

# REVIEW OF THE BOOK

## INTERSECTIONALITY IN A GLOBAL WORLD

*Nira Yuval-Davis: The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations. Sage, 2011, 252 pp., price \$50*

**T***he Politics of Belonging* is a relatively short book that aspires to cover a vast array of social and political theory from an intersectional perspective, and to assess what might be specific or new arising from 'globalization.' On such a far-reaching intellectual tour, the expertise of the guide is definitive for the quality of the experience. In her autobiographical preface, Nira Yuval-Davis writes, 'I have always approached the issues of gender and gender relations intersectionally (e.g. Yuval-Davis, 1980; Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1983), given my anti-racist, socialist version of feminist political commitment' (p. vi). Readers familiar with the author's previous work will recognize the central dilemma that this book also grapples with: how to ground a theoretically based claim for a transversal feminist politics of belonging in the empirical world of practices, lived experiences and embodied politics. Citing explicitly more than once in the book Haraway's (1988) insistence that there is no view from nowhere, Yuval-Davis attempts to present multi-positioned intellectual views that integrate the verticality of theory with the horizontal spread of globalization. Only a scholar with her vast experience in political work and theory would take on such a task, which includes staking a claim for feminist theory among the traditional approaches to social and political understandings of globalization.

The book is structured around the contemporary political debates over the *politics of belonging* as constructed around five notions: *citizenship*, *nationalism*, *religion*, *cosmopolitanism* and *care*. Each of these political projects is given its own chapter with parallel structures. Each chapter begins by introducing the concepts that are central to these notions, outlining to a greater or lesser extent

the main debates in political and social theory, illustrating some of these debates with a selection of examples from the work of Yuval-Davis and collaborators and from secondary sources, and a penultimate section on 'feminism and' that relates the concept to feminist concerns. A conclusion in each chapter focuses on the specificity of globalization for the chapter's arguments. The structure of separate 'feminist' and 'globalization' sections works against the strength of an intersectional analysis which necessarily includes these in the mainstream of the main text.

The introduction provides a useful reference for readers who are not yet familiar with the historical roots of intersectionality and its relationship to social categories. Very briefly engaged in this introduction (pp. 6-10), intersectionality as used in this book is an attempt to move feminist standpoint theory into an analytical differentiation between different facets of social analysis – 'that of people's positionings along socio-economic grids of power; that of people's experiential and identificatory perspectives of where they belong; and that of their normative value systems' (p. 7). It is in the relationship between the social categories themselves that intersectionality offers a useful conceptual tool. Yuval-Davis writes: 'Although discourses of race, gender, class, etc. have their own ontological bases which cannot be reduced down to each other, there is no separate concrete meaning of any facet of these categories, as they are mutually constitutive in any concrete historical moment' (p. 7). It is the necessity of this vast grounding and situating both theoretically and empirically that is the book's challenge, and potentially its most significant contribution. Readers seeking an in-depth theorization or empirical grounding of any one of the five central notions from a feminist intersectional perspective are likely to be disappointed, but the author has written other books on much of this, and this book should be seen more as a consolidating and advancing project.

In some ways, reading the book as a historical trajectory is interesting, as the first chapter's politics of belonging as a (multi-cultural, multi-layered) citizen is mostly grounded in classical political theory, and the politics of care is most explicitly theorized and integrates feminist and globalization critiques. The chapter on 'the national question' is particularly rich, which is not surprising given Yuval-Davis' career. Her review of literature tackling what is a 'nation'? and how this relates to notions of the 'nation state' is a useful indicator of the links between identity, boundary-making, and where, when and how people live embodied lives. Her examples of the politics of 'never-ending queues of foreigners' (p. 101) illustrate various regimes of claims-making that are institutionalized through cosmopolitan structures like the United Nations. A related and strong chapter, although it is situated after the chapter on the religious question, is the one entitled 'The Cosmopolitan Question: Situating the Human and Human Rights'. While this chapter could have been the frame for the entire book if its introductory quotation by Ulrich Beck, 'to belong or not to belong is the cosmopolitan question', (p. 145) were taken at face value, Yuval-Davis uses an intersectional perspective to disrupt the convenience and normativity of cosmopolitanism. Her key argument is that 'cosmopolitanism is always situated, although not always rooted, and intersectional locations, of which national origins and formal citizenships are only part of the constituting factors, affect profoundly cosmopolitan gazes' (p. 153). The chapter engages with the UN and World Governance notions of universality, and in the conclusion sketches out the author's resolution of the constituting debates between the universalist and pluralist positions on the vision of an anti-racist society. 'We cannot – and should not – construct a homogeneous, or even a unified, political order. Rather we should engage in a transversal dialogue (Cockburn and Hunter, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 1994, 1997, 2006) that is

bounded by common political values, informed by recognitions of our differential locations and identifications, and led by a global discourse in which translation, rather than a unitary language, is seen as the cosmopolitan political tool and political projects of belonging are multi-layered, with shifting, contested and porous boundaries' (p. 176). This is the political project that drives the vast amalgamation of theories and examples in *The Politics of Belonging*.

Yuval-Davis takes on much of the strong literature on the politics of care in her final substantive chapter, yet it is not completely clear what claims she is bringing forward from these debates into the arguments of the book. While she acknowledges that caring has been at the 'heart of the performativity, as well as narratives of resistance, of national belonging' (p. 192), her concerns with a less state-engaged feminist politics, and how globalization exacerbates these concerns, are mentioned but not fully developed here. While the conclusion tries to reiterate what Yuval-Davis's political project of belonging is all about, the scope of the book and the vast array of examples lead us to re-read her in-depth work with case studies and/or to follow-up the theoretical literature she cites in the chapters to gain the grounding needed to support such a project.

*Lisa Ann Richey, Professor  
Department of Society and Globalisation  
Roskilde University*

#### LITTERATUR

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### A GUIDE'S ORCHESTRATION OF FEMINIST STUDIES AS A POSTDISCIPLINARY DISCIPLINE

*Nina Lykke: Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing. Routledge, 2010, 241 pp., 323 DKK.*

Nina Lykke, known to many Scandinavians as a distinguished professor, educator and scholar in Gender Studies, presents her international publication *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing* as an advanced textbook as well as a guidebook for newcomers to the field of Feminist Studies (p. 3).<sup>1</sup> The author considers herself to be a guide giving 'personal guidance ... [but] no prescription of a universalized canon' (p. 4) in congruence with her conviction that feminist research should promote 'theoretical diversity and methodological pluralism' (p. 3) and her Donna Haraway-inspired 'belief in a politics of location and an epistemology of situated and partial knowledges' (p. 4).

Remaining within the imagery of a guided field trip, Lykke explains how she has framed *Feminist Studies* as a cartography mapping the four aims (pp. 8-11) of defining Feminist Studies, introducing current theoretical debates, developing new thinking techno-

logies for Feminist Studies, and exemplifying how Feminist Studies might be performed. This structure enables the emergence of what I see as her overall motivation of writing the book, namely to create a founding text and experience for Feminist Studies as a '*post-disciplinary discipline ... [i.e.,] a field of knowledge production that has its own profile, which enables it to pass as a discipline and claim the academic authority of one, but which also keeps up a transversal openness and a dialogical approach to all academic disciplines*' (p. 8; Lykke's italics).

There is much ambition behind her manifold aims, which invites reflections on her level of success in this respect. First, I shall comment on her balancing act in disseminating complex information to newcomers and advanced scholars. This she accomplishes in an exemplary way by trusting to the reflective skills of the reader, yet always providing he/r with enough information and background knowledge to follow her line of reasoning, as in her presentation of Judith Butler's theory of performativity (pp. 90-91) or her explanation of the inspiration Karen Barad took from quantum physicist Niels Bohr's approach to phenomena as partly constructed by the measuring tools (p. 141). In general, there are informative references to key influential works all through the book and solid introductions to the debates and issues touched on. Adding to this, I should mention the nine-page-glossary that provides newcomers with several lines explaining concepts such as 'Cyborg feminist theory', 'genealogical analysis', and 'phallogocentrism' (pp. 203-211).

Another ambitious act of balancing is between being personally engaged and taking an anti-canonical stand. This is achieved, among other things, thanks to her Michel Foucault-inspired genealogical approach to current debates within Feminist Studies, where different theoretical strands have been woven together, all contributing to present orientations (p. 68). As an alternative to presenting theories as antagonistic position-

ings up against predecessors, the reader is guided into a friendly, but still well-defined territory of continuities and discontinuities, as in the explanation of how the current feminist focus on corpomateriality is indebted to the linguistic turn of the so-called 'French' feminists (Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva) and their non-deterministic emphasis on bodily difference, despite its somewhat essentialist underpinning (101-103; 108-110). By orchestrating a sympathetic, yet sharp understanding of continuities and discontinuities, she safeguards present and future readers from implications in a negative, sometimes violent process of othering/positioning up against predecessors. Here, Lykke takes a methodological precaution to meet ethical ideals that advanced readers may know from, for example, Butler's ethics of disidentification (Butler 1990) or Kristeva's ethics of exile (Kristeva (1988) 1991).

Lykke's ambition to promote Feminist Studies as a postdisciplinary discipline relates to earlier feminist discussions on whether Feminist Studies should be characterised by not conforming to established disciplines within academia or should strive to attain disciplinary autonomy. Lykke considers this either-or approach unfortunate. Following Gabriele Griffin and Jalna Hanmer, she recognises that disciplinary status might be attractive for strategic reasons to further visibility and organisational stability and to express grant worthiness vis-à-vis external funding agencies. However, given feminism's contestation of established epistemologies, Lykke is also on the look-out for 'a critical vision of alternative organization of knowledge' (p. 17) that she finds to some extent in Sandra Harding's conception of Feminist Studies as a 'successor-science'. Because Lykke sees Feminist Studies as part of academia, but also as contributing to academia's meta-theoretical renegotiations of and development away from unilateral approaches and monologue understandings (pp. 14-19; 29), she coins the term 'post-disciplinary

discipline' for the envisioned future of Feminist Studies.

It is part of the review genre to present some criticism. Of course I have found minor understandings or formulations that I do not share, but my only major critique relates to the title of the book, which also comes to designate the postdisciplinary discipline, that is, *Feminist Studies*. Lykke makes it clear on p. 11 that finding a name for the book/discipline was no easy choice and that much consideration lies behind this designation. Among the options for a proper designation, 'Women's Studies' is available. It was coined in the 1970s to make women visible and to conduct academic studies that reflected women's standpoints. However, the designation 'Women's Studies' contributes to essentialising and conserving a heteronormative two-gender system. 'Gender Studies' is another designatory option that was current in the 1980s and 1990s. It has the advantage of including a focus not only on women, but also on men and queer identities, but its disadvantage is its essentialisation of 'detachment of gender from sex and embodiment' (p. 12), thus ignoring the intraaction of cultural construction and the materiality of the body (p. 13). Accordingly, Lykke employs 'gender/sex' as the complex object of her study throughout her book, just like she finally chooses the designation 'Feminist Studies' as a title for her book and thereby also for the postdisciplinary discipline to shift the perspective toward the political and epistemological position of the subject of research and its location in the empirical reality of social movements that problematize power differentials and hegemonies based on intersectional gender/sex and a heteronormative, two-gender system. However, I must also underline that I use the label 'Feminist Studies' as an *inclusive* shorthand for 'Women's/Gender/Feminist Studies.' This again is to be understood as a broad umbrella term for the multiplicity of branches of feminist theorizing, and to include that part of Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities

that labels itself as 'pro-feminist,' signalling a political solidarity with feminist movements. (p. 12)

While I do agree that sex and gender have been shown to intra-act to the extent that one cannot separate the one from the other, and while I agree that every scholar has been shown to produce situated knowledges and ought to admit to that and account for it, I miss the argument that explains why the feminist perspective is deserving of its own discipline. It is true of every academic discipline that it owes its existence to the relevance of its research object. Much of Lykke's book emphasises that gender/sex is intersectional and should be radically de/post-constructed, and her book maps out an impressive plan for that. However, female, poor, coloured, postcolonial, sexually non-conforming or transsexual people all have queer perspectives on gender/sex and stakes in gender/sex-research. Gender/sex is a phenomenon, no matter what its intersectional constitution, that deserves universal academic attention just like mathematics, religion or literature. Why a certain group of people, namely feminists, who see and define themselves as partial and political (p. 125) should have privileged access to the study of gender/sex by having their own discipline, welcoming only those who are 'profeminist' (p. 12) to their territory, goes against Lykke's ideal of being anti-canonical. To be consistent with her own use of gender/sex, she could have named the book as well as the postdisciplinary discipline *The Study of Gender/Sex*. Yes, it is stilted, I admit, but it disseminates the complexity that characterises the research object, as well as her book.

Despite this critique, I recommend *Feminist Studies* without hesitation. It would have made a tremendous difference to me had I known a guide like her/-s when I was a newcomer to the field without any established (postdisciplinary) discipline on gender/sex to choose as an area of education or advanced study. Now, as an autodidact on gender/sex, someone I could hesitantly

designate an advanced reader, I have revisited the field of gender/sex under the guidance of someone who is not only characterised by an impressive knowledge and independent thought on gender/sex, but also capable of drawing the compositional, methodological and ethical consequences of her insights.

*Marianne Schleicher*  
*MA & Ph.D., Study of Religion,*  
*University of Aarhus, Denmark*

#### NOTE

1. *Feminist Studies* is a translated, yet revised version of her Danish publication *Kønsforskning: en guide til feministisk teori, metodologi og skrift*, Samfundslitteratur, København 2008.

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