying that the origin of patriarchal dominance at the state level goes much further back in time (see Lerner 1986), but the historical convergence of the rise of capitalism with the consolidation of the modern state has

had the deepest and most critical ramifications for the contemporary configurations of gender and politics, setting the scene for a game women were not in a position to win. While bourgeois cultural hegemony consecrated the figure of the 'domestic woman', household work lost the recognition it had in the pre-capitalist and pre-commodified society; while a female proletariat was emerging, the public labour of working-class women was deemed as clearly not sufficient to legitimize their civic presence or earn them a political voice of any kind (Charlton, Everett and Staudt 1989). And although the gendered public/private dichotomy has been largely reconfigured throughout the 20th century, the 'gender factor' still manages to strongly dictate the conditions and affordances of women's life-world experiences in present times (see Evans 2016; Ridgeway 2011).

The political sphere is one that women have been striving to inhabit for centuries, battling several well-engrained social, cultural and practical barriers standing in the way of their political careers. These challenges have come to be known as the 'five Cs' (Houses of the Oireachtas 2009). Originally identified to describe the experience of Irish women in politics, these five interconnected factors have become keywords to refer more generally to how women's progress is too often impeded by the multiple roles (wives, mothers, daughters) they play in family and community life, taking on caregiver roles and household responsibilities which burden them disproportionately in comparison to their male counterparts (*Childcare*). Also, WIP elbow for recognition in a male-dominated political culture that they feel unable to break through, with major repercussions on their self-confidence as leaders (*Culture, Confidence*). WIP also face a long-standing wage gender gap across most employment sectors, which clearly impacts on their possibility to fund their political career, let alone an expensive election campaign (*Cash*). Moreover, they are often not favoured in the intricate party-internal processes behind the rise of a prime candidate for elections, which often act as a 'gatekeeper' to curb the ambition of many female politicians: as many 'tried and tested' incumbents are obviously men, the opportunities for new women candidates are severely limited (*Candidate Selection Procedures*).

Nevertheless, the active political participation of women has become an important focus in global development policy in the past few decades, with the untapped leadership skills of women finally being more and more recognized. Women's representation in national parliaments across the world has gradually increased from 13 percent in 1999, to 18.5 percent in 2009 to 24.5 percent in 2019 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2019). While Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) are still often regarded as the example to follow in global female political representation, women have also taken the lead in many countries from the so-called 'Global South'. In particular, we have witnessed an early and continuing ascent of women in politics across Latin America

and the Caribbean, with Cuba (53.2%), Bolivia (53.1%) and Mexico (48.2%) currently leading the way. The last two decades have also been crucial in the Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab States, with the number of women in parliaments rising from 11 to 23.6 percent and from 3.1 to 17.5 percent, respectively. Particularly renowned is the case of the Central African state of Rwanda, where women's major civic efforts to rebuild the country after the 1994 genocide has been vital and has resulted in the highest (61.3%) representation of women in parliament in the world (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2019).

While long-standing glass-ceilings are finally being shattered across the world, politics remains a profoundly gendered institution, whose structures, roles and procedures have been established by men for men, at a time when women were still largely excluded from the public sphere and fighting for the most basic civil rights. One of the consequences is that the political arena is characterized by a predominance of 'masculine' attitudes and values, where hypermasculinity is not only normalized, but celebrated as a key element for the creation of an authentic "scenario of power" (Wood 2016, 2). This has proved highly instrumental to the discursive construction of the political arena as not for the 'squeamish', 'thin-skinned' or 'fainthearted'. One of the results is that rhetorical (if not physical) violence is largely normalized: violence is typically regarded as the "cost of doing politics" (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2019), one of the prices to pay to have that degree of power and public visibility, to the point that abuse and intimidation directed at political candidates and elected officials are often considered a "commonplace" (Sabbagh 2019). Yet, while violence can be regarded as a structural component of the political arena, it is growingly acknowledged that men and women experience vastly different forms and frequencies of violence and that data disaggregation allows us to perceive the phenomenon as profoundly gender differentiated (see Bardall 2018).

Starting from the early 2000, under the impulse of female politicians across Latin America, Africa and South Asia denouncing their experiences of violence, we have witnessed a transnational turn to the investigation of gender-based violence against WIP (see Krook 2017). One of the main challenges of investigating how violence affects WIP more specifically is that gender-based violence *per se* is an extremely multifaceted phenomenon. In this respect, the 2011 Istanbul Convention contributed to establishing a broader and more comprehensive framework, by taking into account the diverse and overlapping forms of physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm at issue. In the same vein, the Istanbul Convention contributed to the characterization of a very ample spectrum of empirical manifestations of gender-based violence, ranging from unconscious bias, discrimination and every-day sexism, sexual and psychological harassment or bullying, to rape threats and ultimately to sexual or physical violence (Council

of Europe 2011). As shown in a recent survey conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018), the lived experiences of WIP seem to be characterized by forms of violence encompassing this spectrum in its entirety.

By the time a woman manages to carve out a space in politics, she has inevitably come to realize the exceptional and precarious nature of her very presence. Precarity, here understood in the Butlerian sense, not only designates those politically induced conditions by which women are failed by social and economic support networks (the aforementioned ‘five Cs’ being a non-encompassing example), but also refers to an unequal distribution of vulnerability and a differential exposure to “injury, violence and death” (Butler 2009, ii) that puts women at a clear disadvantage. Adopting a precarity framework, the transversal phenomenon of gender-based violence against WIP can be ascribed to a wider, globally normalized conformity to gendered social norms and a gendered vision of social roles and institutions. This condition of precarity, which characterizes the experience of women in the political sphere, represents one of the many expressions of their “differential allocation of recognizability” (Butler 2009, ii). Compared to men, women are less ‘recognizable’, not only less powerful but less entitled to power. Since their active participation in the public sphere entails a non-compliance with the social norms of gender ideology, violence can be interpreted as an attempt to restore the *status quo* as well as an effective measure to prosecute the trespassers.

Unsurprisingly, statistics show that all these forms of gender-based violence have been working as fairly effective gatekeeping practices, fostering the silencing and exclusion from the public and political arena of less-represented political actors and the (re-)establishment of power as a white, male, cisgender property. In fact, the phenomenon “can harm [women] physically and emotionally and affect their health and sometimes their ability to do their work” (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018). For example, it has been aggressively discouraging WIP from being politically active, dissuading them from running for election or pushing them to leave office prematurely. Research from Australia found that 60% of women aged 18 – 21 and 80% of women over 31 said they were less likely to run for political office after seeing the media violence endured by PM Julia Gillard (NDI 2018). Other shortcomings include candidates withdrawing from digital dialogue and reducing their media presence, with detrimental effects on their political careers (Lumsden and Morgan 2017).

Media play a pivotal role in the unequal representation of women in politics and as a result, they represent a crucial research site when triangulating gender, politics and violence. In fact, the current generation of female political leaders is faced with the unique challenges of ascending to power in “profoundly mediated contexts” (van Zoonen 2006, 288), where politics is being “mediatized”, “spectacularized” and “personalized” (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999) at unprecedented lev-

els. With mass and digital media representing a platform for gendered violence, abuse and silencing, contributions to this Special Issue explore the new continuum of violence that WIP are called to navigate. With this aim, they shed further light on how WIP inhabiting both the political and digital public spheres endure an unprecedented exposure to forms of violence whose material consequences are too often ignored.

3. A new continuum of violence

The role played by media visibility in women's political careers has been deeply scrutinized. By "visibility" I mean both the degree of attention the media give women politicians ("quantity") and the nature of representation and framing in their media coverage ("quality") (Campus 2013). In both aspects, it has been largely demonstrated that WIP are at a clear disadvantage in traditional mass media: they are often underrepresented in sheer numbers (especially during elections) and their coverage is marred by stereotypes, trivialization and a well-established focus on their family relationships and physical appearance rather than on their ideas on political issues (van der Pas and Aaldering 2020). In this respect, the negative role of media is two-fold: reflecting (reproducing) sexism in society and reinforcing (producing) a gendered and sexist picture of reality, enacting a vicious cycle difficult to break (Haraldsson and Wängnerud 2019).

As shown by Margaret Rasulo (this issue, 2021), mass-mediatised politics is often characterized by a language of aggression against WIP which vernacularizes forms of gender-based toxicity and has a profound impact on the general public. In particular, her investigation of newspaper discourse on U.S. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez does not merely take into account the more overt and hostile attacks, but problematizes those well-concealed and not readily classifiable manifestations of aggression that are equally, if not more, corrosive and play a pivotal role in mainstreaming a violent delegitimization of WIP.

Against a backdrop that sees women largely penalized by traditional mass-media representations, the digital sphere was initially regarded as very promising for WIP. Social media platforms have come to play such a pivotal role in sharing political information, engaging and building relationships with the electorate (especially in reaching younger voters or during fast-paced election campaigns), that having an established digital presence is now absolutely indispensable for politicians of any gender (Bruns et al. 2016). More specifically, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were welcomed as having a strong potential to strengthen women's participation in political and institutional processes. Originally celebrated as a utopia of democracy, equality and free speech, they could

potentially act as an ‘equalizer’: a low-cost resource with a great political impact allowing WIP to both bypass gendered framing in traditional media and achieve a greater degree of visibility (Patterson 2016).

Unfortunately, the cybersphere has come to represent a breeding ground for the expression and dissemination of violence against political actors: new forms of violence are in fact to be found on a new continuum between online and offline spaces (Esposito, forthcoming). Social media and their brand-new affordances have come to play a crucial role in the perpetration of violence, only maximized by “constant connectivity” (Keipi et al. 2017, 2) as an assumed given in most societies and by the embeddedness of social media platforms in our daily life rhythms and activities.

Like most phenomena in the realm of politics, digital forms of violence and abuse against political actors are also profoundly gendered: statistics show that they affect women in politics disproportionately in comparison to their male counterparts (Atalanta 2018) and they now represent one of the most prevalent forms of violence against women in politics, with 6 MPs and parliamentary staff out of 10 being targeted across Europe (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018). Under the cloak of innocent gossip or harmless humour, terabytes of content which delegitimize, objectify, shame and sexualize female candidates are being ‘prosumed’ on a daily basis across the cybersphere (see Bardall 2017).

Fortunately, WIP are increasingly aware of the specific threats and troubles their digital presence can bring about. The quantity and quality of digital violence they endure has in fact prompted WIP to question whether social media are actually advancing or impeding their political career (Patterson 2016). Although the impact in terms of emotional and psychological distress may be less easy to measure, WIP are becoming more and more vocal about the digital abuse they are faced with, as they start mobilising against the phenomenon and taking action against social media entrepreneurs themselves. A famous example is Laura Boldrini, at the time President of the Chamber of Deputies of Italy, who in 2017 published an open letter to Mark Zuckerberg which was aimed at denouncing the uncontrolled spread of hate speech and fake news targeting herself and other WIP (Wong 2017). At the same time, online violence still represents such a pervasive and impactful phenomenon that it has pushed many WIP to step down from office over safety fears, as many British female MPs reported at the eve of the 2019 UK General Elections (see Esposito and Zollo this issue 2021; Kuperberg this issue 2021).

One of the most recent events that sparked the debate on online violence against political actors is the tragic murder of Labour MP Jo Cox during the 2016 Brexit Campaign: when the online death threats of one of the many white supremacists inhabiting the cybersphere turned into a ‘real-life’ murder, the issue

suddenly became much more newsworthy and urgent (Saner 2016). Unfortunately, it has often proven difficult to distinguish the forms and consequences of actions that are initiated in digital environments from offline realities and vice versa, and often the perceived disembodiment which characterizes the digital sphere has allowed these forms of gender-based violence to be dismissed as an insignificant, ‘virtual’ phenomenon. Not only social but also legal and institutional responses have often proven inadequate in keeping up with the fast-paced evolution of digital affordances and their potential for violence and harm (Bardall 2020; Kilger 2016).

Against this backdrop, compared to terms such as “online violence”, “digital violence” or “cyberviolence”, I introduce the term “digital technology-facilitated (henceforth, DTF) violence”. Partially drawing on Powell and Henry (2017) and Segrave and Vitis (2017), the term acknowledges the enabling and amplifying role of technology while at the same time problematizing acts of digital violence as human actions with specific (gendered) motives behind them. Moreover, the use of the umbrella-term ‘violence’ (rather than ‘harassment’ or ‘hate speech’) is aimed at maximising the perceived degree of severity and the profound negative impact this phenomenon has on its victims.

This Special Issue engages with gender-based DTF violence against political actors by problematizing a very complex crossroads between existing patterns of violence, well-established gendered social structures, politics ‘as we know it’ and new digital technologies as facilitators. With gender-based DTF violence being highly normalized as the ‘cost’ of inhabiting both the offline and online public spheres, contributions to this Special Issue aim at connecting the dots between the gendered nature of both the political and the digital contexts.

With this in mind, different digital spaces are taken into account, encompassing popular social media platforms such as Twitter (Alam, Kuperberg, Pérez-Arredondo and Graells-Garrido) and YouTube (Esposito and Zollo) as well as comment sections of online newspapers (Kopytowska). What characterizes these case studies is a profound, shared awareness that digital spaces do not represent an alternate, simulated and disembodied ‘virtual’ environment. On the contrary, instances of DTF violence are positioned and explicated within wider cultural and social contexts, highlighting the continuum of violence which exists between the digital realm and the non-digital, physical world.

For example, Zainab Alam in “Violence against women in politics: The case of Pakistani women’s activism” problematizes the role of digital media in the context of the *Aurat March* (Urdu for the International Women’s Day march) in Pakistan, offering insights on how Twitter represents a powerful platform for women to network and organize an increasingly large and impactful march, but also a dangerous way of exposing activists to the furious backlash of the most conser-

vative segments of society. Alam captures both discourses and counterdiscourses on the *Aurat March*, showing how this antagonism unfolds in parallel both in the streets of the major Pakistani cities and on Twitter, as they both represent public spaces that Pakistani women struggle to inhabit, due to the erasing power of political Islam in the country. As such, the debate on women's rights in Pakistan seems to be characterized by multi-modal and multi-directional instances of recontextualization and embedded between online and offline spaces, while at the same time being reprised by more or less aligned traditional media, such as newspapers and TV talks.

In the same vein, Carolina Pérez-Arredondo and Eduardo Graells-Garrido in "Twitter and abortion: Online hate against pro-choice female politicians in Chile" followed the legislation process and the implementation of the abortion bill throughout its two-year lifespan, exploring how the process was debated on Twitter and how it triggered violent abuse against Chilean pro-choice WIPs. Hashtags related to the abortion bill (such as #Apoyo3Casuales or #3causales) and topic-related keywords (such as *aborto* 'abortion' and/or *abortista* 'abortionist') represent the entry points for a composite digital ethnography which is highly sensitive to the political, cultural and religious context of Chile and takes into account how the Twitter debate followed specific milestones in the legislative process.

These two case studies exemplify how, when mediated by the new affordances of the Web 2.0, gender-based violence comes to be shaped at an extremely complex intersection of multimodal communicative acts: meaningful exchanges with massive social and cultural implications are also data located in specific technological affordances which are shaped by capitalist commodified motivations and contexts. This very intersection needs to be explored by striking a balance between two research angles. On the one hand, there is a need for a horizontal awareness of the inner mechanisms of these new contexts of digital interaction, the indigenous norms of new digital practices, their meaning-making resources and the possible repercussions on discursive practices and content. On the other, a vertical, social contextualization will allow us to depart from dangerous digital determinisms and will contribute to explicating the phenomenon of gender-based violence within the gendered social norms of the non-digital, physical world and its Foucauldian networks of power/knowledge (see KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018).

4. Intersectional patterns of gender-based violence

This Special Issue is also characterized by a deep awareness of forms and patterns of gender-based violence as profoundly intersectional in nature, not merely with reference to the diachronic and synchronic interconnectedness of people, ideas and social phenomena, but also taking on an intersectional framework as “a broad, open-ended and inclusive conceptual tool for feminist analysis” (Lykke 2011, 208).

Since its coinage in Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) feminist critique of race and sex discrimination in the US legal system, intersectionality has been growingly taken up on a global scale by scholars and practitioners alike. Never meant to be an abstract notion, intersectionality provides both an ontology and a hands-on framework for the analysis of different forms of discrimination and oppression as simultaneous and multiplicative experiences. Crenshaw (2003) herself, in an essay entitled “Traffic at the crossroads: Multiple oppressions”, employed the metaphor of a four-way traffic intersection or a multi-lane crossroad: if one was going to be knocked over by that speeding traffic, it would have been almost impossible to say which car hurt them the most. In the same vein, human beings cannot literally or metaphorically be divided by their different personal identities – nor can the different forms of unique oppression affecting them, which are to be regarded as a product of *all* of their identity and background. Yet, as we witness various and diverse applications of intersectionality, often resulting in “over and under uses” (Guidroz and Berger 2009, 65) of the term, I see the adoption of an intersectional form of critical inquiry as subject to two main caveats.

First, it is necessary to acknowledge the origins of the concept as profoundly embedded in the specific lived-experiences of African American women at the intersection of race and sex in the United States. As the ‘Cite Black Women’ campaign gains momentum in international academia (Smith 2017), any discussion of intersectionality must take on board the foundational contribution of Crenshaw herself, as well as the works of many other Black feminists, such as Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins and Audre Lorde (see Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013), who have contributed to the evolution of the intersectional framework in the past three decades. This is particularly important since the concept has managed to travel well beyond its starting point, a process which has also raised some concerns in the African-American feminist community (Yuval-Davis 2006). With intersectionality now recognized as the most successful buzzword in the history of feminist theory (Davis 2008), “the question is no longer whether intersectionality should travel, but instead, where it can go” (Kuperberg 2018, 686).

The second caveat is related to Kuperberg’s exact question: where can intersectionality go? And where *should* it go? While heated debates are usually sparked

by this question (see Villesèche, Muhr and Śliwa 2018), it is undeniable that the polysemous fluidity of the term has been incredibly productive for contemporary feminist scholarship. A broader understanding of the meaning of intersectionality, in fact, allows us to acknowledge that a number of subordinated and/or less-represented social actors other than Black women (including indigenous peoples, Latinx, LGBTQ people, differently abled people, religious and ethnic minorities, and stateless people, among others) “continue to see transforming social institutions as necessary” (Hill Collins 2018, 25). This is the core issue at stake: if intersectionality wants to keep its potential in its multiple processes of recontextualization for the investigation of different crossroads of oppressions, it must stay political. It should not be reduced to an Instagram hashtag on its way to the mainstream feminist movement, nor should it be whitewashed on its way to a Europe which struggles to acknowledge that racial inequality is not limited to the other side of the Atlantic (see Davis 2020; Roig 2018).

If both caveats are taken into account, we can benefit from an empowering framework which enables the acknowledgement of the profound way in which discursively, institutionally and/or structurally constructed sociocultural categorizations interact and produce different kinds of societal inequalities and unjust social relations. These, in turn, can be analysed as mutual and intertwined processes of transformation (Lykke 2010). This is imperative when it comes to violence against political actors, because gender is far from being the only factor at play. It has been widely demonstrated that these forms of violence are exacerbated by factors encompassing racial, ethnic and religious identity (Kuperberg 2018), sexual orientation, young age (<40) as well as being more or less outspoken on topics such as equality and human rights (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018).

Against this backdrop, contributions included in this Special Issue investigate some of these intersections at work. In her article, “Are gold hoop earrings and a dab of red lipstick enough to get even Democrats on the offensive? The case of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez”, Margaret Rasulo problematizes the aggressive press against U.S. American Representative for New York as rooted in a number of different and intersected aspects of her identity. These factors encompass her gender, but also her young age (at 29 she was the youngest woman ever elected to Congress) as well as her ethnicity and class: Ocasio-Cortez never made a mystery of the fact that she was born to a Puerto Rican family in the Bronx and took jobs as a bartender and waitress to help her family fight foreclosure of their home. All these inseparable aspects of her lived-experience and identity contribute to her depiction as an outsider in the largely white, male, upper-middle class game of politics, and provide multiple cues for aggression and delegitimization.

In “Incongruous and illegitimate: Antisemitic and islamophobic semiotic violence against women in politics in the United Kingdom”, Rebecca Kuperberg

explores different manifestations of online semiotic violence against female, religious-minority politicians of Jewish and Muslim confessions. Her analysis casts light on how deep-rooted feelings of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in the country are in a dialectical relationship with a long-standing process of racialization of religion that contributes to cast both Britons of Jewish and Muslim faiths as outsiders. As a result, British women MPs of Jewish and Muslim faith are more likely to be attacked for being traitors and for having an alleged dual-loyalty to Israel or Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia. Even more seriously, when Jewish and Muslims women MPs are vocal about the phenomenon, they are belittled and minimized regarding their experiences of violence and often blamed for ‘playing the oppressed victim’.

In the same vein, Monika Kopytowska in “Xenophobia, misogyny and rape culture: Targeting women in cyberspace” explores the interface of misogyny and xenophobia in online discourses concerning refugees and migrants in Poland. By analysing DTF violence against the Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel and the former Polish Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz, she illustrates how they are both attacked for their pro-refugee stance and migration policy. In particular, by means of a “Media Proximity Approach” (Kopytowska 2013, 2015), her analysis problematizes the role of rape culture as promoting both patterns of Polish male dominance and anti-migrant feelings. Against the backdrop of rape as weapon of threat and punishment, women’s bodies are appropriated to the Polish nation and their subjectivity and independence is undermined, while at the same time the immigrant is framed as an unwanted ‘outsider’ and a menace for the national/female body.

In “*How dare you call her a pig, I know several pigs who would be upset if they knew: A multimodal critical discursive approach to online misogyny against UK MPs on YouTube*”, Eleonora Esposito and Sole Alba Zollo highlight the intersectional nature of DTF attacks against the five ‘most hated’ women MPs in the UK (Dhrodia 2018). By adopting a Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) approach (KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018), their analysis shows the overlap and enmeshment of multimodal discursive strategies of misogyny, as women MPs are consistently body-shamed, fat-shamed, mind-shamed and slut-shamed, both in the user-generated “remixed” and “embedded” (Androutsopoulos and Tereick 2015) YouTube videos and in the related comments sections. These DTF attacks reinforce stereotypical and sexist representation of women and contribute to discursively constructing the British political arena as a fundamentally male-oriented space. Moreover, the prevalence of racist comments against the Black British MP Diane Abbott sheds light on a widespread, colonially inherited misogynistic attitude in the country (see Palmer 2020).

By focusing on intersectional patterns of DTF violence against political actors, contributions in this Special Issue also highlight a further, much needed application of the intersectional approach. In recent years, online hostility, harassment and abuse are increasingly being acknowledged as profoundly gendered phenomena, to the point that having an openly female identity in the cybersphere can represent a personal security risk (Jane 2014, 2016). But more broadly, intersectionality can contribute to highlighting the generally overlooked assumption that the cybersphere is far from being a ‘neutral’ space. On the contrary, lived experiences of Internet users can vary considerably not only according to their gender, but also to their sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, mother tongue, age/generation and dis/ability, among others. This idea of an “intersectional Internet”, as recently introduced by Noble and Tynes (2016), allows us to question the organization of social relations embedded in digital technologies and fosters a clearer understanding of the power relations organized through them. Taking on an intersectional approach to digital and social media as a communication paradigm may help us to finally dismantle the edulcorated narrative of digital spaces as enabling egalitarian communication among different people, allowing us to acknowledge its unspoken gatekeeping dynamics and rules that see whiteness and maleness as being just as ‘default’ in the cybersphere.

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