

## (Bio-)Diversity, Gender, and Intersectionality

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## **(Bio-)Diversity, Gender, and Intersectionality** **(Bio-)Diversität, Geschlecht und Intersektionalität**

Now, it's impossible to change:  
Civilization is no longer a delicate flower. [...]  
Today mankind has to put up with monoculture.  
They proceed to generate civilization like sugar beets en masse.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropes* (1955)

In a globalized world Lévi-Strauss' statement – made in the 1950s – has taken on an unsuspected meaning, one that also drives this journal. This Special Issue takes an interdisciplinary perspective on *monocultures* in our natural environments as well as in our understanding of societies. Bringing together environmental *and* social sciences as well as gender studies and theories of intersectionality, we strive to address the following questions: how can we find ways of doing and undoing differences with the goal of fostering variety in flora and fauna as well as variety in human ways of living? And what does it mean if we face not just biodiversity as a natural and diversity as a social phenomenon, but (bio)diversity as an interdisciplinary concept of naturecultures? (Haraway 2003; c.f. Subramniam/Schmitz this issue)

Generally, biodiversity describes the “variety of life” on Earth. About three decades ago, biodiversity became a key concept in the environmental and conservation discourse. The term gained prominence for the first time in 1986, when it was used in the title of the American *National Forum on BioDiversity*. This conference, as well as the subsequent initiatives, marked a conceptual turning point in nature conservation politics. Whereas very early conservation efforts targeted “nature” or “wilderness” and later “endangered species,” the focus eventually shifted to the preservation and promotion of biodiversity (Takacs 1996; Morar et al. 2015). It became an environmental issue par excellence at the environmental conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, when the final document *Agenda 21* emphasized the socio-cultural significance of biodiversity next to its ecological and economic meaning. One year later, the *Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD) was ratified, which has since been endorsed by almost 200 states.

Whereas the natural sciences define biodiversity – seemingly value-free – as the variability between species, within species, and as the variability of ecosystems, environmental social science and the history of science are pointing to shifts of the conceptual frame – for example, from “nature” to “biodiversity” (and nowadays also often towards “ecosystem services”) – as being always strategi-

cally driven and bringing along different political, social and cultural implications. Despite “biodiversity” bearing great bio-physical features, above all, it must be understood as a social discourse. The biodiversity discourse generates and mobilizes a complex network of actors: from international organizations to mostly Western NGOs; from transnational bioprospectors, extending over indigenous communities, to social movements (Escobar 1998). It creates (or denies) access to resources, depending on whether biodiversity is framed as “common heritage of humanity” (in the economic sense of “global commons”) or rather as a good under the sovereign control of nation states or even local communities (Turnhout et al. 2013). Eventually, it privileges certain forms of knowledge, while delegitimizing and therefore marginalizing others (Vadrot 2014).

Social science research on biodiversity, with its focus on “agency” and on modes of knowledge generation, its questions of power, and its aspects of social constructions of differences, reveals parallels and connection points with gender research. Interfaces between social science-oriented biodiversity research and gender research unfold from political initiatives as well as from theoretical and methodological similarities. With regard to political initiatives, the year 2015 can be seen as a significant milestone: in the context of the international convention on biodiversity, the so-called *Gender Plan of Action 2015-2020* came into force. Twenty years after the fourth World Women’s Conference in 1995 in Beijing, one of the most crucial initial impulses for the discourse of *Gender and Environment* (c.f. Schultz 1995), this action plan advances what could already be found on the agenda in China: questions of equity and gender justice are linked with environmental political challenges in a globalized world.

In this context, looking at biodiversity is inseparable from looking at the diversity of human communities. Gender diversity and the power of gendered forms of knowledge and action gain great significance primarily with regard to questions of biodiversity and related questions of sustainability. These questions have been addressed early on in the scientific debate in different forms of Eco-feminism and Social Ecology (Hofmeister et al. 2013, 98-122; internet platform *genanet*: [www.genanet.de/en/](http://www.genanet.de/en/), accessed 4 August 2016).

Although given this background calls for the creation and use of interdisciplinary concepts and methods – and related efforts to bridge environmental studies and gender studies – seem to be obvious, they are rarely found. In the 2013 anthology “*Geschlechterverhältnisse und Nachhaltigkeit*” (“*Gender Relations and Sustainability*”), Sabine Höhler construes environmental studies and gender studies as parallel worlds, despite the fact that the two fields see themselves as “exemplary for new approaches in academic research and teaching, which increasingly strive to address complex global problems”<sup>1</sup> (Höhler 2013: 169, translated). Höhler argues that on this point “the claims and implementation of interdisciplinarity diverge”<sup>2</sup> (ibid.: 169, translated). Related realms are systematically separated, even though they started out to “turn around sciences from the inside out and to explore the mechanisms of knowledge generation” (ibid.: 170, translated).<sup>3</sup>

This Special Issue strives to address the above-mentioned knowledge gap in that it stresses the importance of gender as a category of differentiation. In

gender studies, the differentiation of a genetically influenced, biological sex and a socially constructed gender, as well as the relations between sex and gender, play a crucial role. During recent decades, numerous contributions from the realm of science studies and history of science have pointed out that these relations have been formative for the development of our views on nature and on the relationship between nature and culture as well as the self-image of the natural sciences themselves (c.f. amongst others Keller 1985; Schiebinger 1993, 1995, 2014; Harding 2006, 2011, 2015; Ebeling/Schmitz 2006; Harding 2011; Subramaniam 2014). Recently, environmental studies have gone in a similar direction (c.f. Katz 2015) insofar as they ascribe great importance to the acknowledgement of gender differences as well as the reflection on reformation of socio-cultural gender relations in the global struggle for the conservation of biodiversity (c.f. the project BIODIV for the implementation of CBD; GIZ/BMZ 2001; Hummel et al. 2001; Howard 2003; Becker 2004; Hummel et al. in Becker/Jahn 2006).

Gender studies have triggered various types of fundamental debates on the term (bio)diversity, hence putting our understandings of nature and life up to discussion (c.f. Palm 2008). This automatically leads to several questions: should we hold on to nature as a boundary-drawing concept in order to indicate the unavailability of the living (c.f. Gransee 1999: 203)? Within what structures of the usability of nature are we navigating? Can forms of “doing nature” (Katz 2011) be discussed comparably to the approach of “doing gender” in order to initiate a reflection of the noticeably techno-scientific characterization of environmental and natural sciences?

### The Contributions to this Special Issue

Within the framework of the above-mentioned questions, the following paragraphs summarize key insights from the contributions to this Special Issue organized in three thematic sections: diversity and differences, intersectionality, and theory-praxis-transfers.

#### *Diversity and Differences*

Acknowledging diversity and difference as beneficial qualities instead of using them as indicators of deficiencies or as arguments for limination and exclusion has by no means become self-evident. On the contrary, the traditional characteristics that are historically inscribed into global societal orders and institutional knowledge still take effect (c.f. Subramaniam 2014). This is not the only reason that the efforts of communication and connection of disciplinary perspectives are necessary. Sustainable biodiversity politics require an examination of differences and diversity in their various dimensions.

In their essay “Vielfalt im Wald” (“Diversity in the Woods”), **Bianca Baerlocher** and **Regula Kolar** show how such an examination oriented towards common understanding can work and which further perspectives may be opened up.

The forest is a “NatureCulture” used and shaped by humans for centuries; it is considered as a habitat and as an economic, and, to an increasing degree, also a recreation area. While these dimensions of the forest as an ecological, economic, and recreational resource have shifted in their relations to one another in the course of historical and societal transformations, it seems that, in contrast, due to its cultural-historical development, it is not only the image of the forest that is still informed by traditional perspectives. In fact, these connotations affect areas of activities and practices that are decisive for the negotiation of the relations between humans and the forest. For example, the Swiss forestry sector which Baerlocher and Kolar focus on is still dominated by men. Within this framework the authors raise the question of what perspectives can be opened up to shape this field in an integrative manner, embracing sustainability, equity, and distributive justice by considering and incorporating the interdisciplinarity-oriented approaches of gender and environmental studies.

The acknowledgement of diversity and differences exemplified by the substitution of the term equity for the term equality proves to be a requirement for the implementation of appropriate measures in the field. What is more, it enables us to take new points of view on the relations between all the different actors into consideration. This is what Baerlocher und Kolar are arguing for in the outlook of their study by proposing to understand forestry as care work.

### *Intersectionality*

In the field of gender studies, the concept of intersectionality provides new perspectives on different types of discrimination along categories such as gender, ethnicity, religion, age, or status with regard to rights and agency (e.g. Crenshaw 1991; Becker-Schmidt 2007; Hardmeier et al. 2007; Winker/Degele 2009; Walgenbach et al. 2012). Two papers of this Special Issue explicitly draw on the concept of intersectionality in their analyses of the global biodiversity discourse and of local activism in a UK-based alternative food initiative. Those two papers not only provide insightful case studies, but also propose important conceptual extensions to the intersectionality debate in that they feature two groups of actors that have largely been ignored up until now, i.e. ‘nature’ as a non-human ‘actor’ and researchers themselves.

In their paper “Who Gets to Know About Nature?” **Anna Kaijser** and **Annica Kronsell** start out with the observation that, up until now, research on intersectionality has had a strong ‘humanist focus’; it has largely analyzed relations among humans with little attention to relations involving non-humans. Considering that background, they revisit selected theories that challenge the dualistic construction and representation of humans and nature as separate entities. Drawing on theories from the fields of ecofeminism, critical animal studies, and posthumanism, they introduce an intersectional analytical lens, which enables a focus on human-nature power relations. Empirically, the paper by Kaijser and Kronsell sheds light on two key ‘meaning-making categories’ in the current environmental discourse, i.e. the concepts of ‘biodiversity’ and ‘ecosystem

services,' which have gained significant prominence both in the political and the scholarly debate on environmental issues in recent years. Their review-style analysis of the social scientific scholarly literature shows that dualistic constructions and representations of human-nature relations are (still) predominant in the biodiversity and ecosystem services debate; while the concept of 'biodiversity' largely goes hand-in-hand with notions of universal scientific knowledge and practices of measuring and mapping nature, the concept of 'ecosystem services' shows tendencies of the 'commodification' of nature and, with that, fosters its incorporation into a market-based logic. On a more optimistic note, however, Kaijser and Kronsell also see some potential in the idea of 'biodiversity' for encompassing intersectional human-nature relations, "as the concept opens up for representing diversity and differences among subjectivities and knowledges" (Kaijser/Kronsell: 59).

In her paper "Disentangling Participation in 'Local Organic' Food Activism in London," **Katharina Nowak** focuses on intersectional biases and related practices of inclusion and exclusion on a more local level, namely in the London-based organic food network *Organiclea*. Based on a critique of the globalized, corporate agri-food system, the network strives to facilitate a 'reconnection with nature' through food-growing. The author points out that despite its emphatic claim for diversity and inclusiveness, *Organiclea* still shows a strong white middle class bias among its active members. Building mainly on the work of U.S. food justice theorists, Nowak conceptualizes food as an "array of social relations," an array apt to analyze and understand intersections of race, class, gender – and nature. What is remarkable about this paper is that, in her analysis, the author does not only put her empirical focus on organic 'foodways' as such, but applies an intersectional lens to her own activities as a researcher 'in the field' as well. With that, she strives to carve out "how whiteness, coloniality and scientific methodologies intersect to bring about one-dimensional spaces and subjectivities" (Nowak: 71).

### *Theory-Praxis-Transfers*

When gender research meets environmental science, topics such as biodiversity, mechanisms of knowledge building, and their critical reflection become the focus of analysis. In addition, the objective to generate knowledge transfer and transformational knowledge is often pursued. This is how changeability of social reality as well as creation of social and biological diversity can be put up for discussion in the critical biodiversity and gender research (Braidotti et al. 1994).

Agriculture is considered one of the fields in which this aggregate can be experienced on an everyday cultural basis. **Martina Padmanabhan** reminds us about this fact in the beginning of her essay "Intraface: Negotiating Gender-Relations in Agrobiodiversity," when she refers to the piece of bread we eat for breakfast as the materialization of a cultivation culture that is several centuries old and shaped by various forces. Agrobiodiversity being understood as the species variability of plants and animals, or rather of all living beings involved

in cultivation, is not only to be considered as an ecological preservation goal of a sustainability-oriented agriculture, but also as a historically evolved, socio-ecological artifact in constant change. These conditions call for an adequate examination uniting different forms of knowledge cultures and coming up to the complex interdependence of all involved agents, each of them having a respective momentum and all being interrelated.

For this reason, Padmanabhan introduces the concept of the “intraface” to show, in her exemplary analysis of a gendered organization for rice cultivation in Kerala, South India, what practice-oriented perspectives can be opened for agrobiodiversity.

### *Prospect*

Recently in historical, theoretical, and critical natural science research, post-humanist approaches and a so-called “New Materialism” have come into the scope of interest (Barad 2007; Alaimo 2008; Dolphin et al. 2012). Here, concepts and methods are being developed that deal with the complex interrelations of nature and culture and of material(s), matter(s), and discourse. In contrast to an anthropocentric view and hence also in contrast to an ethno- and androcentric view, they touch upon the concept of human and non-human agency, natural and technical actors, expressing a multi-species network (Ah-King 2014; Haraway 2003, 2008). Banu Subramaniam and Sigrid Schmitz expand on these multifaceted networks, referring also to Donna Haraway’s concept of “naturecultures”, in: “Why We Need Critical Interdisciplinarity: A Dialogue on Feminist STS, Postcolonial Issues, and EcoDiversity“ (c.f. 109-122). In doing so, they draw on metaphors and images that support the discussion about diversity in social as well as in environmental contexts. When dealing with the “diversity of life” in different public realms, we would also like to emphasize the importance of images. This is not only concerning questions of representation in a broader sense, where politics of images play a significant role issues elaborated by critical, feminist and postcolonial arts and cultural studies in the last decades (see e.g. Lewis/Mills 2003; Jones 2003, 2010; Jay/Ramaswamy 2014). To an even greater degree it concerns our envisioning of future constellations of biodiversity and conviviality, insofar as these influence the opportunity of shaping the present. In both realms, artists who deal with the interfaces of the related disciplines have significantly contributed to drawing attention to the interrelations of the politics of images and the possibilities of action. In this way, they also referred to the close interrelation of theories, concepts, and practices that can be experienced in the materiality and embodiment of knowledge. Hence, re-revisions of visual cultures of (bio)diversity as well as a transdisciplinarity-oriented artistic practice targeting this highly relevant field of actions are contributing a fundamental part to the task of sensitizing for current and future questions and problems. Moreover, by creating visibility, encouraging and enabling cross-border communication, and developing strategies for constructive critical action, they offer alternative points of access and activate opportunities capable of opening up new

perspectives (see i.e. Göhler 2010; Kagan 2011, 2013; Christov-Bakargiev 2012; Ebert/Zell 2014; Davis/Turpin 2015).

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Remarks

- 1 Original version: „[...] als beispielhaft für neuere Ansätze in der Hochschulforschung und Lehre [gelten], die sich zunehmend komplexen globalen Problemstellungen zuwenden.“ (Höhler 2013, 169)
- 2 Original version: dass an dieser Stelle „der Anspruch und die Umsetzung der Interdisziplinarität auseinanderklaffen“ (Höhler 2013, 169).
- 3 Original version: obwohl sie antraten, „[...] die Wissenschaften von innen nach außen zu wenden und die Mechanismen der Wissensgenese zu erkunden.“ (Höhler 2013, 170)

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