

BOOK REVIEW

## Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Postsecular Times

Éléonore Lépinard. New York: Oxford University Press (ISBN: 978-0190077167)

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Following in the footsteps of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990), Éléonore Lépinard's *Feminist Trouble* offers a critical look at feminism's troubled foundations during postsecular times and in Western postcolonial societies. While debunking the trouble that haunts feminism, Lépinard explores the possibility of moving toward non-hierarchical intersectional politics among different feminists, in theory and practice. By focusing on various feminist narratives of the policy debates against Muslim women's veiling and explaining how these narratives have been shaping, challenging, and transforming feminist alliances between "white feminists" and "racialized feminists" in France and Quebec, *Feminist Trouble* calls for reimagining feminism by focusing on the limits and limitations of relations between feminists in addition to normative ideals such as autonomy, agency, or freedom. According to Lépinard, exclusions and prejudices in feminism operate through "a denial of the relationality" (93) and creating an illusion of separation, which in turn leads feminists to neglect what they share, that is, their adoption of the label "feminist." Thus, for Lépinard, the first step is not about arriving at a shared understanding of Muslim women's autonomy or freedom, but about bringing relationality back and morally regrounding the political project of feminism in feminists' moral relations with other(ed) feminists.

Interweaving different strands of feminist philosophy with ethnographic empirical research, *Feminist Trouble* indeed repeatedly presents and represents feminism as a moral and political project through which feminists make promises to one another. According to Lépinard, these promises bear with them a responsibility of care. In contrast, the two case studies Lépinard brings forward—the policy debates around Muslim women's use of religious garments in public spaces in France and Quebec—perpetuate the deep-seated divisions within feminism through establishing and maintaining who gets to be a "good" or "bad" feminist subject (Ahmed 2007). More important, Lépinard observes that, in the current postsecular turn, rather than adopting an indifferent or ignorant "orientation" (Ahmed 2007) toward the issue of the veil, the majority of mainstream/white/secular feminists align themselves with "femonationalist" discourses (Farris 2017) even when they declare themselves to be "anti-racist" (90).

For Lépinard, this is where the feminist trouble lies, and this trouble is not about "Muslim/migrant/racialized" women; it is about feminism as an emancipatory,

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transformative project. Lépinard's aim in *Feminist Trouble* is not to reconcile the trouble in feminism (14). However, by shifting the attention away from Islam and Muslim women's veiling, and toward feminists' relations and coalitions, Lépinard proposes to guide the reader toward "a renewed theoretical feminist imagination that can dissociate feminism from nationalist and racist policies" (2). Therefore, although *Feminist Trouble* is contextually based on France and Quebec, two francophone contexts with different colonial histories and approaches to immigrant integration, the main strength of the book (as elaborated in chapters 2 and 6) is the normative promise it entails for feminist theorizing.

*Feminist Trouble* makes several contributions. First, Lépinard argues that feminists should divert their attention away from the "subject question in feminism," where the subject is singular, to the "subjects of feminism," plural (54). To pursue this task, Lépinard seems to implicitly break down the question of the unitary/universal feminist subject into three interrelated parts and proposes possible ways in which feminists can shift their attention on each part to enlarge their perspectives (and possibly life-worlds) to resist implicit anti-Muslim racist biases and silenced forms of everyday othering. While doing so, Lépinard brings together poststructural, postcolonial, and intersectional feminist theories with relational feminist theories of care, in the locus of Muslim women's veiling. Building on Joan Tronto's care ethics, Lépinard argues that feminists should aim toward establishing what she calls a "feminist ethics of responsibility" (28–29) but at the same time acknowledge power asymmetries within that promise (Young 1997), so that feminists can move away from the fantasy of a universally shared feminist identity (23). Second, inspired by Butler and Michel Foucault (and also Saba Mahmood's use of both), Lépinard argues that feminists should stop questioning Muslim women's autonomy, authenticity, and even subjectivity and instead redirect their attention toward different "feminists' political subjectivations" (36–40). Last, according to Lépinard, feminists should also seek to go beyond the negativity of feminist critique while approaching the subject question, and rather pay attention to how power asymmetries shape "emotions," which are markers and modes of "moral dispositions," to sustain the feminist political community and to re-world feminism in relations of love and care (40).

Second, *Feminist Trouble* argues that feminists should combine the political and ethical drives of feminism (28). For Lépinard, the ethical dimension of feminism is not only intrinsic to the feminist project, it should also be the precursor for the transformative power of feminism to rethink hierarchies of power. This can in turn lead feminists to reconsider collaboration with different feminists coming from less privileged backgrounds, such as racialized/migrant/pious/Muslim women. Lépinard argues that it is this transformative moral drive that can redirect feminist imagination toward alternative feminist futures possibly marked by "femoresistance" (250) and not femonation-alism. Therefore, this idea takes the debate beyond a question of identity (25). From an Arendtian perspective, through the works of Linda Zerilli and Iris Marion Young (Young 1997; Zerilli 2005), Lépinard puts (co-)action into the heart of her theorizing. By identifying various interrelated ways in which the "sexularism" debates (Scott 2018) have been transforming feminist relations, attachments, and coalitions, Lépinard argues it is not enough for feminists to desire that their "distant Others" be included in the feminist project at the level of thought, but while doing so continue to guard themselves through a persistent "non-performativity" (Ahmed 2004) of such desire at the level of collective action.

Third, by centering her analysis on coalitions between feminists coming from different ethnic, religious, racial, class-based, and cultural backgrounds, Lépinard's normative discussion also brings forward, albeit not explicitly, the democratic question in feminism. The subject question and the democratic question in feminism are not commonly thought together because of seemingly contradictory demands they posit on identity and difference, recognition and pluralism (Zerilli 2005). Lépinard's book is situated pragmatically and practically at the intersection of the two, and therefore, potentially presents a new praxis for both democratic feminist theorizing and the intersection of theory and ethnography. Lépinard navigates through this terrain by using a genealogy of intersectionality that also aims to go beyond the circularities of identity politics by combining intersectional feminist analysis with Zerilli's feminism as world-building and Ahmed's affect theory (28, 40). From this perspective, Lépinard relocates "self-formation" as a form of "ethical deliberation" (40).

For readers interested in feminist philosophy, therefore, *Feminist Trouble's* main strength lies in the potential it carries for the future of feminist theorizing based on feminists' relations of difference in theory and in practice. However, as *Feminist Trouble* unfolds, the links between the prescriptive and descriptive elements of Lépinard's discussion, as well as the connections between her empirical findings and normative conclusions, start to blur once the reader passes the introductory theory chapters (chapters 1 and 2) and arrives at the most interesting and illuminating parts of the book, based on ethnography.

Building on chapter 3, which traces contextually different yet similarly path-dependent historicities and institutionalizations of the broader veiling debates and the corresponding progressions of the umbrella feminist organizations and alliances in France and Quebec, Lépinard's most prominent use of ethnography takes place in chapters 4 and 5, where she discusses feminists' political "subjectivations" and not subjectivities. Whereas chapter 4 focuses on "white feminists"—which is not an ethnographically sensitive choice of labeling as we are told these interlocutors self-identify as "ethnic majority feminists" (84)—chapter 5 examines "racialized feminists"—we are not informed whether this is an ethnographically sensitive label, although there are references to this term in the narratives. In both chapters, Lépinard's concept of "feminist whiteness" plays a central role. Chapter 4 explains "feminist whiteness" and the different orientations through which white feminists become political subjects in "their relationships to non-white feminists" (82). Chapter 5 looks at racialized feminists' "modes of political subjectivation in relation to white feminists" by resisting feminist whiteness (127). From this perspective, both political subjectivations are constituted in relation to feminist whiteness, but not just any relation—a relation that is either marked by perpetuation of or resistance to whiteness. Whether one perpetuates or resists feminist whiteness also becomes an indicator, in Lépinard's analysis, of who is a part of the majority and who becomes a minority; it determines the privileged and the marginalized.

This brings us to the main trouble with *Feminist Trouble*: Lépinard's argument about the promise of feminism as a moral and political project embedded in care and responsibility is grounded more in theory than in ethnography. Indeed, ethnography is used mainly to validate the strength of "feminist whiteness," which is also the main obstacle against this very promise. As the categories of "white feminists" and "racialized feminists" are set as the two ends of a binary continuum (without sufficient ethnographic justification), this continuum also becomes the praxis through which feminists are "subjectivated" by or against whiteness. This subsumes the scope of ethnographical data on

feminists' relations into a single relation, marked by opposition and mutual othering. Lépinard identifies the emotions through which and how such subjectivations are enacted through various emotions, ranging from benevolence, ignorance, and ambivalence (83–84) to harm, hurt, resentment, anger, and melancholy (83–84, 129–30). While it is informative and interesting, it validates common stereotypical expectations.

It may also raise questions about misrepresentation. For example, in chapter 4, Lépinard explicitly states that the chapter “overrepresents certain forms of feminist whiteness” (85) that are instrumental for “fueling femonationalism,” not representing the full scope of feminist whiteness in the narratives (82). Considered against Sylvia Wynter’s notion that whiteness itself operates through overrepresentation, claiming itself as universal (Wynter 2003), this choice requires a more critical justification than being a “strategy. . . for identifying common repertoires and identifying effects of whiteness on feminist subjectivation” (85).

Similarly, in-group heterogeneity and differences *within* white feminists and racialized feminists require further attention. Although Lépinard repeatedly acknowledges diversity within each group and each setting, the way she interprets some of the narratives that do not support her position ironically contradicts her thesis. For instance, if we look at Lépinard’s interpretation of racialized feminists who are against the veil (49–50, 148–50) or who do not view the veil primarily as an issue of race (49–50, 60–61, 65–68, 138–42), we see that it reproduces the false consciousness thesis in reverse: These middle-aged immigrant women who have experienced religious forms of patriarchy firsthand in their home countries were either misguided, assimilated, white-washed, or they were opportunists taking advantage of the incentives offered by the secular system (50–51; 138–42; 148–50). Therefore, they are either considered not-good-enough-Muslims, or not-good-enough-feminists, which contradicts Lépinard’s goal of debunking the separation between “good” and “bad” feminists.

This is in part related to Lépinard’s framing of the veil as primarily an issue of race and racialization, and not religion and religiosity. Lépinard does acknowledge that race and “Muslimness” do not “fully overlap” but are “co-constructed” (49–50). Although Lépinard’s aim is not to “de-religionize” the debate, her framing still causes confusion given the complexity of the debate, diversity of Muslim women/feminists, and multiplicity of ways in which Muslim women/feminists become religious—some believe veiling is required, some do not. The term *racialized* might be a more common expression in francophone debates and in the European context; however, for a wider audience, this requires clarification.

Likewise, Lépinard interprets white feminists’ claim to stand by their feminist friends in Algeria and Iran, who are against veiling, as an indicator of externalizing and avoiding the real issue at home (91–93). There might be validity to this claim; however, it is also problematic for two reasons. First, it might create an arbitrary division between Western and non-Western debates on the veil issue, whereas, as Rosi Braidotti argues, the postsecular condition is not particular to Europe; it is valid across different religions and regions (Braidotti 2008). The postsecular condition is also not just about rising tendencies for Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism in the West, but also about rising religious conservatism that enhances patriarchy in similar modes that should be considered (4–5). Second, if “externalization” is a sign of avoidance of the real issue, Lépinard herself also falls into the same trap in her analysis, because the only example she gives to illustrate her idea about coalitions based on feminist ethics of responsibility is from the Turkish context, a platform named *Birbirimize Sahip Çıkıyoruz*.

This brings me to my final point about *Feminist Trouble*. In *Feminist Trouble*, *Birbirimize Sahip Çıkıyoruz* is translated as “We Care about One Another” (221). However, Eirini Avrampolou, through whose work Lépinard references this platform, translates it as “we keep an eye on each other” or “we look after each other” (Avrampolou 2013, 234), not “care about one another,” which implies a deeper emotional commitment in Turkish. The platform itself was unfortunately short-lived, and the equivalent of “white feminists” in Turkey, secular feminists, were not a part of this particular platform. Like their French and Québécois counterparts, secular feminists in Turkey prefer to stay at a distance from women/feminists with headscarves. But at the same time, since 1995, the two groups have occasionally met in issue-specific, shared, civil society settings, iteratively form connections and relationships, and continue to radically disagree about the political meaning behind the headscarf (Dokumacı 2020). This effort has not resulted in a deeper feminist commitment of responsibility and care, but it might still show us why, despite its own troubles, *Feminist Trouble* is a timely book for feminist theorizing on feminism as a promise and as a project of world-building, coalition-making, and deliberation as well as an asymmetrical site of trouble where feminists passionately disagree.

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