

Interview with renowned feminist sociologist Raewyn Connell¹

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RAEWYN CONNELL

Professor Raewyn Connell, I would like to thank you for giving me the honor to conduct this interview, which is special since we are going to discuss your well-known views, that have a great impact on the world and I hope that this interview will open for us a new dimension of the public debate and discourse. This interview will be conducted within the framework of a scientific project, which we are conducting through interviews with renowned sociologists, and it is expected to be finalized with the publication of a book. Your answers and views will further enrich our project. In this interview we are talking about these topics: your intellectual experience, masculinities associated with different positions of power, appearance of women in pornography, the role of media in creating cultural identity in Australia, the relevance of postmodern criticism, the potential risks that threaten the world today and global peaceful coexistence, the headscarf as it is caught between discrimination and secularism and Kosovo integrating into EU.

LK: You have intellectual experience as a Professor Emerita of Sociology at the University of Sydney in Australia and as a Life Member of the National Tertiary Education Union. What is the perspective that offers and can you share with us something from your experience in the University and in the NTEU? Especially, for Sociology in Australia?

Connell: Australia is a part of the global periphery (though a rich part) and its university system developed as a colonial outpost of the British university system. It now looks to US universities for most of its models. This is true within particular disciplines.

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Most of the theories, research methods, and many of the textbooks, are imported from the US and UK. Most Australian research finds local details and fits them into paradigms that originated in the global North.

However there is now greater recognition of the significance of indigenous knowledge, and more critique of the neocolonial dependency in Australian intellectual life. What will come of this is hard to say, but I am pleased that the debate is now happening. You will find a discussion of these issues, as they affect social science, in my book *Southern Theory: Social Science and The Global Dynamics of Knowledge* (Raewyn Connell, 1st edition, 2007).

LK: You are known for developing the concept of masculine identity. In this respect you have written the book *Masculinities*, (Raewyn Connell, 2nd edition, 2005). Regarding this concept, sociologist Anthony Giddens, in an interview which I've conducted with him, has said that the global financial crisis – still far from having been fully resolved – reflects some features, including the gender dimension, given the role that 'charged masculinity' played in the aggressive behaviour of those playing the world money markets. How do you explain this from your perspective? You have argued that there is no such thing as a single concept of masculinity, but, rather, that many different masculinities exist, each associated with different positions of power. What are their differences in Australia and other countries and societies in the world, in Europe for example, and especially if you have researched the issue, in small countries in transition?

Connell: In studying masculinity, my concern was not with questions of identity (which I think have been exaggerated in many discussions) but with questions of social practice. What matters is what men and women actually do, in terms of gender. Gender is a social structure, in which the biological reproduction of the human species is given a social form, through institutions such as the family and the economy, and given cultural interpretation (which is where identity comes in). Readers will find more background if they look at my website, www.raewynconnell.net.

To understand our world, it's important to look at the gender dimension in the actions of people with economic power, as well as people with state power. I've recently published a paper about this in the Mexican journal *Debate Feminista*, in which I describe the masculinities of the groups who hold most power on a world scale. It is open access, here is the link: <http://debatefeminista.pueg.unam.mx/index.php/category/vol-51/>

LK: How do you explain the appearance of women in the pornography industry through sexual roles and images combined with the capitalist logic of profit? What are the cultural consequences and effects? How do you explain this from the perspective of your feminist thought?

Connell: Capitalist entrepreneurs are interested above all in profit, and if there is a market among men (who have most of the disposable income in modern economies) for sexual images of women, then some entrepreneurs will operate in that market. The workers in this industry, as in other parts of the sex trade, are doing alienating work and usually get poor wages. But if the income they get is better than they can get in other jobs – or if they cannot get other jobs at all – there will be a workforce. The cultural consequences are to reinforce many men’s sense of entitlement to use women’s bodies, and to circulate on a very large scale stylized images of women which strongly reinforce stereotypes of femininity. Like sexist advertising, mainstream pornography implies that the only thing women are good for is pleasing men physically.

Sex work can be a valuable form of personal service work, and it needs not to reproduce sexism. But for that to be true, sex work has to be separated from exploitative conditions and from sexist culture. We are a long way from that situation now.

LK: The modern world is experiencing an invasion of technological sophistication, and with it, a complex dependence on the media communication, creating psychological and cultural changes in the public. What are the social changes brought about by the dynamic development of online journalism and how are the social networks affecting journalism, communication and the public in Australia? What role are the media playing in creating cultural identity in Australia?

Connell: For more than a generation, print media has been in decline. In Australia, print journalism is now dying fast. The only large newspaper empire left in the country is controlled by Rupert Murdoch – familiar as the owner of Fox News in the USA – so mostly publishes right-wing propaganda rather than serious news. One result is a notable increase in racism in Australian politics.

We depend more on electronic media of various forms. I think this has tended to fragment the political “public”, and create communities of opinion who are highly resistant to debate and fact. We see consequences of that in the Tea Party, in the Trump candidacy, in Brexit. It’s clear the oil and coal companies have been trying to use that phenomenon to resist calls to reduce carbon pollution. What is interesting is how electronic media, especially “social media”, can also be used by social movements for change.

LK: How have the humanities and social sciences affected the consciousness of human history and how do you assess the relevance of postmodern criticism? How do you see the future of humanity, based on the interdependence of the destinies of states, nations and religions in economic and geopolitical plan of this century?

Connell: Postmodernism as a school of thought has lost impetus. Some of its scepticism about what Lyotard called “grand narratives” is now widely accepted, and

some of its self-centredness and obscurity is now disregarded. I think the more exciting intellectual developments now are in areas of natural science and their links to social realities; and especially in the increasing capacities of the global South in the production of knowledge.

I think it is important for people in Europe and North America to become more knowledgeable about what happens, and what is thought, in Africa, South America, South Asia and the Pacific. If our hyper-masculine political and military leaders do not blow us up with nuclear missiles, the future of humanity depends on more cooperative, less exploitative, relationships between the rich and powerful countries and the postcolonial world.

LK: From your perspective, how do you explain the potential risks of disagreements, conflicts and rivalries that threaten the world today? On what premises can a global peaceful coexistence be promoted? How possible would it be to achieve an agreement on the elimination of violence in whatever context, economic, religious, political or military, in order to create an environment of peaceful coexistence, by not imposing globalism as a variant of recolonisation of the states, nations and small cultures?

Connell: We can expect power-holders to defend their power; so one of the key strategies for global peace is to reduce the power of oligarchies within nation-states. Global peace requires local democracy. I agree with you that it is important to name, and contest, “globalization” as a new form of colonialism.

The difficulty is that neoliberal globalization is usually presented to people as a means of economic progress. Well, that is true – for a privileged minority. Neoliberal regimes everywhere have meant growing economic inequality. As post-communist regimes in China, Russia and elsewhere have reverted to capitalism, huge gaps in wealth and power have opened up. It is not accidental that this has also meant a return to sexism, to the exploitation of women on a very large scale, both in factories and in sexuality. And as we have recently seen in Greece, neoliberal development can lead into a huge debt trap for a developing country.

LK: I have a specific question: how do you explain the challenges in the public sphere and institutions faced by women with professional and intellectual ambitions, but that due to the public manifestation of religious beliefs (for example, wearing of the headscarf from Muslim women), they are excluded from work, school, the public sphere and left at the margins? Is this discrimination to them or an attempt to respect secularism? There is such a debate in Europe for the conflict between values, even in Kosovo, although it's not the dominant value, many women are excluded from school, from work, etc., for this reason. What are the experiences in Australia and how do you explain from the feminist perspective?

Connell: There has not been a great controversy about headscarves in Australia. Some Muslim women wear them, some do not. It used to be the case that Christian women were expected to wear hats and cover their shoulders when they went to church. This has now declined.

Probably the wearing of headscarves would also decline, except that it has recently been made a sign of religious identity by some pious Muslims and a point of attack by some non-Muslim bigots. So it has probably increased somewhat. From a feminist point of view, what is striking is that both sides make women's bodies and clothing the point of conflict. They rarely care about what men wear. So we are still in a patriarchal culture, where women are expected to be symbols of men's ideas, to make a show of modesty or a show of secularism by the way we dress.

In Australia there is no particular connection between citizenship and secularism, as there is in France and perhaps in other parts of Europe. Australia was a British colony and the early colony was officially Protestant Christian, but also had Catholic colonists, and soon had other religions. Indigenous Australians had many spiritual practices but did not have a religion with dogmas and holy books. Today in practice Australians are mostly non-religious, and most people do not worry about headscarves, either pro or con. The most virulent forms of prejudice in Australia are racism, homophobia and sexism, rather than religious bigotry.

LK: From amongst many interviews from the last and present year I've interviewed two theorists of feminism: Patricia Hill Collins and Dorothy E. Smith. I hope that you know that we are a society that 17 years ago experienced aggression by the Serbian regime that reflected on different forms of discrimination, violation of human rights, oppression, rape of woman, etcetera. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, the first female president in the Balkans was the president of Kosovo. However, it remains a very challenging effort for the representation of women in the public sphere and achieving gender equality. Taking into consideration that Kosovo's society is in transition and the position of women is undergoing changes at the level of education, employment, occupation, economic and cultural status, my question is in the context of the views expressed by Collins and Smith. Collins has said to me: "As a new nation, you are in a position to argue that Kosovo is less likely to reach its full development if it neglects its young, the most important talent of any nation. Because you have lived with the tragedy of needless suffering, you are closer to the negative outcomes of militarism than countries that can imagine conflict from their distant pasts. You need every bit of talent we can nurture, and that includes women. The disadvantages of being a small country are evident. And the challenges you face, especially with such a young population are palpable. But your size and youth can be assets. You have so many young people, and many of them, especially your girls, are already questioning the lives they are living and, if given the space to do so, are imagining solutions. If the young people in Kosovo are anything like those who I teach in the U.S.,

they are very good at seeing inequities and are searching for innovative and creative solutions to social problems."

Smith has said to me: "It had seemed to me that a country joining the EU would have important advantages. Young people with access to training in colleges and in universities would find a greater openness and a wider field of possibilities. Of course I'm not in a position to evaluate the possible costs of an EU join for Kosovo, but in this area I would see the advantages as powerful and likely particularly significant for young women. It would seem probable too that joining the EU would enable greater connections between your university and college system and the wider and various secondary institutions of the EU and hence greater opportunities and openness for your intelligentsia."

Professor Connell, as you can see, young people (60% of our population is under 25 years of age) are a great asset and talent that we have. From your perspective, what would your suggestion be for creating mechanisms that would advance the position of women in the Kosovar society?

Connell: It's only the people of Kosovo who can devise strategies for social change and gender equality in Kosovo, of course. I can only speak in general terms. We know that the framework of law and public policy makes a difference. It does matter to have laws against discrimination and in favour of equal treatment of men and women, young and old, heterosexual and homosexual, rural and urban. As the Scandinavian countries have shown, providing support for fathers to take an active role in the care of new babies is an effective step towards gender equality. You will find a broad survey of gender politics, governments and social movements, in our book *Gender: In World Perspective* (Raewyn Connell & Rebecca Pearse, 3rd edition, 2015).

If a society privileges men (as Australia does), then providing specific resources for women can be very important, even life-saving: shelters for women and children suffering domestic violence, women's health clinics, etcetera. To overcome the fact that police forces are strongly masculinized, Brazil has created a network of women's police stations, which have been effective. In India there have been very creative projects for involving men in work to reduce gender-based violence, and to support marginalized groups of women such as sex workers and women of lower castes. So there are many interesting examples of initiatives to be found. A very good resource is the international "Men Engage" network, mostly NGOs, you will find their website at www.menengage.org, which has news from gender-equality struggles around the world. For international women's programmes, a very good source is <https://unwomen.org.au/>.

LK: Since we are a small country that has just recently become independent, we are still facing many challenges, especially in the process of visa liberalization and EU integration. This isolation is causing our inability of free movement, contact with other European countries and cultures, integration in the European job and knowledge market, while 60%

of our population is under 25 years of age! We feel the need of integrating and belonging in the European Union! What would you suggest our society do in order for Kosovo to integrate into Europe?

Connell: The EU has strengths and weaknesses. It has prevented most conflicts in Europe from escalating towards war – the break-up of Yugoslavia and the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine are the main exceptions. Its encouragement of free movement has been very positive, especially for young people. But its economic policies have promoted neoliberalism and inequality. That creates resentment which is exploited by racist politicians. That clearly happened in Britain – where young people overwhelmingly preferred to stay in the EU, but fearful older people mostly voted to leave.

In those circumstances, I would think it important for people in Kosovo to consider what kind of “Europe” they want, as well as what kind of society in Kosovo they want. The terms on which your country is integrated into continental structures may have a great influence on social life in the next few decades.