The now well-developed literature on gender quotas focuses mainly on two areas: the causal mechanisms that can be advanced to explain the adoption, diffusion, and effectiveness of political gender quotas worldwide (Baldez 2004; Dahlerup 2006; K Brooks 2006; 2009; Krook, Lovenduski, and Squires 2009; Krook and O’Brien 2010; Lovenduski 2005; Meier 2012); and the benefits, as well as the dangers, that this “fast track” to gender equality can have for women’s substantive representation and for politics in general (Celis and Childs 2012; Celis et al. 2008; Childs and Krook 2009; Dahlerup 1988; Franseschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012; Franseschet and Piscopo 2008; Kittilson 2005; Phillips 1995; Squires 2001). Most studies on gender quotas approach “women” as a group defined by a single axis of oppression and the quotas’ consequences for gender equality broadly. The growing literature on intersectionality, however, calls attention to the internal heterogeneity of the category “women” and the fact that gender relations are embedded in race or class relations, forming a “matrix of domination” rather than a single axis of oppression (Collins 1990). But the question of how gender quotas relate to intersectionality has remained, until now, much less investigated.

Approaching gender quotas with an intersectional perspective that recognizes that “identity categories as gender, race, ethnicity, class, and
sexuality are mutually constituted and cannot be added together” (Simien 2007, 265) logically raises two interrelated concerns: What about political representation for under-represented minorities other than “women?” And what about political representation for minority women? An intersectional approach reveals “a potential dilemma of descriptive representation” since the goals of improving women’s representation and minorities’ representation might run one against the other (Holmsten, Moser, and Slosar 2010, 1181). The question of which group should benefit from specific measures to improve its political representation has been at the heart of normative inquiries on the benefits and risks of implementing a politics of presence. And scholars have proposed identifying specific features of groups that could legitimately, in a democracy, claim the implementation of a quota in political representation or a form of veto power (Kymlicka 1996; Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995; Williams 1998; Young 1990). Although the implementation of gender quotas could contribute to essentializing the category of “women” (e.g., Squires 2001), no detailed study of how this process might happen concretely or how this tendency toward essentialism might relate to intersectional politics has been conducted.

The literature comparing women and other minority groups has focused on the type of mechanism applied to each type of group (Htun 2004) as well as on the institutional or historical patterns that could explain why some countries grant quotas or reserve seats for women only while others grant specific measures for minorities only or for both women and ethnic minorities (Krook and O’Brien 2010). In particular, the possible relationships between the implementation of gender quotas and the implementation of positive action measures for other groups, or for minority women, has not yet been thoroughly explored empirically. An important exception to this gap in the literature is the recent research by Hughes (2011), which highlights the conditions under which gender quotas and minority quotas might improve the political representation of minority women. Focusing on institutional variables, Hughes shows that the type of quota mechanism and the level at which it is implemented matter greatly. But we still do not know much about the role gender quotas might play in specific contexts for opening the door to more intersectional politics, or, on the contrary, for foreclosing opportunities for intersectional coalitions and claims because they advocate descriptive representation for only one group.

In this article, I investigate these questions through a particularly puzzling case study: the French gender parity reform. In 1999, after
almost a decade of legal mobilization, a Constitutional reform was passed by a vast majority of the French legislative assemblies, which enshrined in the Constitution the normative principle that law should “encourage” (favoriser) equal access, defined as a 50–50 balance, of men and women to political mandates and functions.¹ An electoral reform followed suit in 2000, organizing this encouragement with various means of incitation or coercion depending on the electoral level. Since then, each electoral reform has entailed provisions to implement—again, with more or less good will—the goal set in the Constitutional reform. The French parity reform has undeniably been a success for French feminists. Even if the numbers do not match the reform’s ambitions at all electoral levels (especially as one goes up the hierarchy of political mandates), the introduction of the parity laws has changed the rules of the political game for French women (Murray 2010b; 2012). Despite this success and the fact that the concept of parity has opened new avenues for gender-equality claims, it has also closed some doors, or, at the very least, made some roads more difficult to embrace, especially the road to a more intersectional feminist politics.

While parity activists were harvesting the fruits of their mobilization, new political mobilization from minority groups emerged in France. The adoption of European legislation on anti-discrimination (covering five grounds other than gender) in 2001 led to an increased visibility of ethnic and racial discrimination in employment in France. It came at a time when anti-racist organizations were beginning to explore legal mobilization (rather than just political activism) as a potential route for redress. The emergence of this new theme on the political scene fueled a new politicization of race relations as well as the creation of new ethnic lobby groups (Lépinard 2008). Debates about the inclusion of ethn-cultural minorities in higher education also emerged (Sabbagh 2002), as well as heated controversies about ethnic statistics (Sabbagh and Peer 2008). Discrimination was also rapidly intertwined with the idea of diversity in the workplace as well as in politics (Escafré-Dublet and Simon 2009; Sénac 2012). The almost simultaneous appearance of gender quotas in politics and discussions of ethnic minorities’ inclusion in economic, political, and social life could suggest that the parity claim opened the door to new demands from other minority groups (e.g.,

¹ Loi constitutionnelle 99-569, July 8, 1999, passed with 741 deputies and senators in favor and 42 opposed, and Loi 2000-493, June 6, 2000. Although the reform and the electoral laws are known as the “parity laws,” the terms “parity” or “quotas” are never mentioned in the constitution or the law.
Murray 2012) and that it revived, or rather started, a round of French identity politics propitious for the development of an intersectional approach within French feminism. I argue, however, that this has not really been the case; rather, the parity claim has become an obstacle to intersectional politics outside, as well as within, the French women’s movement.

THE PARITY REFORM: A SUCCESS STORY FOR WOMEN ONLY?

The constitutional reform introducing a 50% gender quota in French politics, although not as successful as parity advocates had wished originally, especially since the electoral system was not always redesigned to make quotas easily applicable (Baudino 2005; Lépinard 2007a; Murray 2010a, 2010b, 2012; Opello 2006), has nevertheless transformed not only political opportunities for women, but also — and important for my argument — French feminism. 2 Indeed, the parity movement was a successful coalition that reunited diverse women’s rights organizations, created new alliances, and transformed both the movement and femocrat institutions in France (Baudino 2005; Bereni 2009; Gaspard 2001; Scott 2005). The parity campaign was, arguably, the most visible and important feminist success since the second wave’s hard-won victories (i.e., the decriminalization of abortion in 1975 and the criminalization of rape at the beginning of the 1980s). As a response to the parity campaign, the French government also added a new institution to the state feminist machinery; it established an Observatory for parity in 1995, in charge of monitoring first the gender gap in politics and then, after 1999, the implementation of the constitutional reform.

The consequences of the parity reform are far ranging in terms of feminist advocacy. First, parity advocates successfully argued for improving women’s active citizenship through political representation. The fact that, in 2007, for the first time in French history, a party with a chance of winning the presidential elections chose a woman, Ségolène Royal, to be its candidate certainly denotes the influence of the parity reform on the French political system. This topic has gained legitimacy, and political bodies have been feminized as a consequence. In 2012,

2. Parity is implemented with uneven means and uneven results at various levels of political responsibility. The percentage of women elected in the lower chamber increased from 12.5% in 2002 to 18.5% in 2007 and 26.9% in 2012. In the upper chamber, women have held 21.9% of the seats since 2008.
with the help of a sweeping victory from left-wing parties, the number of
women elected in the National Assembly rose from 18.5% to 26.9%. Although this increase is not the result of more female candidates
(parties nominated, on average, 40% women, and the two main
parties — the Socialist Party and the right-wing UMP — nominated
fewer women than in 2007) and, therefore, does not signal that political
parties have radically transformed their exclusionary practices, it is the
first time that so many women have had access to one of the highest
elected offices.

Parity activists have also deepened their critique of the political system. Indeed, their claim for inclusion via a mandatory quota has transformed
into a broader critique of how institutional mechanisms and entrenched
party practices, such as holding several political offices at the same time,
or consecutively, exclude women from politics. They have broadened
the scope of their critique as well as their activities in order to support
women who run for political office, creating incentives for elected
officials to endorse parity with awards such as the “Mariannes de la
parité” and continuing their lobbying to improve the status of local
elected representatives and increasing their options for professional
reconversion after having held office, an issue of concern for women
elected at the local level. The fact that a new institution was created to
monitor the implementation of the parity laws has also helped to deepen
the critique. Whereas the first reports of the Observatory were mostly
concerned with evaluating how proposed electoral reforms for regional
elections might have an adversarial effect on the percentage of women
elected and tend to blame political parties for not being more pro-active
in presenting female candidates, after 2008, the reports also targeted
parties for not promoting women in their own decision-making bodies.
They also propose detailed measures to improve the status of elected
representatives in order to encourage women to run for office.

Moreover, the Observatory broadened the scope of its expertise to equal
pay, non-discrimination, or work/family balance. This shift illustrates how
the parity claim has spilled over to domains beyond electoral politics. 
Despite fears that the narrow focus on Article 3 of the Constitution on

4. See the Observatory’s report “Elections municipales et cantonales 2008: les partis résistent encore à
   la parité.”
5. Following this logic, on January 3, 2013, the Observatory was incorporated into a newly created
   institution, the Haut Conseil à l’égalité entre les hommes et les femmes, and given a broader
   mission that includes political parity as well as violence against women and women’s images in the
   media.
political representation would limit the scope of the reform, which it did in the first years, the parity motto has found an echo in other areas. In 2008, the French Constitution was revised a second time so that the section on parity, now moved to Article 1, would include professional responsibilities, therefore opening the door to discussions on the imposition of a gender quota in other spheres of social life. A series of laws were passed on “égalité professionnelle” (gender equality in economic life — which targets vertical and horizontal gender segregation in firms and in vocational training). Finally, deputies adopted in July 2011 a new law imposing, on a six-year schedule, 40% representation for women in large firms’ boards of directors. Hence, the parity goal has revived the mobilization in favor of women’s rights in France, and has introduced new items on the feminists’ — as well as the femocrats’ — agendas. For all these reasons, parity has had a long-lasting influence on feminist mobilization and on the political imagination of French women’s rights organizations.

That influence, however, may prove inimical to the adoption of an intersectional approach by French feminist organizations. Indeed, one could expect that the demand for gender quotas would raise similar claims from other under-represented groups. If political institutions are gendered, then they are also raced (Hawkesworth 2003). According to this perspective, minorities could build coalitions reuniting women’s rights organizations and organizations promoting the rights of ethno-cultural minorities under the same banner to improve their descriptive representation. But there is no sign of such a process in the French case. Although some have suggested a positive relationship (e.g., Murray 2012), a clear causal mechanism is hard to pinpoint. Indeed, data from the three last legislative terms show that the impact of the parity laws for other minorities is not self-evident. In 1997, before the parity laws were enacted, 19 members of visible minorities were elected, whereas only 21 were elected in 2002 and 20 in 2007. The vast majority of them were representatives from France’s overseas territories. Only in 2012 was there a noticeable increase, to 32 deputies (or 5.5% of National Assembly members). More importantly, 8 of those deputies are not from overseas territories constituencies, therefore representing the “new” diversity resulting from immigration. This increase, however, can be linked to the

large victory of left-wing parties (22 of the deputies from a visible minority are affiliated with the socialist party, and the 8 deputies from the “new” diversity are also affiliated with the socialist party), rather than a delayed effect of the parity laws. Hence, the increase has not been regular or spectacular.9

Evidence points toward a more complex relationship between the parity claim and the representation of ethnic minorities. Indeed, although claims to improve the political representation of blacks have emerged in France, voiced, for example, by the Conseil Représentatif des Association Noires, this demand is not connected to the parity motto, nor has it benefited from the support of parity-oriented organizations. Quite the contrary, as I show in the last section, organizations advocating parity have been careful to distance themselves from this type of politics of group representation, as well as from the discourse favorable to “diversity,” which has been more and more influential in the French public sphere. Furthermore, the genealogy of the emergence of the issue of “diversity,” be it as diversity management in the workplace or diversity in the media or in politics, is not clearly related to the parity laws (Escafré-Dublet and Simon 2009; Sénac 2012). Indeed, incentives from the European Commission and its anti-discrimination directives passed in 2000, a handful of trials in which important firms were found guilty of discrimination, and the election of President Obama in 2008 seem to have been much more instrumental in visible minority groups’ mobilization to move the issue of diversity into electoral politics (Escafré-Dublet and Simon 2009). Hence, if parity has fueled claims from other groups, it is mostly an unwanted and unforeseen consequence of its successful campaign. The parity claim did shatter the foundations of the republican doxa, but never intended to extend its scope beyond women. The fact that the political representation of ethnic minorities and of minority women has not been an item on the feminist movement’s agenda lately suggests that the gains earned from parity have not been distributed evenly between women, nor have they directly rippled

9. It seems that there has been a slight increase at the government level. Nicolas Sarkozy’s prime minister, François Fillon, named three women with an immigrant background to his 2007 government (out of 31 members). François Hollande’s Prime Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, named seven non-whites, five of them women, to his 2012 government comprising 38 members. In both cases, it seems that it is easier for a member of an ethnocultural minority to enter the government if she is a woman. The lack of data for other levels of political elections limits the analysis. But both Bird (2003) and Lépinard (2006) suggest that, at the local level, the parity emphasis on descriptive representation might have encouraged mayors also to include ethnic minorities on their candidate lists.
through to other minorities. In the following sections, I propose three factors that contribute to explaining why this is so.

HALF THE SKY: TURNING A GENDER QUOTA ARGUMENT INTO AN OPPORTUNITY FOR FRENCH UNIVERSALISM

The parity movement’s aim of an equality of result between men and women was a very unlikely political outcome given the French republican conception of citizenship (Mazur 2001; Scott 2005; Siim 2000). It was quite unlikely that France would adopt a mechanism of gender quotas to improve women’s political representation. As gender quotas scholars have stressed, the dominant model of citizenship in a given country makes it more or less likely that gender quotas will be adopted (Krook, Lovenduski, and Squires 2009). A consociationalist model, such as the Belgian one, which already recognizes some social identities (based on language in this case), makes it more likely that gender quotas will be considered a legitimate claim and finally be adopted by the political elite (Meier 2012). On the contrary, the French abstract conception of citizenship, which officially refuses to grant specific rights to particular social groups, makes difficult the legitimization of any form of group-based affirmative action mechanisms.

Soon after the parity claim emerged, its opponents voiced the concern that a group-based quota was unconstitutional and un-French. A constitutional jurisprudence from 1982 banned a 25% gender quota for municipal elections on the ground that Article 3 of the French Constitution (defining national sovereignty) implied that the electoral body cannot be divided into categories, and that Article 6 of the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen implies that all citizens shall have equal opportunities to access electoral mandates. This legal precedent, based on a narrow interpretation of the norm of equality (as formal equality), and on a stretching of the concept of

10. Symmetrically, the question of parity has never been high on the agenda of minority women organizations (Bird 2001), thereby denoting a mismatch between what has been presented as an important struggle for “all women” and the evaluation of its political importance by minority women.
12. For a detailed analysis of the political history of the campaign and the reform, see Bereni and Lépinard 2004; Lépinard 2007; Scott 2005.
13. Decision 82-146 DC, November 18, 1982.
“indivisible sovereignty,” which characterizes the French Constitutional tradition, opened the door to the use and abuse of the argument that gender quotas were divisive and would lead to a fragmentation of the French political community. The legal argument of the indivisibility of national sovereignty found profound echoes with political repertoires on French universalism and blindness to difference (Lamont and Thévenot 2000).

Whereas French feminists had been inspired by European rationales for gender balance in decision-making, which relied on gender-based affirmative action mechanisms, this argument provoked hostility within the French political elite. The hegemony of French republican universalism was at its height in the second half of the 1990s: Race relations and multiculturalism were ignored, American color-consciousness was despised, and a very republican conception of immigrant integration, stressing assimilationism and refusing any form of cultural rights, was promoted by various official institutions (Favell 2001). Thus, French political institutions did not provide at the time, and still do not, any legitimate space for identity politics or intersectional politics (Bassel and Emejulu 2010).

In such an adversarial context, parity advocates imagined a tactical reformulation of their claim. Their rationale aimed at overruling the 1982 decision to ban quotas by delegitimizing its main argument and at taming the critics of parity by reclaiming the republican tradition for the parity project. In a series of semantic displacements, parity activists detached their claim from the label of affirmative action or quotas. They argued that women were not a category, but rather half of humanity. This was not a mere quantitative assessment. Instead, this move gave a qualitative preeminence to sexual difference over other forms of difference and suggested that recognizing sexual difference would not undermine the universalist conception of citizenship upheld by opponents to the parity reform. In a typical statement, feminist philosopher and parity advocate François Collin asked, “Is parity supposed to contradict universalism or to realize it? Opponents to the reform will opt for the first answer, promoters for the second one.” In a similar vein, Eliane Viennot (1994, 76–77), feminist historian and prominent advocate in favor or parity, stated, “Women are not a social

14. Indeed, the Constitutional Council applied this Rousseauist idea of a united national representation to local elected bodies, which, by definition, represent only a segment of the population.

category or a community. They are one of the two genders which constitute humanity . . . this is why quotas are not the right concept because they assimilate women to a minority . . . [there is] a specificity to the sexual division, which is radically different from any other economic or ethnic division within human kind.”

Following this rationale, women were not a category because their difference was not like any other: It was a universal difference, characterizing mankind. This meant that sexual difference should have ontological and political primacy over other social or biological differences, and that it was, therefore, compatible with the abstract universalism of citizenship and with French republicanism (Bereni and Lépinard 2004; Lépinard 2007). Hence, parity campaigners both challenged and endorsed the republican universalist doctrine that their contenders upheld. The net result of this strategy was to disconnect women’s claim to political representation from other under-represented minorities’ demands for political inclusion (Bird 2001; Lépinard 2007a; Rosenblum 2006).

Indeed, implicitly supporting the parity claim, at least for some of its feminist advocates, is the idea that female political representatives will represent women’s interests. This argument in favor of substantive representation is, of course, tempting but also highly problematic, as it is based on a reification of the social category “women,” which overlooks differences within this category (Phillips 1995; Squires 2001, 2004). From an intersectional perspective, this means that women’s multiple social positions and diverging political interests are not taken into consideration in the analysis of women’s political inclusion. Similarly, in the dominant parity rationale, women constituted “half of human kind,” separating them from other minority groups and enabling them alone to make claims for improved political representation. In this narrative, women’s differences are irrelevant to the construction of political interests or to the political representation of women.

Arguing for women’s political inclusion by creating a hierarchy of oppressions with gender in first position, endorsing the idea that other social groups that are discriminated against cannot enjoy a similar preferential treatment, and implying that women’s political interests are homogeneous is, of course, not conducive to an intersectional approach. The lack of reflection during the parity debate on the issue of ethnic diversity is very symptomatic of the blind spots of the dominant rationale in favor of parity (Bird 2001). As Raissiguier (2010, 30) notes, commenting on the case of the undocumented migrants’ movement in France, in which migrant women were prominent actors:
At a time when the parity movement is engaging the French polity through its radical demand for equal representation for women in all political assemblies and alerting us to critical tensions within French republicanism, it is interesting (and troubling) to note the absence of a large and varied French feminist mobilization around the sans-papiers [undocumented migrants’] struggle.

Hence, the parity reform ended up blocking possible claims by other under-represented minorities and prevented an intersectional approach from emerging in French feminist theory and practice.

THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED? THE GENDER/CLASS CONFLICT AND ITS LEGACY IN FRENCH FEMINISM

If parity contributed to blocking the emergence of a feminist intersectional approach in the French context, then one could reason that, had intersectionality already been part of the French feminist theoretical toolkit, parity advocates might have had to consider it seriously. Therefore, to understand the lack of intersectionality in the parity debate, we need to explore the genealogy of the absence of intersectionality within the legacy of the French women’s rights movement. I have argued elsewhere that prior conceptualizations of differences among women elaborated in the heated debates of the French second wave prevented the emergence of an intersectional approach in the 1990s (Lépinard 2007b). In other words, the harsh conflict over the proper hierarchy between gender oppression and class domination, which characterized the French second wave, left no room to think about multiple oppressions or the intersection of gender and race relations. As some French feminists themselves recognized at the end of the 1990s, the question of racism had never been central in the movement (ANEF 1998). From that perspective, the parity claim is the political return of what has been theoretically repressed.

Theorizing gender difference is a necessity for any feminist theory or any feminist movement. But difference can be theorized in various ways, singular or plural, fluid or static, etc., and the way gender difference is theorized has political implications for feminist movements. As for any other social movement, the definition of identity built by the movement delimits what its members can claim, the type of argument they can use,

16. This situation has changed in the 2000s, as many French feminist publications and translations to French of key works from Chicana and Afro-American feminists attest.
and the coalitions they can forge (Rupp and Taylor 1999; Taylor and Whittier 1992).

Many of the most prominent activists in the parity movement had a history of previous militancy in the “materialist” trend of the French second-wave. This broad movement, defined as “materialist” because of its Marxist-oriented ideology, was marked by its proximity to leftist political parties and organizations (Delphy 1995; Duchen 1986; Moses 1992; Picq 1993; Stetson 1987). Two trends with ideological affinities — but also tensions — characterized materialist feminism. The “lutte des classes” (class struggle) trend of the movement had close relationships with Trotskyite organizations and consistently articulated class and gender oppression. The “radical” or “autonomous” fringe of the movement refused to subsume gender oppression under class struggle and opted for a “gender first” perspective that emphasized the universal and omnipresent nature of patriarchy, which tended to overshadow class issues.

To theorize gender, materialist feminists often used a comparison with other types of oppression, such as race or class. Delphy, a French feminist sociologist and prominent representative of the radical-materialist trend, was inspired by the American civil rights movement that she discovered when she spent a year in the United States at the end of the 1960s. The analogy between race and gender helped her denaturalize gender; however, it did not lead her to call into question the presupposed homogeneity of the social category “women.” On the contrary, her theory of patriarchy as a “specific oppression” characterized by the economic exploitation of domestic work responded to what she felt was the necessity to “define women as the result of a socially constructed exploitation.” To do so, she had to “find a type of exploitation that was common to all women, which would constitute this group as a group” (Delphy 2001, 58; translation mine, italics added). This preeminence granted to gender by materialist feminists prevented them from theorizing how relations such as class, race, or sexuality intersect with and shape gender relations (Lépinard 2007b).

As is evident in Delphy’s use of domestic work as the cornerstone upon which to build women as a social group, materialist feminists also used class as a key to understanding the political nature of women’s economic exploitation. But including class was never seen as threatening to the

17. She came to that conclusion much later, in the 2000s, under the influence of newly created anti-racist/feminist organizations (Delphy 2006).
homogeneity of the category women. Indeed, materialist feminists, especially from the “lutte des classes” trend, theorized the relationship between gender and class in an additive manner. Hence, poor women’s needs and political priorities could be added to the feminist agenda without creating political tensions.

Moreover, the “radical” trend shared with the “lutte des classes” a rejection of identity politics. Whereas the “féminisme de la différence” celebrated femininity and sexual difference as the basis for a common identity and experience, their materialist feminist detractors believed that women’s liberation would be accomplished only when gender difference became socially meaningless. In a typical leftist rejection of identity politics, Delphy (2001, 8–9) sums up her perspective on difference in these words:

[I see] difference as the way in which, for more than a century, inequalities between groups have been justified. ... Those differences are artificially created, in order to constitute groups. Then they are “discovered” as facts external to society. Those differences are not only differences but also hierarchies. ... This difference is a stigma.

Such a rejection of any identity that might be attached to a socially constructed difference echoes the very republican motto of abstract citizenship and makes it even more difficult to consider in a positive way other differences and the identities that their intersection might produce.

Thus, the political space of feminism during the second wave, marked by the will to patrol boundaries with leftist organizations and to oppose their prioritization of class struggle, left no room to think intersectionally. Consequently, before the 1990s, questions linked to racial oppression or discrimination based on immigration status rarely surfaced in French feminist writings and claim making. Mainstream feminist organizations had not many relationships with anti-racist organizations (Lloyd 1998), and women’s organizations defining themselves on the basis of ethnic identity or immigration status only began to emerge in the 1980s in order to create the very political space they did not find within the existing movement. They were self-organized on an ethnic/nationality basis and had stronger links with organizations devoted to migrants than with feminist organizations (Lesselier 2007). A feminist network devoted to migrant women emerged only in the 1990s, and the issue of migrant women was not prominent on the feminist agenda during that decade. Feminist scholars, themselves, by the end of the 1990s acknowledged their almost naïve lapse. In 1997, the French national association for
gender studies organized for the first time a conference on the theme of racism and anti-Semitism. It began with an acknowledgement that these issues had previously been dropped from the research agenda (or rather, had never been put on the agenda) (ANEF 1998).

The limited relationship between feminist organizations and anti-racist organizations, the lack of voices of women of migrant descent inside the feminist movement before the mid-1990s, and the lack of theorizing of intersectionality inherited from the second wave combined to make parity’s emphasis on women as a homogeneous category appear quite natural.

A quote from an interview I conducted with one of the leaders of the Plateforme pour les droits des femmes (women’s rights platform), an umbrella organization created in the 1990s to pull together feminist initiatives at the national level, illustrates this legacy of the French second wave for contemporary feminist mobilization and the conceptualization of intersectionality. When asked whether the organization included concerns about intersectionality on its agenda, the interviewee answered:

> Of course, I’ll give you examples. First, we participated with many other feminist organizations to the mobilization against the reform of pensions policies last fall, we were there. ... and we continue to mobilize in a united way in favor of equal pay with a petition. ... stores’ employees, care givers, female workers in the electronic industry, cleaning ladies. These are the lowest paid jobs, feminized jobs with a lot of vulnerability...

When I asked whether there were other groups of women that they identified as vulnerable, the respondent replied:

> Undocumented women. But we can’t. We can’t invest ourselves in everything. ... So right now our three biggest priorities are violence against women ... equal pay and the closing of maternities and public hospital issues.

Tellingly, when asked about intersectionality, the interviewee raised the question of class — rather than race — religion, or sexuality and recalled a political action led in common with leftist political parties against the reform of pension schemes. As the legacy from the “lutte des classes” trend to which she used to belong, could predict, she showed an acute awareness of how specific groups of women in low-skilled jobs need

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18. The names of organizations have been changed to ensure anonymity.
19. All interview excerpts are translated from French by the author.
specific mobilization and political claims. Yet she admits that other intersectional groups, such as undocumented women, have been dropped off the agenda, which, in the end, focuses on traditionally universalist issues (violence, equal pay, access to health).

The legacy of the second wave, therefore, contributes to an explanation of why including differences other than gender on the feminist agenda has been so difficult in the French context. It highlights how previous conceptualizations of gender difference have prevented the emergence of an intersectional approach. It also explains why the majority of French women’s rights activists did not find the lack of intersectionality, which characterized the parity motto, troubling.

INTERSECTIONALITY: NO THEORY, BUT SOME PRACTICE?

The parity reform is more than a decade old, but, as I remarked in the introduction, the parity motto endures, and claims for women’s political inclusion have spilled over from the domain of political representation to other spheres of social and economic life. Organizations supporting parity are still active, and femocrats have, in many ways, imported the analysis of women’s exclusion and the method for redress (gender quotas, affirmative action) proposed by parity advocates. Hence, the parity claim has durably marked the French feminist movement. The question is — after 10 years and in a context in which the issue of racial and ethnic discrimination has been put on the political agenda — have feminist organizations and, in particular, those that actively participated in the parity campaign, moved to include multiple differences in their analysis and in the ways they frame their political claims? In other words, has the legacy of parity been critically assessed from an intersectional perspective, or, to use Strolovitch’s concept (2007), do French women’s rights organizations practice “affirmative advocacy?”

The answer to this question is nuanced. Indeed, I argue that it depends on the function of the organization under scrutiny. While advocacy-oriented organizations still lack an intersectional perspective, service-providing ones are adopting some insights from intersectionality. I analyze here briefly the political discourse of three mainstream organizations that supported the parity claim and contrast their rationales with a mainstream service-provider feminist organization that approaches the issue of intersectionality in its day-to-day practice.
Nous Aussi! (Us Too!) is a network of women’s rights NGOs primarily dedicated to the parity claim since its creation in 1993. Today, the network lobbies for better implementation of parity laws and for legal reform that would make parity more efficient. It also proposes training for female candidates in local elections. In 2011, I interviewed the newly elected president of the network to inquire as to whether Nous Aussi! might consider extending the parity claim to other minorities or whether there was a specific concern about minority women’s political representation. In both cases, relying on the old parity motto, “women are not a category,” the answer was “no”:

We don’t want to promote this idea of diversity. We truly don’t. There’s been lots of talk about diversity, and because of this, nobody talks about parity anymore. . . . We don’t want Arab women to become token representatives. The problem is that at the governmental level, parity has been diluted in diversity. Diversity weakens us, and on the top of it, some use it to do tokenism. We don’t want parity to be diluted into diversity. We want it to stay 50/50 . . . ethnic minorities, young people, disabled people can be recognized, but they are categories. Women are not a category, the men/women divide is transversal.

Another women’s rights organization, Decide! (Decide!), founded by a prominent figure in the struggle for the right to abortion, had been very active during the parity campaign in the 1990s. In 2011, their lobbying concentrated on the “most privileged European woman clause,” which attempts to harmonize legal protection for women in European countries using, for each domain, the most progressive law existing in the EU. With this new type of legal mobilization, Decide! maintains a very universalist and “gender-first” type of analysis. Women are considered here again to be a homogeneous category in need of specific legal protections that will benefit all women equally. Decide! took a position on the headscarf debate in favor of the law expelling Muslim girls wearing the Islamic headscarf from public school. I inquired whether Decide! thought that this type of political positioning could alienate some minority women’s groups who would not recognize themselves in Decide’s political agenda and would not support Decide! The General Secretary of the organization responded:

I don’t think so . . . because we agree on other things. Maybe our position is very sharp on the veil issue, but we can be allies on other issues, and the most important struggle after all, is gender equality, and it’s parity, it’s equal pay. And that’s our core lobbying, violence against women. . . . I think that
beyond the veil, we have lots of common ground on these issues, which have not been solved for women today. The veil is a specific issue, but there are many other more important issues.

This passage illustrates well the logic of commonality promoted by Decide! and perceived by its members as inclusive of all women because it tackles issues framed as universally shared by women tends to suppress voices from the margin. Issues such as religious freedom are framed as marginal or specific, while they may well be central to the lives of Muslim women in France today. The assumption that some political interests are common to all women, an assumption clearly stated by parity campaigners, continues to frame the main claims voiced by mainstream women’s rights organizations. Although, in the case of Decide!, the current members are part of a generation who did not fight for parity, they use the same universalist repertoires that are now part of the organization’s collective memory.

The focus on broad issues that are supposedly common to all women tends also to sideline issues of minority women’s representation inside French women’s rights organizations. For example, when I asked an administrator from Femmes Européennes (European Women), an umbrella organization that regroups many feminist organizations and links them to European institutions — and that has supported the parity claim since the beginning — whether the representation of minority women inside their organization was a concern, she replied:

That’s not how we think, we don’t tell ourselves, let’s include this woman, we don’t do affirmative action. . . . Grassroots organizations decide to choose a woman from a minority or not to represent them on our board . . . We are not proactively seeking [minority women’s] organizations to join. It’s true that we try to represent the full spectrum of women’s rights, rather than to represent specific minorities. There is the question of migrant women . . . but it’s not . . . central.

The “gender-first” discourse from mainstream advocacy organizations contrasts with the more nuanced and difference-sensitive praxis of other organizations that are mostly service providers to women, such as Santé des femmes (Women’s Health). Santé des femmes’ social workers do not consciously use intersectionality as a conceptual tool to guide their praxis, and they still focus on “women” as a category with common

20. Santé des femmes was very active during the second wave of the feminist movement in the struggle for contraception and abortion rights. Since the mid-2000s, it has also begun taking political positions on a wider set of issues than those related to women’s health.
interests. Nevertheless, they have developed a form of “affirmative practice” that does consider differences other than gender. The fact that their public comes from diverse ethnic, class, sexual orientation, and ability backgrounds means that they are very much aware of differences among women and that they must be reflexive about their praxis in providing for a diverse clientele. In the day-to-day work of an organization like Santé des femmes, differences among women are not conceptualized as related to group identities, which would determine specific political interests (as can be the case in intersectionality theory). Rather, identities are perceived in their individual dimension, and needs are specific to the individual. Inclusivity means listening and helping women on their own, personal, and singular terms. Hence, even if Santé des femmes opted, after much internal division on the issue, to support the 2004 law against Islamic headscarves in schools, it will never refuse to help a Muslim woman wearing the veil or try to convince her that her veil is a sign of gender oppression. As the General Secretary of the national coordination of the Santé des femmes declared when I interviewed her in 2011:

At Santé des femmes . . . we are confronted by the question of differences. . . . In French Guiana, for example, there’s a lot of teenage pregnancies, the numbers are skyrocketing . . . we tend to read it from our own norms. But for girls who have sexual relations earlier, who have kids earlier, part of the picture is about culture . . . but even if it’s cultural, we try to understand what’s going on for each girl by listening to them and working with them so that they can make the tools theirs. We always start from the individual, from what she is living, not what she represents. We never enter a case through religion, for example . . . our question is how can we give her the tools to compose her own decision, to find herself, her own balance.

In this case, the absence of a vocabulary of intersectionality — and the refusal to understand women’s issues through the prism of their other social, cultural, or religious identities — does not mean that differences are erased or that situations of multiple oppressions are ignored. Rather, intersectionality is understood only at the individual level, as the product of an individual constellation of parameters that define a woman’s environment, the constraints she faces, and the choices that have meaning for her. Because they are a service-provider organization, Santé des femmes seems much more open to the issues of differences among women than advocacy-oriented organizations.

While advocacy-oriented organizations are focused on voicing claims in the name of a unified category of “women,” service-provider organizations
are not preoccupied by the elaboration of a collective identity or mobilizing a group in favor of a platform of established common political interests. Unencumbered by the issue of who is the political subject they are fighting for, service-provider organizations can approach the issue of difference from an angle anchored in a politics of need and solidarity, which aims at being inclusive and responsive to the wide variety of situations they encounter. On the contrary, lobbying for parity has been focused on advocacy and legal mobilization quite remote from the field. This remoteness has made it easier to gloss over women’s divergent political interests.

CONCLUSION

Why is the passage from parity to intersectionality so difficult for French women’s rights organizations? I have outlined three factors that shed light on the context in which French women’s rights organizations’ discourses and practices of intersectionality must be understood. The first insists on the French citizenship model, which does not provide institutional space for identity politics or intersectional politics. This foreclosing of the political system to claims for group representation has strongly influenced parity advocates’ strategy, encouraging them to emphasize the idea that women are more than a social category, that they represent half of human kind. This political tactic has led parity advocates to emphasize gender at the expense of other discriminated groups. In the current context, as European institutions give more impetus to the policy discourse about discrimination and diversity, many French feminists have not revised their position and perceive diversity as a threat that might dilute the issue of gender equality.

The second explanation I propose traces the difficulty of conceptualizing multiple oppressions and differences among women back to the feminist movement’s second wave and its various theories of gender difference. I argue that the competition with leftist organizations has encouraged materialist radical feminists who wanted to build an autonomous movement to emphasize greatly the universality of women’s oppression and to downplay differences among women. This historical legacy has weighed on the parity movement itself because many of its protagonists were former members of organizations founded during the second wave.

Finally, I underlined that the position that mainstream women’s rights organizations adopt today vis-à-vis intersectionality depends on the
function performed by the organization. Advocacy-oriented organizations that participated in the parity movement continue to stress the homogeneity of the category “women” and focus advocacy on claims that, they believe, will benefit all women equally. Mainstream service-providing organizations employ a different approach. Their practical ethos, based on the idea that one must respect a woman’s choice and help her on her own terms, enables them to take into account various types of differences among women. This approach, however, does not open the door to the elaboration — at the theoretical or political level — of a collective identity, such as “Muslim women” or “women of color,” from which would derive specific political interests that need to be properly addressed and represented to ensure the inclusivity of the organization.

Hence, the parity reform has given French women’s rights organizations an ambivalent legacy: Although it is an important feminist success, looked at with an intersectional lens, its results are less impressive since the reform has ignored the issue of differences among women and of the political marginalization of other minority groups. Similar to other progressive politics that aim to ensure equality for a previously marginalized group, once seen in an intersectional perspective, the results might appear more ambivalent than expected (e.g., Strolovitch 2012; Zajicek 2002). This case study, therefore, opens new venues to research the relationship between gender quota policies and intersectionality. Beyond the singularity of the French case, this article emphasizes the need to assess gender quotas with an intersectional lens and to look, in each case, at citizenship models, the women’s movement’s history, its previous relationship to other social movements (class-based or race/migration based), and the type of women’s rights organizations in a given national context to understand the dynamics at play. All of these factors contribute to shape the relationship that gender quota policies will have with intersectional issues, as well as the possibilities for true “affirmative advocacy.”

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REFERENCES


