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The importance of historicizing for feminist constructivist thinking.

Comment based on the following texts:

Katriina Honkanen: Historicizing as a feminist practice. The Places of history in Judith Butlers Constructivist Theories. Meddelanden från ekonomisk-statsvetenskapliga Fakulteten vid Åbo Akademi. Institutet för kvinnoforskning ser. A 547. Aabo 2004.

Katriina Honkanen: "It is Historically Constituted". Historicism in Feminist Constructivist Arguments". European Journal of Women's Studies. Vol. 12 (3): 281-295. (Forthcoming).

Honkanen's work has to be welcomed as one of the few - in a Nordic context - profound and careful critical analysis of the constructivist feminist theories (Judith Butler and Joan Scott not least) that have dominated and become normative in feminist research for the last decade or more. The reading of the dissertation is a demanding enterprise, modeled as it is on the decentered and associative style of Judith Butler and Irigaray, where theoretical apparatus, own research interests and positions are scattered around, along with the casual use of references that are used as aesthetic- theoretical points. The work of Honkanen is invested with much thinking and brainwork and pays tribute to the slow speed in a still more superficial and speed orientated environment of knowledge production. And as such it should be appreciated.

Honkanen's work focus on the ways feminists use the words "history" "historicity" and historicizing. Following Heidegger, Honkanen refers to historicity as a kind of matrix, as a mode of thought that enables the entire history to become an object of science or to become a personal investment, or a shared horizon of reality, or a narrative. Historicity is part of the

way we think, and all different histories are enabled by historicity as a mode of thought, the argument runs.

The dissertation is an investigation into aspects of historicity and its connection to constructivism and meaning. This is done by a deconstructive reading of historicity in Judith Butler's theoretization - and to a lesser degree of Joan Scott. Honkanen points to the close links between constructivist approaches and historicism, e.g. as a tool against essentialism, phrased in the well-known statement: *women is historically, discursively constructed* and devotes much attention to deconstruct and discuss the underlying assumptions in this kind of argumentation. Honkanen provides a range of examples of how the work for change and transformation and politics is understood to be historical. Honkanen talks about an inflated concept of history in radical historicity and deconstructionist approaches. And how history pushed to its limits become meaning itself. What is at stake is an unquestioned historicism that operates as a blockage for thinking, meaning that thinking becomes reactive. (51)

Another point of critical focus is the use of history as the context of/for meanings. The placing of phenomena in *their historical contexts* is based on the idea of them being embedded in a historical context. I.e. the nation, the state, modernism, enlightenment, i.e. the broader contexts that consist of their own inner meanings and possibilities. Feminists are encouraged to problematize this kind of strongly context dependant usage of historical meta categories, in particular if feminists wish to change the meta narratives and false universalities that historical accounts of the nation, the state etc are based upon. (I.e. feminist critique of historical periodization and expressions such as women in modernity, the welfare state etc.)

A third point of focus is the central concept of performativity that Honkanen deconstruct in a very able and pathbreaking way. Here Honkanen confronts the time of *kairos* in relation to the time of *chronos* that is inherent in Butler's theory of performativity. Accordingly iterability that is central (and somehow unclear in Butlers work) can be interpreted as an expanded present, as an idea that brings every meaning and time into the ongoing now, a now that does not have a meaningful before, since the other time is always at once with this time.

This is a promising path instead of Butler's strong emphasis on historicity and chronology that hinders the immediacy of performative politics. It postpones and delays politics through its practice of always tracing the genealogies of hegemony. (163)

At this general level Honkanen provides a strong text that makes us more aware and pays tribute to the relocations of the very notion of historicity and related themes. All in all it makes us - as historians and feminists aware of the ways in which historicity is used in feminist theories to see where it stands as a ground for knowledge. In other words I will think of Honkanens points in any future readings of texts and historical practices. Phrasings such as *women is historically, discursively constructed* as well as the idea of *historical context, and well as the idea of chronology* has obtained new meanings in the wake of Honkanens critical assessments.

In Honkanens work concepts such as "strategic forgetting of history" / "a virtual non history" and "historico-philosophical feminism" are developed as concepts that are central to the argument. And at the same time these are concepts that displaces the argumentation from the "fixations" and limitations of existing mainstream historiography and reformist feminism.

Critical points and questions.

From this short introduction I will now outline some critical points and questions.

Honkanens texts are both thought provoking, inspiring - and irritating. I think that Honkanens work makes up a valuable contribution and provocation for those of us - mainly empirical/ hermeneutical "ambivalent others", who are in danger of feeling too happy and too much at home in the existing frameworks and visions of historical work and in the wider sense with the Nordic Welfare States and its academic institutions, where reformism, compromising and mainstreaming and the like form a central part of the agenda. In other words the hostility and critically hints towards reformist, compromising and mainstreaming

approaches that one finds time and again in Honkanens work is a teasing and provocative gesture towards state feminists strategies and similar kind of activities, that many of us wrestle with in our everyday lives as university teachers and researchers.

1. Honkanen does not in the first hand address feminist historians, her work is first and foremost meant as a contribution to develop and strengthen the position of constructivism transdisciplinary feminist research. Honkanens strategy is to theorize untheorized aspects of constructivist theories in order to allow for creative space for feminist thought - and for transformation.

Other scholars have from different - liberal and phenomenological and postcolonial - positions argued the opposite - or a more middle of the road position against the call for theoreticism that they see as an impediment to this very change.

One example is the critique made by the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum in the name of a liberal feminism in favor of universalist human rights and a cosmopolitan world citizenship. In an article from 1999 she labeled Judith Butler a professor of parody and accused Judith Butler for political quietism, and of not being involved in hard work and real practicalities of genuine political reform. She accused Butler of playing an abstract rebellious transgression, but in effect to offer nothing to the poor and disadvantaged. (M. Nussbaum. "The Professor of Parody". *The New Republic*. 22. February, 1999)

Another example, and perhaps more interesting in this framework, is the critique made by the Norwegian- American literary theorist Toril Moi in a couple of essays (in *What is a woman? And other essays* from 1999). The problem according to Moi is that recent theorizing has slimmed the word women to nothing and her aim is to establishing a critical position in opposition to the poststructuralist positions and Butler. She, (like Honkanen) criticizes the identification of sex and the biological and the discoursivation of the biological even though her answer is very different and do not believe in more theorizing: She sees the poststructuralist positions of the 1990s as over-theorized. The rejection of difference based in

biology, can be seen as a pendant to biological determinism, where biology in either frameworks is seen as determined. The rejection of the biological body is unnecessary and it is enough as Beauvoir (and later feminists) to reject that social relations can be based on biology.

Toril Moi points to the need for a more differentiated understanding of how body and gender are implicated in human lives and agency on the basis of a conceptual analysis of Simone de Beauvoir's phenomenological ideas about "the body as a situation" and about the relation between biology and lived experience. Yet this forms a better ground, than the reductive and deterministic poststructuralist theories and the sex-gender binary. So much for Moi's position.

Honkanen at different places calls herself a *formalist structuralist* (in order to explain/explore her strategic forgetting of history) and at some point a *kind of phenomenologist* and at another place a *postmodernist*. Accordingly I wonder why Honkanen did not elaborate her work in a more eclectic and within a more open theoretical framework according to the above statements? Do Nussbaum and Moi i.e. not belong to the political correct feminism or even theory-political correct framework? I find that a more inclusive approach less linked to the particular Butlerian version of poststructuralism would have allowed for a more thorough discussion - and for the provision of new and broader and deeper avenues.

2. In Honkanen's work the concepts such as "strategic forgetting of history" / "a virtual non history" and "historico-philosophical feminism" are developed as concepts that are central to the argument. At the same time these concepts displace the argumentation from the "fixations" and limitations of existing mainstream historiography and reformist feminism. I find this an interesting but also problematic position. As Honkanen points out several times, her work is an analysis of the grammar of historicity in particular theoretical situations. It is not a history of ideas or a conceptual history of central concepts in feminist theories. Contrary to Honkanen I do not see such an approach of conceptual history (in the sense e.g. of the German historian Reinh. Koselleck) as exhausted and as an opposition to more utopian visions and figurations in the field of feminist scholarship.

In other words I find that Honkanens strategic forgetting of history is also in danger of producing - some - rather serious blind spots that in sum refers to the forgetting of modernist strategies and perspectives. This very forgetting results in the freezing of new and old dichotomies that have been problematized by gender studies or other areas of cultural studies during the last decades. In other words the work of Honkanen - while intended to undermine and displace dichotomies also reproduces some rather serious ones. Here I see an important task for future gender studies and particularly for feminist historians. Especially in the reassessment of fields and challenges in the provision of theoretical reflections and conceptual analysis in relation to - feminism, reformism and consensus strategies/ feminism - autonomy - versus main/malestreaming, feminism and transformation and change, and feminism and intersectional perspectives, such as the intersections of gender, ethnicity, class, etc.

I agree with Honkanen that more work and explorations on the transformative figures and concepts such as the cyborg, the nomadic subject, experience etc. is needed.

I would also, however, like to see more critical assessments of possibilities and limitations in transformative concepts such as *strategic essentialism and gender mainstreaming* that is at the very moment carried as a global strategy for gender equality. In other words I would like to focus more on the dynamics and implications of how to get from "here" to "there".ⁱ Honkanen's own work of course is not able to escape modernist figures, i.e. the genuine modernist figure and failure to focus only on the "there" and to build up strategic and real paradises, where nobody feels at home.

3. Honkanens critique and research strategies will probably prove easiest to apply for feminist researchers who feel at home in the field of transdisciplinary feminist studies. They will have less trouble with the advanced theoretical level of the dissertation and less trouble in following some of the suggestions, and the strategic doing away with a historicity, which for many might have been an empty litany anyway.

I am less sure about the applicability for feminist historians, who still see themselves as part of a discipline. What role is left for us/them and for history as a discipline in Honkanens transdisciplinary approach?

At the very moment history is supposed to be at a cross road and has lost its status as linked to the legitimation of the nation state - a break up that means that new possibilities opens up, and that feminist historians are freer to handle and negotiate the boundaries of the profession as well as the methodologies and perspectives in professional history. In this situation I doubt that many historians are willing to subscribe to the hegemonic "iron- cage" construction of history and historicity in Honkanens narrative. In this situation I guess that many feminist historians will see Honkainens work and the strategic forgetting of history as an inclination to take off from the bulk and burden of empirical evidence and as an invitation to more creativity. As well as a useful reminder of how difficult it is to escape the limitations of current knowledge production.

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Notes

ⁱ American Indian philosopher G. Spivak, who at the level of practical politics has suggested the notion of a Strategic Essentialism in which concepts of group identity can be used provisionally along with deconstructivist strategies.