



Restructuring Relations. Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance and Gender

by Rauna Kuokkanen, Oxford University Press, 2019, 384 pp., 56,28€ (hardcover), ISBN-13: 978-0190913281

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BOOK REVIEW

Restructuring Relations. Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance and Gender, by Rauna Kuokkanen, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 384 pp., 56,28€ (hardcover), ISBN-13: 978-0190913281

Rauna Kuokkanen's timely book, *Restructuring Relations. Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance and Gender*, offers an extensive analysis of Indigenous people's struggle for survival recommendable for scholars and activists interested in topics such as (the intersection of) international law, post-colonial, feminist and Indigenous studies. Gender is Kuokkanen's prism for discussing Indigenous struggles against colonialism. Whilst self-determination is definitely the aim of the struggles, it is everything but certain what it entails. Traditionally it has not been related to violence against women, but this is what Kuokkanen does. She compares self-determination issues among First Nations, Inuit and Sámi people from a feminist perspective, and criticizes established international law and human rights regimes for neglecting bodily rights in her exhaustive comparison of Indigenous peoples living in the federal state Canada, the autonomous territory of Greenland, and the unitary Scandinavian states Norway, Sweden and Finland.

Kuokkanen outlines a comprehensive and readable story of similarities and differences in terms of actual and envisioned self-determination and demonstrates how settler colonialism has resulted in violence for Indigenous lands and (women's) bodies.

Indigenous feminism is, according to Kuokkanen, similar to postcolonial feminism, but differs in placing the struggle for self-determination and the question of land at the heart of its theory and activism. Jennifer Nedelsky's theory of relational autonomy, Iris Marion Young's notion of non-domination, and Nancy Fraser's theory of justice are core references when Kuokkanen spells out the normative framework of self-determination: self-determination is a relational and foundational value (something widely shared and considered indispensable), where "the norm of integrity" is imperative. Integrity is a broad concept that encompasses cultural and collective integrity -notions well established in international law—plus individual integrity and integrity of land, which have been less prominent.

Kuokkanen's idea is to expand existing conceptions of self-determination to make them responsive to indigenous women's demands and needs: territorial claims and bodily safety. She displays how violence against women is always shaped by "wider patters of inequality" (p. 12), in this case (neo)colonial relations of humiliation, deprivation, poverty and institutional failure to protect the population in general, and children and women's bodies in particular. In this sense, the book belongs to a proud feminist tradition of expanding the political, and dismantling the public/private divide. As for Indigenous feminism, Kuokkanen—and the women she interviewed—seems to belong to the maternal or relational strands of feminism. The indigenous women's voices in this book are deeply concerned with relations to land, to language, and to bodies. Welfare and care for children and elderly are core issues in their visions for self-government.

This book includes thought-provoking discussions of human rights and justice. Kuokkanen claims that when negotiations of self-determination are considered through international law only, the outcome will be "extremely limiting". The main problem is this approach inevitably "fails to protect against the violence of settler colonialism and interpersonal sexual and physical violence". Kuokkanen leans on existing research in addition to 76 semi-structured interviews with women, and a few men, when she elaborates a gendered analysis of colonial history. Women have continuously contributed to Indigenous people's struggles for self-determination, without being properly recognized.

Chapter One elaborates the normative and theoretical take on self-determination. The mainstream rights approach to indigenous self-determination is limited, legalistic and state-centred, she argues (p. 19). It undermines Indigenous people's world-views that address responsibilities, and it diminishes the collective character of Indigenous people. Kuokkanen explores the multi-layered meanings of self-determination based on her interviews, and she formulates a *relational* approach: she conceptualizes Indigenous self-determination as a foundational value that seeks to restructure all forms of relations of domination, including social and bodily relations. It is understood as a process rather than a predetermined outcome. The point is to foster integrity, not necessarily independence or sovereignty in line with Western political institutions. A relational approach to self-determination must encompass free, prior, and informed consent regarding the use of indigenous land and of indigenous bodies. Kuokkanen demonstrates why and how negotiations of indigenous self-determination should address women and women's concerns about social or community issues such as children's welfare and violence against women.

In Chapter Two, Kuokkanen takes us through the self-government institutions of three Indigenous peoples that differ tremendously in terms of history and size: The Sámi population numbers around 100 000, the Inuit population in Greenland is about 56 000, and the First Nation in Canada numbers 850 000. Whilst the Sámi population is a very small minority in Scandinavia, approximately 1%, the Inuit in Greenland make up almost 90% of the population. When it comes to political histories, the colonial processes were more gradual and less physically violent in Scandinavia and Greenland than in Canada (p. 8), and the Sámi and Inuit people avoided legislation similar to the harsh, segregationist Indian Act in Canada.

The present political structures are very different: there are elected Sámi Parliaments in Norway, Sweden and Finland. There are de facto self-government structures for "the people of Greenland" (although they do not recognize the self-determination of the Inuit Greenlander's specifically). In Canada, there are a number of different forms of local self-government agreements for Indigenous peoples. Despite differences, Indigenous people share colonial experiences and have joined forces in global anti-colonial struggles since the late 1960s.

Kuokkanen argues that the ultimate vision of self-determination is similar among the world's Indigenous peoples; decision-making powers over their own affairs. The actual models of implementing self-determination differ greatly, as discussed in depth in Chapter Three "Implementing Indigenous Self-Determination: Self-Administration, Rematriation, or Independence". The research participants claim that the state, bureaucratization and lack of capacity are basic problems for self-determination.

The interviewees are rather critical towards the self-administration model of the Sámi and dismiss the elected "parliaments" as mostly symbolical. Two visions emerge among the research participants: independence or the Westphalian nation-state among Inuit women in Greenland, and rematriation among First Nation women in Canada. Since the independence vision does not include individual integrity and bodily sovereignty, decolonial rematriation stands out as Kuokkanen's prioritized vision. This vision fully engages with the norm of integrity, she argues, and "reveals the possibility and practice of alternative forms of self-determination not structured along the lines of the nation-state" (p. 136).

Chapter 4 "Gendering Indigenous Self-Government" is an analysis of how Indigenous political institutions, cultures and discourses are gendered. Kuokkanen argues that gender used to be multiple and fluid among many Indigenous peoples, which is why "rematriation" emerge in a number of interviews. The research participants speak of the gender divisions in their self-government institutions, and how hard it is to challenge subtle, informal and understated misogynist strategies. They make strong arguments for "a politics of restructuring" all relations in order to reclaim Indigenous women's leadership roles, to include more women, and to gender the self-determination agenda. Kuokkanen also argues that the interviews go beyond gendering to queering, but queer perspectives are not much elaborated.

Chapter 5 “Self-determination and Violence against Indigenous Women” builds on the claims and experiences of Indigenous women’s organizations. It argues that existing models of self-government are forms of structural violence because they exclude the norm of individual integrity and freedom from bodily harm. Nearly all the research participants agree that violence against women is a self-determination issue, but Indigenous self-government institutions do not (p. 214). They rather relate violence to alcohol and private, psychological problems. Kuokkanen reminds us that social issues are political.

This leads to Chapter 6 “Indigenous Gender Justice as Restructuring Relations”. The failure to consider individual integrity as a self-determination issue, the marginalization of women in political institutions, and the separation of soft women’s issues from hard political issues are discussed. Here, Kuokkanen draws on Nancy Fraser’s three-dimensional theory of justice: participation is not sufficient, redistribution and recognition are necessary. The welfare of children and violence against women have to be addressed because there is no self-determination without Indigenous gender justice, and no Indigenous gender justice without restructuring relations of domination.

As someone who is reasonably familiar with Sámi people and feminism (Halsaa, 2020) I have found it very illuminating to read Kuokkanen’s comparative engagement with Inuit and First Nations people. The harsh legacy of the Indian Act in Canada, including the terrible foster care system and other means of actively disempowering Indigenous women, men and children is heart-breaking, but the colonial heritage vis a vis Sámi people is not that different. The reading has contextualized my understanding of Sámi people, including the mobilization of Sámi women in Norway. Grappling with the complexity of self-determination has been enriching. The book demonstrates advantages of doing comparative research, but the challenges the project entails seem somewhat repressed. For instance, the significant differences between the Sámi self-government institutions—exemplarily outlined—could warrant a more careful general assessment of Sámi self-government. Kuokkanen may be right in stating that the Sámi Parliaments demonstrate that institution-building, symbolic significance and nominal constitutional protection “does not necessarily translate into real political power” (p. 10). I question, however, that the Sámi parliament in Norway is a “puppet of the government” (p. 101) with symbolic meaning only. Going from the particular to the general has its costs.

Kuokkanen deserves recognition for bringing indigenous feminist scholarship into the discussion of self-government, and for illuminating various strands of feminism. In particular, her demonstration of violence against women as a core issue in Indigenous people’s political agenda is urgent. “Hard” sovereignty issues and “soft” community issues—land claims and formal constitutional issues of self-government on the one hand, and social welfare issues—are interdependent issues: the personal is political. When Kuokkanen explores Indigenous self-determination from the perspective of indigenous (mainly) women in Canada, Greenland and Scandinavia, she fulfils in many ways the 2005 call from Bonita Lawrence and Kim Anderson to “understand what indigenous female visions of nationhood and the future *are* out there” (Lawrence & Anderson, 2005). I also enjoy the normative take on the discussions, and Kuokkanen’s crystal clear argument that a feminist perspective on self-determination cannot be content with land rights and political institutions, but also has to encompass bodily rights and social institutions in order to restructure *all* relations of domination.

I also do think there are matters worthwhile discussing further. For instance, I wonder if the perceptions of research participants sometimes tend to be conflated with truth claims. Are the interviews sufficient to conclude that “the intrusion of a massive administrative apparatus [that] is ill-suited and inappropriate”? (p. 102) Another interesting question is the relative role of Indigenous men compared to the colonizers. On the one hand, Kuokkanen argues that patriarchy was enforced upon Indigenous people by the colonizers. On the other hand, she outlines how Indigenous men have not stood up for their women. I get the impression that, after all, patriarchy is primarily the fault of the colonizers. Prior to colonization, Kuokkanen claims, gender was multiple and fluid “among many Indigenous people, but gender binary was imposed upon them” (p. 5). If gender relations were equal before colonization, why did Indigenous men comply with the patriarchal practices of the colonizers?

While I do not expect Kuokkanen to solve the foundational feminist question regarding the origins of patriarchy and the gender binary (!), I do think these claims deserve further unpacking. Nevertheless, I think Kuokkanen has a productive take on rematriation. It “serves as a provocative euphemism for three aspects: the recognition of informal channels of participation; ensuring women’s full participation in politics, and interrogation of heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy” (p. 233).

A final question concerns Kuokkanen’s “research method of relationality”. As an Indigenous scholar she definitely has an advantage in researching the selected people as in “insider”. However, was the insider role really the same in First nation, Inuit and Sámi contexts? What about the problematic sides, such as taking the research participant’s perceptions and experiences for granted?

Reading this book has given me new issues to reflect on, new conceptualizations and indeed a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in ongoing struggles for self-determination. Kuokkanen has broken fresh ground in this comprehensive contribution to dismantle the “binary opposition and conceptual hierarchy of gender and self-determination” (p. 232).

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