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## The Abortion Green Scarf as a Boundary Object: Beyond the Curse of the Left

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By Mara Dicenta

Science and Technology Studies (STS) can engage with social movements in a variety of forms. STS scholarship has provided methods, theories, and concepts related to how information and values are communicated between scientific disciplines and affected communities, how those communities are formed and/or dissolved around matters of concern, how they are (not) listened to and (not) legitimated, and how issues reach political agendas. Thus, STS concepts can be utilized to leverage the possibilities of social movements for producing significant change. In this piece, I draw upon the possibilities for change produced by STS by depicting the green headscarves used in Argentina and other Latin American regions to demand abortion rights as 'boundary objects' (Star and Griesemer 1989; Star 2010). Green scarves as boundary objects are not merely icons, they also afford cooperation among very different communities of practice, thought, and belonging.

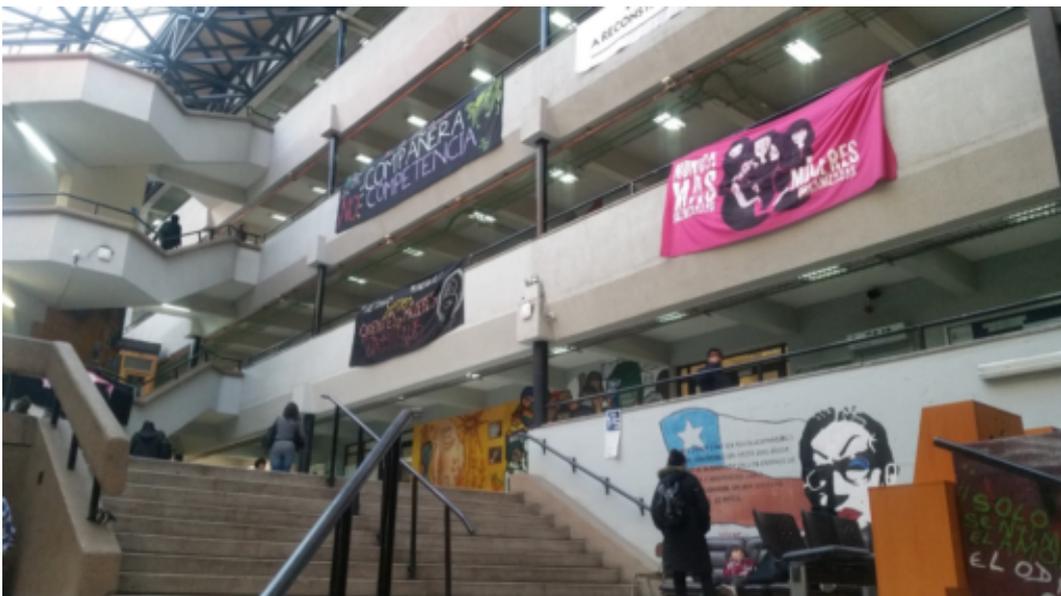
Boundary objects serve to bring different social worlds together into cooperation without consensus (Star 2010; Star and Griesemer 1989). They do this only if vaguely defined and ill-structured. When different groups and disciplines get together, they can collaborate with others by renouncing their specific understandings and claims. Hence, boundary objects are not just any word or item that is subject to different interpretations, they also need to enable the formation of communities of knowledge. Generally, this means that groups move between loose definitions when working together and their specific frames when not collaborating.

To illustrate how boundary-objects work, Star (2010) uses the example of a 19th century article that took a map of the monkey brain and directly transposed it onto a human one. Being an inoperative comparison, the scientific community could not use it for their studies, but the ill-structured map served to establish conversations for the construction of the neurological sciences (Star 2010, 608). A second example from my own research takes the project of beaver eradication in the South of Chile and Argentina as a boundary object. I collaborate with a multidisciplinary group of scientists to examine and mediate the beaver's conflict in Tierra del

Fuego, where the introduction of the species in 1946 has led to considerable ecosystem changes. While most of the local scientists I work with did not leverage the [international plan to eradicate the species](#) from the Islands, the unsuccessful and ill-structured project has promoted a fruitful community that works around the problem of the beavers from multiple perspectives. What follows is an analysis of another boundary object, this time in the context of a movement seeking abortion rights, thus translating a science studies concept to the field of social movements.

### **Abortion Marches and the Latin American New Feminist Wave**

In July 2018, I traveled to Santiago de Chile for [the XII Latin American Conference of Science and Technology Studies](#). I walked into a city that, at first glance, seemed to be comprised of engineers and tall buildings, colonial histories and racialized classism, all situated against a backdrop of the snow-capped Andes and the disavowal of multiple violent pasts. The conference was being held at the public University of Chile, which I found to be a surprisingly vibrant feminist institution covered with posters, graffiti, and impromptu assemblies within the corridors. A demonstrating Chilean University was not something new: the 2011 intense protests demanding more equalitarian access to higher education had led to the approval of a bill that freed tuition costs to the poorest incoming students (Barandiarán 2018, VIII). What was novel was the expansion of feminist territories: from enclosed and marginal rooms to every space within and outside the university, including corridors, classrooms, bathrooms, backyards, and city squares. It was the materialized landscape of what has been called the Chilean New Feminist Wave.



Hall of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Chile

The banners tied international movements such as the North American [MeToo](#), the Argentinian [Ni Una Menos](#), and the Spanish [Yo te Creo](#) with the Chilean New Feminist Wave that arose during the [2018 feminist occupations](#). The protest articulated transnational feminist demands with local configurations of alterity and inequality, related in part to the neo-liberalization of the country and its universities during and after the 70's Dictatorship (Barandiarán 2018). Since April 2018, students had been taking over universities across Chile to denounce sexual abuse and discrimination and to demand sexual identity recognition. They provoked one of the largest ever feminist demonstrations in Chile (May 16) and made possible the largest abortion march (July 25), which ended with [three women stabbed](#). Despite the wide range of collectives participating in the rally for a “legal and safe abortion,” there was one thing we all had in common: a green headscarf similar to the one used by the Argentinian movement at that time. When I asked the reason for using the same scarf, a participant told me: “Chile and Argentina have always looked to one another; if the abortion law passes there, it might happen here too.”

In June 2018, the lower house of Argentina's Congress approved a [bill to decriminalize abortion](#). The bill revitalized and assembled a variety of feminist movements for a common cause and with the same icon, a green headscarf. The scarf was a resignification of the white headscarves that [Madres de Plaza de Mayo](#) (Mothers of Plaza de Mayo) started to wear in their marches in front of the government's office to ask for our *disappeared* relatives during the 1976-1983 Military Dictatorship. The scarf was initially made of cloth diapers and used by the Mothers to identify each other during human rights demonstrations. Not surprisingly, in both Santiago and Buenos Aires's abortion marches, protesters accused the State of hypocrisy, saying: “they say they care for life when they used to take it,” in reference to the State terror lived not long ago.



## Hall of the Faculty of Exact Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires with a giant green headscarf

On August 8, 2018, the upper house of Argentina's Senate had to deliberate the bill. I was in Buenos Aires at that time for my research, so I was able to participate in the massive vigil that took place outside the Senate. Unlike Spain, where parties unify their take on each issue in advance, Argentinian senators of different regions debated for about 17 consecutive hours. They expressed a variety of standpoints that revealed ferocious discrepancies within the parties themselves. Not surprisingly, most speeches in favor of the law came from female senators and from richer regions. The interventions delineated, among many others, biological arguments, efficiency analyses, terrible accusations towards women if raped, the presence of antisemitism, poverty, international rights, public health, references to the bible, and the patriarchy of deciding over women's lives.

From that variety, one could group the arguments in two: those in favor of regulating abortions since they are already taking place through an informal and expensive market so that the State can guarantee the safety and health of Argentinian women, and those alleging moral reasons to reject any State implication in the termination of any kind of pregnancies. While senators sat inside, thousands of people, including members of feminist organizations and political groups, citizens, and green scarves, all waited outside amid heavy rain with hope: "they have to pass it, they cannot look at us through their windows and do otherwise." The wait was filled with performances, conversations, food, fires, music, and exhibitions that publicly ruptured the historical taboo that has, until now, silenced abortion practices ([more than 350,000 per year](#) according to the Argentinian Ministry of Health).



### [Vigil on August 8](#)

Despite the parity of takes during the speeches, the Senate counted with 38 negative votes, 2 abstentions, and 31 in favor, deciding not to pass a bill to debate how to regulate Argentinian abortions. The decision left the country with the same law that dates from 1921, and which criminalizes the voluntary end of pregnancy, a policy that provokes a profitable, discriminatory, and unsafe informal market. Despite the shock, rage, and grief, people outside the palace responded fast: “This has just started; it didn’t happen now but will soon. We are too many.” Indeed, since August 8, 2018 one can see cars, people, dogs, institutions, backpacks, chairs, wrists, houses, and streets all wearing green headscarves nationwide and gathering in meetings and feminist parties. The impulse provoked many to attend the [33 Women’s National Meeting](#) for the first time, which this year congregated [more than 60,000](#) “women, lesbians, and trans-identified people” who got together to exchange experiences through workshops, marches, and celebrations. Moreover, later that month I visited the Argentinian Congress to consult some archives, and found the building filled with green scarves and laces. With such power to mobilize conversations, cannot we speculate and even imagine a green headscarf political party that transcends the traditional Peronist-neoliberal divide of Argentinian politics?

### **Cooperation Without Consensus**

Because boundary objects bring different social worlds together without requiring consensus, understanding the green scarves as boundary

objects allows us to rethink the tensions of complex social movements when pursuing policy changes.

Green scarves are more than a mere icon to symbolize the movement for decriminalizing abortion. They are also a device enabling very different communities to cooperate without needing either understanding or agreement (from prostitution abolitionists, indigenous feminists, some Peronists, anarchists, black feminists, trans groups, health activists, [Catholics for the right to decide](#), scientists, policy makers, mothers, experts, poor classes, [and so on](#)). Representing a variety of theories, experiences, and political goals, the green headscarf functions as an infrastructure that coordinates multiplicity by establishing a loosely defined common. It works because it achieves the articulation of different levels of knowledge and vindication, from very deep and heated debates within communities to more vague conversations and the activation of sorority, intimacy, and complicity rather than agreement within bigger marches and celebrations. Neither level is static; rather they rearticulate each other, strengthening continuation and reflexivity by leaving discrepancies within the spaces where they can be productive.

### **Articulation**

The green headscarves are more than a mere icon to symbolize a group and, indeed, they do not represent the communities that wear it but rather the practices of collaboration and articulation. As a boundary object, the scarf articulates different levels of knowledge and vindication across local and transnational politics, across individuals, communities, and the abortion movement, and across different demands and regimes of truth.

First, regarding the local and global character of the abortion movement, the power of the green scarf resides in its capacity to travel along difference, arriving to other Latin American countries where resignification occurs inside their borders and according to their “national configurations of alterity” (Segato 2007). Second, the scarves are able to move along different levels of knowledge. While in their respective epistemic and active communities, people can elaborate their takes in more complex, critical and thoughtful ways, through the iconic scarf, they can also sacrifice deepness when conflating their stakes with others: at a march or a feminist event. And third, the scarf allows for different forms of vindication to coexist.

Following Foucault, Paul Preciado has argued that vindication politics of the body respond to different regimes of power (Preciado 2011). Thus, when women claiming abortion rights list their bodies into the property register or shout out that their body is *theirs*, they are re-signifying neoliberalist discourses. When they shape a giant vagina and march it in

simulation of a Catholic procession, they are re-appropriating sovereign forms of politics. And when they propose a “uterus strike” and the promotion of sexual practices that do not lead to reproduction, they are critically resisting biopolitical governance. Thus, facing the complexity of leveled realities, boundary objects such as the green headscarf can preclude disintegration and critique, instead allowing multiplicity and coexistence through the articulation of discourses.

### **Beyond the Curse of the Left and the Fear of Fracture**

Thinking of the green headscarf as a boundary object also offers some lessons for northern geographies. While I was taking courses in the United States, I witnessed the ‘curse of the left,’ a form of anxiety derived from the fear of a fractured world. While right-wing reactions to this fear consist of unifying and violently erasing multiplicity and difference, the left tends to become paralyzed by the impossibility of always including every *Other*. This occurs in the form of constant accusations among collectives for not including one another. I remember the attacks my students directed at the Women’s March (17 Jan 2017) that took place after Trump won the election. I heard them express anger at white feminists for marginalizing [black feminists](#) or at women for [essentializing gender](#). Their demands were of course extremely relevant for leveraging more inclusive politics, but they also produced distrust in any collective attempt to change policies. There is still much work to be done around the anxieties that difference produces, but one key therapeutic idea is Spivak et al.’s “strategic essentialism,” which refers to how minorities might *temporarily* essentialize their identities despite their differences in order to achieve rights (Danius, Jonsson, and Spivak 1993).

The goal of working with these anxieties is to not become paralyzed when facing the impossibility of representing every reality. To this goal, I also propose the use of boundary objects as a way of transcending the identity/class dichotomy and the anxieties of difference and representation. Boundary objects enable people across communities of difference to work together, even with disagreement. Think of a different example besides the green headscarf. For the Spanish Anti-austerity movement of *Indignados* (2011-2015), democracy, in a vaguely defined form, was the boundary object that allowed people with very different backgrounds to collaborate in the search for direct participatory democratic practices. More than the ideal definition of democracy, its looseness enabled its practice. Could we then imagine a politics of boundary objects, or arbitrary not-representative icons for enabling cooperation among communities of difference and dissensus?

Taken from STS, the concept of boundary object can be useful for engaging with social movements without the paralyzing fear of fracture

and the curse of the left. Rather than seeking consensus, agreement, or integration at a more abstract level, boundary objects promote the coexistence of difference within social movements that pursue more rights for more people. Today, this is an extremely urgent goal, as the reactionary right is globally taking national forms that aim to violently remove difference and minorities' rights.

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*Sexology, her research is informed by feminist, decolonial, and subaltern theories in the construction of histories, aiming to bring different constructions of natures and territories in order to destabilize the hegemonic vision of a world made of only one world.*

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