

Technologies of Governmentality and the Question of Feminist Politics: New Literature on the Relationships between National Narratives, Law, and Identity Formation

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Women, Crime and Language by Frances Gray. Hampshire/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 240 pp., \$90.00 hardcover.

The Empty Cradle of Democracy: Sex, Abortion, and Nationalism in Modern Greece by Alexandra Halkias. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, 440 pp., \$89.95 hardcover, \$24.95 paper.

Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics beyond the Law by Nivedita Menon. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004, 288 pp., \$60.00 hardcover, \$25.00 paper.

Mainstreaming Gender, Democratizing the State!: Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women edited by Shirin M. Rai. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, 256 pp., \$69.75 hardcover, \$32.95 paper.

Within the past two decades, feminist scholars have critically analyzed the gendering of nationalism and nation-state-building processes. On the one hand, they have explored how women were and are involved in nation-building and national processes (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Yuval-Davis 1997; Mayer 2000; Planert 2000). On the other hand, they have shown that national imageries are represented through gendered terms—for example, feminizing spaces of a territory (e.g., battlefields, soil, homes, landscapes, or boundaries) and masculinizing the movements (e.g., invasion, conquest, and defense) over these spaces—and that specific gender roles shape images of national icons or symbols (Mostov 2000; Ramaswamy 1998).

But up to now, only little attention has been given to the question of how national identity affects personal identities or how national narratives motivate specific self-perceptions as well as forms of behavior and thus realize or engender the nation. The three books being reviewed here interrogate this question from different perspectives and academic disciplines. Furthermore, the authors not only provide a careful analysis of this connection, but also open up on the basis of their analyses the question of how feminist politics have to be drafted to redraw the intricate power relations between the self and the nation-state.

Alexandra Halkias in *The Empty Cradle of Democracy* explores how narratives of Greek national identity are embodied through the choice of contraceptive methods. Having conducted 120 interviews with women who had two or more abortions, Halkias discloses how national identifications are translated into or embodied through sexual behavior. Because of these ways of identification, having an abortion is perceived as a natural act and a method of family planning by many Greek women. Reconstructing the mechanisms of self-articulation through national narratives, it becomes comprehensible that Greece is the country with the highest number of abortions in the European Union which, paradoxically, fuels the intensely discussed nationalist debate about Greece's low birth rate and consolidates the sex-stereotypes of national identity politics.

Illuminating the relationship between self and the nation-state with a very different approach, Nivedita Menon in *Recovering Subversion* argues, following Foucault, that the rule or language of law is an important technique of modern forms of power regulating and constituting identity. Moreover, the rule of law functions as an expression of historically specific narratives of European countries. Or using Menon's words: "A . . . problem is that in postcolonial societies such as ours where the law was a product of the exigencies of colonial administration, it cannot be granted the same emancipatory force it might have had in Europe during the transition from feudalism to capitalism" (8). The functions of law are problematic because it fixes identities and meanings and "is driven towards the erasure of any kind of normative ethic which differs from its own unitary central ethic" (1). Menon discusses these mechanisms of law by analyzing the debates surrounding three highly contested issues in India—abortion and femicide of fetuses, sexual violence, and the campaigns demanding reservation of a specific percentage of Parliament seats for women.

Illustrating the question of what happens to the self when confronted with mechanisms of law is also a main rationale of Frances Gray's book, *Women, Crime and Language*. She considers several crime trials, mainly in Great Britain, that received high public attention and shows how women, although they play different roles in the presented cases—as victims, offenders, survivors of violence, and mothers, are silenced and their identities fixed through the judicial process as well as through media or public discourse. Besides describing how the mechanisms of law shape women's identities, the main focus of the book lies in exploring the border between true crime and fictionalized crime narratives and how fictive narratives are able to provide languages of self-rearticulation.

Examples of what Menon would term "state-organized feminism" are presented in the fourth book: *Mainstreaming Gender, Democratizing the State?* edited by Shirin Rai. It provides a collection of case studies from different countries as well as comparative analyses of national machineries

that were institutionalized to promote and advance women's interests within the administrative structures of a state. Reading the case studies with Menon's critical perspective, it becomes nonetheless possible to discern specific conditions under which stately institutionalized structures can foster feminist politics.

Desiring the Nation

With 150,000 to 400,000 abortions and approximately 110,000 births annually throughout the 1990s, Greece was the country with the highest rate of abortions and with one of the lowest birth rates in the European Union. This interplay of a low birth and a high abortion rate is perceived as a major national problem, and referred to as the *demografiko*, it is intensively debated in Greek public discourse. Halkias takes this discourse as an entry point to explore the multi-layered and intricate connections between narratives of national identity and subject formation.

Considering influential events in the nation's history, realms of popular culture, press articles about the *demografiko*, and studies that analyze attitudes of Greek people toward Greece, Halkias refers to the work of historian Avdela to describe main characteristics of the image of Greek national identity: love for the homeland and of freedom, courage, and being spontaneous and able to resist or persevere in strenuous situations (113–55). Having mapped out these “allegories” of Greek national identity (12), Halkias subsequently unfolds the main focus of the book: the analysis of how national narratives are embodied or engendered through sexual or contraceptive behavior. Surveys about the use of contraceptive methods indicate that the condom and withdrawal are by far the most common methods of birth control. The pill and the IUD (or spiral) are in comparison minimally used. Drawing on in-depth interviews Halkias conducted as well as her fieldwork at a gynecology clinic and a state family-planning center in Athens, she shows how the interviewed women interpret the usage as well as their choice of contraceptive methods and thus express personal attitudes that are perceived as typically Greek.

The pill, for example, is seen as a method that needs precise scheduling and therefore contradicts spontaneity. Furthermore, the pill is seen as a source of alterity concerning the “usual” cycle of a female body. Or like one woman puts it: “[T]he Pill is a very violent intervention in the hormonal system” (140). Important to consider in this context is also that the female body is perceived as an active agent or independent entity that *resists* if one tries to control or regulate it through contraceptive behavior. Taking this view, it becomes possible to interpret pregnancy as a violation or disruption of the “natural” cycle of a woman's body and abortion as a method to restore the hormonal balance.

Similarly, the condom is viewed as a barrier between two bodies that blocks the flow of feelings. Although the condom is reported to be one of the commonly used contraceptive methods, Halkias emphasizes that it is mainly employed during the “fertile days” and not during the whole monthly cycle. This idea of contraceptive methods as interferences into balanced bodily processes renders unprotected straight sex as something unproblematic and naturally given. Besides perceiving the non-usage of birth control methods as a means of expressing personal characteristics like spontaneous excess or uncontrollable desire, the choice of contraceptive methods also relates to the power relations within heterosexual partnerships. Not using any birth control measures functions as a sign of trusting one’s partner. Thus, to risk pregnancy or to prefer unprotected sex offers one of the finest settings for performing appropriate Greek femininity (trusting, spontaneous, and strong enough to risk) and Greek masculinity (trustworthy and hot-tempered).

Technologies of Suppressing Feminist Politics?

Nivedita Menon illuminates the relations between nation-state and individual by exploring Indian feminist activism within the realm of law. While describing and reflecting different feminist engagements within the debates around abortion and femicide of fetuses, sexual violence, and the campaign for reservations for women in Parliament, Menon argues throughout the book that law reform strategies can no longer be perceived as emancipatory from a feminist perspective. This is the case because Western law endorses specific values and principles of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. During the development of Western law in Europe, groups as the bearers of rights were successively replaced by the individual and thus a different relationship between individual and state established: “With legal identity reduced to the rights of the individual abstracted from subjectivity, law could be laid over the land and its inhabitants like a map” (Mohr 2003, 61). Simultaneously, this new idea of rights was asserted to be a universal central ethic. From this perspective, law can recognize only the infringements of the specific rights of an autonomous individual. By reenforcing these rights, law fixes and reasserts its definition of identity and justice while at the same time discriminating against marginal identities. Considering, for example, the engagement of feminists to define rape as violation of the integrity of women and to enforce legislative acts for the punishment of sexual violence, Menon points out that these claims gained acceptance “because the enforced chastity of women is the cornerstone of patriarchal society. It is clear the law’s comprehension of sexual violence can only be through misogynist and paternalist categories even as it condemns and attempts to punish sexual

violence" (133). Moreover, these feminist definitions of sexual violence resonate well with the (nationalist) discourses that constitute sexuality as the "truest, deepest expression of selfhood" and therefore enable men to assume "power over the most private part of a woman's life: her body" through sexual assault (141).

Although Menon stresses that the kind of feminist politics she envisions can be supported by engaging with the law, she insists that this could be only a part of emancipatory politics and that we need to create new forms and spaces of political engagement to be able to hegemonize current common sense. Far away from laying out a political program, Menon nonetheless indicates that emancipatory or "radical" political practices could embrace activities in long-term and self-reflexive struggles to reclaim meaning at the level of common sense, work in communities to challenge local structures of power, and build alternative structures that oppose the family or other hegemonizing institutions (216).

Desires of the Self

Frances Gray continues the exploration of the relationship between the realm of law and self by taking as an entry point the description of intensely debated murder trials, reaching from the Whitechapel murders of the 1880s, over the hanging of Edith Thompson in 1923, the murders by Peter Sutcliffe in the late 1970s, to the Bulger case in the early 1990s. By examining these trials, she illustrates how women are represented as victims, criminals, survivors, and mothers of criminal children. Gray does not analyze how the mechanisms of law work in the respective cases, but focuses on how the women involved in these trials are silenced by the judicial process as well as by public discourse such as press coverage. By contrasting these representations of true crime narratives with an array of fictive narrations that deal with the respective crime cases, Gray shows that the representation of women's experiences can be articulated and self-rearticulation can be achieved by creating different ways to speak about crime.

In her chapter "Survivor Stories," for instance, Gray describes several cases of women who survived attempted murder or brutal sexual assaults and their search for justice within judicial institutions. Based on Menon's analysis of law, the injuries that Sarah Seward, who was raped at knife point in the presence of her father during a burglary, had to bear, were not recognized or validated by law. The judges "found her 'word,' her articulacy and ability to cope in court . . . as evidence that she had not been seriously disturbed and thus reason to award the perpetrators a light sentence" (90). Referring also to Nancy Venable Raine's *After Silence* (1999), Gray emphasises that she was able to rearticulate herself as subject,

as “a person with a complete history,” through documenting her experiences in her own language (92). Because the creation of different narratives provides new ways of perceiving and new forms of experiences, the conscious proliferation of different languages and narrations in particular situations might therefore be one of the emancipatory strategies Menon is arguing for.

Technologies of Empowering Feminist Politics?

The fourth book, *Mainstreaming Gender, Democratizing the State?*, presents the working mechanisms of state-organized institutions for the advancement of women. It assembles case studies from Ecuador, the Philippines, European Nordic countries, Central and Eastern Europe, the United Kingdom, Uganda, India, and Australia as well as comparative analyses, and it gives detailed insight into the working processes of national machineries for women regarding the advancement of gender mainstreaming policies. The decision to foster gender mainstreaming, defined as “government wide mainstreaming of a gender-equality perspective in all policy areas” (United Nations declaration, cited in Rai 2003, 2), as a strategy for the advancement of women, was made at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995. At an expert group meeting in 1998 in Santiago, Chile, recommendations were drafted for ameliorating the efficacy of gender mainstreaming policies through national machineries. One recommendation was the compilation of a United Nations publication on good practices, which this book provides.

In her introductory remarks, Rai points out that the following criteria are crucial for the effectiveness of all national machineries even when their organizational structures differ widely:

“Location (at a high level) within the decision-making hierarchy (and authority) to influence government policy. Clarity of mandate and functional responsibility. Links with civil society groups supportive of the advancement of women’s rights and enhancement of women’s status. Human and financial resources. . . . Accountability of the national machinery itself” (26).

But even if all those criteria are met, the question remains if emancipatory politics is possible within the structures of state administration. In Rai’s opinion, the state is not seen as solid and unified but rather as a “fractured and ambiguous terrain for women,” whose structures are negotiable (19). This assessment is supported by the description of the national machinery on the Philippines: Having to fight against a “macho Congress” and for the allocation of sufficient funding, women working within the bureaucracy are “networking among each other and with women in the GO-NGO community for mutual growth and inspiration and a common agenda” (142).

Open Desires

Regarding the exploration of the relationships between national narratives, nation-states and personal identities, the introduced books provide impressive openings. Their elaborations, however, point to further yet disregarded aspects. Although Menon follows Foucault's assessment that modern forms of power regulate and produce identities, she neglects the aspect that these forms of power produce and, I would say, enable specific identities and the structures that "frame our desires" (Menon 210). Hal-kias, on the other hand, takes us into the processes that constitute these frames of our desires but misses an analytical framework that would connect the scattered parts of a nation's narrative. Thus, it will be an exciting question for further research to examine how the frames of our desires are enabled and structured by modern forms of stately power.

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