



SWEDISH  
COLLEGIUM  
for ADVANCED STUDY

## REGULAR SESSION INFORMATION

**Session:** Gender and Modernity: Rethinking Power and Identity in the Global Arena I

**Session Convener(s):** Sofia Aboim, University of Lisbon; Pedro Vasconcelos, Lisbon University Institute

**Chair:** Sofia Aboim, University of Lisbon

**Comments:** -

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I) *Facebook and Resistance: Iranian Women Construct Identity through Subversion Agency*  
Shahin Gerami, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA

II) *Identity Politics and the Media— from Saartjie Baartman to Caster Semenya*  
Kristin Skare Orgeret, Oslo University College

III) *Sexual Diversities in Contemporary India: Possibilities and ‘Closures’ for Different Identities*  
Pushpesh Kumar, SRTM University, Nanded, Maharashtra

IV) *Bodies, Gender and Power: A Mass Culture Narration*  
Nicola Porro, University of Cassino

V) *Power and Appropriation: Rethinking Gender and Modernity*  
Sofia Aboim, University of Lisbon;  
Pedro Vasconcelos, Lisbon University Institute

### Distributed papers:

*The Return of the “Honour and Shame” Paradigm in the European Space. A Study on Symbolic Violence against Women*  
Franca Bimbi, University of Padua

*Brides, Billionaires and Buildings: The Gendering of Real Estate in Postsocialist China*  
Leta Hong Fincher, Tsinghua University, Beijing

## ABSTRACTS

### Session description

Over the past few decades, a number of crucial challenges led to further reflection about the uncontested supremacy of both western modernity and a male-dominated gender order, thus shaking the traditional linkages between hegemony and subordination. Bearing this in mind, we aim, in this session, to contribute for a critical view on the impact of economic transnationalism and cultural globalization upon the power upholding the continued hegemony of a gender order still marked by various forms of subjection, even if these are increasingly plural and complex. We aim to bring together two main topics of research. First, it is necessary to locate gender relations in an increasingly globalized world, where new collective subjectivities are being built at the same time that new forms of power recreate the linkages between domination and otherness, often hiding the resilient foundations of a number of processes that perpetuate both male (or at least that of a certain male) and Western supremacy. Secondly, it is also important to reflect upon the historical construction of modernity itself as an imperialist project that is most commonly presented as a degendered endeavour. As a result, the construction of white Western men as dominant subjects is deeply connected to the ways through which a certain Eurocentric vision of modernity has been centre-stage to perpetuate key forms and processes of gender differentiation, both structurally and symbolically. We welcome papers that challenge binary dichotomies (e.g. traditional and modern) and seek to develop an approach combining the analysis of gender relations and identities with a critical view of modernity. A wide range of topics are of interest to this discussion: from practices to values in different corners of the globe, from empirical papers to theoretical discussions. We particularly encourage papers that may contribute to the questioning of hegemonic categories of power and identity (e.g. the 'West', the white man).

### Papers

1) *Facebook and Resistance: Iranian Women Construct Identity through Subversion Agency*

Shahin Gerami, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA

Iranian women have responded vigorously to the national construction of the Islamic patriarchy by either supporting or opposing its gender mandates. The largest opposition is the urban youth, especially urban women ranging from 16 to 30 years in age. They express their opposition to the regime's policies through many vehicles. The most common is manipulation of the dress code. Young women, desiring self expression, manipulate the Republic's complex dress code from size, color, texture to shape, cut, and accessories. An extension of that is the use of cyberspace, particularly Facebook. Using cyber feminism model, I have designed an interactive/ interpretive research to measure Iranian women's expression of agency. The narrative of cyber feminism and construction of gendered subversive discourse provide tools to discern women's expression of agency. Cyber gender dynamics requires sensitivity to class, religious and patriarchal identity formations within an increasingly global environment. When applying literature of cyber empowerment to women of the south, we need to consider the nuanced ways women use to subvert state and family patriarchy. I map young Iranian women's use of Facebook to construct agency by subverting Islamic Republic's and patriarchal family's codes of female domesticity and chastity. I propose that: Social networks have created interconnected fields of activism and opposition. They are utilized by young Iranian women: to challenge states' cultural fields of female modesty and domesticity; to interconnect and enhance social field of extended family from home to diaspora; to challenge patriarchal control of female body under codes of chastity enforced by the state apparatus and the family. When the state surveillance of college campuses increased, cafes and shopping centers become too dangerous, Facebook became more valuable. Though there is tough online surveillance of these networks and random shutdown of all internet connections, Iranian youth have remained savvy in the use of these sites. Young women use the medium to post their unveiled pictures and to carve

a space for their rebellious identity. Though compared to their western cohorts these expressions are modest, they are nevertheless a deviation from extended family's decorum of chastity. I have designed an interactive participant-coordinated research plan to measure women's use of Facebook for agency to resist social codes of modesty, challenge sexual decorum of chastity, and subvert the IR's gender codes. Feminist epistemology has challenged positivistic research in social sciences. We have further learned that fixed research hypothesis and operationalization of variables, though suitable for some research questions, may not be suitable for interpretive technique. Participants are not research subjects rather collaborators to help the researcher understand and document their lived lives. The design incorporates four techniques of an interactive-participant collaboration model including; (a) an initial focus group, (b) a short survey based on the group's recommendations; (c) an interpretive content analysis of the Facebooks of participants, and finally (d) phone interview of a sample of 25 to 35 participants through the use of Skype. My preliminary analyses document a female centered cyber community with nuanced faced of western modernism and eastern/Islamic/Iranian gender codes of propriety and identity construction.

II) *Identity Politics and the Media— from Saartjie Baartman to Caster Semenya*  
Kristin Skare Orgeret, Oslo University College

The paper will look into the South African media coverage of the so-called 'Caster Semenya case'. The 18-year old South African athlete who won the Women's 800 meter in the World Championship in August 2008, and had to undergo 'gender testing' while the world followed closely. Inspired by theories from the field of feminism and 'intersectionality', an approach to embedding gender processes into specific historical, cultural, and economic/political contexts, the paper will study how the process of 'gendering' take place in the media. How did the Semenya-case feed into central political and cultural power processes in South African media? How does it reflect the ruling stereotypes on sex and gender in a country with one of the highest levels of sexual violence in the world? How did the constructions of gender in the media feed into the constructions of race? The concept of identity politics is multifaceted – covering issues such as sex, gender, ethnicity, colour, status and class, reflecting colonial as well as the postcolonial realities. The paper will draw lines back to the historical example of Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815), the so-called Hottentot Venus, a Khoikhoi slave who was exhibited at freak shows in London and Paris 200 years ago, and which serves as a powerful example of the 'double-colonisation' of black women. The analysis will look into the main South African media discourses in the coverage of the Semenya-case, and discuss whether they challenged binary oppositions of traditional versus modern, colonial versus post-colonial, male versus female. The findings are believed to have a direct bearing on debates about identity politics and the media.

III) *Sexual Diversities in Contemporary India: Possibilities and 'Closures' for Different Identities*  
Pushpesh Kumar, SRTM University, Nanded, Maharashtra

The issue of sexual diversity articulated through some civil society groups almost coincides with the economic liberalization in India. The movement and assertion of sexual minorities and articulation of alternative sexual identities in India has definite western linkages. But globalizing alternative sexuality movement has not adequately addressed the issue of differential access of different groups of sexual minorities to economic and cultural resources in accessing the possibilities offered through cultural globalization. Against this backdrop the present papers looks at the modern elite gay sub-culture in India and contrasts it with the non-elite gay sub-culture of *hijras* and *kothis* (the majority transgender communities). Based on the secondary literature around the modern gay life in India and my own ethnographic data from semi-urban part of western India (Maharashtra) the paper dwells upon the possibilities and closures for elite and non-elite gay communities in contemporary India. It delineates the moments of fusion and

fission within these two groups and how civil society operates to bridge and/ or neglect the distance among diverse issues of different sexual identities.

#### IV) *Bodies, Gender and Power: A Mass Culture Narration*

Nicola Porro, University of Cassino

In the late modernity the icons of the body have been more and more inserted in a media representation of politics, art and power. It emphasizes gender differences making women's bodies a matter of public desire and desire itself as an expression of a pervasive advertising culture. So the bodily narration provides an intriguing perspective of the transition from modernity to postmodernity (or better *hypermodernity*) to be supported by a critical updating of Elias's theory on Western civilization. This one constitutes however a controversial issue, already raised in the late Eighties by Hans-Peter Dürr. He harshly criticized the 'myth of good manners' focusing on the crucial topics of nudity and shame. According to Dürr, Western civilization is nothing but an intellectual blunder, developed through a critical variation of the functionalistic theory. Elias's theory is reduced to a merely ideological and ethnocentric representation, unable to explain the cultural changes in contemporary Western societies themselves. According to this criticism the increasing commodification of women's images in the mass culture of late modernity cannot be empirically inquired and theoretically settled as 'temporary derailments from the paths of civilization'. The Elias's opponents do not however succeed in suggesting an alternative narrative to the figurational representation of the civilizing process. Actually, social sciences still lack a renewed approach to the topics. The paper focuses on an exemplary bodily narration, dealing with the relationship of gender domination and manipulation of identities suggested by a successful tv programme. The empirical investigation rests on a content analysis of one of the Italian issues of the *Big Brother* reality. The theoretical frame of the research aims at connecting the figurational approach and the theory of *somatic society* as elaborated by scholars such as Foucault, B. S. Turner, Agamben and Bauman.

#### V) *Power and Appropriation: Rethinking Gender and Modernity*

Sofia Aboim, University of Lisbon;

Pedro Vasconcelos, Lisbon University Institute

The critique of the old idea that Western modernity would progress and create a uniform world ruled by the very same cultural and institutional patterns is today at the centre of the debate, thus opening the theoretical space for other approaches to global change to emerge. With these critical perspectives, which have benefit from culturalist, post-structuralist or post-colonial theorizations, another major questioning is brought into the debate: the erosion and/or transformation of patriarchy as the pillar of an unequal gender order, where women and a number of men are subordinated subjects. Therefore, we are proposing that a critical approach to the transformation of hegemony(ies) – that of the West and that of men – implies viewing both processes as entangled inasmuch as modernity has been a gender endeavour from the outset. In order to further develop our critique, we contend that power, and the ways in which it is mobilized and performed, is an essential concept that cannot be discarded. Hoping to reconcile a materialist view of power as the appropriation of goods, which is highly indebted to Marx and post-marxist theorizations, with a Foucaultian definition of power as a creative force of the subject that ties together those who are dominant and those who are dominated, we reckon that the concept of appropriation should be taken as a point of departure to rethink modernity and gender relations. This is a challenging argument, but it is our contention that reworking Marx's notion of 'appropriation' may be an important step, if we are able to go beyond a materially driven definition and extend the concept of appropriation to culture and symbolic goods as well as agency and embodiment. Indeed, the process of incorporation, whether domination or subordination is to be (re)produced, implies appropriation, and this appropriation is always a power-based process, where some actors are alienated

subjects. Such a perspective will allow us to rethink the changing hegemonies of the world and the uneven impact of globalization and transnationalization processes in different corners of the globe and upon gender relations.

Distributed papers:

*The Return of the “Honour and Shame” Paradigm in the European Space. A Study on Symbolic Violence against Women*  
Franca Bimbi, University of Padua

Nowadays it seems that the return of the “honour and shame” paradigm in the European feminist debate on violence against women is linked to specific characteristics of some migrant cultures. The main issue is whether the defence of the women’s honour, based on body’s modesty, pre-marriage chastity and conjugal fidelity, might entail risks of gender violence. Thus, at the opposite, we wonder if in our “modern” time women’s emancipation requires to consider as positive any easier display of women body to public gaze. Furthermore, cases of women’s murder are reported as “honour killing”, a hotly contested category: could it be considered as a direct result of patriarchal cultures or as a label to discriminate certain groups of migrants? A research group at University of Padua is working on these issues to investigate different dimensions of symbolic violence. At the moment, the “honour and shame” paradigm being assigned to “the Other”, facilitates the invisibility of “our” symbolic violence and it produces a false evidence of unchallenged oppression against migrant women. Despite the Northern-Western egalitarian frames, we could find a moral and political dualism in the European hegemonic discourse on violence against women. In “our” modern gender reciprocity, the “facts” concerning violent behaviours in “our” men are increasingly described as an individual deviance or pathology. On the other hand, the victimization of migrant women is more often considered as a possible consequence of their internalization of traditional gender asymmetry. The supposed homogeneous patriarchal cultures of some immigrant groups is the other side of the invisibility of migrant women’s effort to disempower their frames of symbolic violence, re-defining, at the same time, the meanings of their cultural identities. We can consider these efforts, together with a critical approach to “our” invisible symbolic violence, as a new hermeneutic for the European citizenship.

*Brides, Billionaires and Buildings: The Gendering of Real Estate in Postsocialist China*  
Leta Hong Fincher, Tsinghua University, Beijing

Skyrocketing house prices in China in recent years are emblematic of the country’s modernity and rapid economic development. Since 2007, price-to-rent ratios in Beijing and some other major cities in China have increased by 30 to 100 percent. China is now the largest home-owning society in the world. Yet entrenched patriarchal traditions undermine the modernity of the real estate market. 31-year-old Anna (pseudonym) has a successful career as a real estate agent in Beijing but no home of her own. Her parents bought a house for her brother so that he could marry, but did not buy one for her because she is female. Anna plans to marry soon, but her fiancé could not afford a home, so she contributed her savings to help him buy an apartment in his name alone. She feels that it is important to support his sense of manhood, even though she will have no legal claim to the property in the event of a divorce. China’s Supreme People’s Court has just changed the country’s Marriage Law to state that after divorce, marital property belongs solely to the person who registers as home owner. The vast majority of residential property in China is in the man’s name alone. Demand for residential real estate is driven in part by China’s sex-ratio imbalance, which has intensified pressure on parents to buy a home for their son to attract a bride. This paper explores the social construction of gender in China’s real estate market by drawing on interviews with real estate agents and home buyers, as well as observation of housing development openings in Beijing. I also find signs of

resistance to the state's new law, such as the blogger who says "we women should buy our own house, get artificial insemination and have a baby by ourselves."