FREIA
Feminist Research Center
in Aalborg
Aalborg University
Kroghstraede 3
DK-9220 Aalborg East

Phone: +45 9940 8310

E-mail: freia@cgs.aau.dk

Power, Intersectionality and the Politics of Belonging

Nira Yuval-Davis

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Foreword

The paper: *Power, Intersectionality and the Politics of Belonging* was presented by professor Nira Yuval-Davis as a keynote speech at the National Gender Conference for the Danish Association for Gender Research 2011. The conference was hosted by FREIA: The Feminist Research Centre at Aalborg University April 30. The conference was titled: *Power and Mobilization – locally, nationally and globally.*

Nira Yuval-Davis is Professor and Director of the Centre on Migration, Refugees and Belonging, East London University. She is the author of the influential book: *Gender and Nation* (1997), which has been translated into many different languages and she has co-edited*: Women, Citizenship and Difference*, Zed books 1999. Her new book is entitled: *The Politics of*

Power, Intersectionality and the Politics of Belonging

Nira Yuval-Davis

This discussion on power and mobilization is based on my forthcoming book (*The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*, Sage 2011) which focuses on issues on the intersection of the sociology of power and the sociology of emotions.

Politics involve exercise of power and different hegemonic political projects of belonging represent different symbolic power orders. In recent years, the sociological understanding of power has been enriched by the theoretical contributions of Michel Foucault (e.g. 1979; 1991a) and Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. 1984; 1990). Traditionally, power was understood and measured by the effects those with power had on others. However, feminists and other grass roots activists, following Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), promoted a notion of 'empowerment' in which people would gain 'power of' rather than 'power on'. While this approach has been used too often to cover intra-communal power relations and the feminist 'tyranny of structurelesness' with which Jo Freeman (1970) described the dynamics of feminist politics, the notion of empowerment does fit alternative theoretical approaches to power which focus on symbolic power.

Max Weber's classical theory of power (1968), which differentiated between physical and charismatic powers, those dependent on individual resources and those emanating out of legitimate authority, has been supplemented, if not supplanted by other theoretical frameworks which sought to explain what is happening in the contemporary world where social, political and economic powers have become more diffused, decentered and desubjectified. The most popular of these new approaches have been those by Foucault (1979, 1986, 1991a) and Bourdieu (1977; 1984; 1990). Foucault constructed a notion of a 'disciplinary society' in which power increasingly operates through impersonal mechanisms of bodily discipline and a governmentality which escapes the consciousness and will of individual and collective social agents. Under such conditions, power as was formerly known, starts to operate only when resistance occurs.

However, as Ciaran Cronin (1996:56) points out, while Foucault's genealogical perspective of power is of crucial importance in understanding contemporary politics, it is too radical and monolithic, and therefore 'it is impossible to identify any social location of the exercise of power or of resistance to power'. This is where Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, while sharing some of

Foucault's insights, such as the role of body practices as mediating relations of domination, can serve us better. The subject for Bourdieu is both embodied and socially constituted. His theory of practice (in which there is constant interaction between the individual symbolically structured and socially inculcated dispositions of individual agents which he calls '*habitus'* and the 'social field' which is structured by symbolically mediated relations of domination) offers a more empirically sensitive analytical framework for decoding impersonal relations of power.

Symbolic powers are of crucial importance when we deal with political projects of belonging, although more often than not, they are the focus of contestations and resistance. Adrian Favell (1999) defined the politics of belonging as 'the dirty work of boundary maintenance'. The boundaries the politics of belonging are concerned with are the boundaries of the political community of belonging, the boundaries which, sometimes physically, but always symbolically, separate the world population into 'us' and 'them'. The question of the boundaries of belonging, the boundaries of the Andersonain (1991[1983]) 'imagined communities', is central in all political projects of belonging. The politics of belonging involve not only the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers (within and outside the community) but also their contestation, challenge and resistance by other political agents. It is important to recognize, however, that such political agents would struggle both for the promotion of their specific position on the construction of collectivities and their boundaries as well as using these ideologies and positions in order to promote their own power positions within and outside th

The politics of belonging also include struggles around the determination of what is involved in belonging, in being a member of such a community. As such, it is dialogical (Yuval-Davis & Werbner, eds, 1999) and encompasses contestations both in relation to the participatory dimension of citizenship as well as in relation to issues related to the status and entitlements such membership entails.

It is for this reason that we need to differentiate between belonging and the politics of belonging. Before discussing this in a little more detail, however, it is important to discuss why intersectionality and the epistemology of the situated gaze is so central to it.

Intersectionality

Epistemologically, intersectionality can be described as a development of feminist standpoint theory which claims, in somewhat different ways, that it is

vital to account for the social positioning of the social agent and challenged ‘the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere’ (Haraway 1991:189) as a cover and a legitimisation of a hegemonic masculinist ‘positivistic’ positioning. Situated gaze, situated knowledge and situated imagination (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002), construct differently the ways we see the world. However, intersectionality theory was interested even more in how the differential situatedness of different social agents constructs the ways they affect and are affected by different social, economic and political projects.

I do not have time here to get into the history of various inter- and intra-disciplinary debates on how to approach intersectionality. Instead, I shall just mention three main points that characterize my approach to intersectional analysis. Unlike many feminists, especially black feminists, who focus on intersectional analysis as specific to black and ethnic minorities women or, at least, to marginalized people, I see intersectionality as the most valid approach to analyze social stratification as a whole (see my paper in Lutz & al, 2011). Intersectional analysis does not prioritize one facet or category of social difference. However, unlike those who view the intersection of categories of social difference in an additive way, I see them as mutually constitutive. As to the question of how many facets of social difference and axes of power need to be analyzed – this is different in different historical locations and moments, and the decision on which ones to focus involve both empirical reality as well as political and especially ontological struggles. What is clear, however, is that when we carry out intersectional analysis, we cannot homogenize the ways any political project or claimings affect people who are differentially located within the same boundaries of belonging.

Belonging and the politics of belonging

It is important to differentiate between belonging and the politics of belonging. Belonging is about emotional attachment, about feeling ‘at home’. As Ghassan Hage (1997:103) points out, however, ‘home is an on-going project entailing a sense of hope for the future’. (See also Taylor 2009). Part of this feeling of hope relates to home as a ‘safe’ space (Ignatieff, 2001). In the daily reality of early 21st century, in so many places on the globe, the emphasis on safety gets a new poignancy. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that feeling ‘at home’ does not necessarily only generate positive and warm feelings. It also allows the safety as well as the emotional engagement to be, at times, angry, resentful, ashamed, indignant (Hessel, 2010).

Belonging tends to be naturalized and be part of everyday practices (Fenster, 2004). It becomes articulated, formally structured and politicized only when it is threatened in some way. The politics of belonging comprise of specific political

projects aimed at constructing belonging to particular collectivity/ies which are themselves being constructed in these projects in very specific ways and in very specific boundaries (i.e. whether or not, according to specific political projects of belonging Jews could be considered to be German, for example, or abortion advocates can be considered Catholic).

As Ulf Hannerz (2002) claims, home is essentially a contrastive concept, linked to some notion of what it means to be away from home. It can involve a sense of rootedness in a socio-geographic site or be constructed as an intensely imagined affiliation with a distant local where self realization can occur.

Belonging

People can 'belong' in many different ways and to many different objects of attachments. These can vary from a particular person to the whole humanity, in a concrete or abstract way, by self or other identification, in a stable, contested or transient way. Even in its most stable 'primordial' forms, however, belonging is always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity – the latter is only a naturalized construction of particular hegemonic form of power relations. Belonging is usually multi-layered and – to use geographical jargon – multi-scale (Antonisch, 2010) or multerritorial (Hannerz, 2002).

To clarify our understanding of the notion of social and political belonging, it would be useful to differentiate between three major analytical facets in which belonging is constructed[1]. The first facet concerns social locations; the second relates to people's identifications and emotional attachments to various collectivities and groupings and the third relates to ethical and political value systems with which people judge their own and others' belonging/s. These different facets are interrelated, but cannot be reduced to each other.

Of course not all belonging/s are as important to people in the same way and to the same extent and emotions, as perceptions, shift in different times and situations and are more or less reflective. As a rule, the emotional components of people's constructions of themselves and their identities become more central the more threatened and less secure they become. In most extreme cases people would be willing to sacrifice their lives – and the lives of others - in order for the narrative of their identities and the objects of their identifications and attachments to continue to exist. After a terrorist attack, or after a declaration of war, people often seek to return to a place of less 'objective' safety, as long as it means they can be near their nearest and dearest, and share their fate.

[1] As will become clearer further on in the chapter, these facets can be reconstructed and reconfigured in many different ways by different political projects of belonging.

Ethical and political values

Belonging, therefore, is not just about social locations and constructions of individual and collective identities and attachments but also about the ways these are assessed and valued by self and others and this can be done in many

nationalist political projects of belonging as well as the ethnocisation of many states. It contributed to the rise of political movements which embrace the conviviality and richness of multicultural national lives. However, it has also, and in a growing intensity, contributed to the rise of and the emotional power of autochthonic movements which claim possession of territories and states because ‘we were here first’.

This is the other side of the growing legitimacy of the notion of indigeneity, which conversely has proved to be a potent tool for claiming rights of racialized minorities who survived colonization and settlement of Europeans in various parts of the world. Their struggles, although different from those of other racialized minorities of people who immigrated to those and other western countries, can be analyzed, on the one hand, as some forms of nationalist political projects of belonging. On the other hand, however, they can also be seen as part of the global rise of cosmopolitan political projects of belonging which rely on human rights discourse to claim their entitlement for individual and collective rights.

Another rising cluster of political projects of belonging are linked to religion. These can be linked to particular nationalist and ethnic movements or constitute parts of cosmopolitan global movements. However, some of the most important political projects of belonging of our times are religious fundamentalist (or absolutist) movements which have arisen in all major religions and are part – especially some Muslim and Christian fundamentalist movements - of the global ‘clash of civilizations’ discourse which has come to replace the cold war as a dichotomizing discourse of the globe.

Although there have been feminist political projects focusing on all major political projects of belonging – citizenship, nationalism, religion, cosmopolitanism (Yuval-Davis, 2011) I consider ‘ethics of care’ to be more specifically a feminist political project of belonging. It relates more to the ways people should relate and belong to each other rather than to what should be the boundaries of belonging. Nevertheless, in the last instance, the question of boundaries cannot really be avoided once we start questioning who cares for whom and what are the emotional and the power relations which are involved in this interaction.

Virginia Held (2005) claims that the care social and political model developed out the mother-child relationships model guarantees mutual equality and respect among people. In reality, however, although children can wield a lot of

‘masculinity’ as complementary opposites, as is constructed in hegemonic discourses on these roles, have detrimental effects on women’s powers and autonomy, let alone completely excludes the experiences and values of sexual minorities.

At the same time it is clear that even in such hegemonic discourses care is not exclusive the property of womanhood. There can be no clearer sign in such hegemonic discourses that men care about their community and society than their traditional readiness to perform the ultimate citizenship duty - to sacrifice their lives and to kill others for the sake of the nation. Moreover, as Cynthia Enloe (1990) pointed out, fighting for the nation has been often constructed as fighting for the sake of ‘womenandchildren’. More concretely, it has been shown that men care not only for the notions of home and homeland but for the other men in their unit with whom they are fighting (Kaplan, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 1997, ch.5). One of the main worries of military commanders about including women in combat military unit has been that their presence will disturb the male bonding which is at the heart of military performance. On their side, women as carers are not only constructed as the biological and cultural reproducers of the nation, but are also the men’s ‘helpmates’ – their roles in the formal and informal labour market has been usually defined according to the range of duties demanded from the men, fulfilling, in addition to their traditional reproductive duties, all the tasks the men left when called to fulfil national duties in times of war and other crises (Yuval-Davis, 1985). Caring, in its different gendered forms, therefore, has been at the heart of the performativity, a well as narratives of resistance, of national belonging.

Nowadays, in many states, serving in the military is not any more a male citizenship duty. Just when women started to be allowed to join the military formally in more equitable manner, the military was transformed from a national

in the Jewish tradition

use Alison Assiter's words (2009:101) that 'all human beings are needy and all suffer' (ibid:101).

Following Kierkegaard's call to love all human beings and Levinas' insistence that care and love should not be mutual or conditional, she also argues that 'sometimes, loving another will involve respecting their differences from oneself to the extent that one is able.' (ibid:102). The position expressed in the above quote raises two issues which are of fundamental importance to feminist and other emancipatory politics of belonging. Firstly, what criteria should be used to decide when such difference should or should not be respected, and secondly, how does one determine their ability to respect such differences. I would like to examine these two issues via examining transversal feminist politics (Yuval-Davis, 1994, 1997, 2006; Cockburn &Hunter, 1999).

Care, belonging and feminist transversal politics

Transversal feminist political movements are one form of cosmopolitan dialogical politics. The participants, while being engaged with 'others' belonging to different collectivities across borders and boundaries, act not as representatives of identity categories or groupings but rather as advocates, how they are reflectively engaged in 'rooting' and 'shifting' and how their strength lies in the construction of common epistemological understandings of particular political situations rather than of common political action. It was also mentioned that transversal politics, unlike 'rainbow coalitions', depend on shared values rather than on specific political actions, as differential positioning might dictate prioritising different political actions and strategies. Most relevant to our discussion here, it was described how transversal politics encompass difference by equality and while continuously crossing collectivity boundaries, the transversal solidarity is bounded by sharing common values.

Shared values as the basis of solidarity and cooperation is generally rejected by ethics of care feminists. The bond of mothers to their children and of carers to their dependents is not that of shared values but that of love and need. The ethics of care feminists and others might share the value of helping the needy, but there is no such a demand for the needy to necessarily hold such values. This is an asymmetrical politics of solidarity based on the Levinas principle.

Transversal politics, on the other hand, are based on the symmetrical politics of the Buberian 'I-You' approach. But the symmetry and reciprocity is not that of commercial interest, as Levinas claimed in his critique of Buber, but of the reciprocity of trust. While one might be engaged in defending the rights and/or helping to fulfil the needs of any individual and collective human beings whatever their values, common political belonging depends on shared values,

although these shared values encompass intersectional individual and collective differential positionings. This trust, based on common values, also differentiates transversal politics from the Habermasian (Habermas et al, 2006) deliberative democracy approach[5].

This is of crucial importance because in this way the transversal perspective helps us to judge which differences matter when and where, and to differentiate between care and compassion towards the oppressed, whoever and wherever they are, and that of accepting them all as long term potential political allies in any case of political mobilization[6]. Southall Black Sisters in London, for instance, are very active in the defence of women of all ethnic and religious communities from domestic violence and abuse, rejecting any cultural and religious justification of such acts. At the same time, they are not the political allies and oppose those who have sought to solve domestic violence caused by migrant men by deporting them from Britain – after all, men of all classes and ethnic communities commit the crime of domestic violence but are not punished by deportation. Racist solutions should not be the answer to sexist problems and SBS would not establish a transversal political alliance with those who do not share their anti-racist values.

However, although Southall Black Sisters have been an effective campaigning organization in many ways and even managed to overthrow attempts by politically hostile local authority to stop their funding, they do not have the power to stop such deportations.

Examining feminist ethic of care and feminist transversal dialogical politics brings us back to the question of power

I would argue that a feminist political project of belonging, therefore, should be based on transversal ‘rooting’, ‘shifting’, mutual respect and mutual trust. It should be caring, but should differentiate clearly between caring towards transversal allies and caring towards the needy. Above all it should not neglect to reflect upon the relations of power not only among the participants in the political dialogue but also between these participants and the glocal carriers of power who do not share t

dispositions of individual agents and the social field structured by symbolically mediated relations of domination.

So – is our mission impossible? Probably. But we must carry on in the Gramscian way – with the pessimism of the mind and the optimism of the will. As the Zimbabwian women's slogan says – 'If you can talk, you can sing; if you can walk, you can dance'. As my friend Helen Meekosha has shown – you can dance even in a wheelchair.

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