



## **Evaluation of the MA thesis *Gender, Ethnicity and Peacebuilding in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict* by Ramil Zamanov**

In this thesis Ramil Zamanov develops an intersectional perspective to examine the long-term effects of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in the lives of displaced and refugee women, and on people who identify as lesbian, gay, transgender and queer. On this basis he outlines some suggestions of how marginalised people could be included in peacebuilding and revive, and possibly reconfigure, the stalled peace process. The thesis mobilises critical perspectives from gender and sexuality studies and the study of race and ethnicity in relation to a region where these approaches are rarely pursued and that remains underrepresented in studies of post-socialism: the South Caucasus, and, as Zamanov shows taking the example of Nagorno Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan, its complex history of mono- and multi-ethnic states, colonial occupation by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union with a conflicting legacy of democratic oppression, gender progressive policies (e.g. promoting women's literacy, education, employment and legalisation of homosexuality) and fuelling ethnic division. The author has chosen a qualitative approach (interviews and observations) to examine the living conditions of those whose concerns are rarely attended to.

In highlighting some key strengths of the thesis, I first commend Ramil Zamanov for his courage to place himself in sometimes difficult research relations in Georgia and Azerbaijan. Here the willingness of a researcher born after the end of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh to revisit sites of massacre and forced eviction, and to listen to those who had to flee and/or face discrimination and to face mistrust and refusal of those who did not want to talk to him constitutes itself a hopeful (feminist) responsive and responsible moment for a more peaceful future.

The strength of the thesis' literature review consists less in working with a variety of existing conceptions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and intersectionality than *setting to work* concepts such as Tambiah's politics of ethnicity in the analysis of historical census data and pinpointing inequalities of power – hence, the author is already doing analysis rather than merely summing up the work of others. The work on gender and sexuality too opens up some of the complexities of Caucasian gender regimes: Soviet rule did not simply strengthen *or* undermine masculine power, but gender relations were configured by class positions as well; the legalisation of homosexuality coexists with family honour killings of gay and queer young people.

A merit in the discussion of the research design and feminist reflexivity is the accounting of the positionality of the researcher as differently constituted in different interactions, sometimes in surprising ways: in his country of birth, Zamanov is himself (mis)taken for and

disparaged as a displaced person, and in Georgia generously hosted by those who had very little. Throughout the thesis Zamanov is open about what did not work out and the refusals and silences he encountered. Importantly these are considered as data that need careful analysis. The refusal of participation by formerly displaced women who considered themselves (assimilated) locals, for example, is an opportunity to reflect on the category of IDP, its temporality as well as pressures to assimilate and forget histories of displacement (chapter 3).

I consider a key strength of the thesis what could also be construed as its weakness: that it does not isolate a single determining factor but stays with the complexity of the participants' lives, shaped by the material conditions of flight, marital status, state assistance, illness and more. Each of these are systematically examined in relation of gender and ethnicity without according any one a singular power of determination: they are configured situationally, such that state assistance is unequally distributed based on nationality, and is both a source of support and of envy and discrimination. That women feel closer to those of another ethnicity than 'their own' in a different location shows how ethnicity is locally inflected. Considering the experiences of queer lives provides further insights into the mutual constitution of gender, ethnicity as well as sexuality as Zamanov shows in relation to the construction of militarism and pronatalism that underpin national aspirations from which nonnormative genders and ethnic groups are excluded. At the same time, the subject positions of the marginalised are not exempt from critical analysis: not all refugee women and LGBTQ participants are anti-militaristic, and there are no natural alliances between women and queers.

These intersectional complexities ground four practical suggestions for the participation of working class displaced and refugee women, minoritised ethnic groups and queers through material support, subgroup formations and quotas, that Zamanov argues have to be included in large enough numbers *because* of their diversity. This brings me to two more critical remarks: given that the research participants included peace activists (p. 29) more focus could have been put on existing practices in peacebuilding to nuance the recommendations – especially since women's peace organisations had declined to participate. Second, it is sometimes not clear what existing studies have already established, for example, with respect to high occurrence of illness among displaced women (p. 47) that corroborate the authors findings.

Overall, however, I consider the intersectional analysis and demonstration of the categorical complexity of gender, ethnicity and sexuality successful and recommend the grade 1.

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