

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS/ REZENSIONEN

FEMINIST TROUBLE: INTERSECTIONAL POLITICS IN POST-SECULAR TIMES

Éléonore Lépinard, 2020. New York:
Oxford University Press. 336 p.

Éléonore Lépinard is a sociologist and professor at the University of Lausanne focusing her research on intersectionality and feminist movements. Her new book *Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Post-Secular Times* (2020) contributes to this field in a way that is descriptive, analytical, and normative. The book offers a rich argument of how whiteness shapes the political subjectivities of white and racialized feminists and proposes a new feminist ethic of responsibility. Éléonore Lépinard's comparative methodology is based on qualitative data as she conducted fifty interviews with feminist organizations that represent white and racialized women in France and the Canadian province Quebec.

The book contains six chapters and is divided into three main parts. The first part, chapters 1–3, provides the reader with a theoretical contextualization and an analysis of the public debates which articulate gender equality and secularism in France and the Canadian province Quebec. The second part comprises chapter 4 and 5 and comparatively analyzes the subjectivities of white and racialized feminists in the two locations. In the final part, chapter 6, Éléonore Lépinard unfolds her normative argument and proposes a feminist ethic of responsibility.

Chapter 1 places “Feminist Trouble” in a context of “femonationalism” (Farris 2017) where neoliberal governments and xenopho-

bic parties are increasingly instrumentalizing issues of women's equality. The author claims that there is a need to understand the way hierarchies and white hegemony are sustained within feminism. According to Éléonore Lépinard, heated debates regarding pious Muslim women's agency question the basic premise of liberal feminism grounded in Eurocentric conceptions of agency, equality, and resistance. At the same time, these debates contribute to define proper and improper feminist subjects and renew attention paid to the moral dimension of the feminist project.

In chapter 2 Éléonore Lépinard builds upon existing intersectional feminist theorists who provide a critic of power asymmetries between women. In particular, she engages with an alternative genealogy of intersectionality which considers that there is a need to look beyond identity politics in order not to conflate identities with interests and experiences. Therefore, focusing on feminist's political subjectivities allows her to explore the relations between feminists “based on other grounds than identity, such as solidarity, shared ideals, recognition or even love” (p. 33).

The third chapter describes how “sexularism” debates which articulate racialization, religion, migration/national identity, and gender (Scott 2011), contribute to defining the boundaries of national identity differently in France and the Canadian province Quebec (p. 46). France is famously known for sustaining a so-called French “secular exception” and a majority of French mainstream feminist organizations are end-

owing this vision and have been supporting veiling bans and regulations. Meanwhile, Québec has passed a series of amendments and laws enshrining the secular values of the Quebecois political community in the name of “interculturalism”, in opposition to the multicultural Canadian model (p. 51). While the latter grants an equal recognition to all cultures, interculturalism recognizes pluralism but gives greater weight to Quebecois culture and values secularism in public spaces (Banting and Soroka 2012).

Chapter 4 centers on the concept of “feminist whiteness” which the author defines as the outcome of a process of political subjectivation as a white feminist as well as a location of privilege (p. 81). In France, white feminists rely on two main discursive repertoires to shape their feminist whiteness: universalism, on the one hand, and, on the other, placing race outside of the nation (p. 87). The first consists of downplaying racism either by reaffirming the primacy of social inequalities over racial concerns or by refusing to see how racism shapes power relations within feminism (p. 91). The second repertoire allows white feminists “to situate themselves not in the configuration of racial relations in the French contemporary context, but in racial configurations of international solidarity” (p. 93). Both result in an active resistance to approach feminism from an intersectional perspective (p. 95).

In Québec, feminist whiteness is articulated around the repertoires of interculturalism and intersectionality. Interculturalism is used by some white feminists to acknowledge racial differences but it is often understood in culturalist terms, without engaging the responsibility of white feminists to account for power asymmetries. On the contrary, those who join the intersectional repertoire are more willing to do so. This section

provides an insightful bottom-up analysis of the way national cultural repertoires can be mobilized and resignified through discursive strategies in order to secure white privileges.

In addition to this geographical comparison, Éléonore Lépinard also brilliantly analyzes how different views of the feminist project lead white feminists in both countries to adopt diverging moral dispositions. On the one hand, when feminism is understood as a social practice, non-white women are either seen as passive recipients of care, as subjects to be potentially enrolled in a pre-determined feminist collective project, or as subjects to be granted autonomy. On the other hand, when feminism is conceived first and foremost as a political project, it involves answering legitimate questions about the exclusion of racialized women. These questions are often dismissed by white French feminists, producing emotions of fear, anger, and melancholy of what they perceive as a long-lost unity among feminists (p. 117).

In the fifth chapter, the author looks closely at racialized feminists’ self-identification in France and the Canadian province Québec. She notes that presenting oneself as a racialized feminist in the public sphere, rather than a feminist, must be interpreted not only as subversion or identity-claiming. Rather, it is also a way to reformulate feminism and to claim visibility within the women’s movement. The author argues that negative emotions expressed by racialized feminists, in particular resentment, should be interpreted as resistance to power as well as a moral address and as a call for action (p. 170). Indeed, racialized feminists want white feminists to recognize the political nature of their claims, rather than to deem them as specific or marginal.

In the last chapter, Éléonore Lépinard develops an approach to a feminist ethic of

responsibility which is resolutely pragmatic. She exhorts that the concrete consequences of our actions – rather than our values – define our responsibility towards other feminist subjects. Indeed, when non-Muslim women favor a ban on Muslim headscarves, they will not bear the direct consequences of their action, such as exclusion from school and job discrimination, while Muslim women will (p. 213).

Identifying herself as a white feminist scholar and activist from the global North, her invitation to be morally responsive to “other” feminist subjects seems to be directed at feminists who structurally benefit from white privilege. Given the author’s intention to focus on feminists’ emotions, it would have been interesting and relevant to further include in the analysis how her standpoint and positioning on the issues at stake may have triggered emotions during interviews.

The author’s ambition to revisit the “foundations” of feminism results in the argument that a feminist ethic of responsibility should not be directed at all women but exclusively towards “other feminist subjects”. Such a statement could seem surprising at first, since women who face discriminations on the basis of their racial identity may be less likely to give an account of themselves as feminists in their everyday interactions, as the author rightly points out in the appendix (p. 252). However, in the last chapter, Éléonore Lépinard proposes a broad, yet relevant definition of the feminist subject, which goes beyond discourse and self-identification to include objective power relations. As she describes, those who should be considered feminist subjects are also “those who are put in relation with feminism through their claims – such as a claim to wear an Islamic veil in school or public spaces” (p. 231). The author’s argument on feminist’s ethical dis-

positions towards other feminists can be seen as part of a broader reflection on the articulation between a political project and the common moral ground which sustains the members of a political community. In this sense, the book’s contribution exceeds the fields of feminist theory and extends to social movement theory, normative theories, and literature on care.

Highlighted in the #metoo movement, questions of gender and sexual equality are today at the forefront of societal debates in numerous countries. But shifts in laws and norms are often accompanied by a displacement of boundaries of exclusion. For this reason, the author’s argument could be applied to the analysis of other forms of exclusions perpetrated in the name of feminism. Indeed, women wearing the veil, but also transgender persons and sex workers, are being relegated to the margins of the feminist struggle. In this context, Éléonore Lépinard’s reminder that the ethical responsibilities that feminist subjects have towards each other depend on their power and privilege is, above all, necessary and powerful.

References

- Banting Keith, and Stuart Soroka.** 2012. “Minority Nationalism and Immigrant Integration in Canada.” *Nations and Nationalism* 18, no. 1: 156–176.
- Farris, Sara R.** 2017. *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Scott, Joan W.** 2011. “Sexularism: On Secularism and Gender Equality.” In *The Fantasy of the Feminist History*, edited by Joan W. Scott, 91–116. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Camille Giraut, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, camille.giraut@graduateinstitute.ch*