

**Christina Hughes: *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research*. London:
Sage Publications, 2002**

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1 The main purpose of Christina Hughes' *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research* is to introduce a "conceptual literacy" for social science students. Hughes' differentiated explorations of equality, difference, choice, care, time and experience, which are key concepts in feminist theory, and her balanced overview of sociological and connected studies are based on topical postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches: "Conceptual literacy is no more, and no less, than an act of sensitization to the political implications of contestation over the diversity of conceptual meanings. In this it draws attention to the multiplicity of meanings that are invoked by the use of key terms; to the dualistic framing of language; to the art of deconstruction; and to the salience of focusing on language in use" (3). In her accessible handbook, the author not only provides an overview of the vast amount of literature on feminist theory, but also manages to facilitate access to complex theories and convey the importance of deconstruction in social sciences and related areas.

2 The clarity of the book's layout and structure enable students to easily compare and distinguish difficult concepts. Chapter subdivisions make a multifaceted exploration of each topic possible. Hughes' overview of the major studies concerning feminist theory will help the reader to become acquainted with parts complex œuvres such as these of Butler, Irigaray and Spivak. Hughes not only summarizes, but explains theoretical debates and also provides insight into the complexity of these authors by including longer quotes of their work. Each chapter ends with a short summary of the main arguments and definitions as well as further commented reading suggestions which enable students to find their way through the relevant literature with ease. The further reading sections and the bibliography refer to classic as well as current studies. The book also includes 17 case studies dealing with a variety of issues such as education, gender transformations and the economics of gender. These case studies point above all to applications of feminist theory, drawing attention to the necessity of conceptual literacy and particularly taking cultural diversity into account ("Progress' in Zimbabwe," "Theorizing Young Asian Women's Experiences"). The prism of cultural and postcolonial diversity avoids the shortcomings of other feminist studies which are often exclusively focused on white Western experiences. Throughout the book, Hughes follows the poststructuralist approach which she uses in order to examine key feminist terms and provide an overview of academic debates and literature.

3 The introduction to *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research* centres around the necessity and validity of poststructuralist thinking and research as such. Hughes makes it very clear even for newcomers to theory that what is at stake in this debate is the previous insistence on one stable authoritative "truth:" "For all its postmodern provenance, plurality stands in contradiction to a more modernist desire for fixity and boundedness, for neatness and framing. It contradicts, in fact, a desire for absolute knowing that is a mark of scientific enquiry" (3). In addition, the introduction anticipates students' "fear" of theory and already provides answers to possible problems or misconceptions. The explanation of pedagogical aims and an overview of the book's structure ease the reader's entry into this challenging domain.

4 In the first chapter "Concepts: Meanings, Games and Contests," the author clarifies that a debate over the meanings of concepts and terms is crucial for our complex society and our scientific research. After introducing the sex-gender distinction and subsequent debates about the usefulness of these terms (Toril Moi), Derridean notions of *différance* are contrasted with hierarchical dualistic Western thinking, particularly with respect to issues of power and language (Plumwood). Both Derrida's basic theses (compared to de Saussure) and Wittgenstein's analysis of language games highlight the merits of poststructuralism. The detailed analysis of the workings/strategies of binary thinking urgently illustrates the need for deconstructive approaches to gender in linguistics and subsequently in social research.

5 The second chapter entitled "Equality" sheds new light on the question "Equal to what?" by clarifying different definitions of gender equality and their interactions. Hughes recapitulates the debates on equality as sameness and equality as difference, refers to possible measures of sameness and deals with critiques of essentialism. To dismantle the standard which is often uncritically aimed at by feminists, as that of white, middle-class masculinity, the book critically works with studies on equality and its measures (does equal treatment mean identical treatment? does equality mean equality of opportunity or equality of outcome?). Hughes explains the historical basis of equal rights arguments, which is Enlightenment liberalism of the 18th and 19th century. The chapter reflects on liberal philosophy, the insistence on equal rights and legislative changes and discusses criticism about the narrow focus on the middle class. In this context, motherhood is historically treated as a central point of the debate on "equal *but* different" or "equal *and* different" (already in Mary Wollstonecraft). Like others, Hughes is convinced that the seeming necessity of choosing between essentialism and constructionism is detrimental for feminist theory and practice. Her reference to cultural differences (for example Italian theories of sexual

difference which cannot be easily classified as either essentialist or constructionist) illustrates this convincingly.

6 The third chapter further investigates debates on difference. Both the chapters "Equality" and "Difference" prove to be valuable reading not only for social scientists, but also for readers working with theories of literature, expanding uncritical and mono-dimensional views on the equality-difference debates that have influenced discourses on gender. Hughes explains major standpoints of gynocentrism, identity politics and postmodernism and also refers to the key thinkers that students should be familiar with. The author devotes most of the space to postmodernism and poststructuralism, as in contrast to other approaches, "Postmodern critiques note that there are as many claims to 'truth' as there are different language games and discourses" (65). In this chapter, which I regard as the most important chapter of the book, influential theories as those of Butler, Scott, Spivak and Foucault are rendered accessible for beginners. In addition to such concepts as Butler's performativity, psychoanalytical approaches are examined (Lacan, Mitchell, Chodorow) to determine their usefulness for feminist theory. *Écriture féminine* (Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous) is presented as central for post-Lacanian theories of sexual difference. Finally, the sub-chapter "Postcolonial Differences" completes the treatment of the concept of difference by incorporating vital issues of postcolonial theory: "Drawing on the idea of multiple subjectivities postcolonial analyses have also challenged Western binary oppositions through a focus on cultural hybridity that gives rise to multiple differences" (77).

7 The next chapter is focused on the concept of choice. Issues of agency and structure serve as an analytical framework. Hughes points to two distinct conceptualizations of choice: rational choice based on the assumption of an agentic, rational subjectivity, and poststructuralist conceptions of choice where issues of mastery and submission come into play. Economics plays a major role in rational choice theory centred on "methodological individualism" (86). Although rational choice theory maintains that "individuals are relatively free to choose with no account taken of power relations or the structuring of advantage and disadvantage" (99), feminist critique dismantles its basic tenets as based on gender binaries implying a simplified view of gender based stereotypes of public and private. The sub-chapter "The Poststructuralist 'Choosing' Subject" shows that the gender blindness inherent in rational choice theory has to be addressed differently. Above all, poststructuralist accounts of agency are based on a critique of humanism and take into account the fact that "The consciousness and deliberateness of 'rationality' might be subverted by both conscious and unconscious desire" (100). Finally, Hughes argues that the concept of free and autonomous choices

neglects the power of discourses which makes even a forced choice appear "free."

8 Chapter five, entitled "Care," undertakes an analysis of the literature and concepts focused on the multifaceted approaches to care. In particular, Hughes addresses the economic character of care both in areas seen as private (family) and those regarded as public (workplace). It becomes clear that care occupies a contradictory role in feminist theorizing, regarded both as a "hallmark of woman's difference and [...] as an entrapment of subservience from which woman must escape" (108). Ethical, moral, political and psychological matters are discussed in this context.

9 Hughes' chapter on time in feminist theory distinguishes between three different conceptualizations of time: linear clock-time, cyclical time and concepts of time that regard past, present and future as simultaneous and thereby illuminate issues of authenticity and identity formation. Time plays a role not only in feminism (first, second and third waves, post-) and other social revolutions, but also as category in philosophy and personal experience. Discussing important theorists, Hughes traces the development of thinking about linear "male time" and cyclical "female time" and connects this with ideas about time and selfhood. Her treatment of theories on time and space (Irigaray, Kristeva, Grosz) also draw attention to areas of feminism which remain undertheorized at present.

10 Experience, Hughes shows in chapter seven, also forms an important category within feminism, as it includes political, social and personal matters. It becomes obvious that phrases such as "the personal is the political" and methods of consciousness-raising have given important impulses to feminist thought and still provide critical challenges to scientific methods and authoritative knowledge claims. Old conceptualizations of truth and reality are at stake in this discussion and are confronted with "feminist epistemologies" (Griffith) and postmodernist relativism. The very enlightening discussion of Haraway and "Cyborg Standpoints" provides glimpses into a post-gender world as well as into possible new developments of postmodern standpoint theory.

1 The last chapter, "Developing Conceptual Literacy," ties previous discussions together and connects the terms presented in order to enable readers to recognize them and develop a new approach to social sciences, which Hughes has stated as the aim of her book: "my primary purpose in writing this text is to offer an approach that will enable students to go beyond simple learning to live with the multiple conceptualizations of key terms" (10). This chapter provides examples of synthesizing concepts and learning to regard them as connected and mutually influential - as a "web of meaning." Hughes' focus here lies particularly on the work of Bronwyn Davies.

12 This book makes clear that feminist issues are neither on the margins of social sciences nor a minor aspect of academic research, but convincingly shows that feminist demands and discourses partake in and, in turn, transform every discourse of society. The fact that feminist concepts are at the centre of critical and poststructuralist thought is made clear by chapters covering basic sociological fields of interest (Care, Time) from a feminist and poststructuralist perspective. The text casts a critical view on gender-blind research in the social sciences and ultimately challenges patriarchal notions of "truth" by introducing the complexity of feminist and social concepts and helping students develop "conceptual literacy."

13 Hughes precisely and comprehensively introduces a deconstructivist view of previously fixed terms and definitions. In doing so, she ultimately challenges the reader to critically examine all concepts and "truths" that he or she will be confronted with. However, the most central term - "feminism" - lacks a critical and, above all, a historical definition. Both the history of what we now call "feminism" and of the term "feminism" itself (which was in Britain only used in the modern sense from the 1890s onwards) requires a more careful analysis. Given this omission, the reader unfortunately may be tempted to oversimplify the term "feminism," which would undermine Hughes' basic aim - the introduction of critical, multidimensional concepts which require active reflection and discussion. Presenting a history of feminism could reveal much about terminology and definition as such (is the *Querelle des Femmes* of the Middle Ages, which anticipates many gender concerns of today, already feminist? What are the differences between a "pro-woman" and a feminist argument? What significance do such terms as "the Woman Question" or "Female Advocate" hold for the development of feminist concepts today?). A definition such as Gerda Lerner's "feminist consciousness" could be very helpful for Hughes' study.<fn>Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From The Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993.</fn> As far as Hughes' valuable references to Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill are concerned, two aspects are important to bear in mind: first, that both writers/philosophers did not refer to themselves as "feminist" and second, that there were of course also many other important thinkers promoting what we now call a feminist point of view. A short reference to these and to further reading on the history of feminist theory would probably be helpful.

14 As a whole, *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research* is a very useful handbook, which is at once accessible for beginners and complex enough to account for the

multidimensionality of poststructuralism. It is certainly always topical and is thus an invaluable guide through the jungle of gender theory in the social sciences.