

BOOK REVIEW

The Future of Difference: Beyond the Toxic Entanglement of Racism, Sexism and Feminism

Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa. Translated by Sophie Lewis.
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Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa ground their analysis of the complex workings of difference in the example or event of Cologne 2016, when New Year celebrations in the city were marked by the assault of numerous women by numerous men. Very quickly, in a meme-like manner, this was transmitted and translated into young Arab and Muslim men (allegedly linked to refugees and asylum seekers) attacking “German” women.¹ Rather than using the term *meme*, Hark and Villa refer to Cologne as “an emotionally explosive moral ‘node’” as well as to the Althusserian idea of interpellation, that “Cologne interpellates us” (47).² That node, Cologne, gathered ever more toxic politics in its wake and culminated in an unexpected alliance between traditional German feminists and right-wing groups who had been attacking Germany’s so-called “welcome culture” (too many refugees) as well as, among other things, the institutionalization of “gender studies.”

One of the gifts this timely book offers is channeling well-known names and concepts within North American feminist debates through the contexts of Europe and Germany. This process, which is also a kind of methodology, serves to highlight unexpected aspects of the work of familiar individual critics as well as producing differing emphases contained within commonplace conceptual categories such as intersectionality. Those of us who have worked for decades trying to parse the politics of feminism and difference know that at its core is always the dilemma of how to calibrate difference in relation to groups without allowing it to freeze into a paralyzing homogenization that leads invariably to *a priori* or presumptive judgments. In such preemptive moves: women are . . . ; Germans are . . . ; Muslims are . . . and so on. Hark and Villa explore, to great effect, these moves and how they can be prevented.

The preface to the translated English version contains a complex introduction to the specific circumstances surrounding the Cologne event. 2015 had been characterized as “the summer of migration” when, following Angela Merkel’s *Willkommenskultur* (welcome or hospitality culture), public opinion had morphed into resentment and fear of these collectively imagined others who were penetrating (and contaminating) a supposedly homogeneous German culture. As in the case of other nations around the world in these past few years, it led to the formulation of a shrill new “citizen law,” a Nationality Act (*Staatsangehörigkeitgesetz*) that supposedly enshrined German values while simultaneously stoking anti-Muslim sentiment. Hark and Villa

eloquently dub this phenomenon as “the völkisch, ethnonationalist dog whistle” (xvii). This book is also a continuation of their important earlier edited collection on antigenerism published in 2015 and unfortunately not yet translated into English (Hark and Villa 2015). That book had mapped the ways in which “gender” as a “foreign” term had been transformed from a useful concept pointing to the social elements in the formation of sexual identity into a symbol of attacks on “family values” by a significant, Europe-wide assembly of right-wing groups. This coalition was behind persistent assaults on women’s studies courses as well as many forms of feminist research. The prevailing assumption was that *gender* was a term imported from dubiously ideological North American thinkers who were foisting their questions concerning gender formations onto self-evidently wholesome family bastions.³

The preface outlines the ways in which attempts to mobilize difference too often led to “the violent, fundamentalizing logic of differentiation” (xxxv) that cemented narrowly defined cultural identities and their supposed allegiance to particular values. Here Hark and Villa refer to the work of the German theorist Birgit Rommelspacher and her analysis of “dominance culture,” a concept that has a slightly different genealogy in Anglophone spheres where it is associated with the work of Patricia Hill Collins’s “matrix of oppression” and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s influential concept of intersectionality. In Germany during the Cologne debates, Villa in particular refers to the ways in which it was difficult to deviate from a unified discourse that linked concern for the women attacked to a simultaneous racialized and Orientalist designation for their attackers (110). As a way to break open the dynamics of this homogenized response, Hark and Villa maintain that their methodology foregrounds their own differences of opinion. This is modeled in particular in their dialogue in chapter 5.

The first chapter deals with debates on difference in relation to histories of representation that build on the work of Stuart Hall, in particular, and how representation always produces (rather than simply depicts) difference. Hall’s concept of “articulation” is also central since the process of linking elements invariably also transforms them (21). Echoing Judith Butler, Hark and Villa ask, “Whose vulnerability do we take seriously and understand as our own?” (15). The second chapter takes readers through “the night that changed everything” where the “enemy” was codified in specific and narrow ways, and their actions, yoked to an allegedly feminist concern with violence against women, were transformed into a “justification for anti-Muslim racism” (30). Reminding us that there were of course significant suffrage movements outside the Anglophone sphere, Hark and Villa cite the work of early German feminist Hedwig Dohm and her concept of *Versämtlichung*: the process of “otherization” determined by mechanisms of homogenization and abstraction. Mobilized here as well is the burgeoning work on affect, particularly the ways political affect functions. Here Sara Ahmed’s work on the politics of affect is referenced (46–47), as well as Hannah Arendt’s reminder that all morality ultimately depends upon the keeping of promises (49).

The third chapter focuses on visual imagery, seemingly straight out of an Orientalist playbook, that was attached to the Cologne controversy and considers the impact of its symbolism. Hark and Villa use John Berger’s influential contention that all images are performative and that rather than simply reproducing, they produce particular effects. Jacques Rancière’s designation of an “ethical regime of images” (52) and the notion of “ethos” as the moral framework that sustains specific social values for groups also provide illumination. The graphic images associated with Cologne tell their own stark story of the kinds of Orientalist prejudices invoked. Hark and Villa pose core questions

concerning violence against women: can this emphasis on sexualized violence as characteristic of “asylum-seeking men” (59) be perceived primarily as an effective distraction from the everyday violence committed by German men as reflected in police statistics? In this scenario the pervasive global phenomenon of rape culture is always perceived as being introduced by foreign actors rather than being endemic in a particular culture. The authors go on to discuss the phenomenon of what they term “ethnosexism” in which the bodies of so-called foreign men signify their alterity across a spectrum of allegedly core characteristics, familiar to us from Frantz Fanon’s work. Hark and Villa also discuss Angela McRobbie’s work on the “phallic woman,” in which her contemporary modernity is figured in part through choosing to identify as a sex object. In other words, enlightened modernity is signified through very particular embodiments and performances of female sexuality.

Chapter 4 looks at the difficult issue of “femonationalism” (echoing Jasbir Puar’s concept of homonationalism), or the ways in which feminism is intermittently harnessed to right-wing enterprises. The primary example here is the well-known German feminist Alice Schwarzer, founding editor of the iconic feminist journal *Emma*. A comparable figure would be Gloria Steinem or Germaine Greer (both of whom have been occasionally critiqued for not being sufficiently aware of the granular details of racialization or transgender issues). In Schwarzer’s case, Hark and Villa identify an ever-present Islamophobia in her responses to the Cologne controversy as well as a general bias against immigrants and multiculturalism in her work (78–79). Taking issue with her approach, they stress throughout that “[t]he key is not to fix these men in their identities, while also not denying that the offences took place” (98). The solution they suggest is that “[o]nly by taking into account the concrete social and economic, political and cultural conditions of sexual violence, including, for example, the urban spatial environment and local political struggles, will we get out of the woods” (100). The point Hark and Villa are making concerns the importance of always paying attention to the specific contexts and circumstances in assigning meaning to any form of sexual violence. In other words, one should not resort to ready-made, often prejudicial, categories for deriving meaning. Avoiding those traps is why, as they point out repeatedly, they are not attempting to analyze the nature of the experiences and atrocities endured by the women who were targeted during that New Year event.

Chapter 5 takes the form of a dialogue between Hark and Villa that is designed to highlight their differences. To what extent is each of them an outsider within? Ranging over discussions of what it means to be German and the pernicious influence of concepts such as *Leitkultur*, signifying an autochthonous or dominant culture, both consider themselves to be obliquely situated in relation to this notion: Villa because she is Jewish and Hark because she comes from Saarland, one of those border territories historically governed by different powers.

The epilogue sums up their project. They take inspiration from the work of Audre Lorde, Butler, and Arendt in their examination of the mechanisms and logic governing processes of differentiation and how difficult it is to suspend *a priori* judgmentalism. They emphasize Arendt’s concept of the “nonfungibility” of people, their insistent individuality, but at the same time identify with all those whose political work is devoted to rendering minorities visible, who need to find ways to speak about groups in a manner that avoids the pitfalls of difference and identitarianism where “establishing a specific identity in advance” (131) in effect functions to remove it from criticism. Although the debates represented in this book are complex, the ways in which Hark and Villa link them with very specific figures and events make it suitable for upper-level

undergraduate as well as graduate students. As the finely grained aspects of “difference” proliferate and become more urgent, I hope this book will be used widely to provide international substance to our debates.

Notes

- 1 For a perspective from outside Europe on this event, see Lalami 2016.
- 2 Althusser’s interpellation is sometimes described as a process whereby a subject is “hailed into being” as citizen, or gendered being, or age-group, and so on, in terms of institutions that define such collectives. Althusser distinguished between what he termed the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA)—the police, the military, the prison system—and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA)—education, religion, and so on (Althusser 1971/1984).
- 3 For more on this topic, see Plate 2020 on comparative gender studies.

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