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Translocational Social Theory After “Community”: An Interview with Floya Anthias

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Floya Anthias is Professor of Sociology at the University of East London, visiting Professor of Sociology at City University in London, and Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Social Justice at Roehampton University in London. Her research spans a range of theoretical and empirical concerns related to racism, diaspora and hybridity, multiculturalism, gender and migration, labor market disadvantages and class position. Anthias’ current work develops the concept of translocational positionality as a way of addressing some of the difficulties identified with concepts of hybridity, identity, and intersectionality. Her most recent book is *Contesting Integration, Engendering Migration*.

disClosure Collective (DC): Thank you for chatting with us this morning; it is a pleasure to have you in town here in Lexington. I guess starting off, please tell us where you’re situated now in academia and how you came to be there.

Floya Anthias (FA): Well, at the moment I am Professor of Sociology at the University of East London. I have been a professor at a number of different universities. I was, for many years, at the University of Greenwich in London and then moved to Oxford Brookes University and, after that, moved on to the University of Roehampton. I actually retired from there, so I am now Emeritus Professor at the University of Roehampton. And then, after a year or so, I was appointed at the University of East London as a professor. I did my undergraduate degree at the London School of Economics, post-grad at the University of Birmingham, and PhD at the University of London’s Royal Holloway College.

DC: How often do you find yourself in the United States, coming around to universities here?

FA: I have been several times to the United States, but not terribly often. I get invited a lot in Europe and in Canada and Australia more, but the United States, not so frequently.

DC: So, how would you define social theory?

FA: Okay, well that is a difficult one, to give one definition. But social theory is that attempt to provide an analytical framework, a set of related concepts, which help you to understand and research society.

And social theory is a broader concept to sociological theory. I am actually a sociologist, but social theory includes any theory of society which might include aspects of theory and analytical concepts that come from the social sciences more generally. So social theory is a body of work that involves the production of analytical concepts which are heuristic: that is, which enable us to study, understand, and explain social relations more generally. These include institutional relations and structural relations, as well as relations between people and, of course, discourses and representations of society.

DC: Absolutely, and it is such a broad concept that you unpack very well. I think it's about not being restricted to the disciplines we find ourselves in, so that's really helpful. You mentioned that you are a sociologist. As a sociologist, how do you develop a social theory framework within sociology? I would say, from the sociologists I know and have read, not all of them would associate themselves with social theory, so how do you develop a social theory framework within your specific field?

FA: As a sociologist, I have a very long tradition of sociological theory to draw from. There are the three greats, the trio of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, of course: the classical sociologists that provide very important tools for the nature of society. But of course each contributes very different tools: with Durkheim being concerned with the study of objective phenomena, Weber more concerned with subjective relations between actors, and, of course, Marx, who was concerned with the relationship between economy and society. So, they provide very important tools and, of course, there are traditions emanating from those three kind of areas of social theory. But, of course, not every sociologist sees themselves as a social theorist.

I happen to have always been very interested in theoretical questions, although I have done critical work. And my theoretical questions stem from trying to think about what are the tools we can deploy in order to understand things better, and I was always interested as a young person in issues of racism and issues of sexism and, of course, class inequality. So these three things always bothered me, always interested me. They were the reasons I studied sociology in the first place, because I was interested in how they operated in society. And that comes partly from my own background, because my father was a journalist and a political activist. He himself emerged from the peasant class in Cyprus to become an intellectual. So, these are the things that sort of haunted me to develop my interests in social theory, particularly in that area of gender, race, and class.

DC: Yeah, and I think the next question really speaks to this combination.

FA: Yes.

DC: And we'll follow-up on that a bit later as well. How would you define intersectionality, and how has your view changed over the years?

FA: Now, I first started thinking about the questions that have now been termed "intersectionality" in a different way through looking at how ethnicity and gender particularly related in my work: in my PhD which was on Greek-Cypriot migrants in Britain. I looked at the connections between ethnicity and gender, class, and so on in that PhD. What I tried to demonstrate in one of my chapters was how women were particularly useful as resources for the ethnic group. They were used in particular ways for developing small-scale self-employment concerns for the wives, and of course the children of the migrants were being deployed. So, I looked at how gender operated in terms of "ethnic adaptation," which was the term that I used. In those days, we used to talk about "sexual divisions" rather than gender divisions.

You know we’re talking about the late Seventies, before intersectionality had even entered the sphere at all. And already I was beginning to think about the connections since, in my PhD in the late Seventies, I had worked on racism before. I had also done a master’s thesis on the conceptualization of racism: the ideological aspects of the concept of racism. So, I was embedded in that area.

One epiphany, partly, was going to the “Sexual Divisions in Society” Conference in 1974. It was the first time the British Sociological Association had a conference on sexual divisions. It was the time of the growth of third wave feminism, and this was fantastic, because there was one particular paper that was looking at the links between ethnicity, gender, and class. I thought, “Wow, there’s somebody out there thinking about these things!” So that was important for me as well.

Another important aspect for me was when I first started academic life as a young lecturer with Nira Yuval-Davis, whose work you may know; she is very well-known. She was also very interested in the same issues, and we went to a meeting of what was called the “Sex and Class Group,” which was a group that was a part of the Conference of Socialist Economists. There was this group in the UK and Britain. And in this group—you know, this group of feminists, many of them—we suggested that we should have a subgroup looking at gender and race. And at the time, I have to say, there was very little interest in it. Because feminists—these were particularly white feminists—were not particularly interested at the time on issues of race. They had other things they were interested in: developing a kind of Marxist approach to gender, socialist feminism, and so on. So Nira Yuval-Davis and I decided we would write an article on gender, race, and class, which we did, and published it in *Feminist Review* in 1983.¹ So that began a kind of collaboration with Nira, although we also worked separately.

It was not intersectionality; you see we were writing about these issues in the late Seventies and the early Eighties before, of course, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s important article in 1989.² We talked about intersections and we talked about connections but did not talk about intersectionality as such. So in the “Contextualizing Feminism” article, one of the main arguments was that you couldn’t have a mechanical-additive approach: you couldn’t say, “there’s gender inequality, and then there’s racial inequality, which you add, and then there’s class inequality, and that it adds up to more inequality.” You could not have an additive model. Instead, we should look at the specificities of experience that emerge out of the cross-cuttings of these “social divisions,” as we called them. That was the main argument, and we looked at how Marxist Feminism had failed to address issues of race and how anti-racist theories had failed to address issues of gender.

So that is how we started. But we always—I can say this for both myself and Nira—we always had a view of what later became intersectionality, which was against an additive approach, was against treating gender, race, and class merely as identity categories. We were always interested in the structural foundations of these forms of inequality—the material structures which underpinned them. And, of course, over the years, you know, I’ve been writing about these issues in a number of different ways. I have written quite a lot on rethinking class. How can we rethink social stratification approaches to take into account the stratifying element of gender and race, that when we look at forms of stratification and hierarchy, we shouldn’t only be looking at labor market processes, or economic processes? Gender and race are *central* elements of the stratification theory of society. So, I have written a number of papers on that, and my views of intersectionality, of course, developed into what I called “translocational positionality,” which tries to overcome some of the potential problems of some forms of intersectionality—not *all* forms of intersectionality—which treat intersectionality as a question of identity categories that come together in people’s experiences. And I argue that it’s an approach that applies to everybody; it’s not just a theoretical approach that is limited to looking at certain particularly disadvantaged groups. It is more generally applicable.

DC: So translocational positionality came about not as a corrective, but a sort of retooling, to some extent, of intersectionality?

FA: Well, it came out of two things. One, it came out of a critique of particular approaches to hybridity and identity. I mean, I first talked about it in one article that was published in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.³ In that article, I critiqued those approaches to hybridity that saw culture as something that just came together, that two cultures (the migrant culture or minority culture) came together with another to produce a hybrid form. I argued that it was much more complex and provided a critique of identity there, which I later developed in another article in 2002.⁴ So it [translocational positionality] came about as a critique of a particular identity/culture discourse. Part of it was that it was a honing of the idea of how different social divisions connect together in ways which are not fixed, which are not essential or given, but are context-related. We need to incorporate both hierarchical structures and structures relating to the boundaries between categories.

DC: I think that's absolutely right—that, the more we learn, the more we see how complex it is. These are very important challenges, to sort out the identity politics paradigm that was coming out of the Nineties. It makes a lot of sense. Here in 2015, as social theorists working in these different fields, how do we move *toward* intersectionality or toward a fuller consideration of these concerns? What do you see as some of the challenges that lay ahead as we incorporate these ideas into our work?

FA: Well, there are a number of challenges, both conceptual and political. The conceptual challenges relate to the question: How do you actually live out an intersectionality framework as a theorist? Is there a methodology that we can call intersectional? There have been a number of debates about this—about, for example, different ways intersectional research can be approached, such as McCall's ideas on inter-categorical/intracategorical/anticategorical. You can either refuse categories (anticategorical), you can look at divisions within the category of gender (intracategorical), or between gender and race (intercategorical). That was an important moment, and there has been a lot of debate around that.

But, there is increasing interest in what the methodological challenges are, and I think two things come to mind. One, I don't think there is any one theory that we can say is intersectional theory. I think of intersectionality as providing a particular lens, a particular way of seeing things (an analytical sensitivity), that always asks us to interrogate how different forms of inequality interact together—to always think. If we're exploring issues of racism, to always think of the gendered aspects of that and the class aspects of that. Similarly, if we're looking at issues of gender, to always look at the racialized and the class aspects. So, it's a lens. I don't think intersectionality, *yet*, anyway, has the conceptual apparatus of its own, which allows us to say it's a theory. I don't think it's a theory, but rather a framing, rather than a *framework*. You can use a number of different theoretical traditions to explore it. You can use a more Marxist approach which is intersectional, which pays particular attention to material structures. You can use a much more Weberian approach, which is more concerned with social action and interaction amongst people. You can use a Bourdieuan approach. It allows you to choose a theoretical framework and incorporate an intersectional perspective within that. I don't think it yet has its own conceptual tools, as such, or its own methodology.

DC: So we could start to get there by drawing from other frameworks? With Bourdieu, it would seem to be around the concept of value—starting there, then folding in these other considerations. That's very helpful.

FA: Yes.

DC: So this semester, our social theory course is titled "Transnational Lives," and we're studying how people move across border, across nations. We wanted to know how you see the theme of transnational lives fitting in with social theory, or even within translocational positionality. What kind of knowledge can transnational lives produce?

FA: Transnational lives is a very important and very current concern. I mean, it's very important because population movements have grown. They've become much more diverse. There is rampant globalization, and transnationalism provides a very important lens because it enables us—as Nina Glick Schiller⁵ has said—beyond the nation-state boundary and avoid methodological nationalism, recognizing that all people live their lives transnationally, whether they're actually moving or not. Avtar Brah⁶ has talked already about diasporic space—she calls it "diaspora space," where even if you are not yourself a member of a diaspora, and many of us are of course, many have also stayed where they were born and their parents have stayed where they were born. They also occupy a transnational arena inasmuch as around them the lives are transnational, and they are a part of that process.

It's very important. The theoretical tools for transnational lives come from a much more global sociology, if you like, or social science, a more globally inflected social theory. It's concerned with the interconnections between nation-states, the hierarchical structures globally, and the modes by which lives are led across nation-state borders. There's the role, for example, of cultural exchanges, new forms of communications, like digitalized and internet communications, the different forms of inequality that emerge through transnationalism, such as the growth of categories that are particularly exploited with transnational movements of population, like care workers, domestic workers, and so on.

DC: Yes, and I think moving past a national framework and understanding what that entails, it's about figuring out what the new heuristic is, or what the new "community" is, if such a thing exists. I have heard you say elsewhere that community doesn't exist in modern society in the same way. Do you think that's right? If we're moving past a national framework, what do you think constitutes a group or a community? When does a collection of people turn into a body that can be studied?

FA: Yes, thank you for that question. Well, let's attack this notion of community head-on. One of the problems, I think, with the notion of community, as such, is that it assumes an organic whole. It assumes a homogeneity. When we talk about communities, it's as though we're talking about sets of people that actually share exactly the same characteristics—that they are a community because they share values. Or they are a community because they bonded together in forms of solidarity. We assume some homogeneity.

And although, certainly, there are self-proclaimed communities, and there are people who come together in terms of shared values or occupy the same terrain, as social scientists we should be aware that these communities are not organic wholes and that they are not unproblematic. Because communities themselves are often structured in conflict. For example, within communities, there are leaders and there are followers. There may be some that are more powerful—there are gendered forms of exploitation that go on within communities. The community leaders, who purport to represent the community, often are representing their own interests. The voices of the marginalized, of the women and of the young, often are not heard. And there're lots of constraints in communities about conforming. So yes, maybe communities are a good thing inasmuch as they provide people with senses of belonging, which is very important. However, communities are also fractured, and when we look at communities we should always be

looking at those elements as well. We should not assume them to be unproblematic entities.

Of course, in the modern era, community becomes even more problematized, with movements of population, with fracturing, with the growth of urbanity and particular forms of urbanism. In isolation and alienation within urban settings, we find that community no longer has the same meaning for people. I mean, people strive for community. There is an instinct, I think, to find community—a pull for belonging, if you like. Instinct is the wrong word. Maybe we should think about it as “What are the group-making practices that people are involved in in *making* groups?” Groups are not given. They don’t exist as such, but they’re made by people in their everyday lives. What prompts people into group-making practices, and how do they forge their belonging? So we can ask questions about group-making practices and belonging practices, and these are problematized in the modern world by particular forms of exclusion and boundaries that exist in the global world, in the world with modern movements. For example, nation-states attempt to control their boundaries, so that only some migrants are acceptable and others are not as acceptable, some are allowed citizenship while some are not, some are excluded more than others. There are a number of issues here about how, in a global society, how do we develop forms of belonging, engagement, and participation that are as inclusionary as possible.

DC: Emancipatory, you might say. Not restrictive.

FA: Yes.

DC: So your work proposes that it’s necessary to look at groups while simultaneously taking into account gender, race, and class, which you had mentioned toward the beginning of the interview. Do you think it would be helpful, or even necessary, to include other subject-positioning markers, such as physical and mental capacity, or capability, educational level, regional affiliation, and sexual orientation? This was something we discussed in our class. Should we talk about other categories?

FA: Yes, absolutely. There are two aspects of this answer. One is, of course, when we are doing research which is intersectional, there are some categories that are often invisible, categories that we don’t often think are salient. We must always be alert to categories that are important in people’s lives. These will of course include issues of ability and disability, age, education, and so on. There is no set number of categories that are intersectional.

Some people have tried to say there are, saying, “Oh, well there’s just the ‘big three.’ Gender, race, and class are the *most* important.” Other people have extended it. Some have said seven; others have said thirteen. In equal opportunity conversations, for example, in Britain, faith has been included, along with disability. I can’t remember all the others. So you can extend it, certainly. But I think the important thing is to ask what is operating in a salient way in the work that we do, in the world that we see around us, in terms of the focus we have in research. These categories are emergent; we will find them. They are not things we can impose. That’s one part of the answer, so I’ll say “Yes, we should also look at a range of relations around us.”

The second answer is that, in my own work, I have argued in terms of the concept of “social division.” Social division is a concept that is useful. Unlike the concept of a social category, a social division takes into account, I have said, a number of characteristics. A social division is often constructed in a very binary way, so, for example, with race, it is often in terms of white versus black, or dominant versus subordinate. In terms of class, it’s often those who have and those who haven’t. In the case of gender, it’s male and female. Of course, sexuality should be included in the categories. It’s a social division that may be heterosexual or homosexual, as a sort of binary. So, these particular binary-making categories, as social

divisions, are particularly powerful in constructing forms of exclusion and inequality.

And attached to these binaries are constructions of selves and others, and also forms of hierarchical relations, and resource allocation, forms of inferiority. People who are on the right side (white, male, heterosexual) have more power than the left side (female, black, homosexual). So, the other part of my answer is, yes there are a range of categories that become salient and which are always emergent, but in terms of conceptions of social divisions, we can think of some of them as very systematic. They appear differently in different contexts. We will find them operating in social forces across the globe in particular ways, and these would be things like gender, race, class, sexuality, maybe disability as well. We can think of all the others as well as emergent, but these seem to be the most powerful globally.

DC: Yeah, and I like how you framed the first part of your answer, which helps the second part, that we shouldn't impose these categories on our objects of study, on our topics. It's more about finding what is operational in a context we're looking at.

FA: Precisely.

DC: That's a very helpful way to think about it. I'm in literary studies, and, constantly, that's the debate: Do you find it in the text, or do you find it outside of the text? You've touched on this in some of your other answers, but how do you think intersectionality and translocational positionality can be used to analyze non-migrants? You mentioned earlier that everyone is transnational, whether they know it or not. I'd be interested to hear how you see these concepts working with non-migrants.

FA: These are not concepts that actually are specifically about migrants. If you look at intersectionality, it emerged as an approach through the work of Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, in terms particularly of understanding the experience of racialized women, particularly black women. So they emerged out of anti-racist feminism, if you like, and this is where my own work started in the late Seventies and early Eighties—through an anti-racist feminism. I was also, at that time, married to developing a Marxist approach that was able to incorporate gender and race into it. So, it wasn't specifically about migrants.

But also, intersectionality started as a way of addressing disadvantage, and one of the things we can see today with its development is that actually intersectionality can also address forms of advantage. What are the intersections that help advantaged groups? It's not just about disadvantage; we could look at the colonizers, for example. What were the intersections there, with dominant capitalist classes and so on? But apart from exploring disadvantage and advantage, it's also something we can use to explore everybody's lives; everybody lives their lives intersectionally. Everybody operates in terms of the hierarchies and boundaries of social categorization, social stigmatization, social evaluation, status, and so on. This informs everybody's lives. That's why I think it's a theoretical framing which applies to the study of society more generally, not just to groups. And groups, in any case, are always made or constructed; they're never a given. Part of the group-making exercise *is* the intersections within which group-making is forged.

Similarly, with translocational positionality, all of us are involved in this processual element, which I've called the making of translocational positionalities—that is, the making of social locations and how social locations come together in different times, in different contexts, to produce particular effects, both in terms of our objective social position and the way we position *ourselves* in relation to that.

DC: I think we have time for one more question. What advice do you have for the next generation of

scholars? What are one or two things that you wish someone had told you while you were in graduate school?

FA: Okay, let's start with the first one: what advice I would give. One of the main advices that I would give is to follow your interest, follow that which you are passionate about. I know it's not so easy always, because there is a job market out there which pulls you in particular directions. But in order to do effective academic work, my view is you really need to be engaged with what you're doing. So that's one advice: go where your heart and mind take you, then put *all* your energy into it. Secondly, never be disheartened. One of the things PhD students, or those who have recently gotten their PhDs, have said is how difficult it is for them to make an impact. It's all been said before, or they've sent some articles to publishers and received these comments that are often very hard to take. I say, if you believe in yourself, get on with it. Don't take to heart what a reviewer might say about what you've done. Polish it up. Change it. Transform it, work at it. Keep at it, and you will succeed. Those are the two aspects: passion and perseverance and belief in yourself. Don't ever let yourself be disheartened, because actually the whole review process can be very psychologically damaging. One of your supervisors might say, "I don't like what you've done." You know, I had it done to me. I had one article that was very well-cited, but when I first submitted it to a journal I was told, "You know this is not up to standard." I was a lot younger then, and it was very upsetting, but I persisted because I realized that you know what, I've got something to say, and I'm not going to let this person say otherwise. And interestingly enough, we edited a book with Nira Yuval-Davis that became quite well known—*Woman, Nation, State*—which was one of the first studies on the relationship between gender and rationalism. And we submitted our introduction to a journal in the US and got rejected. We were told, "Actually, you know, there's no empirical evidence that there's any connection between gender and nation" and so on. But we persisted because we believed in it, and I'm glad we did it. As a graduate student, I wish I'd been given this advice.

DC: This is so helpful, because we were all talking the other day about how we feel funneled into something in our work, and a lot of times our passions might not fit with those funnels. So it's helpful to think about it this way. It's encouraging.

FA: I mean, you might be saying something beyond your time in a way that the academic community, stuck in one position, is unwilling to move a little bit more or take the next step. There are always investments by scholars in particular approaches, and it can be more difficult if you're developing a theoretical tool than if you're producing empirical work. You could be regarded as a maverick, someone outside the fold trying to undermine the conventionally received wisdom of the time. But you *need* to take risks as well, that's the other thing. If you do see loopholes in problems, you should be willing to explore them, sometimes at risk. It *can* pay off in the end.

DC: Thank you.

FA: Thank *you!* These were very challenging and interesting questions.

Notes

1. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, "Contextualizing Feminism - Gender, Ethnic and Class Divisions," *Feminist Review* 15, no. 1 (1983): 62-75.
2. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Cri-

- tique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139-167.
3. Floya Anthias, "New Hybridities, Old Concepts: the Limits of Culture," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 4 (2001): 619-641.
 4. Floya Anthias, "Where Do I Belong? Narrating Collective Identity and Translocational Positionality," *Ethnicities* 2, no. 4 (2002): 491-514.
 5. See Nina Glick-Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristiana Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Project, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (London: Routledge, 1993).
 6. See Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1996).