

**O(S) SENTIDOS(S) DA(S) CULTURA(S)**

**CICLO**

**EUROPA FORTALEZA.**

**FRONTEIRAS, VALADOS, EXILIOS, MIGRACIONES**

**COORDINADO POR Ramón Máiz**

***SITUATED INTERSECTIONALITY AND  
THE MEANINGS OF CULTURE***

**Nira Yuval-Davis**

**XOVES, 9 DE MARZO DE 2017**

**17:00 HORAS**

**CONSELLO DA CULTURA GALEGA**

## NIRA YUVAL-DAVIS

A profesora Nira Yuval-Davis é directora do Research Centre on Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB) na University of East London. Foi presidenta do Research Committee 05 (sobre racismo, nacionalismo e relacións étnicas) da International Sociological Association, membro fundadora de Women Against Fundamentalism e da rede de investigación internacional Women In Militarized Conflict Zones. Foi membro da UK 2008 RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) e do 2014 REF (Research Excellence Framework) nos subpaneis de socioloxía. Actuou como consultora para diversas organizacións, ONGs e dos dereitos humanos como UNDP, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Amnesty International, AWID e a internacional Investigative Women's Delegation 'Justice in the Gujarat'. Editora da serie de libros *The Politics of Intersectionality* de Palgrave MacMilan.

Nira Yuval-Davis escribiu amplamente sobre aspectos teóricos e empíricos de nacionalismos interseccionais, racismos, fundamentalismos, cidadanías, identidades, pertenzas e relacións de xénero en Gran Bretaña e Europa, Israel e outras sociedades de colonos. No importante proxecto de investigación ESRC utilizou técnicas de teatro participativo como metodoloxía de investigación para traballar cos refuxiados do este de Londres. Colaborou no recente proxecto da UE "Borderscapes", onde liderou un equipo internacional, examinando a fronteira cotiá nas cidades metropolitanas e as diferentes zonas fronteirizas europeas desde una perspectiva interseccional.

Entre os seus libros e edicións figuran *Woman-Nation-State*, 1989; *Racialized Boundaries*, 1992; *Unsettling Settler Societies*, 1995; *Gender and Nation*, 1997; *Warning Signs of Fundamentalisms*, 2004; *The Politics of Belonging*, 2011; *Women Against Fundamentalism*, 2014 e o próximo *Bordering* (2017). As súas obras foron traducidas a máis de dez idiomas.

## ***SITUATED INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE MEANINGS OF CULTURE***

**Nira Yuval-Davis**

In this essay I'm going to present the analytical and methodological framework of situated intersectionality as a lens for understanding the meanings of culture. Its main argument is that it is impossible to understand culture without a dialogical epistemology which includes the situated gazes of as many as possible of those who refer to, as well as practice, that 'culture'.

I shall first introduce the framework of situated intersectionality and then turn to examine the notion of culture and the ways situated intersectionality can enrich and validate our understanding of it.

### ***Situated Intersectionality***

What is intersectionality? Lesley McCall (2005:1771) and others argue that intersectionality is 'the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies in conjunction with related fields, has made so far'. Indeed, the imprint of intersectional analysis can be easily traced to innovations in equality legislation, human rights and development discourses. Given its multiple and multi-disciplinarian history, intersectionality is not a unified body of theory but more a range of theoretical and conceptual tools<sup>1</sup>. As such, however, it is similar to all other major theoretical perspectives that have been developed by more than one theorist or a space/time context, from Marxism to Neo-Liberalism to feminism, let alone sociology. This does not mean that we cannot debate what should be the right theoretical framing using intersectionality for particular analytical and political purposes. I call my particular version of intersectionality theory 'situated intersectionality' (Yuval-Davis, 2015), which is quite different from some of the other versions of intersectionality that have become popularized.

While originally developed as a counter to Identity politics that emphasize (as well as homogenize and reify) unidimensional versions of identities, some of these intersectional approaches have become a kind of fragmented identity politics, in which the focus is no more, for instance, women or Blacks, but Black women. Fundamental to my approach to situated intersectionality analysis (which I started to develop with Floya Anthias (eg, 1983, 1992) in the early 1980's, before the term intersectionality was invented by Kimberlé Crenshaw in (1989), is that intersectional analysis should be applied to all people and not just to marginalised and racialised women, with whom the rise of intersectionality theory is historically linked (e.g. Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1990; see also Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Our contention is that while the political, professional, and disciplinary interests of

---

<sup>1</sup>For a debate about the nature of intersectionality see eg Lutz & al, 2011 and the special issues on intersectionality of *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 2006 and of *Signs*, 2013.

those who use intersectionality analysis might vary, only such a generic approach to intersectionality analysis could ultimately avoid the risk of exceptionalism and of reifying and essentialising social boundaries. As critical race and ethnicity studies point out, not only black people are racially constructed, and feminists do remind men they too have a gender. Even more important to our interest here, not just minority ethnic people have 'culture and tradition'.

Intersectionality analysis relates to the distribution of power and other resources in society and therefore it constitutes what in sociology is known as stratification theory. Stratification, or, rather, social stratification, relates to the differential hierarchical locations of individuals and groupings of people on society's grids of power. Intersectionality is the most valid and comprehensive approach to the study of social stratification because it does not reduce the complexity of power constructions into a single social division, usually class, as has been customarily the case in stratification theories. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that I do not see the different social divisions which construct power relations as additive (e.g. in Bryan & al., 1985), cross-cutting (e.g. Crenshaw, 1989) or interlocking (e.g. Hill Collins, 1990), but rather as mutually constituted, forming the particular nuanced and contested meanings of particular social locations in particular historical moments, within particular social, economic and political contexts in which some social divisions, eg gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship status, ability, have more saliency and effect on particular people and/or society as a whole, than they have in others.

However, as Floya Anthias and I have always emphasized, although in concrete situations the different social divisions constitute each other, they are irreducible to each other – each of them has a different ontological discourse of particular dynamics of power relations of exclusion and/or exploitation, using a variety of legitimate and illegitimate technologies of inferiorizations, intimidations and sometimes actual violence to achieve this. For example, class relations are constructed around notions of production and consumption; gender – those of sexuality and reproduction; race/ethnicity as constructed by particular phenotypical or cultural boundaries; ability around the notion of 'the normal' etc. Social inequalities thus amount to much more than the mere life style 'distinctions' of culturalist approaches to stratification (such as Bordieu, REF).

Intersectionality can be described as a development of feminist standpoint theory which claims, in somewhat different ways, that it is vital to account for the social positioning of the social agent – the researcher or the researched - and challenge 'the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere' (Haraway 1991: 189) as a cover and a legitimisation of a hegemonic masculinist 'positivistic' positioning. Situated gaze, situated knowledge and situated imagination (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002), construct differently the ways we see the world. However, another irreducibility in my approach to intersectionality analysis (2011) is that I consider as crucial the analytical differentiation between different facets of social analysis – that of people's positionings along socio-economic grids of power; that of people's

experiential and identificatory perspectives of where they belong; and that of their normative value systems. These different facets are related to each other but are also irreducible to each other. They need to be studied autonomously rather than automatically implied by each other as identity politics tend to do. And yet, the meanings of these different facets can only be understood in relation to each other – which is why we need a research methodology which combines what McCall (2005) calls the intercategorical approach with the intracategorical one. People positioned in the same social locations would often develop different identifications, meanings and normative attitudes and attachments to them.

Situated intersectionality analysis, therefore, in all its facets, is highly sensitive to the geographical, social and temporal locations of the particular individual or collective social actors examined by it, contested, shifting and multiple as they usually are. Therefore, in the intersectionality approach presented here, we also need to highlight the central importance in the analysis of issues of translocality – i.e. the ways particular categories of social divisions have different meanings – and often different relative power - in the different spaces in which the analyzed social relations take place; of transculturality – i.e. the ways different social divisions have often different meanings and power when we examine them in small scale households or neighbourhoods, in particular cities, states, regions and globally; and of transtemporality – i.e. how these meanings and power change historically and even in different points in people's life cycle (Anthias, 2012; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy, forthcoming; for a somewhat different but also global intersectionality approaches to the study of inequality see Bose, 2012; Walby, 2007, 2009). All these elements of situated intersectionality analysis are of prime importance when we come to assess the meanings of culture.

### ***The notion of 'culture'***

Even more than many other central concepts in the social sciences, the definition and meaning of the term 'culture' has been contested. Raymond Williams, the 'father' of 'Cultural Studies', has suggested 3 meanings for the term (1983:90): that of a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development [culture as 'civilization']; one of 'the works and practices of intellectual and artistic activity' ['high culture'] and one which is 'a particular way of life, whether of people, a period or a group'. It is this last one which, as Anthony Giddens points out (1989:31), the sociologists tend to use. According to him this way of life is composed from 'the values the members of a given group hold, the norms they follow and the material goods they create' (Giddens, op.cit:31).

Jonathan Friedman (1994:67-77), who has looked at the emergence of the culture concept in anthropology, describes its 'long and confusing history', especially in the 19th century when 'culture was simply what was distinctive about others'. The confusion often stems out of the conflation of the above three different meanings of the concept of culture which at the time were philosophically differentiated but anthropologically fused. It also brought about a close association between 'race' in

the form of 'Volkgeist' and 'culture', as culture was used as 'people's defining characteristics'. Only at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the work of Franz Boaz, has culture become separated from its racial and demographic basis, and started to be studied as an autonomous abstraction, a phenomenon in its own right. One should not lose sight of the fact, however, that at least until recently, the cultures studied have tended to be those of the 'Other'. Popular culture as opposed to 'high culture' within western society has, only relatively recently, become a legitimate subject of study, owing much to the work of Stuart Hall and the others who developed Cultural Studies as an academic discipline. Furthermore, essentialized constructions of 'cultural difference' constitute one of the major modes of contemporary popular racisms (Modood, 1994).

The development of the concept of culture has been determined for a long time by the cyclical debate which Friedman describes between those who hold universalist and relativist paradigms of culture. According to the first perspective there is one generic human culture in which different people and groupings have particular rank, according to their 'stage of development' which is often described in evolutionary terms. This is being rejected by those who hold the relativist perspective according to which different civilizations have different cultures which need to be understood/judged within their own terms. Geertz (1966), for example, has actually claimed that there is no culture in general, but only specific cultures.

In spite of the difference between these two perspectives and the perpetual debate between them, they both share, as Chatterjee (1986) has pointed out, an essentialist view of 'culture' as having specific fixed 'cultural stuff' of symbols, ways of behaviour and artefacts which coherently and unproblematically constitute cultures of specific national and ethnic collectivities. Internal differentiations and differences in positionings cannot be counted for in either of these two approaches.

A much more useful way of theorizing culture has been developed during the last few years, using discourse analyses inspired by both Gramsci and Foucault, in which cultures have been transformed from static reified homogenous phenomena common to all members of national and ethnic collectivities, into dynamic social processes operating in contested terrains in which different voices become more or less hegemonic in their offered interpretations of the world (Bhabha, 1994; Friedman, 1994). They point out that cultural discourses often resemble more a battleground of meaning rather than a shared point of departure. Cultural homogeneity in this view would be a result of hegemonization, and it would always be limited and more noticeable in the centre rather than in the social margins, being affected by the social positioning of its carriers.

This raises questions about continuity and persistence of cultures as well as about the relationships between different cultures. Anthony Smith (1986) and Armstrong (1982) both argue that cultural myths and symbols have an enduring ability which is being reproduced generation after generation, notwithstanding changing historical and material conditions. However, this seeming durability can be very misleading.

Firstly, because our view of it stems from a very particular temporal perspective - we can see all the cultural stuff that has endured all these historical changes and survived. We cannot be fully aware, however, how much cultural stuff has **not** survived historical change, archaeological and historical research notwithstanding. Moreover, even with cultural stuff that has survived historical changes, their meanings can and do undergo radical changes and often they become just symbolic markers of identity (Gans, 1979; Armstrong 1982). Similarly, while some portray the world in terms of clashes between separate and opposing civilizations (Huntington REF), others are much more aware of the synthetic nature of all contemporary cultures, their appropriations of symbolic artifacts and meanings from other civilizations and their own internal heterogeneity (Bhabha, op.cit.).

It is important to recognize the two contradictory co-existent elements in the operation of cultures, of the tendency for stabilization and continuity on the one hand, and of perpetual resistance and change on the other hand. Both of these tendencies stem out of the close relationship between power relations and cultural practice (Bourdieu, 1977; Bottomley, 1992). As Friedman points out (1994:76), cultures are not just an arbitrary collection of values, artifacts and modes of behaviour. They acquire, to a greater or lesser extent, 'stabilizing properties' which are inherent in the practices of their social reproduction. These processes of social reproduction are not just processes of cloning, but of social interaction in which motivation and desire play their part. As a result, cultural models become resonant with subjective experience. They become the ways individuals experience themselves, their collectivities and the world.

Although analytically the discourse of culture is distinct from that of power relations (Assad, 1993), concretely and historically it is always embedded in them. This is true not only in relation to hierarchies of power within cultural institutions and their relations to more general structures of class and power within the society, but also in relation to cultural imaginations and their hierarchies of desirability as well as constructions of exclusions and inclusions.

Rather than a fixed and homogenous body of tradition and custom, 'cultural stuff', therefore, needs to be described as a rich resource, usually full of internal contradictions, which is used selectively by different social agents in various social projects within specific power relations and political discourse in and outside the collectivity. Gender, class, membership in a collectivity, stage in the life cycle, ability - all affect the access and availability of these resources and the specific positionings from which they are being used.

Situated intersectionality, therefore, is a crucial methodological tool in analysing and deciphering the meanings of culture.

### ***Situated intersectionality and the meanings of culture***

As discussed above, the approach of this essay to the meanings of culture is neither universalist nor relativist. Rather, it is based on a dialogical epistemology which, as Bakhtin (2010) as well as Patricia Hill-Collins (1990) have argued, is based on the (usually unequal) incorporation of the situated gazes of the different social agents who participate (or observe, directly or indirectly) particular social encounters and practices. These situated gazes construct cultural meanings, selecting different available social cultural resources according to their normative value systems as well as their identifications and emotional attachments. However, their social locations as embedded in vary-scalar hierarchies of power, would usually determine their impact in the production of generic social 'culture'.

Therefore, the situated intersectionality methodological approach to the study of culture, combines the inter-categorical and intra-categorical methodologies described by Lesley McCall (2005). The first methodology concerns comparisons between the same social phenomena (eg the frequency of attending religious institutions by people of different genders and classes) in different locations; the second focuses on the meaning of these practices in particular social and historical contexts. The translocality, transculturality and transtemporality of situated intersectionality allows us to avoid the vernacularity of many social studies as well as the simple universality of others which just assume, rather than enquire, the different meanings of these social practices in different locations. Mignolo (2000) has called it epistemological pluriversality.

However, situated intersectional analysis does not homogenize or reify boundaries of localities or groupings. It takes into consideration the situated gazes of particular people in relation to their own social locations and social well-being. Focusing on these situated gazes enables us to incorporate minority and non-conformist perspectives of social actors rather than assume that all people in particular social category even in the same geographical and social locations would necessarily share the same meaning of social relations of power and/or of their 'culture and tradition' in their own society or community in general and their own positionings in particular. Rather, we need to add to the pluriversal epistemology a dialogical inclusive one in which as many as possible of the participants in a particular social encounter would take part, as the only way to approximate the truth (although 'the truth' would ever remain elusive (Hill Collins, op.cit.).

The meanings of culture, then, are situated, shifting and contested, with different boundaries and different saliency which change focus and relevance in different local, temporal and scalar perspectives. This does not mean that they lack specific meaning. It just means that there is no 'objective' way to claim this meaning.



## References

- Anthias, F. (2012), 'Hierarchies of social location, class and intersectionality: towards a translocational frame', *International Sociology* 28(1) 121-138
- Anthias, F. & Yuval-Davis, N. (1983), 'Contextualizing Feminism: Gender, Ethnic and Class Divisions' in *Feminist Review*, no. 15, pp. 62-75
- Anthias, F. & Yuval-Davis, N. (1992), *Racialized Boundaries: Race, nation, gender, colour and class and the anti-racist struggle*, London: Routledge
- Armstrong, J. (1982), *Nations Before Nationalism*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill
- Assad, T. (1993), *Genealogies of Religion*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore
- Bakhtin, M.M., (2010) *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (Vol. 1). University of Texas Press.
- Bhabha, H. (1994), *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London.
- Bose, C. (2012), Intersectionality and global gender inequality, *Gender & Society* vol.26(1):67-72
- Bottomley, G. (1992), *From Another Place: Migration and the Politics of Culture*, Cambridge University Press
- Bourdieu, P. (1984), *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- Brah, A. & Phoenix, A. (2004), 'Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol.5, 3: 75-86
- Bryan, B., Dadzie, S. & Scafe, S. (1985), *The heart of the race: Black women's lives in Britain*, London: Virago
- Chatterjee, P. (1986), *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: a Derivative Discourse*, Zed Books, London
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*. University of Chicago.
- European Journal of Women's Studies* (2006), special issue on *Intersectionality*, vol 13(3).
- Friedman, J. (1994), *Cultural Identity & Global Process*, Sage London
- Gans, H.J. (1979), 'Symbolic Ethnicity: the Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America' *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, vol.2, no.2
- Geertz, C. (1966), 'Religion as a Cultural System' in M. Bainton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Tavistock, London
- Giddens, A. (1971), *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: an Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim & Max Weber*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Haraway, D. (1991), *Simians, cyborgs and women, The reinvention of women*, London: Free Association Press
- Hill Collins, P. (1990), *Black Feminist Thought*, NY: Routledge
- Huntington REF in p.6
- Lutz, H., Herrera Vivar M.T. & Supik L. (eds.) (2011), *Framing intersectionality: debates on a multi-faceted concept in gender studies*, Farnham: Ashgate
- McCall, L. (2005), 'The Complexity of Intersectionality', *Signs*, Vol. 30 (3): 1771-1800.

- Mignolo, W. D. (2000), *local histories/global designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledge and border thinking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Modood, T. (1994) 'Political blackness and British Asians' *Sociology*, vol 28, November, pp.859-876
- Signs* (2013), special issue on *Intersectionality: theorizing power, empowering theory*, vol. 38(4).
- Smith, A. (1986), *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford
- Stoetzle, M. & Yuval-Davis, N. (2002), 'Standpoint Theory, Situated Knowledge & the Situated Imagination', *Feminist Theory*, vol.3, 3: 315-334
- Walby, S. (2007), 'complexity theory, systems theory and multiple intersecting social inequalities', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 37 (4): 449-470.
- Williams, R. (1983), *Keywords*, Fontana, London
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2011), *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* London: Sage
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2015), 'Situated Intersectionality and Social Inequality' in *Raisons Politiques* no. 58:91-100
- Yuval-Davis, N., Wemyss, G. & Cassidy, K. (2018, forthcoming), *Bordering*, Cambridge: Polity Press