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What is 'transversal politics'?

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*Nira Yuval-Davis provides a brief introduction to
the concept of transversal politics.*

Like many other feminist activists, I have been in search of a name for what so many of us are doing.¹ I found it when I was invited by Italian feminists from Bologna to a meeting they organised between Palestinian and Israeli (both Jewish and Palestinian) women which took place in 1993. I later learned that there has been a whole tradition of autonomous left politics in Bologna under the name of transversal politics.

Before describing what transversal politics is, it is important to state what it is not. Transversal politics has been developed as an alternative to the assimilationist 'universalistic' politics of the Left on the one hand, and to identity politics on the other hand. While the first has proved to be ethnocentric and exclusionary, the second has proved to be essentialist, reifying boundaries between groups and, by homogenising and collapsing individual into collective identities, undemocratic within groups.

Transversal politics is based on the following. First, standpoint epistemology, which recognises that from each positioning the world is seen differently, and

1. Eg. 'unity in diversity' - see Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Identity politics and women's ethnicity' in V.M. Moghadam (ed), *Identity Politics and Women*, Westview Press, Bolder, Co 1994; and Kuniari Jawayardena, *The White Woman Oilier Burden: Western Women and South Asia during British Ride*, Routledge, London 1995, p10.

thus that any knowledge based on just one positioning is 'unfinished' - which is not the same thing as saying it is 'invalid'. -In this epistemology, the only way to approach 'the truth' is by a dialogue between people of differential positionings.

Secondly, an important concept in relation to transversal politics is the encompassment of difference by equality.³ This means the recognition, on the one hand, that differences are important (as stated in the foregoing paragraph), but on the other hand, that notions of difference should encompass, rather than replace, notions of equality. Such notions of difference are not hierarchical. They assume *a priori* respect for others' positionings - which includes acknowledgement of their differential social, economic and political power.

Thirdly, transversal politics is based on a conceptual - and political - differentiation between positioning, identity and values. People who identify themselves as belonging to the same collectivity or category can be positioned very differently in relation to a whole range of social divisions (e.g. class, gender, ability, sexuality, stage in the life cycle etc). At the same time, people with similar positioning and/or identity, can have very different social and political values.

Several implications can be drawn from the above. One is that feminist and other community activists should not see themselves as representatives of their constituencies (unless they were democratically elected and are accountable for their actions). Rather, they should see themselves as their advocates, working to promote their cause. However, even as advocates, it is important that the activists should be conscious of the multiplexity of their specific positionings, both in relation to other members in their constituencies, as well as in relation to the other participants in the specific encounter. One of the problems with both identity politics and - probably even more importantly - with multiculturalist policies, is that such activists and 'community leaders' too often become the 'authentic voice' of their communities. This is often, as Pragna Patel points out in her article in this volume (see p115) harmful to women and other marginal elements within these communities.

2. Donna Haraway, 'Situated knowledge: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14(3), 1988.
3. See Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchies*, Paladin, New York 1972; for Pnina Werbner and Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Women and the new discourse of citizenship', in N. Yuval-Davis and P Werbner (eds), *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, Zed Books, London 1999.

Soundings

A second implication is that such advocates do not necessarily or always have to be members of that constituency. It is the message, not the messenger that counts. This does not mean, of course, that it is immaterial who the 'messenger' is. The feminists in Bologna introduced the concepts of 'rooting' and 'shifting' to clarify how this could be done. The idea is that each such 'messenger', and each participant in a political dialogue, would bring with them the reflexive knowledge of their own positioning and identity. This is the 'rooting'. At the same time, they should also try to 'shift' - to put themselves in the situation of those with whom they are in dialogue and who are different.

Transversal politics, nevertheless, does not assume that the dialogue is without boundaries or that each conflict of interest is reconcilable - although, as Jindi Pettman points out 'there are almost always possibilities for congenial or at least tolerable personal, social and political engagements'.⁴ Similar, compatible values can cut across differences in positionings and identity and assume what Alison Assiter calls 'epistemological communities'.⁵ Such epistemological communities share common value systems, and can exist across difference. The struggle against oppression and discrimination might, and mostly does, have a specific categorical focus but is never confined just to that category.

What the boundaries of the feminist 'epistemological community' and coalition politics should be is a difficult question, not only because the specific historical conditions in which any specific feminist campaign might be carried out can vary so much, but also because there are so many strands among self-identified feminists, among whom there may be very serious divisions of opinions. Moreover, as Angela Davis herself has pointed out, if the struggle against her imprisonment in the 1970s had been limited only to those who shared her politics, the campaign would have never been successful. And this is true of many other campaigns. Also, not all political campaigns are the same. There are different levels of overlapping value systems and different levels of common political work, from a tight formal organisation to a loose informal network, from an ideological alliance to a single-issue-based coalition.

4. Jan Pettman, *Living in the margins, racism, sexism and feminism in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1992, p157.

5. Alison Assiter, *Enlightened Women: Modernist Feminism in a Postmodern Age*, Routledge, London 1996, chpt 5.

However, this multiplicity of forms and intensities of coalition politics should not make us all into post-modern 'free floating signifiers' for whom 'anything goes'. Transversal politics stop where the proposed aims of the struggle are aimed at conserving or promoting unequal relations of power, and where essentialised notions of identity and difference naturalise forms of social, political and economic exclusion. The processes of 'shifting' and 'rooting' can help to distinguish between differences that are of context and terminology and differences that are of values and goals. This can have very little to do with labels and stereotypes of 'Otherness'.

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During the last ten or fifteen years, there has been a lot of progress, locally and globally, in what Charles Taylor called 'the politics of recognition'.⁶ One of the effects of this has been a growing decentering of the West and a much wider and equal dialogue between feminist and other activists on a global scale. The travel and communication revolutions, especially the growing use of the Internet, have played central roles in this development. The various UN NGO forums as they have developed in Rio, Vienna, Cairo, Copenhagen and Beijing have seen many examples of transversal dialogue and co-operation. The recent UNIFEM videoed conference on violence against women (which took place on International Women's Day, 8 March 1999) combined the technical, organisational and political advances of this movement. Probably even more impressive have been the dialogues and co-operation that have been taking place among women's and peace organisations from opposing sides of ethnic and national conflicts. On a more local level, organisations like Women Against Fundamentalisms, and Justice For Women, have been able to work in a way in which differences encompassed equality among their members without falling into the pitfall of identity politics (see reference to Women Against Fundamentalisms in Marie Mulholland and Pragna Patel's article in this journal, p134).

In many ways, the political dialogue in Northern Ireland and the proposed political settlement (whose fate, unfortunately, at the time *of* writing, seems

6. Taylor, Charles, 'Examining the Politics of Recognition', in Amy Gutmann (ed), *Multiculturalism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1994.

Soundings

more and more in doubt) have reflected the beginning of a shift in 'establishment politics' too towards transversal politics. However, as important and positive as transversal politics is, there is a silence/absence at its heart which would need confronting and transcending before it could successfully move into the centre of the political stage.

Transversal politics recognises the differential power positions among participants in the dialogue, but it nevertheless encompasses these differences with equal respect and recognition of each participant. Moreover, transversal politics resists autocratic decision-making mechanisms in which certain individuals take upon themselves to 'represent' their communities. However, it does not offer any alternative mechanism or criterion for decision-making, especially in times and places where the old feminist ideal of consensus politics is unavailable or impractical. Moreover, because transversal politics does not privilege *a priori* any-positioning or identity, the same value system might simultaneously prioritise different political projects from different standpoints. For example, where campaigns about women's control of their own bodies might prioritise struggles for the legalisation of abortion in one location, they might prioritise against forced sterilisation in another. This is not important if both struggles can take place at the same time with mutual support. However, if there are only limited human and financial resources available and there is a need to choose only one of these struggles at any one time, there is no built-in transversal way of deciding which one to choose. This was one of the main reasons that a transversal organisation like Women Against Fundamentalism could at a certain point become paralysed.

To sum up, then, transversal politics represents in many ways an important advance on the earlier *modus operandi* of the Left, which fell into traps of 'over' universalism or 'over' relativism. However, for transversal politics to become a major tool of 'real politics' as well as of 'alternative' social movements, requires from us more thinking and doing.

This article derives from a ten minute introduction to 'transversal politics' given at the seminar 'Doing Transversal Politics' in January 1999. It is therefore very brief and schematic. I have elaborated more on the concept in my article 'Women, ethnicity and empowerment, in Feminism and Psychology, special issue, Shifting identities, shifting racisms, edited by K. Bhavnani and A Phoenix; and in my book Gender and Nation, Sage, London 1997, chs. 4 & 6).