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# Investigating gender in a world of gender consciousness

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## Résumé

**Enquêter sur le genre dans un monde qui a conscience du genre.** Qu'on s'en réjouisse ou qu'on le déplore, il est devenu difficile de faire des sciences sociales sans rencontrer le genre, et ce bien au-delà des terrains d'enquête qui le prennent spécifiquement pour objet. Depuis la naissance des études éponymes, le genre s'est progressivement imposé, à la fois comme fait ou structure de l'agir social, et comme la catégorie d'analyse par laquelle on les désigne. Ce numéro du *BMS* prend racine dans l'idée que l'analyse du genre lui-même est indissociable de l'histoire de son concept, et que la diffusion grandissante de cette notion dans la société a des conséquences sur les façons de travailler sur le genre. En l'espace de quelques décennies, nous sommes passés d'un monde où les chercheurs travaillaient à donner de la consistance à ce qui n'avait pas de nom, à un monde où l'on a désormais conscience du genre, où on le mobilise, le critique, s'en revendique, y résiste et en débat. Dans un monde qui a conscience du genre, les règles de la recherche changent. La notion de conscience de genre que nous proposons dans cet article emprunte précautionneusement aux travaux de sociologie du droit développés sous le nom de Legal Consciousness Studies (LCS). Qu'il y ait différentes définitions du genre en concurrence les unes avec les autres n'empêche nullement de considérer qu'il y a du genre, et l'on peut même considérer que la prolifération des définitions participe de la stabilité du phénomène social qu'on étudie, de la même façon que pour les théoriciens des LCS les représentations plurielles du droit participent aussi de son hégémonie. Un des enjeux centraux de ce numéro consiste à problématiser cette dialectique entre catégories de la pratique et catégories de l'analyse en la recentrant sur les questionnements méthodologiques et épistémologiques des enquêtes. C'est par le « retour au terrain » que nous chercherons à répondre à ces

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questions, en proposant dans un premier temps un bilan synthétique et personnel de ce que les épistémologies féministes (I) et les méthodologies féministes (II) ont apporté aux sciences sociales, pour aborder enfin les questions de recherche contemporaines que le prisme de la conscience de genre peut soulever (III).

### **Abstract**

For better or worse, it has become difficult to conduct research in the social sciences without encountering gender, even well beyond fields that specifically focus on it. Since the advent of gender studies as a discipline, the concept has gained momentum both as a social fact and structure of social action, and as the analytic category through which these are conceptualised. This special issue of the *BMS* is embedded in the idea that the analysis of gender itself is indissociable from the history of the concept, and that the increasing spread of this notion throughout society has an impact on the way(s) gender is investigated. In the space of just a few decades the world has evolved from one in which researchers were working to give consistency to a nameless force, to one which is now gender conscious, where gender is mobilised, criticised, claimed, resisted, and debated. In a gender conscious world, the rules of research are changing. The notion of gender consciousness that is proposed here borrows carefully from research in the sociology of law developed under the name legal consciousness studies (LCS). The fact that there are different definitions of gender that compete with each other does not prevent us from considering that there is gender, and we may even consider that the proliferation of definitions participates in the stability of the social phenomenon we are studying, just as, for the theorists of LCS, the multiple representations of the law contribute to its hegemony. One of the central issues here is the problematization of the dialectic between categories of practice and categories of analysis, with a focus on the methodological and epistemological questions of these studies. This 'return to the field' will provide answers to these questions, beginning with a personal summary overview of what feminist epistemologies (I) and feminist methodologies (II) have contributed to social sciences, before moving on to contemporary research questions that emerge through the prism of gender consciousness (III).

### **Mots clés**

catégories de la pratique/catégories de l'analyse, conscience du droit, conscience de genre, épistémologie féministe, méthodologie féministe

### **Keywords**

categories of practice/categories of analysis, feminist epistemology, feminist methodology, gender consciousness, legal consciousness studies

### **Matériel supplémentaire**

La version française de cet article est disponible sur le site internet du BMS. Elle est téléchargeable en tant que 'matériel supplémentaire' joint à l'article.

### **Supplemental Material**

The French version of this article is available on the BMS website. It can be downloaded as 'supplementary material' from the online version of this article.

## Introduction

For better or worse, it has become difficult to conduct research in the social sciences without encountering gender, even well beyond fields that specifically focus on it. Since the advent of gender studies as a discipline, the concept has gained momentum both as a social fact and structure of social action, and as the analytic category through which these are conceptualised. That there is gender in the very texture of social relations is hardly an issue, despite ongoing resistance to the concept or the study of gender in some spheres. The consolidation of the concept over the last half century has fed a vast area of research, an epistemological renewal, and methodological considerations that have influenced the social sciences as a whole. The conceptual history of gender is all the more interesting in that the phenomenon clearly existed prior to the invention of the term. There was gender in periods where gender was not mentioned, and it is only recently that the concept has gained transparency, so that this structure of social relations can be named, be better identified, and increasingly be a subject of analysis. As a scientific concept, gender has brought together terms that are sometimes more political, such as patriarchy or male domination, and has become progressively stabilised across different scientific areas, even though its definitions continue to be a source of debate and subject to reformulation.

This special issue of the *BMS* is embedded in the idea that the analysis of gender itself is indissociable from the history of the concept, and that the increasing spread of this notion throughout society has an impact on the way(s) gender is investigated. For instance, the first studies on gender, which began in the 1970s (Oakley, 1972), set out to reveal these invisible social relations through their analysis. The goal was to shed light on the deeply naturalised foundations of the relations between the sexes, and to account for a whole range of normalised structural social relations that are taken for granted. Gender studies conceptualise and name a range of phenomena, and in so doing adapt empirical investigation to an explanatory concept that leads to an epistemological breach. As a concept, gender breaks with ordinary representations and everyday thought, and thus allows for the development of an analytic grammar of gender capable of improving our understanding of reality (Bachelard, 1938; Bourdieu et al., 1968). The history of the distinction between sex and gender, which overlaps very broadly with the history of gender studies, reflects this attempt at theorisation aiming to produce a 'useful' category of analysis, in the words of the historian Joan Scott (Scott, 1986). Now armed with this scientific concept, researchers are able to identify gender where laypeople do not necessarily see it (despite being subject to its forces) and they continue to refine the meaning of this category that is specific to them.

However, in this issue we shift the perspective onto the contemporary period and the formidable historical acceleration in the spread of gender as a term. If we think in generational terms, this acceleration is indeed spectacular. When Joan Scott proposed the first canonical definition of gender in 1986, none of her peers in other areas of research used this term. In contrast, what young adult today has not heard of gender, has not chosen a gender as part of their identity on social networks, or has not been party to the incessant controversies surrounding the concept? In the space of just a few decades the world has evolved from one in which researchers were working to give consistency to a nameless force, to one which is now gender conscious, where gender is mobilised,

criticised, claimed, resisted, and debated. Gender has been politicised both as a category of thought that ‘allows us to talk about it’ (Lagroye, 2003: 4), and as a juridification that has pushed it to the rank of a legal norm (Hennette-Vauchez et al., 2016). But this success story has also occurred at the expense of a progressive dilution in meaning of a term that has become repeatedly reappropriated and over-determined. The democratisation of gender has also robbed researchers of the analytic category they had so carefully constructed. In the early 2000s, Joan Scott deplored that, ‘no matter how insistently feminist theories have redefined the term gender, they have been unable to prevent its corruption. In popular conversation, the terms sex and gender are as often used synonymously as oppositionally; indeed, sometimes it seems that gender is simply a polite euphemism for sex.’ (Scott, 2010 [2001]: 96). This introductory article takes the opposite stance to this critique of the ‘co-optation’ of gender (Clair, 2016: 68) and puts the ‘indigenous’ appropriation of gender as a category back at the centre of methodological considerations. In a gender conscious world, the rules of research are changing. After all, the proliferation of gender is part of its history, and it seems sociologically absurd to consider that social actors are wrong in the way they use this term, as though reality itself could be ‘wrong’ (Chauvin, 2019). The goal here is not to identify usages, or create order among definitions, as though this were purely a conceptual issue. On the contrary, in the contemporary period there are numerous grammars of gender that overlap and transform the concept, and these heterogeneous uses continue to construct it and also contribute to its tangibility, independent of any conceptual quarrels. Ultimately this is about reviving the question of the distinction between categories of analysis used by researchers and categories of practice (Brubaker, 2013; Bourdieu et al., 1968) used by ordinary actors unconcerned by academic orthodoxy (Jaunait, 2019). Researchers working in this area today must take into account the definition the respondents have of gender, and sometimes even negotiate with those who have appropriated it. In keeping with feminist epistemologies and the anthropological distinction between emic and etic approaches, reflecting on these two types of categories articulating gender enables us to grasp its historicity, its contemporary construction, and its transformations.

The term gender consciousness has been studied in political sociology with a view to measuring the forms of political awareness among certain minority groups that are more or less sensitive to struggles for emancipation, and more or less able to understand the basis of their domination. Although these studies provide useful information about the ways in which individuals experience belonging and become progressively aware of forming a group with specific gender or sexuality characteristics that lead them to adopt critical positions, they remain limited by the idea that these groups more or less adopt the definition of gender proposed by the researcher. Some groups appear to be gender conscious, others less so or not at all, but this consciousness (the nature of which will be discussed in this article) is essentially evaluated in light of the analytical category used by the researcher (Gurin, 1985).

The notion of gender consciousness that is proposed here borrows carefully from research in the sociology of law developed under the name legal consciousness studies (LCS). In this approach, influenced by pragmatism, the law is considered through actors’ representations of it. In other words, the law is not defined a priori as having an external impact on individuals, rather it constitutes the centre of the analysis and the ordinary

modalities of the way law is thought about contribute to the reality of law itself. In much the same way, we consider that contemporary gender consciousness, because of its plurality, constructs and transforms the reality of gender – which does not necessarily lead to the abandonment of all conceptual definitions for researchers. The fact that there are different definitions of gender that compete with each other does not prevent us from considering that there *is* gender, and we may even consider that the proliferation of definitions participates in the stability of the social phenomenon we are studying, just as, for the theorists of LCS, the multiple representations of the law contribute to its hegemony. One of the central issues here is the problematization of the dialectic between categories of practice and categories of analysis, with a focus on the methodological and epistemological questions of these studies. How can we conduct research on social relations that actors are aware of, when it is no longer a question of simply revealing the impact of these relations on their practices? How can we analyse a phenomenon through studies conducted with actors who do not share the same definition as the researcher? Do multifarious reappropriations of a category weaken its potential scientific scope while accentuating its social validity? This ‘return to the field’ will provide answers to these questions, beginning with a personal summary overview of what feminist epistemologies (part 1) and feminist methodologies (part 2) have contributed to social sciences, before moving on to contemporary research questions that emerge through the prism of gender consciousness (part 3).

## **Feminist epistemology and gender consciousness**

Gender studies are partly linked to feminism, given that the awareness of the structural role of gender is indissociable from the formation of a specific field of research. But from the very beginnings of feminist research, an epistemological and methodological question arose as to the ways of analysing a form of social interaction that was not external to scientific worlds but, on the contrary, was very much involved in how they function. This pre-existence of gender partly explains the relatively late emergence of gender studies. Studying gender with scientific epistemologies and methodologies that are *already gendered* requires additional reflexive work that leads to a radical questioning of the conceptions science is based on and the ways it is produced, which progressively shaped feminist epistemology. This introductory article revisits the main discoveries in this epistemology, with a view to showing how the feminist perspective involves ongoing reflexive work on the object and implications of research. Drawing on the numerous contributions on this theme, we focus on three major characteristics of feminist epistemology. The articulation of these critical characteristics forms the foundation of a genuinely feminist position in terms of traditional conceptions of scientific activity (section 1). We then go on to analyse this specific position, formalised as standpoint theory, in which the numerous theoretical borrowings enable a reflection on the subject/actor of this knowledge (section 2). Finally, this reflexive work, characterised by constant questioning of both the research subject and object, has nourished and contributed to many other epistemological propositions that extend beyond the question of gender (section 3).

### *The three critiques of feminist epistemology*

Today, studying gender or incorporating a gender aspect into social science research does not necessarily mean adopting a feminist approach; gender has become very much a variable like any other, to be analysed more or less closely depending on the study. However, the initial studies that both revealed gender as a social fact and theorised it as a concept were characterised by the strong political matrix of feminism. The emergence of women's studies and then gender studies are indissociable from the political project for social critique driven by 1970s feminism (Bereni et al., 2020). Indeed, these disciplines formulated numerous proposals as to the way research on gender should be conducted, and these proposals have in turn influenced the way social science research is conducted. Here we will present a selective overview of the feminist reflexions that initiated gender studies, which both allow us to account for the specificity of gender as an object, the ways of studying it and its most recent evolutions.

The feminist approach to gender was not necessarily a scientific revolution in itself. In one founding text, entitled 'Is there a feminist method?' Sandra Harding declared outright that there was no method for feminist research that could be radically distinguished from other approaches of scientific inquiry, an affirmation that also concerned epistemology (Harding, 1986). Rather, for Harding, they were a range of converging approaches and concerns that constituted a kind of trademark or an imperative, and which distanced themselves from traditional male approaches to scientific research. From a feminist perspective, epistemology and methodology are necessarily connected; a theory of knowledge cannot be understood separately from the ways in which evidence is produced or data is collected (Naples, 2007; Espinola, 2012; Charron and Auclair, 2016; Clair, 2016). This conception is constructed around the principle of relationality and reflexivity in conceptualising gender and how it is studied, borrowing from other scientific paradigms, as we will see. This approach unifies and amplifies certain ways of thinking and conducting science, and research in this vein tends to do a number of things: (1) it notes the fact that 'traditional' science is governed by an androcentric point of view that is both biased and incomplete, forming not only a knowledge bias but also contributing to the reproduction of existing power structures; (2) it proposes a critique of scientific objectivity as it has been promoted by empiricism, and defends subjectivity as an essential aspect of knowledge rather than a bias; and (3) it transforms research into a critical standpoint that assumes feminist science is also a project for social transformation in which politics and research cannot be considered separately.<sup>1</sup>

These three aspects of the feminist approach are connected by logical bonds that make them a whole. Indeed, just as women's history was constructed around the observation that 'history' was being written without them, or even writing them out, feminist epistemology begins with the idea that 'classical' science – and particularly the life sciences that naturalise gender – were above all science made by men, for men. This was not simply a matter of deploring an oversight, but of pinpointing the scientific effects of this oversight, the cognitive bias inherent in this androcentric perspective, which by failing to recognise this in itself produces inaccurate science (Anderson, 1995). Androcentrism is not merely unjust, it constitutes bias, and a critique of it therefore has a heuristic and rectifying effect on a range of epistemological propositions and theoretical corpuses.

A critique of the androcentric perspective thus also implies a critique of what is taken for granted about science in the classical empiricism of Hume or Locke, or in the revised 20th century empiricism of Quine or Russell. Hegemonic science is based on objectivity and relegates subjectivity to the scrapheap of scientific inquiry. From this perspective, a scientific approach means evacuating subjectivity, associated with bias, cutting out what is personal, and constantly aspiring to an overarching and universal perspective. Donna Haraway considers this requirement for universalism a kind of 'reductionism', enforcing a single language that can only be one possible translation of reality among others – the reality of those who dominate (Haraway, 1988). The feminist approach, by contrast, proposes the reversal of this objectivist paradigm. It draws on and utilises subjectivity, considering that any scientific research necessarily comes from somewhere and this embeddedness in a social and historical situation should not only be acknowledged but that, in certain circumstances, this acknowledgement may in fact produce greater objectivity. This is one of the main positions in the feminist approach, formulated in stand-point theory.

Finally, feminist epistemology and methodology are deeply connected to the goal of social transformation. This third aspect is linked to the two others in that the disregard of women, a source of both bias and injustice, essentially produces the established systems and divisions of power. To put it even more crudely, a science that is written exclusively by men expresses men's problems and resolves them to their advantage. The feminist approach is therefore necessarily political. Its critique of androcentric science shows to what extent this traditional approach is riddled with bias, and the very real consequences of these biases. All forms of science emanate from power and are produced by power, and in this respect feminist science is a critique of that power that aims to rattle the established divisions in place. It also aims to reveal the mechanisms through which the exclusion of women leads to a vision of scientific objectivity that broadly contributes to the naturalisation of their subordination. Gender studies thus provide both a critique and an alternative, and its lessons and propositions can be extended to all kinds of ways of producing scientific research.

We need look no further than Donna Haraway for a masterful illustration of the coherence of these three pillars of scientific research. A zoologist by training, her book, *Primate Visions* (Haraway, 1989), looks at 20th century primatology and the major differences between the observations made by male primatologists and their female colleagues. For example, male researchers tended to emphasize competition and sexual aggression among the great apes, while female zoologists focused more on cooperation strategies within the group. The sex of the researcher therefore has an impact on what is observed and the way it is observed. Male researchers focused on the collective domination of male apes over female apes, while female researchers developed new observation techniques focusing on interactions between females and long-term observations of the trajectories of particular individuals. Haraway's reading thus accounts for different visions of power – gender being one among others – that influence research and give rise to theorizations of the epistemological divisions that have the most impact on our social structure. 'Studying primates does not mean ceasing to produce discourses that are legitimised by the authority of science in society. This is therefore an active contribution to the differentiation between nature and culture, whether in terms of differences



between humans and animals, or men and women, or westerners and non-westerners. *Primate visions* investigates the way in which scientific knowledge and practices are based on social, colonial, or gendered organization that they also help construct' (Gardey, 2013: 181). Beginning with a critique of androcentrism allows us not only to reveal its biases and different approaches to science, but also to reposition it in the political context that it continues to renew and reinforce.

Since Haraway, a considerable number of studies have emerged, exploring the history of sciences tainted by androcentrism and whose principle effect – often condemned as being the 'biologisation of the social' – has been to naturalise existing power systems and the unconscious structures that support them (Hacking, 2001; Morning, 2011; Jaunait et al., 2014). In 'The egg and the sperm', the anthropologist Emily Martin shows how the metaphors used in biology manuals 'describe' the penetrative conquest of a passive ovum by a conquering sperm. Far removed from the reality of the biological process itself, scientific representations are rooted in sexist social imaginaries and in turn reinforce them through the weight of their scientific authority (Martin, 1991). Since the 1990s, the incursion of feminist research into the bastions of supposedly objective science (such as biology) has shown to what extent a critical perspective hunting down androcentric assumptions could lead to epistemological and methodological breakthroughs, and results that are profoundly different from existing paradigms; so different they demand a paradigm shift. Gender influences the premises of scientific questioning from the outset and influences the research process as a whole. Within the field of biology in particular, results tend to validate the initial bias in a way that is essentially self-fulfilling, demonstrating that which was expected and reinforcing the initial evidence of binary sex categorisation, and eliminating anything that would shed doubt on it. Research on the biological foundation of binary sex categories are now legion, but they illustrate remarkably well how the 'hard' sciences have their 'soft' spots (Laqueur, 1990; Oudshoorn, 1994; Fox Keller, 1995; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Gardey and Löwy, 2000; Gardey, 2006; Jordan-Young, 2010; Raz, 2021). This rigorous demonstration of the self-confirming feedback loop between unconscious social representations and their consolidation through biased scientific demonstration is indeed a political undertaking because it demonstrates how the strategies of scientific reasoning solidify the least well-founded of its assumptions.

### *The softness of hard sciences: standpoint epistemologies*

One of the major legacies of this threefold feminist critique is associated with a group of theories brought together under the term standpoint theory. This theory is not exclusively inspired by feminism, nor are its programmatic proposals. Yet it was within feminist and gender studies that these epistemological and methodological propositions were updated, unified, and reformulated into a robust theoretical ensemble able to contribute to the renewal of feminist thought, in line with other areas of investigation such as science and technology studies and the sociology of sciences (Chabaud-Rychter and Gardey, 2002; Wajcman, 2004; Barad, 2007; Gardey, 2010, Braidotti, 2013).

The epistemologies that are brought together under this term, in spite of their plurality and certain conceptual disagreements that we will not go into here, share a critique of

classical empiricism (Nelson and Nelson, 1996) and particularly the notion of scientific objectivity (Naples, 2007; Espinola, 2012; Bracke et al., 2013; Clair, 2016; Lépinard and Lieber, 2020). As we noted above, hegemonic science claims objectivity, distance, and a universal perspective, while being a male-oriented science that is historically constituted, in Bourdieu's terms, as 'the position of God the father, who knows all and is situated outside the world He knows objectively' (Bourdieu, 2016: 455). The feminist position, in contrast, consists of a starting point anchored in a social context that is the origin of scientific questions, how they are treated and how they are resolved (Haraway, 1988; Löwy, 2000). For feminists there can be no externality to scientific practice, no overarching position, or 'God's trick' in Haraway's terms, or 'geometry of all perspectives' in Merleau-Ponty's terms, reused by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2016: 450). The scepticism toward a theory of knowledge that considers itself strictly external to its objects and questionings is not in itself a discovery of feminism or specific to gender as an object; the critique of objectivism has long been established and extensive in the social sciences. However, it was feminist research that intensified the critique of objectivity by radically reversing the empirical stance, promoting the contextuality of research as an advantage to knowledge. Subjectivity is thus presented as a resource for scientific investigation rather than a bias that must be eliminated at all costs in pursuit of objectivity.

Sandra Harding, one of the main theorists of standpoint epistemology brings together several researchers under this label (Harding, 1986), of whom the most famous are Nancy Harstock (1983), Hilary Rose (1983), Dorothy Smith (1987 [1974]) and Patricia Hill Collins (1986). It was these pioneers, through their mutual discussions and debates, who progressively developed and refined standpoint theory. One early formulation can be attributed to Nancy Harstock in 1983 ('The feminist standpoint'), adopting the Marxist theory of the value of the proletarian perspective on social change. Because they have a genuine experience of production, workers are said to grasp both the perspective of the dominated and that of those who dominate them. It is this form of reflexivity – invisible to the bourgeoisie – which enables the expression of a more complex and complete perspective on the world, based on real relationships and the experience of work.

The elaboration of a political position based on certain experiences of the working class, to promote them to the rank of knowledge, leads to a different and more reliable interaction between humans and nature, social relations and natural relations, as well as on the functioning of capitalism. (Bracke et al., 2013: 50).

In opposition to empiricism, the Marxist perspective theorised the 'epistemic authority' of the oppressed, who are necessarily localised and rooted in experience, far from the idea of a disembodied point of view. By way of analogy, Harstock substituted the experience of women for that of workers, considering that the former have a more authentic perspective on the world, close to that developed in the literature on the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993) or by those combining Marxism with the specificity of women's experience (Rose, 1983). The individual abstract perspective of men is contrasted with the relational concrete experience of women, promoted as a form of genuine knowledge encompassing the whole world and all the interactions within it.

Feminist scholars did not invent the concept of epistemic authority of the oppressed but rather borrowed it from Marxism. There is also a prior theorisation of this idea that is sometimes forgotten, in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, which can be considered a precursor of standpoint theory. Seen as one of the founding fathers of relational sociology (Emirbayer, 1997; Martin-Breteau, 2020), W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the major theorists of epistemic privilege. His critique of white supremacy is both a critique of a deeply unjust racial system and of a flawed system of knowledge that meant the lie of racism had very real consequences (Du Bois, 2019 [1899]; Martin-Breteau, 2020). By simultaneously considering the question of knowledge and social justice, from the same analytic position of ‘epistemic injustice’<sup>2</sup>, Du Bois proposed a theoretical framework analogous to that put forward by feminist epistemology. ‘Injustice affects the framework of knowledge, the overall epistemic architecture of a society, the resources of subordinate groups and of dominant groups. The result is global cognitive disfunction, an ‘epistemology of ignorance’ (Bessone, 2020: 17). The union of politics and epistemology in a single conceptual framework heralds the notion of standpoint theory developed by feminist thinkers against the idea of an ‘asocial cartesian actor’ capable of objective science (Mills, 1997 quoted by Bessone, 2020: 21). In the context of societies that are stratified by power, certain minority perspectives appear more knowledgeable than others about reality, whether they are Black, working class, or women, because as oppressed people they have a grasp on both their own perspective and that of those who dominate them. These theories thus draw on and update a range of critical epistemologies that return to the notion of objectivity and completely overturn it. For Sandra Harding ‘strong objectivity’ is specifically constructed based on the subjectivity of the oppressed group whose position in social relations is considered the most objective, while the objectivity of the dominants is rendered ‘weak’ (Harding, 1991). The epistemological formalisation undertaken by these theorists comes close to a more radical form of the doubt expressed by Pierre Bourdieu in relation to objectivism: ‘we do not feel inclined to award constructions of objectivist science (which does not mean objective) the plaudits that it too quickly and freely grants to itself’ (Bourdieu, 2000 [1972]: 222–223)

The notions of epistemic privilege and strong objectivity associated with the perspective of women have of course been subject to relatively traditional and well-founded criticisms. Appropriating the privilege of knowledge, refused by correlation to those in a position of dominance, simply by virtue of a subordinate position, is clearly problematic in terms of its theoretical foundation. Hartsock has thus been criticised for her dual essentialism which consists in considering that simply being a woman provides a more enlightened worldview, and also that there is a single unified perspective shared by all women or by all feminists (Haraway, 1985; Collins, 1986; Heckman, 1997; Espinola, 2012). In passing, the dialogue of different standpoint theorists was particularly fruitful and produced significant and regular corrections that helped develop the theory further. The use of theoretical resources developed by precursors such as Marx and Du Bois, based on subjects other than ‘women’ made it possible to de-essentialise the first feminist theorisations of standpoint epistemology. On the one hand, the goal was to reformulate what was understood by women’s perspectives – which was clearly potentially essentializing – into a *feminist* perspective that valorised and promoted that perspective

in itself but emphasised that the construction of that perspective is something that requires work, and a collective reflexivity that is far from innate (Espinola, 2012; Bracke et al., 2013). The politicisation of feminist thought requires an awareness of the dynamics of power relations. Far from being essentialist, this approach emphasizes the fact that social groups, their position in society, and the forms of awareness they develop do not pre-exist the power relations that create them.

On the other hand, and with surprising ease given they were initially founded in the idea of unique female experience, these theories rapidly moved beyond the sole point of view of women, as part of a constant broadening of the epistemic subject. Patricia Hill Collins, who was herself inspired by Du Bois, incorporated the reflections of Black feminism into the epistemological framework being constructed and reiterated the importance of the minority perspective of African American women (Collins, 1990). The feminist question thus morphed into a minority question with multiple meanings, and the notion of epistemic privilege rolled out to all minority perspectives, whether in terms of race, class, sexual orientation, ability, etc. The notion of the 'outsider within' (Collins, 1986) or of 'bifurcated consciousness' (Smith, 1997 [1974]; Collins, 1986) similarly reflect the idea of epistemic privilege, and may be applied to many dominated groups, not only women. In response to accusations of essentialism, standpoint theory therefore universalised by increasing its subjects. But this enlargement also consisted in de-essentialising 'women' as subject, shifting the gaze onto the diversity of women's and feminist experience. This is how the critique of essentialism shifted into both a universalism and anti-universalism, reformulating the notion of a standpoint as the point of view of all oppressed groups and of the diversity of forms of domination women are subject to as a group. Hill Collins' contribution to standpoint theory was clearly a precursor to the intersectionality of the 1990s, aiming to break up the political subject of feminism and bringing the question of epistemic privilege back to the importance of taking into account the diversity of women's social situations, positions, and experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). These theories begin from the paradoxical invisibility of certain minority subjects in the context of the representation of recognised minority groups, reiterating that perspective and social struggle are not only inseparable but also demand constant questioning and repositioning.<sup>3</sup> The theorisation of minority perspectives is an endless epistemological task because shedding light on the experience of certain minorities creates shadows in which other minorities remain unrepresented (Chauvin and Jaunait, 2015). Standpoint theories also reiterate that epistemology cannot be apolitical and that any epistemic privilege can be annulled if it is recognised as legitimate and institutionalised. This is a constant dialectic between majority and minority in which power is a question of knowledge. As Magali Bessone puts it,

anyone who aspires to an objective understanding of the world, more complete and less biased, must engage in epistemic practices that are collaborative, democratic, and community-focused, and must seek to embrace the knowledge that originates in majority *and* marginalised groups, so that the epistemic frameworks through which we understand our social world may gain as much objectivity as possible (Bessone, 2020: 21).

Although the idea that the social position of women implies a form of knowledge that is inaccessible to men in dominant positions is both plausible and demonstrable, any theory that claims to encapsulate all possible perspectives is potentially condemned to become entangled in the very thing it criticises – the idea that one group has a ‘better’ perspective than the others. As critiques of intersectionality demonstrated later, the quest for an absolute minority is regressive and endless. Donna Haraway, for example, writes that the search for epistemic authority is a quest for ‘a ‘full’ and total position’, ‘the search for the fetishized perfect subject of oppositional history, sometimes appearing in feminist theory as the essentialized Third World Woman’. But she also notes that ‘subjugation is not grounds for an ontology (. . .). Only those occupying the positions of the dominators are self-identical, unmarked, disembodied, unmediated, transcendent, born again’ (Haraway, 1988: 586–587). For Haraway, all knowledge is situated in experience, and feminist epistemology is not an epistemology by essence when it is properly understood. The feminist perspective must accept the fact that it is partial and embodied, and thus one form of knowledge among others, better founded because it recognises that it is simply a point of view. Objectivity is constructed by taking into account one’s own perspective – rather than ignoring it – and can only be achieved through an approach to science that is open to diversity and a multiplication of perspectives, as Helen Longino argues from an intersubjective approach (Longino, 1993). For Haraway, objectivity is not so much a position that is inherited by the dispossessed, or even something that can be conquered once and for all, but rather a scientific practice that is based on reflexivity and diversity that are necessarily boundless.

### *Feminist epistemology at the crossroads of social sciences*

The claim of impure scientific research in the production of knowledge resonates strongly with other, non-feminist research programmes or methods that have considerably influenced epistemology over the last fifty years. It is impossible to cover all of these disciplinary connexions here, but we can take note of how reflections on feminist epistemology fall into line with certain major research programmes in science and technology studies (STS) and the sociology of sciences.

From the 1960s–1970s, STS developed a range of interdisciplinary research studies conducted in the fields of the history, sociology, and philosophy of sciences and technologies. Like feminist research, the starting point for these studies was the deconstruction of the traditional scientific approach and a questioning of the overarching view of the researcher able to produce science that was both objective and neutral. The scientific laboratory, site of the rules of objective thought that Pierre Bourdieu described as ‘that enclosed world, set apart from the vicissitudes of the real world’ (Bourdieu, 2003 [1997]: 41) is not however, really separate from society. STS conceive scientific production through its relations to society as a whole, considered as a socio-technical aggregate, and reintroduce the range of contingencies of scientific research, whether they are socio-cultural contexts, political influences, or individual interests and subjectivities (Bloor, 1976). In these fields of research, if we think of the symmetry of scientific relationships between actors in Actor-Network-Theory developed by Madeleine Akrich, Michel Callon and Bruno Latour (Latour, 1984; Callon, 1986), the hierarchy between the object and the subject of knowledge dissolves in exactly the same way as the description of the

radical, pluralist, feminist sociology proposed by Dorothy Smith (Smith, 1997 [1974]). This return to the field takes the form of radical reflexivity that breaks away from the major theoretical frameworks, much like the accounts of ethno-methodologists who scrutinize practices in the field as they happen, and conceptualise the networks between researchers, their instruments, and their objects, simultaneously deconstructing the divisions between nature and culture, or science and society (Callon et al., 2001). STS also explores certain contemporary anthropological questions (Descola, 2005) and initiated the fundamental epistemological shifts on the status of nature and what it takes for granted, which constitute the heart of feminist investigation into the distinction between sex and gender primarily understood as a distinction between the physical and the social. Delphine Gardey also notes how the work of Bruno Latour and Dona Haraway 'so enthusiastically deconstructs what counts as nature, as science, and as society. They drain the categories used to describe and define the world' (Gardey, 2010: 212). In her commentary of Haraway, Gardey considers that

the social is that particularly complex natureculture: it is the contemporary aspect of our presence in the world, in a technoscientific environment in which the borders between the living and the artefactual have always been uncertain [...] Here there is a sort of 'biosocial' conception of presence in the world that once again places relationality (this time between species) at the centre. (Gardey, 2013: 173)

The connections that we seek to emphasize here cannot, of course, do justice to the complexity and diversity of these major research programs. However, they allow us to emphasize epistemological convergences and synergies on different fronts, as well as their interactions that have so durably transformed the vision and practice of social sciences. The political questions raised by the pioneers of feminism and by the second wave in academia do not constitute isolated militant reflections restricted to gender. On the contrary, they recount the epistemological questionings of their time, they transform them and amplify them, adopting the scientific authority of research schools less often accused of militancy. As mentioned above, feminist research developed around objects that had too long been the exclusive domain of natural sciences, thus successfully pushing the limits of social constructivism, into the very heart of representations of the living world and particularly one of its major assumptions: the biological differences between the sexes. In the last twenty years, feminist research successfully developed at the crossroads between the sociology of science and the natural sciences themselves, while at the very beginning of the 1980s it was often constructed in *opposition* to the natural sciences, as 'biophobic', as though nature were merely a pure social representation, a discourse to be deconstructed (Hoquet, 2016; Ahmed, 2008). Recent decades have allowed for a dialogue to develop between the natural sciences and feminist research around a shared concern for the deconstruction of traditional binaries: objective/subjective, nature/culture, realism/constructivism, biological/social, body/mind, human/non-human...In her observation of treatment in a Dutch hospital, Annemarie Mol shows that the 'multiple ontologies' of atherosclerosis enacted by the specialists, carers, and sufferers (the visions and perceptions of patients and those of different health professionals), reveal a reality that is often contradictory and in which different

objectivities of a given phenomenon coexist (Mol, 2002). The question of materiality has also been also reincorporated into innovative feminist approaches like those recently developed as part of new materialism (Cool and Frost, 2010), combining the relational epistemology of feminism with more contemporary questioning on biology and physics. Rosi Braidotti's 'posthuman' (Braidotti, 2013), or Karen Barad's notion of 'matter's agency', which she sees as opposed to social constructivism (Barad, 2003, 2007), are situated in the continuity of early feminist research on the denaturalisation of the social. Yet they also go beyond this early research, not hesitating to think *with* nature and not *against* it, in an illustration of both the opening-up of feminist epistemology and its contribution to social sciences, and indeed science as a whole (Grosz, 1999; Lépinard and Lieber, 2020).

Ultimately, feminist research has indeed provided a major contribution to the scientific process. Beginning with the political question of a staggering lack of women in sciences, these studies have contributed to a form of scientific realism that is congruent with approaches developed in other scientific areas outside social sciences. Reality cannot be independent from the way in which we set out to study it. The border between society and the natural sciences has become weaker, thus demonstrating that the social does not stop at the doors of the research laboratory, and that politics infuses and informs every scientific act (Gardey, 2005).

## **Feminist methodology: from reflections on power to awareness-raising**

Although feminist epistemologists' contributions to the social sciences cannot be denied – particularly as they converge with, amplify, or enrich reflections and orientations in other disciplinary traditions – it is sometimes difficult to gauge what a feminist approach involves on a methodological level. Whether it means 'feminist fieldwork' (Clair, 2016) or more broadly investigating gender by using tools and reflections seen as specific to it, questions on methodology are at the heart of this special issue. Like for questions related to epistemology, feminist approaches to methodology have had a clear impact on social sciences, without revolutionising them. As Helen Charron and Isabelle Auclair wrote, 'methods, as protocols for apprehending reality, are not in themselves feminist, it is the way they are used and the ways of problematising processes of production and localising knowledge that enable the production of feminist knowledge and the subversion of hegemonic scientific paradigms' (Charron and Auclair, 2016: 2). Here, we will selectively reproduce some of these fundamental methodological propositions from approaches driven by feminist studies and gender studies, resulting directly from the epistemology discussed above. Accepting that research is socially situated and self-aware imposes a principle of heightened reflexivity in the field (section 1), in keeping with the fundamental grammar of feminism: power (section 2).

### ***Deconstruction, subjectivity, and gender consciousness***

Standpoint theories as a whole make subjectivity a driving force in the production of knowledge – whether thinking in terms of the position of the researcher or of the

conceptual worlds of the people studied – in keeping with the principles of ethnomethodology and pragmatism. The central place of subjectivity encourages the development of research principles based on reflexivity and the relational nature of research, a form of intersubjectivity that constitutes the backbone of scientific investigation, both in the field and within epistemic communities open to constant critical dialogue (Longino, 1993). This relational research is not so much (or not exclusively) an ethical position as a way of revisiting the research objects and methods of traditional positivist research, particularly as they are incarnated in the supremacy of quantitative methods.

It is no exaggeration to say that at the beginning of feminist studies ‘*quanti was the enemy*’ (Hughes and Cohen, 2010). From the 1970s, Dorothy Smith associated positivism and quantitative analysis with making women and their work invisible (Smith, 1997 [1974]). Quantitative science was seen as more ‘objective’ and qualitative approaches were seen as simply illustrative. The former also represents a form of research in which variables measured ‘all other things being equal’ are added or removed, disconnected from each other, and thus unable to sufficiently account for the contextual aspects of the phenomenon studied (Naples, 2007). This vision, which flattens the data, leads to a form of ‘cognitive fragmentation’ (Charron and Auclair, 2016: 3) of the research objects. This is perfectly illustrated in studies on domestic labour or care work, for which simple quantification is unable to provide satisfactory answers – how can the mental load that is inseparable from women’s domestic labour be accurately quantified? How can we understand women’s work without the emotional and cognitive aspects associated with it, beyond the description of repetitive tasks (Molinier, 2013)? The goal here was to reconceptualise the classical objects of sociology by situating them within the systems of relations that give them meaning, thus de-naturalising them. Whether the subject is work, gender violence, sexuality, care, or sexism, purely quantitative studies are unable to account for the tangibility of these phenomena and the dynamics that they produce and reproduce. When research objects are categories with contested and shifting borders rather than phenomena that are clearly perceived and identified by all, the concern for context and reflexivity on the object are a necessary part of the constant definitional work that is at the heart of social relations and the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees.

In this respect, qualitative research has long been considered the most appropriate for both feminist approaches and research fields (Charron and Auclair, 2016; Turcotte, 2016) as part of an often binary association between androcentrism/objectivity/quantitative research on the one hand, and feminism/subjectivity/qualitative research on the other. This binary opposition has been progressively weakened as part of a demand for a plurality of research methods consistent with the ideal of a multiplicity of perspectives and contingency of research objects. Feminist methodology is above all pragmatic, rather than simply being anti-quantitative (because ultimately the first studies of domestic labour would not have emerged without strict quantification of the labour differential between men and women and its connection to GDP) (Delphy, 1998). The principle of relationality leads to the diversification of research instruments: statistics, ethnography, discourse analysis, interviews, comparison, observation (Naples 2007; Turcotte, 2016). Rather than being a single method, it emphasizes methodological flexibility, allowing both more complete investigation and a constant redefinition of the object. In other words, it is reflexive.



Paola Tabet's research is a remarkable example of this. Tabet, an Italian anthropologist, has successfully managed to combine the analysis of marriage, prostitution, the social and economic power of men, and the ordinary everyday life of women. By deconstructing prostitution as an object, she situates it within a continuum of economic-sexual exchanges and questions the reasons for its stigmatisation within societies that are marked by sexual monetary exchanges. Studying the structure of power relations between men and women, she simultaneously refines the analysis from the 'inside' by interviewing women themselves, showing how taking into account the position of each of them is a gain in knowledge over the system as a whole that constrains them. Thus, in *La grande arnaque* (The Great Scam) she writes that comparing 'the degree of constraint or autonomy of women in various types of relations has a particular meaning: it means respecting, trying to understand and analyse the choices women themselves make, even if these choices all remain within systems of male domination and do not allow escape' (Tabet, 2004: 118). Studies like this have revolutionised the analysis of certain objects, linking them to others to observe the emergence of systems and approaches that are specifically feminist and powerfully interpretative. The immense field of research on gender violence provides an illustration of how feminist research produces results that are more comprehensive within a framework of interpretation that avoids sequencing different kinds of violence, as they are represented and quantified in criminal and legal proceedings (Delage et al., 2019). Quantitative and qualitative analysis are inseparable here, in demonstrating how violence against women – rape in particular – reflects the way the whole social system is organised according to gender. For decades, feminist analysis has been running counter to an understanding of gender violence as social deviance, instead resituating it within a quasi-functional social logic that only a study of gender relations can fully explain (Lieber, 2008 ; Debauche, 2011; Delage, 2016; Debauche et al., 2017; Rey-Robert, 2019).

Clearly, when it comes to studying gender, the intersubjective perspective means renouncing an overarching position which would involve establishing a research protocol once and for all. It is undoubtedly on the question of categories that methodological and epistemological humility seems the most necessary and demands the most reflexivity, as can be seen in the development of queer methodology (Browne and Nash, 2010). How can we investigate sex identities and sexual orientations when the categories used to describe them are challenged (even by those who use them and advocate for them) for being either insufficiently inclusive in classical protocols of data collection, or as reflecting shifting identities which are thus impossible to grasp with any kind of finality? Whether it is the multiplicity of definitions of trans identities, non-binary people, or those with fluid sexuality, moving into this kind of fieldwork forces the researcher to accept a certain analytic dispossession, and a constant reinvention of the categories they use with their respondents. 'Yet, the methodological deployment of queer theorizing can fundamentally undermine some of the key tenets of social science methods. For example, in terms of sampling processes, how can you sample around identities, if identities (and subjectivities) themselves are understood as unstable, fragmented, and fluid' (Brown and Nash, 2016: 3; on these same questions, see Jackson, 2000; Callis, 2014; Magliozzi et al., 2016; Trachman and Lejbowicz, 2018; Darwin, 2020).

## Power and gender consciousness

The importance of reflexivity in the feminist approach is both coherent with standpoint theory – aiming to transform bias into knowledge gains – and with the starting point for feminist research, i.e. the political critique of women’s invisibility in science, which goes beyond the question of justice to the problem of knowing and reflecting reality. Investigating gender also means investigating power (like any study of structural social relations) but also *with* power, by ensuring that at every stage of the research process we remain conscious of the system that we are condemning, and actively avoid contributing to its reproduction. Paying attention to one’s own position as a researcher and to the kinds of power we have over participants is by no means a new methodological concern, whether in terms of the bias we produce in the results, or from an ethical position in terms of the effects of one’s own research and the power imbalances between interviewers and interviewees. The originality of the feminist approach does not solely lie in this constant awareness of the issue of power, but also the fact that this awareness is fed by the evolutions of the theory and by feminist struggles themselves.

In keeping with this approach that consists in reconstructing political subjectivities and replacing them in their context and historicity, it seems that standpoint theory involves a continued investigation into the process of construction of subjectivity itself, and into the possible connections between different struggles and contestation. (Bracke et al., 2013: 56)

The need to pay close attention to power relations in research is undoubtedly why ethnography is often chosen as the preferred method in gender-focused approaches, a phenomenon constituted through the dynamic of social relations itself (Kergoat, 2009). ‘Conducting fieldwork as a feminist’, as the French sociologist Isabelle Clair suggests (Clair, 2016), also involves immersion in a community where proximity to interviewees proves to be a resource, running counter to the distance and neutrality supposed to guarantee the objectivity of research. Unlike the detachment specific to empiricism, research methods like participant observation constitute ‘feminist techniques’ that encourage more reflexivity into ‘the nature of interactions that develop over the course of research, as well as the transformation by the researcher of the lives of others in the field – and of interactions, struggles, evidence [...]’ (Clair, 2016: 69). The gender consciousness of the researcher working on social sex relations, thus constitutes a genuine methodological toolbox that enables proximity with interviewees, sharing their beliefs and their problems, and the presentation of their dilemmas within a space of sisterhood and solidarity which is more a benefit for the research than it is a bias. Although these forms of exchange and proximity are proclaimed as ‘a different way’ to do research and produce greater knowledge, they also represent potential pitfalls given that power relations can be a double-edged sword. Indeed, in a particularly influential article on feminist research from the late 1980s, the American sociologist Judith Stacey raised the issue of the possibility of conducting purely feminist ethnography. Interviewers and interviewees may indeed share a common body of experiences and socialisation but any idea of sisterhood remains an illusion in a context where the benefit of

the research belongs to the interviewer or researcher alone, and the suffering associated with the research is in fact the substance of these benefits (Stacey, 1988). These reflections converge with those developed by the sociology of the working classes (Schwartz, 1990; Clair, 2016), which are also careful to conceive the research relationship above all as social interaction that must be objectivated (Bourdieu, 1993). Michel Pialoux, for example, reflects on the reasons that led him to abandon his regular chronical in the academic journal *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, co-written with one of his working-class interviewees, Christian Corouge. The sociologist was concerned that the publication would have uncontrolled effects on the interviewee's life, whether in terms of Corouge's relationship with his hierarchy or with factory colleagues. The militant collaboration between the worker and the sociologist profoundly transformed Christian Corouge's working-class consciousness, but also led to significant tensions in his workplace. On the other hand, many elements from this research later provided material for works by Michel Pialoux and Stéphane Beaud. The sociologists' reflection on the relations between workers and researchers led him to break off their collaboration, before eventually resuming it 25 years later in a different, more serene context (Corouge et al., 2012). The controversies provoked by Alice Goffman's book *On the Run . . .* (Goffman, 2014) are also a striking example of criticism of the ethnographic method, accused of stereotyping interviewees and setting up the ethnographer to profit from current political events. Ana Portilla shows that it is this ultimately incomplete reflexivity in the position of the researcher, rather than the ethnographic method itself, that is responsible here, demonstrating to what extent research is littered with pitfalls and can lead to the worst as well as the best (Portilla, 2016). Judith Stacey's reflection on the exploitation of interviewees is thus by no means unique, but it is this form of critical reflexivity on power that possibly reflects the mark of feminism, in the sense that it plays out *within feminist political theory*, and has constituted the evolutionary dynamic of this theory for more than fifty years. Indeed, Stacey's exploration of the lack of reciprocity and equality between interviewers and interviewees, and on the good relationships a researcher should develop with research participants, as well as the impossibility of producing genuinely collaborative work that is not exploitative, is inspired by the critical reflections of feminists from developing countries and postcolonial studies, such as Lila Abu Lughod, Chandra Talpade Mohanty or Gayatri Spivak (Mohanty, 1984; Spivak, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 1990). These authors were early critics of the western academic approach that universalised their own perspective and captured the voice of oppressed peoples – 'Can the subaltern speak?' – imposing their own feminist agendas onto groups of women to 'save them'.<sup>4</sup> In light of north/south relations, certain struggles that appear universal, such as the fight against female genital mutilation, deserve a more political re-examination (Boddy, 2007; Gardey, 2019). In much the same way as 'the private is political', we could say that 'the field is political'. Indeed, even as third wave feminism opened up a vast critical field levelled against white feminism, and deconstructed the political subject of feminism – both through intersectionality and postcolonialism – these critical questions were immediately reflected into the sociological aspect of research, identifying its fundamental imbalances and knowledge biases. What are the limits of sisterhood? What do actors really share in a scientific process that distributes gains unequally? Can research really contribute to the transformation of power

relations or does it amplify them behind a veil of solidarity? Many reflections on research ethics are born from these issues, raising the question of the real benefits of the investigation from the point of view of the interviewees and not the researcher, particularly in the case of minority or marginalised social groups suffering from 'research fatigue' in the face of the insatiable academic appetite of those who monitor them constantly (Clark, 2008; Ashley, 2021). Ultimately, the feminist approach, or more generally the approaches that put the critique of gender at the heart of their practices tend to demonstrate that the reflexive relationship with power is endless and represents more a horizon than a destination. In any case, it cannot be set up as a simple posture of solidarity, affirming its objective contribution to the emancipation of the oppressed. Clearly, whatever methodological choices are made as part of a reflexive and political approach, they cannot do away with the norms and principles of scientific legitimacy that are marked by pre-existing power relations (Turcotte 2016; Pache, 2016). Today, in order to 'count', a study that is conceived and implemented in the most feminist way possible must nevertheless find its way in a productivist scientific system that controls norms for academic writing, the presentation of articles, citations, or intellectual property. It will be forced to transcribe its project for social change into an 'impact' norm that can be represented in a Gantt chart.

Moreover, the dilemmas of feminist research are not limited to questions about the borders of sisterhood. They sometimes engage the scientific position itself and its requirement for empathy when the field forces the researcher to confront their own convictions and generates discomfort or revulsion. Thus, research by Mélanie Gourarier on the 'Community of Seduction', groups of men who set out to rehabilitate virile values and who engage in constant devalorization of women through explicitly sexist seduction practices, led her to take on a role as an 'honorary male' in direct opposition to her own beliefs. Feminist ethics and professional skills collide painfully here, over the course of research that demands the acquisition of the very values the study seeks to ultimately denounce (Gourarier, 2011). Even more brutally, Philippe Descola invokes his 'duty of neutrality' in the context of the domestic violence he witnessed, after having tried to reason with a violent husband who then compared the ethnologist to a moralistic missionary. Rationalising the role of this male violence in the society he studied, Descola confessed that trying, 'by reasonable interpretation, to appease the feeling of revolt against certain practices that go against their convictions is the only solution ethnologists have, condemned by the nature of their task to not censure those who have placed their trust in them' (Descola, 1993: 217–218). Yet feminist commitment can mean engaging more with the field than Descola's rationalisation suggests. For certain anthropologists, fieldwork requires making a judgment, 'choosing sides' and denouncing a situation of injustice or violence knowing that this will immediately end the research, as certain anthropologists have related in the context of violent and dangerous fieldwork (Nordstrom and Robben, 1996). These examples question the limits of what researchers in the field can accept to do or not do, and lead to the painful evaluation of the value of research itself, given that the ultimate justification of a study may pale in comparison with the moral cost of accomplishing it. Research from a feminist approach may thus involve a radical break away from the neutral research ethos which considers such a dilemma

unresolvable, when from a feminist perspective the problem can in fact be resolved . . . as a feminist.

In the wake of this attempt at a synthesis, we might conclude, with Sandra Harding, that there is no feminist method as such, but that over the course of the history of feminist studies and gender studies, certain reflections have become characteristic of an approach that is guided by the social experience of women and specific to the study of gender. The problem of the historic invisibility of women is transcribed into a problem of knowledge of reality, and this approach has promoted a break away from more traditional forms of objectivism by proposing to make the most of all of the subjective inputs in research. Like in the history of sciences and technology, the goal is to provide a lucid theory of research articulating the fact that all scientific study is an intervention in reality, and accepting that politics shapes the study of gender by giving access to relational aspects of reality that androcentric research tends to disregard. Although the reflexivity is not unique to feminist research, we can say that it is impossible to conduct research on gender without reflexivity and without problematising power in some way. The fact that politics provides material for epistemology is not new either, as the influences of Marx and Du Bois on the early standpoint theories show. However, the feminist approach draws from this the conditions for its permanent evolution, and constant enlargement of its epistemic subject, deploying feminism and gender beyond femininity and sex. This approach begins and ends with politics, via a social change through research, whether participating incrementally in the transformation of social relations, intervening in field-work in which the researcher is 'supposed' to remain impartial, seeking to associate actors with hypotheses, results, or benefits of the study, or provoking policies for scientific coalition beyond gender alone (hooks, 1984) and associating the 'oppositional awareness' of other kinds of struggle (Sandoval, 1991, 2000). Feminist epistemology and methodology thus propose to conceive of scientific and political spaces symmetrically, encouraging all researchers to think about their work with humility, without abandoning indignation. Ultimately, feminist research appears to be a position haunted by radical doubt and a kind of permanent scruples that are reminiscent of a way of being in the world typically associated with femininity, as a counterpoint to the absolute assurance of male entitlement. This internal divide is masterfully described by the feminist anthropology initiated by Marilyn Strathern in her major work *The Gender of the Gift* (Strathern, 1988), and that she further theorised in *Patriarchal Connections* (Strathern, 1991). Strathern draws on Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg, considering feminism as a tool that prolongs the researcher's identity and completes it, but which fails to fully fuse with it into a coherent whole. Instead she imagines an intermediary form that can never be totally unified, with different ways of being feminist representing heterogeneous properties in constant interaction with the object being studied. This perpetual fractioning helps categorise this feminist anthropologist in her most interactive form, continuously redefined by the context and field studied. Ultimately, if feminism can never be perfectly integrated into research, it is because that is not its vocation, firstly because it is too heterogeneous, and secondly because the totalising pretention of research is without foundation (Iteanu, 2014).

Like an endless quest, feminist research has been constantly reconceptualising and reforming itself to set itself apart from the methods and epistemologies it criticises. This

constant reflection on power, with an emphasis on reflexivity that is indissociable from the feminist position and the fundamentally relational nature of research, have led to questions on the nature of gender itself, as this analytic concept has become an 'ordinary' category used by interviewees.

## **Towards gender consciousness**

Questioning new modes of research on gender is not a matter of simply providing an update on the maturity of this academic field, seen as having progressively found its concept or its object. More than that, the goal here is to question the effects of the widespread distribution of a term that is now part of the ordinary vocabulary of social actors, making gender an 'object' that is both shared and challenged within research. In a certain respect, although there has always been gender in our societies, it has become more prominent as the term has become politicised, legalized, and mobilised in the most ordinary everyday interactions. Non-specialist definitions of gender have multiplied, and the researcher must confront 'indigenous' conceptions that are sometimes quite remote from the concept that he or she wants to mobilise. This 'dynamic nominalism' supposes that what is studied is transformed through profane appropriations of the scientific category which force the researcher to constantly question their research object (Hacking, 1986). Similarly, sociologists of science Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Star have studied the phenomenon of 'convergence' between social groups and systems of classification, to explore the consequences of scientific classification for the phenomena that these categories capture (Bowker and Star, 1999). Here we defend the idea that research on gender is today deeply interconnected, even indissociable, from actors' consciousness of it, not only because representations 'count', but also because gender in ordinary social interactions alters gender itself. Gender consciousness is gender. In breaking out of scientific laboratories and becoming more accessible, gender has created new epistemological and methodological challenges that are inherent to studies in which a single term covers both a category of analysis that has become progressively stable (in spite of persisting disagreements), and categories of practice that have emerged from the success of that same analytic category in the social world. The dialectic between these two types of categories is a challenge for the social sciences. Breaking down barriers between science and society particularly concerns the analysis of highly politicised issues like gender and is increasingly crystallised in the social world. Gender thus appears to exemplify the tension between analytical and practical categories that Rogers Brubaker encouraged researchers to disentangle through increased reflexivity on their scientific practices. He writes:

We may have no good alternative to using analytical categories that are heavily loaded and deeply contested categories of practice; but as scholars we can and should adopt a critical and self-reflexive stance towards our categories (Brubaker, 2013: 6).

To understand this contemporary shift in the proliferation of gender, we use the term 'gender consciousness' which has been developed in sociology and political science to refer to a form of awareness of power relations resulting from the politicisation of

minority experience. In this ‘typical’ conception, gender consciousness is a notion similar to class consciousness. It refers to a collective and individual process by which social actors identify, name, and theorise the relationship with power that binds and unifies them, and in so doing give themselves the means to get around, subvert, or contest it. However, here we propose a reformulation of the concept borrowing from the sociology of law, and particularly from legal consciousness studies (LCS) of which one of the primary propositions is to understand the law in relation to the way it is concretely used and interpreted by social actors. The LCS approach allows us to reformulate the link between categories of analysis and categories of practice that is at the heart of our reflections (section 1). We then seek to demonstrate, based on the contributions to this issue of the *BMS*, how contemporary conditions of gender research have changed in a world that has become gender conscious. The banality of gender today no longer allows us to study it as a hidden foundation of social logics, or as something to be ‘revealed’. According to David Valentine, for example, reflection on the categories used by researchers must always take into account the way in which interviewees consider these categories themselves; a failure to do so results risks replacing the experience of reality with the category constructed to understand that reality (Valentine, 2004) (section 2).

### *Consciousness of what?*

In order to problematise the methodological and epistemological issues associated with the proliferation of gender as a practical category we began this article with the question of how gender can be analysed in a world that is ‘gender conscious’. The very idea of consciousness seems relevant to describe the process by which gender has become more transparent in recent years, shedding light on social structure and allowing us to understand its effects. Social actors today are not solely ‘moved’ by gender, they conceptualise it reflexively, and politicise it through internalised awareness. Similarly, the history of sexuality that developed in the wake of Michel Foucault is not only a history of a category or a social fact transformed overtime, but the history of the way individuals have developed a perspective on a category through which they represent and conceive themselves, transforming their subjectivity, and transforming sexuality in itself (Foucault, 1976, 1984). Foucauldian history of sexuality is indeed the genealogy of a range of practices that have long been associated with social roles that evolved into sexual orientations over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, then into identity, as categorisation by sexuality progressively spread through society (D’Emilio, 1983; Halperin, 1989; Halperin et al., 1990; Katz, 1990; Chauncey, 1994 ; Chauvin and Learch, 2021).<sup>5</sup> Grasping the historicity of gender, like that of sexuality, means understanding and analysing the transformations that have affected them as they have progressively become categories of practice and modalities of subjective identification.

The term gender consciousness has been particularly closely studied in research on political and electoral sociology. Patricia Gurin, for example, compares women’s gender consciousness to group consciousness of other American minorities (such as African Americans or blue-collar workers) in the 1970s and 1980s (Gurin, 1985). For her, gender is an approximate synonym to ‘women’, reflecting a minority political experience that has developed with feminism. In French political sociology, gender consciousness has

been described as an awakening that differs depending on the political trajectories of women and the assimilation of feminist heritage (Masclat, 2015; Albenga and Bachmann, 2015). For Catherine Achin and Delphine Naudier, the acquisition of gender consciousness is the key to women's empowerment, providing reflexivity on the collective oppression of women (Achin and Naudier, 2010). The sociology of social movements also combines gender consciousness and class consciousness to shed light on the logic and foundations of activism (Fillieule and Roux, 2009; Gallot and Siblot, 2021). In the area of electoral sociology, in the study of the gay vote for example, it is the feeling of group belonging to a minority social group that enables the transformation of sexual orientation to be used as an independent variable (Hertzog, 1996). The awareness of oneself as conscious of belonging to a group can be qualitatively measured and correlated with electoral behaviour. Mickaël Durand's analysis is particularly subtle, exploring the gender consciousness of lesbians in France, distinguishing between a form of consciousness based on sexual orientation, and a form of consciousness that stems from being women (Durand, 2020).

All of these studies provide solid analyses that converge on the notion of gender consciousness, defined as a grammar of belonging similar to the Marxist notion of 'class for itself', that can be measured by different kinds of research. The more an identity is politicised – through primary and secondary socialisation – the stronger gender consciousness will be, allowing the development of a 'gendered reading of politics', and an 'interiorisation of the critical schemata for reading the social world from the perspective of gender' (Durand, 2020: 47, 48) or an 'alternative minority vision of gender norms' (Achin and Naudier, 2010: 78). However, it is interesting to note that in these approaches, gender itself is barely questioned, acting as an analytic category for the researcher or as a substrate assumed to be objectively defined. Certain women are aware of gender and others are not, gender being understood as an 'ability of individuals to decipher' (Durand, 2020: 48), in other words a grammar which corresponds to that of the researcher. Although we agree with these studies on the need for the researcher to maintain the analytic category through which they observe and interpret their research object, we argue that this approach does not sufficiently allow for an understanding of the plurality of conceptions of gender that can co-exist in the field, and that need to be reflected in research. In a world that is increasingly gender conscious, it is useful to look at these conceptions, not to equate gender with an infinite plurality, but on the contrary to understand how the diversity of visions of gender also participates in the coherence of the concept and the researcher's analytical toolbox. In this sense, the notion of consciousness as we understand it aims to see gender not as something that is predetermined or which can be indisputably objectively delimited. This approach to the consciousness of something that is not a given has been discussed and theorised in sociology of law, by legal consciousness studies (LCS).

LCS has broadly renewed the contemporary analysis of law by moving away from a vision of law as a phenomenon that can be isolated from the social world that influences it – as law *and* society – and towards a phenomenon that is constantly unfolded and modelled within the social interactions that are permanently defining it – as law *in* society (Silbey, 2005; Péliisse, 2005; Commaille and Lacour, 2018).<sup>6</sup> Deeply influenced by ethnomethodology, LCS considers law as a phenomenon that must be continually



accounted for through descriptions of the way it is thought and used by individuals, an ‘idea of law’ that is mediated by the way it is used and is distinct from law in its institutional dimension but participates nevertheless in the reality of the way individuals invoke it (Ewick and Silbey, 1998; Commaille and Lacour, 2018). Thus, LCS proposes a realistic approach that guides research toward the plurality of acceptations of law, disentangling the great division between an analytic concept seen as predefined by the researcher, and the plurality of ordinary uses onto which the researcher projects coherence in hindsight. Beyond the fact that as an approach it is more sociological because focused on usage, LCS has upturned the object of law itself by re-situating it within everyday life, and looking at the ‘layers of subjectivity’ that constitute it and connecting them with their profane interpretations (Silbey, 2005). For Sally Merry, law is associated with a grammar of significations and categories through which the individual forges an awareness of themself (Merry, 1990, Pélisse, 2005). In opposition to a more theoretical perspective, LCS looks at law as a social practice in everyday life, and not a ‘thing’, an indeterminant interpretive framework, fundamentally associated with the specific configurations in which it is applied. In a book that is emblematic of this field of research, drawing on several hundred interviews, Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey suggest categorising three modalities that account for the ways in which individuals position themselves in relation to the law. There are the ‘before the law’, ‘with the law’, or ‘against the law’. Depending on the situations and interactional constraints, social actors may take on the roles of ‘applicant’, ‘player’ or ‘resistor’, their own positions revealing a law that is different in different situations (Ewick and Silbey, 1998).

We cautiously propose to consider gender consciousness in a similar way, in order to better conceptualise the contemporary relationship between gender as an analytic category and its myriad usages as a practical category. Just as there are several types of relationship toward the law that participate in the reality of the law itself, there are several types of relationship to and understandings of gender. The idea that social actors have of gender participates in the construction of gender through their concrete practices – in an interactionist way – and the meaning of gender revealed through ordinary practices requires the researcher to define it more reflexively – in a pragmatic way. In his analysis of socio-sexual trajectories and ways of being trans in France today, Emmanuel Beaubatie thus creates a ‘social space of gender’ in which gender norms are lived differently, conditioning sexual social mobility that is variable because linked to different parameters. By distinguishing three major groups, those who ‘conform’, those who are ‘strategic’ and those who are ‘non-binary’, Beaubatie successfully describes the standpoints and trajectories that stem from different conceptions of gender and different ways of using it, plural gender relations that construct heterogeneous identities and conceptions of the self. For some trans people, gender is a binary norm that must be resisted. For others – and sometimes also for the same ones – gender is a system of self-expression with multiple variations. It is therefore clear that not only are there several genders, but that the process by which genders are produced, measured, and evaluated can be observed. Above all, it is possible to observe how these genders are conceptualised according to the resources, the fields of possibilities, and the interactional constraints in question. In this, Beaubatie produces a stable analytic definition of gender that allows him to construct a concept of the social space of gender, while taking into account

the universes and representations of gender mobilised by the actors that he studies (Beaubatie, 2021). Gender is both a binary normative space and a range of heterogeneous practices that cannot be limited to a binary, but which continue to implement gender, if only through their opposition to it. This is not a question of choosing between scientific definitions and profane definitions, or abandoning the concept of gender in the name of an irreducible plurality of practices, but on the contrary of fitting this multiplicity of representations and usages that reflect them.

This proposition seems coherent with the way LCS, like feminist epistemology, have come together with STS in a converging conception of contingent and situated science that allows us to account for the diversity of scientific practices (Commaille and Lacour, 2018; Albe and Lacour, 2018). Standpoint theory, STS, and LCS share a common epistemology that breaks away from objectivist science, in spite of the differences in their research objects. It is worth remembering that the widely varying forms of consciousness of the law mentioned in the studies do not lead LCS theorists to conclude that the law does not exist as a unified and identifiable phenomenon. On the contrary, the polymorphous representations and varied uses of the law paradoxically contribute to its unity and its power, and by no means challenge its hegemonic nature (Chappe et al., 2018). In the study by Ewick and Silbey, the actors are either very familiar, familiar, or unfamiliar with the law, but *the law exists* all the same and is continually constructed through its mobilisations. A similar paradox can be formulated with regards to gender; at the very moment when its scientific definition is in competition with multiple alternative definitions, many of them in fact aim to block, subvert, or undo gender as a power relation (Ewick and Silbey, 1998).

Indeed, the multiple ways gender is appropriated by social actors, and the vocabulary of plural ‘genders’ that accompanies it, in itself constitutes a thorny question as to how gender is defined. Researchers must be able to account for these evolutions, to evaluate their consequences on what we study, and to consolidate the conceptual tools that allow us to analyse them. We could content ourselves with noting the apparent contradiction between calls to abolish gender and the multiplication of ‘genders’ as though the destruction of the phenomenon could be brought about through its multiplication. In fact, it only seems contradictory if we adopt an overarching position to examine practice and its ‘incoherencies’. However, at least initially, we must acknowledge that the vocabulary of plural genders that emerged against the binarity of the sexes has a very real impact, as we can see in the emergence of non-binary categories or gender-fluidity. However, as Sébastien Chauvin writes, ‘new stabilities are [also] produced by these fluidities’ (Chauvin, 2019: 237). Judith Butler noted in the very early 1990s (Butler, 1990; Bereni et al., 2020) that the appropriation of gender as a social reality as opposed to sex as a purely biological reality, has contributed to a renaturalisation of sex as deeply binary and rooted in the intangibility of nature. Today, gender and gender identity, anchored to the idea of choice and individual subjectivity, also provides a glimpse of a kind of ontological devaluing of this kind of new identity claimed as a ‘process of doing’ rather than a ‘state of being’ (Schneider, 1984). Yet as Chauvin notes ‘what happens to ontology when ontology is lived and written about in terms of performance, in the social world and by the social world?’ (Chauvin, 2019: 239). Even when the law recognises gender identity based on individual subjectivity, it nevertheless retains a purely binary definition of sex

as an intangible reality that exists prior to the empire of individual choices (Jaunait, 2020). The desire to denaturalise gender may therefore have paradoxical effects, which can be seen, for example, when in trans identity vocabulary we might talk about ‘changing gender’, as though changing sex is all the more impossible because what is variable and constructed seem to have been entirely absorbed by the category of gender.

Clearly, the objective here is not to propose an alternative between an analytic definition of gender – that is possibly inaccessible to interviewees – and an uncritical adoption of all the alternative profane definitions as if they were ‘more true’. The goal here is to reflect the link between these myriad everyday definitions and the way in which we are nonetheless able to preserve an analytic definition of gender. This is a genuinely reflexive approach in the sense that all the ethno-definitions of gender encourage the researcher to reflect on their own definitions during fieldwork, to understand the effects of these new topologies of gender on the gender that is being studied. Documenting contemporary gender consciousness also allows us to interpret the effects of this definitional polytheism, noting that in certain contexts it is indeed gender defined as a system of binary social categories and as an ideology of nature that is in fact reinforced – as though an ultimate trick – by invoking the very plurality that was supposed to put an end to that binary. Analysing practical categories from a relational perspective reveals different strata of reality, different ontologies and different forms of existence that can be observed in the analysis of attempts to subvert gender that sometimes reinforce it. The softening of the definition of a concept by its reappropriations can also participate in solidifying the social phenomenon that it seeks to describe. Attempting to renew the analysis of gender with this idea of contemporary gender consciousness, as a specific historical moment, means both taking this diversity of definitions of gender into account and connecting them with each other in order to understand their new arrangements, to grasp what has solidified and what has become more fluid. This topographic analysis of gender by genders is a challenge to the researcher’s concept and requires an additional effort to strengthen its validity. In the analysis of a social world in which gender is not simply a concept that enables its own interpretation, but a term that is constitutive of itself, gender consciousness encourages greater reflexivity in exploring the links between categories of analysis and of practice.

### *Contributions to this issue*

This issue of the *BMS* brings together contributions that are vastly different, both in terms of their research objects and their methodologies, but which share the goal of investigating gender today. They have not been written explicitly with a view to illustrating the notion of gender consciousness developed above, and the methodological and epistemological questions that they raise concern various issues associated with contemporary research on gender and sexuality. They can therefore be read independently of each other. I will present them through an interpretative exercise that cannot fully do them justice. Yet, in spite of their differences, these three articles are characteristic of an approach to fieldwork that incarnates reflexivity, and they all take into account the gender relations developed by their interviewees, in one way or another. This sensitivity to the actors’ own thematization of gender leads the authors to adapt their research and

interpret the results in a way that makes gender a 'shared' object that is not the sole and exclusive property of the researcher.

Marième N'Diaye looks at the production of gender in the legal system by studying the implementation of the law by family and criminal courts in Senegal. Drawing on cases of divorce and the repression of homosexuality, she uses various methods to explore her object, including archives, interviews with professionals, and observation of court sessions. In this way she is able to increase the different perspectives on gender and its production through institutions. N'Diaye responds to the analytic definition of gender as a 'system of hierarchical bi-categorisation between the sexes (men/women) and between the values and representations associated with them (masculine/feminine)' (Bereni and al., 2020: 8) which allows her to investigate the way in which the law participates in the (re)production of gender categories and assignments. This is one of the objectives of the literature on 'gender and law' more generally which, through its critique of the law as a challenge to power relations, sets out to show how law contributes to the naturalisation of differentiation and discrimination between the sexes. Yet N'Diaye does not impose this definition on either her fieldwork or on her interviewees. On the contrary, she evokes a 'puzzle' that allows her to describe gender in action, as it is being constituted through practice, and as it is crystallised in the final decision of the courts. In other words, in breaking down the practices and encouraging judges to reflect on their practices, she shows that gender influences their decisions even though in the magistrates' discourses it remains a category unrelated to their reasoning and interpretation (or at least not familiar to them). Indeed, N'Diaye reminds us that gender issues do not necessarily come through in legal texts and actors in this sphere do not always formalise them as such, even though they are often at the heart of the tensions that run through the legal system on questions of equality. Ultimately the definition of gender that she proposes represents a stable analytic category that proves to be compatible with the range of ethno-definitions of gender which are used by actors and result from their practices. Although the definition of gender as a 'hierarchical system of bi-categorisation' is ultimately confirmed, it is no less composite in its construction, characterised both by powerful androcentrism and marked identity assignments in the divorce rulings, and simultaneously encapsulated in the language of sexuality as a heteronormative order revealed in the investigation into the repression of homosexuality. Gender is captured both through the language of sex and the language of sexuality, disclosing intricate interconnections between spheres of reality that the analysis nevertheless tends to distinguish.

This article also illustrates the remarkable acceleration of history as far as the gender category in the contemporary world is concerned. In the context of fieldwork in Africa, Marième N'Diaye is thus perpetually confronted with her identity as a feminist researcher. As postcolonialism has shown since the 1980s, the issue of gender itself has strong normative connotations in the context of north/south relations. In N'Diaye's article, we can see how this postcolonial critique has become widespread and has come to haunt the research process in the form of the relations between the interviewer and the interviewees. As a feminist researcher she is frequently suspected of incarnating a post-colonial order in which western superiority is expressed through the language of gender, as the numerous studies on sexual nationalisms have shown (Jaunait et al., 2013). Gender

consciousness plays out at an international level here, global power relations are reflected at the local level, deeply modifying the meaning of gender that is implicitly expressed through individual relations constructed between the different actors in a research project. The challenge for the researcher in this context consists in overcoming interviewees' mistrust of research on gender, which is perceived as a foreign concept imposed by feminists (and thus the west) that does not correspond to social reality in Senegal or in Africa more broadly. What is at stake in this research is precisely the ability to observe categories of practice emerge from the fieldwork that illustrate the multiple (re)appropriations of the concept in a non-western context, including within the legal institution whose alleged neutral functioning does not stand up to empirical investigation. Ultimately, Marième N'Diaye successfully manages to bring together a range of definitions and practices that make gender by challenging the analytical category she proposes at the beginning of her work. In keeping with the lessons from LCS, and in spite of the variety of aspects of gender that are studied and the different forms of consciousness the actors have of it, gender indeed forms a solid matrix that is produced and reinforced through the law as a powerful androcentric and heteronormative order that cannot be easily undermined.

The article by Tania Lejbowicz and Mathieu Trachman revisits data from a statistical study on violence and gender relations to explore declarations of experiences of violence among sexual minorities. Comparing responses from homo-/bisexuals identified in the general population study and homo-/bisexuals recruited as part of a volunteer sample (in this case, minority self-identification is stronger), the authors note that lesbian and bisexual women always declare more experiences of violence than gay or bisexual men, and that the declaration of this violence is markedly higher in the volunteer sample. Beginning with this apparent statistical 'abnormality' (different responses for populations whose social properties are supposed to be identical), the authors critically revisit their own method and explore the meanings that can be attributed to this initial difference. In so doing, they refine the initial results of their study to reduce the discrepancies between the samples.

First and foremost, the analysis illustrates the characteristics of a feminist methodology that does not take an overarching perspective and which critically explores the influence of the study itself in relation to what is being studied. The question of samples (general population or volunteer) shifts the gaze onto the researcher's choices and their intervention on the reality they research. Samples, like collection methods, illustrate the variations that can exist between sexual minorities examined in different ways. LGBT volunteer samples and the collection methods that characterise them capture populations whose group belonging is more pronounced than in the general population. Behind social stratification lies the question of how socialisation to gender and sexuality is measured, and forms of politicisation that reflect the traditional understanding of gender consciousness. Recognising oneself and fully identifying as a member of a minority significantly increase the likelihood of declaring experiences of violence, but also of identifying those experiences as being minority-related violence. Lejbowicz and Trachman reveal the relational nature between research objects; the texture of group identity is connected to the characterization of violence, a subjective category that may vary according to feelings of belonging. Beyond the fact that violence may more easily be identified by

actors who are more 'conscious', the indissociable nature of belonging and the consciousness of that belonging may also increase the propensity to be subject to violence. 'The sense of belonging to an LGBT community, which implies the possibility of linking a negative experience to an identity, may influence whether and how individuals experience and/or report violence.' Indeed, this result shows the impact that a feeling of belonging may have on reality, altering social life, behaviour, and the construction and evolution of one's sex and sexual identities. Self-awareness is a grammar, a genuine cognitive system, of ways of thinking that continually interact with what is seen, but also what is lived and experienced.

One of the major results of this article is also to update the different facets of gender. Indeed, by analysing subjective forms of belonging that are more or less strong in different samples, the authors allow us to differentiate the awareness of belonging to a minority based on sex (for example, as women) from that which characterises belonging to a sexual minority (as gays, lesbians). In so doing, the analysis accounts for the profound intricacies between gender and sexuality, once again encouraging a better conceptualisation of the relationship between categories of analysis and categories of practice. Although gender and sexuality are today considered distinct and independent categories in terms of analysis, in reality the interconnections are far more complex. Thus, gay men's attitudes towards violence is strongly marked by 'gender attitudes' perceived as belonging to the other sex and showing that sexual orientation remains deeply marked by gender. For men, identifying as having a homosexual sexual orientation is located within the grammar of gender, their sexual identity remaining associated with a certain representation of femininity. Although this coding of sexuality through gender has consequences for men, these are less pronounced for women. For lesbians, adopting masculine sex behaviour is less considered 'a distancing from heterosexuality'. These results confirm that in practice it is not quite so easy to separate gender and sexuality. They also allow us to show to what extent gender is not simply characterised by duality, but also by asymmetry. If gay men are often subject to family violence early in life it is because in certain contexts their breakaway from traditional masculinity marks them as homosexuals and this mark is seen as both unmistakable and condemnable. By contrast, the fact that this is not as true for lesbians is because the breakaway from traditional femininity is considered less degrading, and that gender-dissonant behaviour in women is less immediately associated with sexuality (Chauvin and Learch, 2021). The predominance of the masculine over the feminine is clear in the meanings and social consequences of sexual orientation, with the paradoxical result of greater condemnation of gays than lesbians. However, it is impossible to conclude from the results of this study that gay women or bisexuals somehow pay a lesser price for this. The harshness and brutality of gender can be gauged through the prevalence of family violence that is systematically higher among bisexual women and lesbians. The authors hypothesise that the fact that the prevalence of violence remains high in the two samples of women, and that the difference between the group of men and women is smaller, is also because women's lives are incomparably more likely to be marked by violence in general than men's.

Finally, in asking 'who has the right to study gender and how?' Emmanuel Beaubatie tackles the question of the ownership conflicts that can complexify research when the

notion of gender constitutes both the core of the investigation and a crucial aspect of social and political identity for the interviewees. Beaubatie analyses the sex change trajectories of trans people and the processes of social promotion or downgrading resulting from these 'sex migrations' in view of the different social characteristics of the interviewees. He relates the immense difficulty in interviewing populations whose history is intricately associated with scientific objectification, control, and pathologization. Trans individuals are often hostile to researchers ('Fuck you and fuck your fucking thesis'), suspected of harnessing their voice and benefiting from the analysis and dissection of their lives. The relational nature of fieldwork is crucial here, as the interviewees' attitudes is dependent on the way they perceive the gender identity of the researcher. To use Sandra Harding's terms, non-trans researchers have 'weak' objectivity in the eyes of interviewees who see themselves as having much greater knowledge of what is being studied (because they are personally concerned). This situation of inverted knowledge is part of a long history of trans identity and is a perfect reflection of that. Emmanuel Beaubatie observes that trans women, for the most part, more readily agree to collaborate with the study, having historically been the prototypical subject of trans identity as it was 'invented' in American medical research in the 1950s, which theorised 'transsexuality' in resolutely binary terms. Inversely, many trans men, who have been historically invisible in trans identity research, bluntly refuse the very principle of a study they consider completely illegitimate (all the more so when they themselves are politicised and highly educated). Beaubatie sheds light on the social determinants that govern the interviewees' response to the study (not only gender determinants but also class determinants, with those from more privileged backgrounds being the least binary, but also the most liable to criticise scientific categories of analysis) and which condition the researcher's strategic navigation of their fieldwork. Moreover, the tension between researchers and interviewees also plays out in the categories mobilised in the study. In this particular research, the researcher is obliged to reject an analytic definition of gender that would be immediately rejected by the participants. As other reflections on statistical categorisation have shown (Magliozzi et al., 2016; Trachman and Lejbowicz, 2018), the research categories must take into account expectations and categories of interviewees, although the analysis does not have to use them uncritically. The dialectic between categories of analysis and categories of practice is explicit here; the researcher can only proceed by taking into account the ways in which the interviewees define, articulate, and identify gender. We are indeed in a world that is deeply conscious of gender and this reflexive consciousness constantly modifies the categories that are mobilised by the researcher and their approach to fieldwork. As Beaubatie notes in relation to questionnaires, the 'neither man nor woman' category used in 2010 crystallised into a 'non-binary' category a few years later, reflecting the way certain trans identities have been deeply ontologised. Moreover, analysis has a major genealogical benefit. By modelling a social space of gender, Beaubatie successfully constructs a stable gender analysis capable of reflecting the dynamics between different ethno-definitions of gender that are used in social practice. In a certain respect, his work allows the emergence of gender topographies that have been progressively transformed since the 1950s. In the medical world that defined and 'treated' 'transsexuality' in the mid-20th century, gender was a perfectly binary category in which body and mind constituted distinct entities. In the 2010s, a new

topography of gender appeared, more fluid in some respects, less in others. Gender was indeed constructed reflexively through the development of social and political gender consciousness, this in turn enabled breaks from the historical trajectory and accelerations with very real consequences. Gender is constantly being redefined between science and society, and yesterday's stabilities are now fluid. For Emmanuel Beaubatie, conceptualising gender means observing that it belongs to those who are conscious of it and who feed its constant evolution.

## Conclusion

In keeping with the perspective proposed in this introduction, the article by Tania Lejbowicz and Mathieu Trachman suggests that it is not necessarily useful to distinguish between gender consciousness and consciousness of sexuality, because their analysis – like that by Marième N'Diaye – demonstrates that in certain configurations, gender is already sexuality and vice versa. Gender is sometimes also class and vice versa, as seen in the eminently conflicted relationship to binarity among the most privileged respondents in Emmanuel Beaubatie's article. Moreover, the LCS perspective presented in this introduction consists precisely in breaking away from the idea that what we are conscious of can be objectivated prior to its realisation. Gender consciousness as a concept and an instrument can therefore reflect, over the course of the research, how what we are aware of is not always a social area that can be isolated from others, but that it is continually both interconnected to and distinguished from them, constantly demanding additional efforts for historicization. In other words, gender consciousness does not stop at the boundaries of gender.

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## Notes

1. In this overview, we draw on other similar summaries, without which this article could not have been written. In particular Naples, 2007; Espinola, 2012; Bracke et al., 2013; Clair, 2016; Lépinard and Lieber, 2020. Any errors or approximations remain my own.
2. In her book on the question of compensation for colonial slavery, Magali Bessone, retraces the concept of epistemic injustice used by Miranda Fricker, José Médina and Charles Mills (Mills, 2007; Fricker 2007; Médina 2012). Her brilliant demonstration shows how this injustice is based on the lack of credibility accorded to minority memories and the excess confidence of dominant perspectives. This asymmetry is reinforced by ‘systemic ignorance’ developed by the most privileged actors, both incapable of integrating minority perspectives and of accounting for their own indifference to them (Bessone, 2019). Her analysis sheds light on the intellectual heritage that connects epistemological reflections by contemporary theorists on justice and the epistemological intuitions developed within feminist theory that partly preceded them (Bessone, 2020).
3. The notion of repositioning, in the epistemological rather than political sense, has been theorised by the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, who describes how his wife’s death radically shifted his point of view on his research area. Investigating a head-hunter ritual associated with grief and loss, his own experience of mourning ‘repositioned’ him in the field, leading him to understand not only the provisional nature of all interpretation, but also to what extent his own observations were dependent on his experiences and his position (Rosaldo, 1989).
4. The critical articles by Judith Stacey and Lila Abu-Lughod, published two years apart, are both entitled ‘Can there be a feminist ethnography?’.
5. In particular, the ways in which historians of sexuality distinguish – by historicising them – the notions of practices and sexual identities. In Greek antiquity, erotic practices were dependent on a person’s status in society (sexuality was dependent on social rank) whereas in the modern world sexual orientation has become a characteristic ‘in itself’ of all people, regardless of social standing. Foucault thus evokes the passage from socio-sexual isomorphism in Antiquity to modern socio-sexual dimorphism that allows us to consider that sexuality has not always existed in the way we understand it today (Foucault, 2014).
6. This reflection draws on the very detailed 2018 issue of the journal *Droit et Société* entitled ‘After *Legal Consciousness Studies*: dialogues transatlantiques et transdisciplinaires’ (3(100)). It also draws on the presentation of LCS by Jérôme Pélisse in the journal *Genèses* (Pélisse, 2005).

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