

The intersectional approach to intergenerational justice: a first sketch

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I

There is little doubt now that mitigating climate change and moving towards more sustainable forms of production and consumption will yield widespread benefits in the long term. Guaranteeing future generations an environment in which the minimum conditions for a flourishing life are assured is a good thing in itself. However, the major normative problem, which often risks being left on the sidelines in both climate events and in public discussion on a sustainable future, is to obtain a just distribution of the costs of the energy transition, at least in the short term (see also Posner and Weisbach 2010, ch. 4). And it is reasonable to assume that a comprehensive approach to the various normative aspects of the energy transition may also help to solve the non-normative issue of the social acceptability of climate policies.

The idea that I intend to defend in this very short essay is that intergenerational claims of justice could be best addressed through an intersectional analytical framework, that is, from a perspective that takes into account all the social and temporal positions that each individual involved in the justice claim occupies. There is little point, in other words, in asking what the single individual owes to future generations, for example in terms of climate mitigation or financial prudence, without first contextualising the individual within the multiple relationships of domination, vulnerability and responsibility relative to the social groups to which she/he belongs. After briefly introducing four of the main social categories (social class, nationality, gender and ethnicity) that intersect with the temporal category of generation in the climate issue, I will focus, for reasons of space, on the relationship between the categories of social

class and generation.

II

The concept of intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) in an enlightening article on gender and racial discrimination, in which she argued that the two forms of oppression can only be properly addressed together. The intersectional approach to discrimination, and more generally to injustice, has been further articulated, especially in political philosophy, over the last two decades (see Carastathis, 2014). What I am interested in borrowing from the literature on intersectionality is not simply the discourse on gender injustice, rather the more general methodology that subtends it. An intersectional analysis can be carried out according to different methodologies, depending on the use it makes of social categories. The methodology I intend to focus on, as it is useful at the intergenerational level, is “intracategorical complexity”: the social position of each individual is measured at the point of intersection of all the categories to which she/he belongs (see McCall, 2005). Applying this methodology in the field of intergenerational justice, we could say that in order to make an accurate and fair assessment of the duties of distributive justice of a present individual, X, vis-à-vis a group of future individuals, G2, it is first necessary to identify the subcategories to which X belongs and the point in which they intersect. And every problem of intergenerational justice brings into play different social categories, that tell us important things about both the vulnerabilities and the responsibilities of the individual.

Take the case of climate change. Some basic categories that we may want to take into consideration, and from whose intersection it is possible to identify the social position of each individual with respect to the intergenerational problem that climate change raises, could be social class, nationality, gender, ethnicity and generation. Social class is a rather precise indicator not only of the individual’s ability to contribute to mitigation, but also of her/his causal contribution to climatic worsening (see Nolt, 2010). In simple terms, the higher the social class to which one belongs, the greater one can imagine to be both her/his capacity to contribute to the costs of the energy transition and her/his ecological footprint, i.e., her/his emissions-generating activities. Nationality can instead tell us three things: the individual’s backward-looking responsibility for her/his country’s historical emissions (L. Meyer and D. Roser, 2010); the individual’s vulnerability to the negative consequences of climate change due to geography (Rozenberg and Hallegatte, 2019); the individual’s forward-looking responsibility for how much resources her/his country invests in energy transition and adaptation (Caney, 2010).

Gender, on the other hand, can give us a measure of how much freedom of personal and

political action an individual exercises within a given society. The more gender unequal a society is, the greater the normative relevance of this category. It would be illogical to consider women who live in a patriarchal society, in which all they can do is consume and produce in the infrastructural and technological context imposed on them, to be responsible for their emissions, and it would be equally absurd to imagine that in a gender unequal context men and women have the same level of forward-looking responsibility for the climate mitigation policies of their country or municipality (see Jayachandran, 2015). A similar argument applies to the category of ethnic origin, as long as disenfranchised minorities have fewer opportunities to intervene politically in the future of the climate and have fewer economic resources at their disposal. In addition, both women and discriminated ethnic groups tend to be more exposed to the negative consequences of climate change, both because they are more vulnerable to economic shocks and because discriminated ethnic groups tend to live, even in the most developed countries, in places that are more exposed to pollution and have more difficulty adapting to abnormal climatic events - e.g., rainfalls, heat waves, etc. (See Islam and Winkel, 2017; Dunne, 2020; Patnaik et al., 2020).

Lastly, the temporal category of generation determines a structural power asymmetry resulting from the impossibility of direct cooperation between different generations. The present generation can only receive from the previous one and give to the next one, which obviously limits the possibilities of sanctioning free-riding behaviours (see Arrhenius, 1999; Page, 2006). There is no space here to specifically analyse how these different categories should be intersected in order to arrive at normative claims of intergenerational justice. I will therefore focus on only two categories, social class and generation.

The very simple idea that the more you have, the more you should contribute to social spending (see G. A. Cohen, 2008), and which is generally accepted in intragenerational distributive systems, usually through progressive taxation, often loses its centrality in the public debate on intergenerational justice, in favour of moral principles that aim at rectifying power asymmetries between individuals misaligned over time. Principles which, of course, are not wrong in themselves, but offer a limited insight if not placed within an intersectional matrix.

Imagine, for example, that the individuals in a given community can be divided into five social groups, of which group 1 is the poorest and group 5 is the richest. Any principle of intergenerational justice, be it egalitarian, utilitarian, sufficientarian, and so on, would tell us that group 5 of the present generation G1 performs a series of morally wrong actions if they transfer an excessive amount of negative externalities to group 1 of the next generation G2. And the same would probably apply with respect to group 4 and 3 of G1 towards group 5 of G2. But things become less clear as we consider the moral duties of group 1 of G1 towards groups 3, 4 and 5 of G2: do the poor of G1 owe to group 5 of G2 the same, in proportion, as

group 5 of G1? If we look at intergenerational morality in an intersectional way, the answer is probably negative. This does not mean, of course, that the class difference cancels out intergenerational duties between members of different generations, but only that as classes vary so does the intensity of intergenerational duties.

In less abstract terms, let us assume that the costs C of the energy transition are to be shared between two adjacent generations, G1 and G2. Principles of intergenerational justice, taken without further specification, would tell us that it is wrong for G1 to abuse the advantage provided by their temporal location to transfer C , in its entirety, to G2 (see Fleurbaey et al., 2019). It will therefore be necessary for G1 to internalise a fraction of C , the size of which will depend on the type of intergenerational justice principle employed. For this to happen, it will be necessary for each member of G1 who has the capacity to pay, and who is therefore not hovering above the relative poverty line, to bear a part of this fraction of C . It would be wrong, however, from an intersectional perspective, to think that the estimate of individual costs to be shared by each member of G1 derives normative cogency only from the moral relationship between G1 and G2. Instead, it depends also on distributional differences within G1. In other words, it would be normatively inconsistent to determine the intergenerational effort required of the single individual within G1 solely on the basis of the overall duties of G1 towards G2, without taking into account the intragenerational duties that exist between the members of G1, and which must be preordained with respect to the intergenerational ones. When this intersection between the intragenerational and intergenerational levels of justice is missing, the risk is that a fictitious opposition to intergenerational justice goals arises in the most vulnerable and/or oppressed individuals of G1. Where by “fictitious” I refer to an opposition that formally takes the expression of a rejection of intergenerational morality, but which in substance is entirely attributable to an intragenerational distributive issue.

The paradoxical aspect of the fact that it is actually the victims of multiple oppressions to risk abandoning the fight for a sustainable climate, is that these are also the persons who are most vulnerable to climate threats and would therefore have more reasons to support a radical green transition (see Daguerra, 2019). More specifically, the paradox arises when the class issue (but it could be said the same of nationality, gender or ethnicity) intersects with what could be a chain of indirect reciprocity between individuals exposed to the same risks, albeit at different times in history, and reduces the moral and political effectiveness of these intergenerational bonds.

Obviously, in today’s society it would be a stretch to imagine social classes that remain closed in time, i.e., individuals belonging to a particular social class and generating children and grandchildren who remain within the confines of that class. The same holds true for ethnic minorities, and the role of women within social groups also evolves over time. Therefore, I

do not intend to refer to indirect reciprocity along family lines, but to reciprocity involving individuals who perform similar functions and occupy similar positions. We could think, for example, of the employee who is about to retire and is concerned with sorting out all the pending tasks attributable to her/him, so that her/his successor can start work in the minimum conditions of order that she/he was assured on her/his first day of work. Or we could think of the precarious research workers, who, even though they are often forced to work in worse conditions than those of previous generations, might have the desire to ensure that those who will find themselves doing research after them can do so in conditions that are at least not worse than those that already exist.

In cases like these, moral models of more or less imperfect indirect reciprocity are conceivable (see also Gosseries, 2009). By "conceivable" I refer to the fact that such models are possible, not infrequent in practice and susceptible to increase through discursive stimulus, while by "moral model of imperfect indirect reciprocity" I mean identifying those cases (such as that of the precarious research workers just mentioned above) in which the present generation has received less from the preceding one, than the latter had received from the even more adjacent generation in the past, without however yielding to the pejorative mechanism and therefore acknowledging the moral duty to transfer to the future generation what the present one would have considered just to receive from the preceding one.

The point I want to stress is that a lack of alignment between the reasons for justice deriving from social categories, on the one hand, and reasons of justice based on the temporal category, on the other, risks loosening these already weak moral constraints, leading to the paradox already identified above with respect to climate change, which consists in the moral detachment of that class of persons who would benefit most from a scheme of intergenerational indirect reciprocity.

A preliminary conclusion

In this article, I have outlined a proposal for an intersectional methodology to be applied to cases of intergenerational justice, and in particular to the intergenerational dimension of climate justice. I have briefly introduced four of the different social categories that intersect with the temporal category of generation in climate justice: social class, nationality, gender and ethnicity. I then focused on social class and generation, due to limited space, and explained how the intersectional approach based on intracategorical complexity could help to achieve a balance between intragenerational socio-economic demands and intergenerational climate justice. Accordingly, a distribution of the costs and benefits of energy transition based on an intersectional analysis of vulnerability, oppression and responsibility can contribute substan-

tially to broadening and keeping together the global environmental front, avoiding fictitious contrasts between the vulnerable and the oppressed of today and the vulnerable and the oppressed of tomorrow.

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