



## ‘Belonging’ as politicized projects and the broadening of intersectional analysis

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### review of

Yuval-Davis, N. (2011) *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*. London: Sage. (PB, pp. 264, £27.99, ISBN 9781412921305)

What does it mean to feel at home, to feel safe – to *belong*? As the intricacy of the question unfolds it seems no easy answers come right to mind. One approach to explore this further is by rephrasing the question, asking oneself: How is such a feeling of belonging constructed and politicized? In the book *The politics of belonging – intersectional contestations*, Nira Yuval-Davis sets out to expand a simplified dichotomous thinking of belonging or not belonging by asking how and where carriers of political projects of belonging are situated locally, globally and last but not least intersectionally. Indeed not an easy undertaking as intersectional analysis necessarily accompanies a need to address ‘the complexity that arises when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis’ (McCall, 2005). The preface situates the book in the context of the personal and professional life of author Yuval-Davis noting that it has been long under way, starting back in 1997 in the time of reverberation of her popular book *Gender and Nation* (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

### The chapters 1-5 in brief

Chapter 1, ‘Framing the questions’, intrigues the reader by asking a question that many journalist were bothered by in the aftermath of the 7/7 London bombings:

How is it possible that ‘British’ people were able to carry out such atrocities in Britain? Questions relating to recent historical events are raised throughout the book, and for readers with an interest in contemporary political issues Yuval-Davis keeps the reader attentive by addressing such issues from global and local perspectives. The focus on concrete political issues serves the purpose of contextualizing projects of belonging as politicized – a typical and indeed relevant context for such intersectional analyses. As much as the 7/7 bombing case and other questions intrigue, the importance lies perhaps even more in the way these questions are formulated. Why do journalists tend to couple the multidimensional identities of terrorist with questions of Britishness? It seems that actions of terror are often projected into a referential space, where some identity categories dominate over other categories of belonging – in this case Britishness. The issue of Britishness in the 7/7 bombing case, or more broadly nationality as a dominating identity category, is questioned, revealing the absurdities in much of the taken-for-grantedness accepted by many of us in everyday life.

In Chapter 2, ‘The citizenship question’, Yuval-Davis explores contemporary constructions of *citizenship* denoting various political projects of belonging. Yuval-Davis introduces the notions of active vs. activist citizenship; intimate citizenship; consumerism as citizenship; multicultural citizenship; and multilayered citizenship. The author points out issues related to politics of belonging highlighting some of the paradoxes of contemporary citizenship. According to her there is a distancing between citizens and their states along with a somewhat contradictory unprecedented penetration of state surveillance [78]. Along these two lines there is a third rise in activist citizenship protesting against the reconfiguration of the state and its associated diminishing of citizenship rights. More broadly the author reveals how dual and multiple citizenships ‘challenge the fundamental logics of a twentieth century politics of belonging, which were based on state citizenship’ [80].

As a stepping-stone to Chapter 3, ‘The national question’, citizenship is critically discussed in relation to nationality, showing the intersectional complexities of the *nation-state* and the westernized tendency to equate nation and state. Again, contemporary issues are discussed. For example the Roma people of EU, who do not have a nation-state of their own, have claimed the right to be called a nation in order to obtain collective rights in the EU and in the UN. This exposes the performative effects of a nation-without-state revealing how the politics of belonging are governed by macro-structural matters such as the EU and UN conventions. Less than half a year ago the UN vote on whether to give the state of Palestine ‘an observer status’ broke headlines around the world. Though the book predates this voting, the struggles of the Palestine people portray the ever-

present relevance of the discussion brought forward by Yuval-Davis. By way of comparison to the Roma case, the case of the UN voting highlights the different paths collective identity groups may take in order to gain international legitimacy. Whereas the Roma people struggle to obtain a 'nation-without-state' status the Palestine people struggle to obtain a 'non-member observer *state*' status. Though different in so many ways, the cases of the Roma and the Palestine people can both be viewed as political projects of belonging. The two cases reveal how contextual factors situate principal identity categories such as citizenship and nationality thereby creating unique settings for the way political projects of belonging are being dealt with. The author draws attention to three perspectives on globalization that respectively claim that globalization does not diminish the role of nationality as a hegemonic contemporary identity, globalization can be seen as opportunity providing for resurgence of nationalists movements while producing 'new nationalisms', or that globalization can be viewed as cultural processes of hybridization. Yuval-Davis points out how these different scholarly perspectives on globalization, though sometimes oppositional, are not diagnostic alternatives but rather complementary. In her view 'globalization has contributed to the growing separation of nationalism and the state, as well as made it both more necessary and difficult for the state to use nationalist "social cohesion" discourse as a major tool of its governmentality' [III]. According to the author however, one of the most important observations is the partial transformation of 'what nationality issues are' in the contemporary world, and she points to the fusion of nationalist issues with other identity politics issues. Interestingly, according to Yuval-Davis a symptom of such transformation might be the rise of particularly virulent kinds of autochthonic politics where states are weak.

Building on the cases presented in earlier chapters an overall argument is slowly materializing in Chapter 4, 'The religious question'. Yuval-Davis points out how a discourse of dialogue between civilizations or 'clash of civilization' assumes non-overlaps between civilizations and approaches 'civilization' as essential. This ignores the synthetic nature of all contemporary cultures as well as their own internal heterogeneity. Indeed there are parallels between this reasoning and the arguments presented concerning citizenship, and nationalism. Religious belongings are portrayed as important elements of nationalist, ethnic and other political projects. Furthermore, according to the author, marginalized and threatened people are increasingly using religion as a political project of belonging as an alternative way to gain autonomous empowerment. Yuval-Davis points out how religious movements, in times of growing instability and globalized neo-liberalism, then can benefit from empowerment and moral accountability as guidance for social and political action.

In Chapter 5, 'The cosmopolitan question', Yuval-Davis explores various facets of cosmopolitanism. In one of his writings a decade ago Ulrich Beck (2003) stated: 'To belong or not to belong – that is the cosmopolitan question' [145]. Yuval-Davis critically expands the meaning of the cosmopolitan question discussing the major debates around the notion of cosmopolitanism and current manifestations as a political project of belonging. Drawing on Appiah (2006) Yuval-Davis argues that the two cosmopolitan ideals, the universal one and the respect for legitimate difference, have inner conflicting tensions, and therefore cosmopolitanism should not be seen 'as the name of the solution but as the name of the challenge' [174]. She argues that the dichotomy of universalism / relativism is a false one. The emancipatory aim is to 'establish a universal which would be as inclusive as possible, at the same time knowing that this is a process, and not a goal, and that therefore, as Pollock et al. (2002: 1) claim, "specifying cosmopolitanism positively and definitely is an unc cosmopolitan thing to do"' [175]. The author believes that we cannot and should not construct a homogeneous or unified political order but instead engage in transversal dialogues. Translation, rather than a unitary language, should become a cosmopolitan political tool making political projects of belonging multilayered, shifting, contested and with porous boundaries.

### Positioning within intersectional research

Yuval-Davis deals less explicitly with the oppression of marginalized groups than do some strands of intersectional studies. Even though chapters 2-5 conclude with a positioning of current feminist debates around questions of citizenship, nationalism, religion, and cosmopolitanism only rarely do these discussions turn explicitly normative in relation to aspects of oppression and marginalization. This however is not a coincidence, as the author in Chapter 1 openly states her own agenda of offering an intersectionality approach applicable beyond the multiple marginalized members of society. Instead she strives to develop a theoretical (and I would add analytical) intersectional framework for studying identity classifications more broadly [8]. In her influential paper from 2005 Leslie McCall introduced the notions of intra-, inter- and anti-categorical perspectives to intersectional research (McCall, 2005). Yuval-Davis critically relate to these notions by arguing that the two approaches inter- and intra-categorical research, are not mutually exclusive. In fairness it should be noted that McCall believes the three approaches should conceptually be understood as a continuum (McCall, 2005: 1773), not necessarily excluding each other, and that 'some research crosses the boundaries of the continuum, belonging partly to one approach and partly to another' (*ibid.*: 1774). It seems that the ambition of Yuval-Davis is to not delve on the three different perspectives presented by McCall, but instead to extend the focus by emphasizing the analytical differentiation between different

facets of social analysis – specifically focusing on the socio-economic grids of power, people's identificatory and experiential perspectives, and their normative value systems. As such Yuval-Davis argues that there is 'no direct casual relationship between the situatedness of people's gaze and their cognitive, emotional and moral perspectives on life' [7].

The consequences of such an approach should not be underestimated. As intersectionality early on arose as a normative project of enabling the marginalized and oppressed, today intersectionality is gaining new grounds by addressing intersectional contestations of stratification more broadly (Nash, 2008). Some intersectional scholars might disagree on the appropriateness of such development, though this development doubtlessly will broaden our understanding of human classification. In my view, addressing intersectionality as a theoretical and analytical framework for studying identity classifications beyond the multiple marginalized members of society opens up new exciting avenues of understanding social stratification. The contribution of the book is thus much more far-reaching than the concrete cases and their relatedness to citizenship, nationality, religion and cosmopolitanism. As such chapters 2-5 can be seen as a welcomed input inspiring the development of alternative intersectional analyses. In the light of such mainstreaming of the concept of intersectionality the author joins the choir of intersectional researchers stating that intersectionality has become one of the most important contributions from feminism to date (see also McCall, 2005). Yuval-Davis manages to set the scene for a contemporary intersectional analysis by expanding its boundaries to encompass all members of society and thus to see intersectionality as a useful theoretical framework for analyzing social stratification.

### The chapters 6-7 in brief

Chapter 6, 'The caring question', focuses what can be seen as *the* feminist political project of belonging i.e. 'ethics of care' aimed at 'constructing an alternative model of social and political relationship to the neo-liberal discourse of self-interest' [45]. Here the author argues that a feminist political project of belonging should 'be based on transversal "rooting", "shifting", mutual respect and mutual trust' [199]. Most importantly however, political feminist projects should 'reflect upon the relations of power not only among participants in the political dialogue, but also between these participants and the global carriers of power who do not share their values, who need to be confronted, influenced and, when this is not possible, resisted' [199]. In the light of chapter 6 the book turns explicitly normative in the process becoming a timely 'third wave feministic' contribution to theorization beyond the singular, instead looking at politics of

belonging structured along multiple identity axes (e.g. Hutchinson and Mann, 2004).

Conclusively in chapter 7 Yuval-Davis lays forward her own political project of belonging, stating that such a project is multi-layered, by recognizing the importance of belonging and the politics of belonging without essentializing or prioritizing naturalized boundaries. In this view she advocates for a transversal, not cosmopolitan, project by transcending boundaries, recognizing situated gazes while rejecting identity politics. Moreover her project promotes universal human security as well as the tremendous importance of caring relationships, though recognizing the importance of taking into account the contextual power relations within these relationships. In presenting her personal political project of belonging – by promoting human security and ethics of care – one might ask: What is the correlation between making intersectionality applicable beyond marginalized societal members and promoting normative values of ethics of care and universal security? And furthermore: Do these two different agendas in parallel constitute a tension? While some readers might prefer an explicit discussion around these questions I find the deliberate omission liberating. As Yuval-Davis mentions her book is an interim account of contemporary political projects of belonging. In my view the book constitutes more than this, by providing an intersectional analysis which, through its implicit tensions, eloquently addresses some of the challenges that intersectionality as a concept faces in the process of creating new avenues to explore social stratification. In one view, my view, the book can be seen as a micro-emancipatory step toward rethinking the normative dimensions of intersectionality research in the process of mainstreaming the concept.

I have tried to contextualize the intersectional contribution offered by the book, positioning it in relation to contemporary intersectional research. The book spans many areas of interests but seems particularly relevant for people with a curiosity about concrete and contemporary political cases of belonging, as well as scholars with an interest in current debates within intersectional studies.

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