

Which issues and imperatives of feminist political sciences are still topical even after 20 years?

Dhawan, Nikita

2017

<https://doi.org/10.25595/3514>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Dhawan, Nikita: *Which issues and imperatives of feminist political sciences are still topical even after 20 years?*, in: *Femina politica* : Zeitschrift für feministische Politik-Wissenschaft, Jg. 26 (2017) Nr: 1, 151–153. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25595/3514>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: <https://doi.org/10.3224/feminapolitica.v26i1.12>

Which issues and imperatives of feminist political sciences are still topical even after 20 years?

NIKITA DHAWAN

After a talk I delivered on postcolonial feminist theory at an international conference in Germany, a senior and renowned German feminist and social scientist reprimanded me. According to her, if one were to take Black feminist and postcolonial critique of Western feminist politics and scholarship to heart, it would result in the end of any possibility of alliance politics between Western and non-Western feminists. In response and in my defense, I quoted Angela Davis who remarks “I cannot imagine a feminism which is not anti-racist”. As follow-up, this respected German feminist, who must remain unnamed, accused me that I had no “hard data” to back up my theories, which in her view were “preachy” (*moralisierend*). As a social scientist, she lectured me on the importance of qualitative and quantitative methods, concluding that without evidence-based research, postcolonial-queer-feminism remained politics at best and ideology at worst. For her, it certainly did not qualify as social or political science. In response, I shared with this esteemed colleague my concerns about the turn to positivism and the backlash against poststructuralist and Marxist inspired critical feminist theory, which in my view was alarming. The exchange was very instructive, for it once again became clear to me that while German feminists were primarily invested in establishing the respectability of feminist scholarship as “scientific”, partly in response to the backlash against Gender studies, in contrast postcolonial and third world feminists continue to struggle for their perspectives to be recognized as legitimate critique of Western feminism. This encounter also reminded me of two incisive remarks made on the challenges of alliance politics: The first is Gayatri Spivak’s (1998) warning that “in postcolonialism we don’t know our friends” and the second is Hannah Arendt’s (2013) statement “The problem, the personal problem, was not what our enemies did, but what our friends did”.

It is ironic, that even as critical insights of postcolonial feminism like intersectionality, difference and diversity have become career-making machines for German feminists and data-collection in the global South or interviewing migrants and refugees in the global North has galvanized the fledging professional prospects of many Western feminist social scientists, there is continued resistance against acknowledging the extent to which Western feminist scholarship is indebted to the non-Western world. The “whitewashing” gesture of “come-outing” as privileged through a ritualized itemization of one’s entitlements (“white”, “heterosexual”, “bourgeois”, “able-bodied” etc.), which goes by the name of “*sich positionieren*” in the German-speaking context, is usually followed by back to academic business as usual, so that differences are not allowed to make a difference. Stuart Hall (1989) once stated that the *British* (Whites) are *not racist* because they *hate Blacks* but because they do *not* know who they are without *Blacks*. Along similar lines, one could argue that without

third world and migrant women, Western feminists would not know who they are, much less do what they do.

As pointed out by Sara Ahmed (2006), regardless of the hype about intersectionality and diversity as emancipatory concepts of feminist politics and scholarship, they regrettably remain predominantly symbolic commitments in academic and policy discourses and institutional practices. Despite claims to “do diversity” and to be diverse, discourses and institutions sustain the status quo through, for instance, Eurocentric and Androcentric academic curricula and discriminatory hiring practices. The rhetoric of diversity is employed to deflect charges of racism and hetero/sexism, even as there is systematic resistance against the institutionalization of diversity. Western feminists, mostly bourgeois, heterosexual and white, profit the most from diversity politics and also from the intellectual labour of migrant, third world, and postcolonial feminists. Ironically the pedagogical deployment of intersectionality in feminist scholarship has resulted in re-securing the centrality of the subject positioning of white feminists. Women of color, on the other hand, who were supposed to emerge as new subjects of feminism through intersectional analysis, are deployed as simply “articulating a grievance,” even as the category is emptied of its specific meaning through scholarly overuse (Puar 2012). The postcolonial world is only considered to be good enough to provide the raw data, but not critical theory, which must be produced by Europeans. Thus the only function available to migrant and postcolonial scholars is of native informants so that Western academy can undertake information retrieval about the non-European world.

My well-wishers have warned me that my comments may be interpreted as polemical or bitter (bear in mind the stereotyping of Michelle Obama as the “angry black woman”). Speaking from personal experience, one of the most empowering moments for me as a young student of women’s studies in India was learning the importance of speaking truth to power. In this spirit, on the happy occasion of the 20th anniversary of this extremely important feminist journal, instead of writing another wishy-washy comment on the accomplishments of feminist scholarship and politics, I have chosen to focus on the arrogance and ignorance of Western feminists and the challenges that non-Western scholars and scholarship faces in German-speaking academic context. In her inspiring talk, Angela Davis raises the question “How does change happen?” This reminds me of one of my favorite jokes about German academia and it goes like this: “How many German Professors does it take to change a light bulb?” The answer: “Oh my god, did you say change?”

Finally, I would like to end with more recent events that pose great challenges for feminist politics and scholarship. In her work, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) outlines how Western (feminist) scholarship is abound with stereotypes about third world women and women of color as mute victims of their culture and society, who have neither agency nor political voice to resist patriarchy and thus apparently are in need of solidarity from their more emancipated and enlightened white sisters. Recent events, however, seem to suggest otherwise: For instance, in contrast to over 50% of

white women, both with or without college education, who, despite his sexist, racist, homophobic politics, voted for Trump over Clinton in the United States presidential election of 2016, an overwhelming majority of Black, Latina and other women of color voted against Trump (now here are some eye-opening statistics for my hard data loving feminist social scientist colleagues: CNN Politics 2016). It looks like, to paraphrase Spivak, it is the burden of “brown women to save white women from white men”. In the face of current geopolitical situation, postcolonial-queer-feminist struggles for non-dominant futures are more compelling and urgent than ever.

References

- Ahmed**, Sara, 2006: The non-performativity of anti-racism. In: *Merideans: Journal of Women, Race and Culture*, 7 (1), 104-126.
- Arendt**, Hannah, 2013: *Hannah Arendt: The Last Interview: And Other Conversations*. New York.
- CNN Politics**, 2016: Election 2016. Exit Polls 2016. Internet: <http://edition.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls> (23.1.2017).
- Hall**, Stuart, 1989: “Ethnicity, Identity and Difference”. In: *Radical America*. 23 (4), 9-20.
- Mohanty**, Chandra Talpade, 1984: Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. In: *Boundary*. 2 (12/3), 333-358.
- Puar**, Jasbir, 2012: I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess: Becoming-intersectional in assemblage theory. In: *Philosophia*. 2 (1), 49-66.
- Spivak**, Gayatri, 1998: Attention: Postcolonialism. In: *Journal of Caribbean Studies*. 12 (2-3), 159-170.

Stellen Sie sich vor, Geschlechtergerechtigkeit wäre global erreicht? Womit würden Sie sich am nächsten Tag beschäftigen?

ANTKE ENGEL

Geschlechtergerechtigkeit global erreicht? Hübsche Idee, nur widerspricht sie meinem Verständnis von Gerechtigkeit. Gerechtigkeit ist niemals „erreicht“, sondern stellt sich (als eine Praxis) immer nur relational und temporär her. Und das ist gut so. Denn es eröffnet Einzelnen, Gruppen, Kollektiven die Möglichkeit, Gerechtigkeitsforderungen zu erheben, für Gerechtigkeit zu kämpfen – und sich bei dieser Gelegenheit den Forderungen, Wünschen, Ansprüchen und Befürchtungen anderer zu stellen. Da alle Lebewesen und gleichsam die komplexen menschlichen und nicht-menschlichen Beziehungen, in die sie eingebunden sind, sich fortwährend verändern, kommen wir nicht umhin, immer wieder neu auszuloten, wie das entsprechende Gefüge, möglichst wenig Hierarchien und Zwänge, möglichst viel Freiheitsräume und Unter-