Suvi Keskinen, Salla Tuori, Sari Irni and Diana Mullinari (eds.): Complying with Colonialism. Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region
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There is little doubt that if you were to ask «most people» about the history of colonialism in the Nordic countries, nearly all of them would tell you that «There is none!» In Complying with Colonialism, papers from seventeen authors located in the Nordic region challenge this common assumption. This edited volume presents to the reader a variety of papers that seek, firstly, to demonstrate the ways in which countries in the Nordic region have and continue to comply with colonialism. Secondly, the papers consider seriously the fact that «gender is not peripheral to global inequalities» (Mullinari & Rathzel, 2009:81). Accordingly, post-colonial Nordic feminism is the central framework in a number of the papers, allowing the authors to highlight the particularities of the intersection of gender and «race»/ethnicity in the Nordic countries. Lastly, Complying with Colonialism offers a timely and important critique of Nordic welfare state models from a post-colonial perspective; showing the nuanced ways in which «race» and ethnicity are implicated in the constitution of Nordic welfare states and of their «welfare subjects» (Mulinari et al, 2009:6).

I will discuss each of these three aspects of the volume in turn. Complicity is understood in this volume to be a process, whereby «(post)colonial imaginaries, practices and products are made to be part of what is understood as the ‘national’ and ‘traditional’ culture» (Mulinari et al, 2009:2) of Nordic countries. As one of the authors explains, «complicity» represents a feeling or consciousness located somewhere between «guilt» and «innocence» (Vuorela, 2009:19), which is evoked by the spectres of colonialism and post-colonialism in the Nordic context. This is, of
course, reminiscent of some of the work done by other theorists of colonialism and post-colonialism in relation to western European nations, such as Homi Bhabha (on ambivalence) or Paul Gilroy (his theorisation of melancholia), which considers the conflicting emotions that constitute and through which colonial and postcolonial encounters are constituted. It is no accident, I think, that these types of words (complicity, ambivalence, melancholia) are used to explain colonial and post-colonial encounters. As words that are ordinarily used to describe states of emotion, they enable us to make «human-ness»/«human-mess» the central consideration in this area. Although it is governments, Church and other administrations, private business interests and monarchies that were and are the main orchestrators of colonial projects; colonial/post-colonial relations ultimately involved and still involve encounters between individuals and groups of people. So, to talk of complicity in the Nordic context, is to acknowledge the fact that although the countries in that region are not normally thought to be key players in European colonisation, they were not excluded and did not exclude themselves from its «ripple effects». In addition, the concept of colonial complicity addresses the complex political landscapes and shifting power relations within the Nordic countries, as well as between them, and between them and other countries in Europe, which were at the centre of colonialism and are currently in various states of post-coloniality.

In her paper, Vuorela argues that even when a country, such as Finland, is not an instigator of colonial conquest, it can still be linked in a number of ways to the knowledge that is generated from, and in support of, the colonial enterprise. She states that this is because Nordic countries have «participated at least in the acceptance of the hegemonic view of the world and partly in the contributions to the making of that world view» (Vuorela, 2009:29). Similarly, Palmberg argues that the existence of such a thing as the «Nordic colonial mind» does not depend on whether a country had or has direct colonial power, wealth and influence, but rather that: «the key to the Nordic colonial mind lies ... in a more generalised identification with and share in colonial exploitation» (2009:47). As these and other papers in the collection show, the concept of colonial complicity opens a space for questioning the assumption of Nordic exceptionalism in relation to colonialism. It is also a useful tool for levelling the colonial «playing fields» of continental Europe in its entirety and for enabling us to recognise that: «we are all post-colonial» (Palmberg, 2009:39), albeit in myriad, complex, conflicting and contradictory ways.

As an analytical tool, colonial complicity also offers us a way to understand the differing roles that countries outside of Western Europe, (not only those in the Nordic region), have played and continue to play, in colonial projects. In effect, the concept destabilises what we usually take to be the colonial/post-colonial centres and peripheries; it challenges us to rethink what and where it is we are referring to when we use those terms. Some of the papers in the volume bring to the fore colonial and post-colonial relations that are often hidden or pushed into the background, and invite the reader to consider the colonial and post-colonial histories and presents of countries from Central and Eastern Europe. So, for example, Sverdljuk argues that there is no automatic «temporal distinction between ‘pre’ and ‘post’, or before and after colonialism; rather, various neo-colonial forms of power are as relevant ... as ... the traces of past imperial or colonial powers» (2009:102). The paper calls for readings of the (post-colonial)
states of the former Eastern bloc that are not separated from analyses of post-socialism. In effect, the volume makes a serious attempt to engage with the complexities of the inequalities (relating to colonialism and post-colonialism) that shape and reshape the European landscape beyond its western borders.

The second key aspect of Complying with Colonialism is its position within post-colonial Nordic feminism, which aims to critically analyse «the (diversified) meaning of gender» (Mulinari et al., 2009:3) by making «race» and ethnicity central to analyses of gendered inequality, especially in Nordic contexts. In her paper, Bolette B. Blaagaard demonstrates the gendered dimensions of, and the parallels between, «the iconography used to evoke the Viking imaginary, the fascist imaginary of white supremacy, and the colonial raciology» (2009:63) in relation to Denmark. In so doing, she seeks to highlight the ways in which notions of the European self and of belonging that are often interpellated through the social (genetic) imaginary vis-à-vis Denmark are both racialised and gendered. In another paper, the authors show how the Swedish national self-perception of Sweden as a place of non-racism that is located outside of European colonial relations is challenged by «auto-ethnographic texts» written by adult adoptees in the country. On the contrary, the lived experiences of the adoptees show that their bodies and appearance are invariably racialised and gendered, and linked metonymically to countries in Asia, Africa and South America by ethnic Swedes. In a third paper, the subject of «honour related violence» is discussed in relation to the constitutive discourses of gender, «race» and ethnicity in Nordic countries. Here again, the author demonstrates through a post-colonial reading, how national self-image in the Nordic region depends on the discursive juxtaposition of ‘the majority’ in relation to the «patriarchal minority» (Keskinen, 2009:269). In her discussion of how discourses around honour related violence, honour killings and forced marriages are constituted in Sweden, Norway and Finland, Keskinen centralises the complex intersections of «race»/ethnicity/culture and gender as they emerge in those countries.

Post-colonial Nordic feminism is presented in this volume as a critical engagement with the «usual» understandings of «race»/gender, culture and ethnicity in Nordic countries. Most significantly, it is a theoretical perspective that challenges the ways in which racism tends to be overlooked or explicitly excluded from analyses of social inequalities in the Nordic region.

Finally, a number of papers in Complying with Colonialism meet the Nordic welfare state models head on in their analyses, but from the perspective of minoritised others. As a result, the reader is shown the differences between the Nordic welfare state models, as well as the ways in which institutional racism operates through them (Mulinari et al., 2009:8). In her paper, Vuori analyses official «guidebooks» produced in Finland and the professionals that work with migrants to ensure their successful «integration» into Finnish society. She shows how the Finnish state produces Finnish ethnicity within these texts, thereby entrenching the differences between «us» and «others» (Vuori, 2009:207). Gender issues appear in the texts within the discourse on equality: Finnish men and women are presented as equal in relation to each other, whilst immigrant men and women remain unequal (Vuori, 2009:218). In essence, the texts analysed in this paper show that the Finnish state’s discourse about integration adds considerable «epistemic violence» to the experiences of migrant men and women, by presenting Finnish society as «clear, coherent and flawless»,
whilst migrants are «faltering and unclear» (Vuori, 2009:217–218). Another paper in the collection challenges the unproblematised heteronormativity and racialisation that underpins the welfare state in Finland, which, as the author argues, is most visible in the political discourse on families (Tuori, 2009). We see here also, how the discourse on the «the West» and «the Rest» comes into play.

_Complying with Colonialism_ is an important collection in which many of its authors bravely go where few have dared to go before. They critically engage with the received wisdom about the Nordic region’s place in colonial/post-colonial histories and present times, using a post-colonial Nordic feminist framework to challenge the assumed benevolence of Nordic welfare state models. ★