

## **Theory and Politics in Research on Muslim immigrants in Norway**

*By Christine M. Jacobsen*

### **Introduction**

From the second half of the 1980s, immigration was established as one of the most controversial issues in Norwegian public debate, a phenomenon that intensified in the 1990s as “the immigrant other” increasingly crystallized as the “Muslim other.” The academic field reflects this development. More and more researchers have turned their attention to issues related to immigration, integration, Muslims, and Islam, and the research has become more explicitly politicized. The current politicization, resulting from a complex interplay between mass media, research, government, public opinion and the populations in question, poses important epistemological, methodological and ethical challenges to researchers working in this field. While politicization may, for various reasons, be deplored, it also represents an opportunity to critically reflect upon academic knowledge production and dissemination. This article seeks to further such reflection by examining recent public debate on the role of academic research on immigration and Islam in Norway.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the article is to sketch out some of the underlying premises of these debates in order to throw some light on the conditions of academic knowledge production in the fields of Islam and migration studies in our times.

At the outset, I would like to establish the point that “research on immigration” and “research on Islam” are constituted by a number of different disciplines within the humanities and the social sciences, each with their different traditions, as they have developed in and across different national contexts. While keeping in mind the movement of theories and concepts from one discipline to another, and from one country to another, discussions of the role of the researcher must, to some extent, relate to particular disciplines and their disciplinary genealogies, and internal scientific and ethical standards. I will therefore concern myself primarily with Norwegian anthropology,<sup>2</sup> while also identifying how certain problematics cut across disciplinary divisions; thus, pointing towards broader reconfigurations of the academic and political field, and their relationship to one another. Two media-debates that have addressed the role of research on Islam and immigration in Norway are the point of departure for my discussion.

A number of important questions are raised in the two debates, of which I will focus attention on three: (1) the social location of the researcher, (2) the critique of relativism, and (3) the effect of “methodological nationalism” in framing research on Islam and immigration. It should be noted by the outset that as an anthropologist working on issues related to migration and Islam, I am deeply involved in the debates I here attempt to analyze. There is, thus, no pretension of neutrality and my arguments should, rather, be seen as a form of self-positioning in relation to crucial and contested epistemological, methodological and ethical issues that face researchers working in politicized fields. Rather than spell out my own position in the introduction, it will hopefully become clear to the reader through the following discussion and assessment of different research perspectives. To sum up my own position, I advocate a notion of “methodological relativism” as a technique for displacing “methodological nationalism” and of taking into account the embedment of academic knowledge production and dissemination in regimes of power.

### **Heroes and villains of academia**

The first of the debates on academic research on Islam and immigration that I will address in this article was spurred when a Norwegian translation of Ibn Warraq’s<sup>3</sup> book, *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (2003 [1995]), was published by Humanist Publishing with an introduction by the General Secretary of the Humanist Association, Lars Gule.<sup>4</sup> The publisher presented the book as “politically incorrect” and as a “strong attack on cultural relativism.” In a newspaper interview (Tjønnne 2003), Gule announced the reason for publishing this controversial book: “Out of fear for offending nations that suffered under colonialism, the liberal intelligentsia in the West has shun away from calling Islam in its fundamentalist version into account.” In the introduction to Warraq’s book, Gule argued that critique of negative aspects of Islam was necessary to guard against the growth of fundamentalism: a “totalitarian ideology with fascist-like features.” To avoid such a growth in Norway, Gule suggested an increased insistence on values that “all who live in Norway must share”: democracy, tolerance and gender equality.

In a review of Warraq's book, Walid al-Kubaisi<sup>5</sup> repeated Gule's allegations towards the Western intelligentsia and claimed that Norwegian academics were afraid of offending the "vulnerable Muslims," or cause hatred against Islam among Norwegian readers. The intelligentsia therefore overlooked both the critical voices of "heretic" Muslims, and the negative aspects of Islam that are contrary to Western, humanist values, al-Kubaisi argued. He thus affirmed his position as, to quote the Norwegian anthropologist Unni Wikan, "one of the most vocal critics of multiculturalism and cultural relativism from within the rank of "immigrants" (Wikan 2002: 146). Al-Kubaisi directed these charges specifically towards three of the most prominent "Islam-researchers" in Norway: Kari Vogt (comparative religion)<sup>6</sup>, Knut Vikør (history) and Oddbjørn Leirvik (theology). Vogt, Vikør and Leirvik are all established academics in the field, and have figured as "Islam-experts" in the media on various occasions. Commenting on Al-Kubaisi's critique, Gule<sup>7</sup> affirmed that "Norwegian researchers have not done enough to direct critical attention towards negative sides of Islam, such as the legitimization of female oppression, and modes of punishment, such as: amputation, flagellation and stoning" (Todal 2003).

The three named researchers responded to Al-Kubaisi's challenges in a newspaper interview, entitled: "Want to do research, not to pass judgment" (Todal 2003).<sup>8</sup> Vogt stated that the task of the researcher was primarily to "describe reality," rather than to "pass judgment," which she saw as being passed frequently and often too quickly and uncritically in public debate. She nevertheless affirmed her support for "an unbiased [Norwegian: saklig] critique of inhuman practices within Muslim societies." Vikør confirmed this position, stating that researchers "study how Islam has developed throughout history," and that normative judgment is not the goal of research: "Our task is not to criticize, but to give foundations for critique." Leirvik countered Al-Kubaisi's allegations by pointing to inclusion of the "dissident" and critical voices of e.g. Muslim feminist and "secular Muslims" in his own work. The three also stressed the need to counter negative stereotypes of Muslims and Islam by contextualizing, historicizing and displaying internal variation and differentiation among Muslims.<sup>9</sup>

The second debate I will discuss here started in March 2006, when four researchers,<sup>10</sup> presented in the newspaper as: “among the most profiled and recognized” in immigration studies, were quoted on charges that Norwegian research on immigration was characterized by cowardice, political correctness, self-censorship, and taboos. The alleged taboo issues concerned, among other things, criminal activities among immigrants, the number of Muslims in the country, and the attitude of immigrant’s towards “Norwegian values.”<sup>11</sup> The charges were countered by a number of other researchers,<sup>12</sup> including one of the four cited in the original article who apparently felt uncomfortable with the newspaper’s framing of her critique (Djuve 2006). Despite their disagreements, researchers participating in these debates seemed to agree that it was important to challenge “unwritten rules about which topics can be legitimately put forward in Norway” (cf. Gullestad 2006: 12). What they differed on was the assessment of what precisely these unwritten rules are, and which kinds of topics the rules exclude from public debate.

The critique of “cowardly” immigration research was not new to Norwegian academic debate, and had already been elaborated on by some in their popularized and academic writings. In a 1991 article, the anthropologist Inger Lise Lien criticized anthropologists in general, and immigration researchers in Norway in particular, for being relativist and positive towards “the foreigners” and negative and critical towards “ourselves and our own culture” (Lien 1991). She strongly opposed what she saw as the use of different moral standards in the evaluation of “us” and “them.” Researchers in the immigration field were more preoccupied with representing themselves as “a Good Human Being” than with being “a Good Researcher,” Lien argued. Lien distinguished between “painting a true picture” of reality and the “moralist” and politically informed research done by those she referred to as “radical left-wing researchers” – members of what sociologist Ottar Brox in his work on political correct anti-racism (1991) calls “the moral elite.”<sup>13</sup> In 1995, Unni Wikan (1995) followed up this critique, attempting to raise the “taboo” issues of immigrant research – an attempt that was critically received by many of her colleagues (Borchgrevink 1997; Fuglerud 2001; Fuglerud 2003; Gressgård 2005; Gullestad 2006a; Lithman 2004).

I do not intend to construct from these examples a seemingly coherent position from where a critique against research on immigration and Islam is voiced. There are important epistemological and political differences between the positions of the critics that I refer to. However, I find a certain convergence in terms of how they make use of particular discourses, and the positions these discourses offer, when voicing their critique against the research fields in question, and when proposing research and policy “solutions.” It is these broader discursive frames that I seek to elucidate and not so much the similarities and differences between individual participants in these debates.

### **The social location of the researcher**

The critiques directed towards researchers dealing with Islam and immigration draw attention towards epistemological questions of how knowledge is influenced by the social position of scholars and by its intended recipients. Critics use a diversity of characteristics to position Islam and immigration researchers according to their political sympathies, (radical left-wing), epistemological and theoretical positions (post-modernist, relativist, subjectivist), social status (elite, intelligentsia) and morality (moralist, cowardly, politically correct, moral relativist). The assumption underlying the criticism of Islam and immigration researchers is that the political sympathies of researchers (or in some cases rather their political naivety) align them with the regulative forces of a dominant discourse that delegitimizes and silences critique of Islam and immigrants in the name of tolerance and multiculturalism. While such charges have been repeatedly raised, a systematic analysis of the assumed epistemological, political, and social constellations, and their effects, has yet to be offered. The characteristics that some use to position Islam and immigration researchers appears as a way of discrediting them rather than as a call for reflexivity qualifying the interpretation and use of the knowledge they produce.

The critique of research on Islam and immigration could have been, in my opinion, a welcome point of departure for a debate about how the production and dissemination of knowledge is influenced by the social position of scholars. However, the epistemological underpinnings of the critique do not invite such a broad debate. In her critique of Norwegian immigrant research, for instance, Lien opposes such figures as “truth,” “painting a

true picture,” and “reality” to the “ideological smoke-screening” of “radical left-wing researchers” of the “moral elite.” This claim to represent “truth” and “reality” is shared by many critics of “multiculturalist,” “relativist,” and “politically correct” research. My own epistemological approach, and that of many others, is quite different, as it acknowledges the role of the social sciences in constructing a particular understanding of the world that is based on, and tends to naturalize, certain representations and positions. From my point of view, research is thus not a matter of “revealing truth,” but includes acknowledging the embedment of knowledge production and dissemination within formations of power. By claiming to speak from the position of reality or truth, and relegating the views of her opponents to “ideological smokescreening” and self-enforced silence, Lien veils her own social location and the context in which her knowledge is produced.

A further point relates to the authority of academic knowledge in society. In Lien’s opinion, the refusal of researchers to “paint a true picture” out of concern with their self-representation has undermined the authority of researchers in the wider population. Put somewhat bluntly: Lien’s thesis is that people do not believe in researchers anymore because they fail to spell out “what everybody knows is true.” It does, indeed, seem to be the case that there is currently a decrease in social status for scholarship, accompanying the destabilization of the social role of scientific knowledge and the associated relationships of authority (Gullestad 2006b). Lien’s and other claims to speak the truth about reality may be seen precisely as a response to such destabilization. The claim to speak on the behalf of “truth” and “reality” is an effective way of authorizing knowledge claims. However, there are other, and I would argue better, alternatives for reconfiguring scholarly authority than attempting to retrieve a position of authority in wider society by aligning research to the naturalized understandings of the world that are perceived as “reality.” Gullestad (2006b) has, for instance, advocated that scholarly authority should be reconfigured in terms of research processes that are based on reflexive contextualization, cooperation with the people whose life-worlds are examined, and dialogue with the general public.

There have been a number of attempts by other researchers (e.g. Gullestad, Fuglerud, Lithman) to locate the voices of “the critics” within broader social structures and their current transformations. Gullestad (2006a) has argued that public debate about immigrants in Norway (the participation of researchers included) needs to be understood in relation to changes in the cultural and political climate at the turn of the decade from the 1980s to the 1990s, which witnessed “the beginning of a remarkable but, nevertheless, largely unacknowledged change in the cultural climate in the direction of the rearticulating and reaffirmation of ethno-nationalist and integralist ideas” (2006a: 300) – constituting a polarized frame of reference that has become more or less hegemonic in Norway. Analyzing a wide array of contributions to public debate, she argues that: “even well-intended statements by the Norwegian political and cultural elite (in the widest sense of the term) often draw on some of the same underlying ideas and the stereotypes as the more venomous and discriminating statements by political extremists” (Gullestad 2006a: 300).

In a discussion of Norwegian migration research in the 1990s, Øyvind Fuglerud (2001) situated the work of Wikan and Lien within a growing “new realism<sup>14</sup>” in public administration, as well as amid left-wing academics that had previously supported the vision of Norway as a multicultural society. Inspired by, among others, Sweden, Norwegian politics from the 1980s on advocated a form of “multiculturalism” that stressed equal opportunities of social participation and cultural developments for citizens with differing values, forms of expression, views of life and ways of living (cf. Gressgård and Jacobsen 2003). In the 1990s, multiculturalist politics increasingly came under attack in both countries. In Sweden, Schierup argued that a “new realism” appeared in public administration, in politics and among academics. This new realism involved the culturalization of ethnicity and attendant control and monitoring of immigrants who were presumed to be backward, un-modern and on a collision course with the dominant Swedish culture. A central characteristic of this new realism, Schierup argued, was that “ethnic and cultural difference” increasingly came to be seen as a “problem” and as a hindrance for individual adaptation to majority society. The “new realism” was coupled with a culturalization of the question of integration, where both “multiculturalists” and their critics contributed to

constituting “culture” as the arena where political oppositions were defined. The ideological trend shifted from problematizing structural limitations towards culturalizing social problems (Ålund & Schierup 1991). Fuglerud argues that there has been a similar development in Norway, and that several of the most highly profiled immigrant researchers in Norway (among others he discusses the work of Wikan and Lien), see it as their role to deliver arguments to the growing “new realism” in public administration, arguing for limiting cultural pluralism and down-playing the importance of racism.

Both Gullestad and Fuglerud are concerned with how particular research framings contribute to buttressing majority hegemony and naturalize boundaries between a national “we” and a foreign “them” in a way that makes the cultural specificities of the majority invisible while cultural difference is considered as deviance.<sup>15</sup> This concern is shared by many of those accused of being silent about the “problems” associated with Islam and fundamentalism – researchers who have argued to their defence that it is not “cowardice” but legitimate and even necessary to take into account the social context when disseminating research results (cf. the above mentioned interview with Vogt, Leirvik and Vikør). Gullestad is the one who have most explicitly engaged with post-colonial critique of the historical involvement of Western academics in the representation of “other” people, cultures and religion, and the effects of such representations. From within this tradition of post-colonial critique, she and others have pointed towards how academic and popular representations continue to justify discrimination, exploitation and domination (cf. Narayan 1997; Said 1978). In this perspective, to historicize and nuance dominant representations of immigrants, Islam and Muslims may be understood as the ethical responsibility of researchers – avoiding their contribution to the stigmatization, discrimination and domination of certain categories of people – rather than as “fear” or “cowardice.” It should be noted that this ethical principle is central to the guidelines for social science research as developed both by national and international ethical committees.<sup>16</sup>

I want to draw two points from this discussion. One is that the efforts to understand the production and dissemination of knowledge on immigration and Islam in terms of the social location of researchers so far, seems, to a large extent to leave the critics’ own po-

sition unthematized. I would, thus, call for a more thorough discussion of the relationship between knowledge and power – a discussion that brings all positions into the social field, rather than establishing some as “points from nowhere” from where to criticize others. The second point is that, recognizing that researchers are always located within the social worlds they study, the challenge for researchers, as well as politicians and the general public, is to evaluate the knowledge that researchers produce. In my opinion, such evaluation should not be made in terms of the status of the researcher as a moral person (“coward,” “fearful”) or what some voices in public debate perceive as politically correct, or, for that matter, “true;” but, rather, in terms of (diverse available) standards for good research and research ethics that are defined within the academic community.<sup>17</sup> The standards of scientific disciplines and research institutions do, and must of course, remain in a critical and productive dialogue with the ethical, legal and political demands of the wider society.

### **Cultural relativism or "if you don't believe in my God you must believe in my Devil"**

A critique that is frequently voiced in public debate against researchers writing on Islam or immigration is that they are “relativist.” “Relativism” figures centrally in the critique raised by Gule, al-Kubaisi, Tvedt, Lien, Brox, Wikan and others. The attack on “relativism” is often coupled with a call for the need to defend values such as democracy, freedom of speech and gender equality against Islamic fundamentalism, and/ or traditionalism of Muslim immigrants. As attested by the manifesto issued by a group of twelve internationally prominent intellectuals, among them Salman Rushdie, in February 2006, the assertion that “relativism” is an anti-democratic doctrine facilitating a “new totalitarianism-Islamism” is not peculiar to the Norwegian debate. In wider cross-national public debate the critique of “cultural relativism” has come to be embraced to a critique of “multiculturalism” – somehow seen as the practical-political manifestation of relativism. Further, the critique of “cultural relativism” is often couched in terms of a revolt against “political correctness,” and as a defence of the principle of “freedom of speech.”

There is much to be said about relativism, and it is not my intention to review different anthropological and philosophical positions on the issue here. Rather, what interests me is the rhetorical function that the critique of relativism currently plays in debates over the role of researchers working in the field of Islam and immigration studies. My argument is that the critique of relativism in the particular context with which I am concerned here, groups together a variety of divergent positions under the blanket term “relativism” in a way that does not help further discussions about the methodological, epistemological and ethical challenges that research faces. The charge of relativism is an effective means in political debates because the term conveys the double assumption that everyone knows what relativism means and that this meaning has been, and is, a dominant (and politically correct) position among researchers as well as among other representatives of the “moral elite.” This double assumption permits public figures such as politicians, journalists or public intellectuals to construct “relativism” as a danger to be opposed in the name of a universal humanity and moral universalism. It also permits the defence of liberal notions of democracy, gender equality, tolerance and individual rights, taking their content for granted rather than by acknowledging their contestedness and the tensions and nuances in the historical understandings and attempts to implement these notions.

But what is this relativism that anti-relativists think we should be fearful of? Approaching the question “What is cultural relativism?” Feinberg begins by affirming that “cultural relativism does not exist”: “Not that we have nothing in mind when we use the expression; on the contrary, we have too many things in mind” (Feinberg 2007: 778). The term “relativism” has, as Feinberg points out, been used to denote a variety of ideas, not all of which sit comfortably together. Or as Perusek affirms, relativism has become “a free floating signifier that can, and much of the time does, mean anything to anyone” (Perusek 2007: 833). This was also noted by Clifford Geertz in his 1984 distinguished lecture, entitled: “Anti Anti-relativism,” in which he argues that “Whatever cultural relativism may be or originally have been [...] it serves these days largely as a spectre to scare us away from certain ways of thinking and towards others” (Geertz 1984: 253). As I argue below, this seems to be the case also for how the term “relativism” is used in contemporary Norwegian debates about research on immigration and Islam.

So what do critics have in mind when they take those who do research on immigration and Islam to task for being relativist? To stay with Feinberg, it does seem that people have “many things in mind” when they criticize “cultural relativism”. Let me first give a couple of examples of how the term is used in public debate. In a newspaper article in *Aftenposten* (14.03.2006) entitled “When values become relative”, anthropologist Anne Ellingsen argues that warnings against cultural relativism should be taken seriously, since relativism does not offer any protection against totalitarianism (more precisely identified here as Islamism). As an example of a relativist position she quotes a statement by Kari Vogt on the issue of Islamism, “Islamism is [...] an ideology based on Islam with the goal of legitimizing the creation of an Islamic state where Islamic law is the guide for cultural and political life. To throw around accusations where the word acquires the meaning of fanaticism and extremism is to go too far” (*Vårt Land* 22.02.2006). Ellingsen criticizes Vogt for seemingly regarding the wish to introduce Sharia-law as a “normal” position. Ellingsen further suggests that Vogt’s statement could be interpreted as an expression of “cultural relativism”, and that from such a perspective it is impossible to regard anything as extremist, not even things that from a “commonly accepted standard” must be characterized as both fanatic and extreme. In this particular case, and I would argue that this holds also for a number of other cases: “cultural relativism” is thus used to characterize the failure of supporting a particular diagnosis of “the others” (in this case Islamists) as “deviance” from a norm, and as “problematic” and/or “dangerous” on given accounts. “Relativism,” thus implies a refusal to occupy a specific position in public debate. Further, charges of “relativism” are voiced against those who seek to problematize the claims supporting this diagnosis (for instance that Islamic fundamentalism is a “totalitarian ideology with fascist-like features”, or that Islamism is “fanatic” and “extremist”). Branding such efforts “relativist” serves to establish particular claims about “immigrants” and “Islam” as the foundations upon which any critical activity must be based. Such foundationalism may be understood as a site of exclusion that hides the contingency and specific form of criticism embodied in those positions claiming to encompass the very field of criticism.

In the introduction to Warraq's book, Gule attacks the flip side of "politically correct cultural relativism": "The assumption that it is wrong to criticize others' cultural and religious practices ends in a moral relativism, that in the end, contributes to legitimizing the oppression of women, anti-democratic sentiments, and violence". Lien similarly seems to see "politically correct cultural relativism" as conducive of moral relativism in Norwegian immigration research. In contrast to Gule, however, Lien stresses recent challenges to this "cultural relativism." She argues that there has been a paradigm shift: "[...] from a position in which relativism, tolerance and focus on the position of groups were the central values, to a position in which universal human rights, responsibility and the individual stands in the centre. In this new outlook, the researcher's responsibility and her role as a helper are coming into favour again, while indifference and too much tolerance lose value" (Lien 2002: 100). Both Gule and Lien, thus, primarily understand "cultural relativism" as a form of "moral relativism," or as a position that "ends" in such relativism. However, their positions also differ in the way in which they link "tolerance" to the problem of "cultural relativism." Whereas Gule seek to combine critique of Islam with "more tolerance," Lien seems to understand relativism and tolerance as inextricably linked. What neither of them thematize is how the construction of "Muslims" and "immigrants" and their religious identities and practice as something to be "tolerated" (by whom is not specified, but a majority "we" lingers in the subtexts) reinscribes power relations between "us" and "them" (cf. Brown 2006; Gressgård and Jacobsen 2008).

### **The gender question and methodological relativism**

The most politicized issue within the debate over cultural relativism in Norwegian studies of immigration and Islam, has, no doubt, been gender. In *Generous Betrayal* (2000) Wikan claimed that anti-racists and other "cultural relativists" betray minority girls and women because they are concerned with representing themselves as good anti-racists rather than with "speaking truth." According to Wikan "cultural relativism," by which she seems to understand "the idea that all cultures are equally worthy of respect" has informed Norwegian immigration policy, and the deadly word "racism" has been used to make people subservient to cultural relativism in cases where culture was *not* worthy of respect (2002: 146). Wikan based her argument on the French philosopher Finkielkraut's

arguments against cultural relativism in *La défaite de la pensée* (1987). Here, Finkielkraut argued that the cultural relativism underlying contemporary politics of anti-racism and multiculturalism is a “generous betrayal” – an attitude that betrays the ideals of universal human rights and that denies “others” a status as moral actors. Like Finkielkraut, Wikan sees “cultural relativist anthropologist’s” efforts to replace race with culture, and superiority with diversity, as conducive of new patterns of oppression: “cultural relativism has become a celebration of servitude.”

Wikan’s concern for minority girls and women is easy to appreciate, and the critique that she and others offer of the way in which “culture” serves to legitimize the oppression of women, although problematic on several accounts, is, doubtless, important and has been widely addressed e.g. within feminist theory (see e.g. Cohen et al. 1999; Gressgård & Jacobsen 2003; Narayan 1997). However, it is problematic to conclude from this that researchers will consequently have to choose between, on the one hand: cultural relativism, resulting in indifference, too much tolerance, and a “generous betrayal” and, on the other side: a critique of “negative” aspects of immigration and Islam based on moral universalism. This dichotomization collapses the distinction between relativism as a moral position and relativism as a methodological approach. Very few, if any, Norwegian researchers on immigration and Islam would defend relativism as a moral position<sup>18</sup>. The position embraced by researchers like Vogt, Vikør and Leirvik – who are all branded “relativists” by their opponents – is at most a position of “descriptive relativism” striving to understand the complexity of the phenomena in question within their own context by temporarily suspending judgement. Rather than relativizing universal human rights, the value of gender equality or individual autonomy, they, like perhaps most researchers in the fields of immigration as well as Islamic studies, implicitly or explicitly hold “the others” accountable to these values by focusing, e.g., on “modernizing,” “positive” and/or “progressive” forces among Muslim immigrants in Norway and on the existence of such forces in the so-called “Muslim world.” This focus is not a consequence of a “relativist” approach, but rather an affirmation of the values and standards of evaluation that are said to be betrayed in the name of relativism.

Anthropologists working in these fields have also, from various positions, defended “cultural relativism” as a methodological strategy invaluable to anthropologists who wish to grasp the meaningfulness of social, cultural and religious practices to the people that engage in them, or to see them as alternative ways of organizing human life, rather than just as deviance from a norm. Marianne Gullestad, for one, has recently argued that suspending judgement in order to know more about the actor’s point of view “is a value that we need to guard intensely in the present climate of populist journalism and reaffirmation of stereotypes” (Gullestad 2006b: 921; cf. Thorbjørnsrud 2008). In her later work, Wikan has also stressed the importance of methodological relativism as a research tool when approaching practices that, from the outsider point of view, appear to be void of rationality. In the introduction to *In Honor of Fadime: Murder and Shame*, she argues that in order to defend women’s individual rights it is necessary to *understand* the practices that violate these rights and to describe them in a way that does not stigmatize (Wikan 2003: 8). This example shows that “methodological relativism” can also be defended from a position of moral universalism and a concern with “finding solutions” to particular social problems.

To uphold a distinction between methodological and moral relativism, is, of course, tricky in so far as judgement can never be wholly suspended from research and that the questions we ask never emerge from a neutral position. However, rather than seeing a renewed insistence on universals (be they assessments of “human nature,” “human mind” or moral universals) as a necessary guard against the threat of relativism, I agree with those who argue that “methodological relativism” is a necessary and valuable tool for humanist and social sciences. In my opinion, methodological relativism should not only include a temporary suspension of judgement, but also a commitment to critically investigate how theoretical and analytical frameworks enable (and disable) particular descriptions of “the other.” Such a commitment to methodological relativism should also entail the possibility that in the process of understanding “other” conceptual orders and traditions than our own, we will discover the particularisms and contingencies of “our own” in a way that may also lead us to revise our normative standards for critique (cf. Mahmood 2005).<sup>19</sup> This does not imply that I defend a positive theory of moral relativism

where “anything goes.” Rather, I argue that research, and in particular research dealing with politicized issues like Muslims and Islam, should continue to question norms and standards that are presented as universal. The effects of establishing certain norms and standards as foundations beyond criticism should also be problematized. This should be done on the basis that these standards adhere from particular experiences and perspectives – often from those of people in a structurally privileged position, and serve to reinforce particular relations of power. The debates surrounding gender issues demonstrate precisely the need to take into account the intersection of relations of power related to gender, ethnicity, religion and class. Methodological relativism, thus understood, implies not only the temporary suspension of value judgment as a means to understand other conceptual systems, but also a continuous effort to reflect on the embeddedness of our analytical concepts and tools in particular socio-historical contexts and relationships of power.

In the next section, I will consider how the anti-relativist position risks naturalizing the framework of the nation-state and how it articulates with images of a Norwegian “us” as opposed to an immigrant/Muslim “them.” In continuity with my stress on the continued importance of “methodological relativism,” I argue that such a principle importantly serves to counter the fallacy of what I, in following Wimmer and Glick-Schiller,<sup>20</sup> refer to as “methodological nationalism” – the tendency to frame the “problems” (whether of research or of society) within a perspective that takes for granted and naturalizes the modern nation-state regime and forms of power associated with it. I argue that “methodological nationalism,” also, to a considerable extent, frames research on immigration and Islam, particularly in relation to research that is conducted on the basis of assumptions tied to the political-administrative system.

### **Methodological nationalism: Reconsidering the “problem” with Muslim immigrants**

Wikan is one of the Norwegian anthropologists who have attempted to intervene in debates on immigration and Islam, both as a researcher and as a concerned citizen. In her 1995 debate-book, *Towards a New Norwegian Underclass* (1995), Wikan set herself “the task of trying to make the Norwegian government change its policies regarding immi-

grants and their children” (Wikan 2002: 1). The relative success of this endeavour to influence policies has been noted by several of Wikan’s critics, and, as I have argued elsewhere, can also be read from policy documents on immigration and integration in the period after her book was published (Gressgård & Jacobsen 2003). Wikan’s book caused a massive stir among Norwegian academics, and there is no reason for me to repeat the more or less well-substantiated criticisms that were voiced at the time (but see for instance Brochmann & Rogstad 1996; Fuglerud 2001; Fuglerud 2003; Gullestad 2002). What I want to do here is to use Wikan’s intervention as a starting point for problematizing certain aspects of “framing” that I find relevant for a broad range of research on Muslims and Islam in Europe.

In their critique of methodological nationalism in the social sciences, Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick-Schiller (2002a; 2002b) argue that the epistemic structures and programmes of mainstream social sciences have been closely attached to, and shaped by, the experience of modern state formation. They identify three main forms of methodological nationalism: ignoring the national framing of modernity, taking national discourses, agendas, loyalties and histories for granted and thus naturalizing the nation-state, and territorializing social science imaginary and reducing analytical focus to the boundaries of the nation state. These three forms, they argue, form a coherent epistemic structure, a self-reinforcing way of looking at and describing the social world, with consequences for the demarcation of problems and phenomena for social science.

Wimmer and Glick-Schiller (2002b) also identify four major reasons why immigrants become a special object of policy making as well as of a specializing body of research within a methodological nationalist framework. Firstly, immigrants challenge the isomorphism between people, sovereignty and citizenry upon which nationalist perspectives rest. Immigrants are “perceived as foreigners to the community of shared loyalty towards the state and shared rights guaranteed by that state” (2002b: 227). This perception gives rise to a series of concerns about the potential disloyalty of immigrants, and about the status of their “rights” as opposed to non-immigrant citizens. Secondly, immigrants destroy the isomorphism between people and nation, and questions thus arise as to how

immigrants can be made part of the “receiving” nation. Central to migration studies has been precisely the scrutinizing of cultural differences between immigrants and nationals, and to describe pathways of assimilation and integration into the national group. In other words, migration studies have contributed to a description of the mechanics of a successful nation-making process (Favell 2003; Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002b). Thirdly, immigrants challenge the isomorphism between “people” and “group of solidarity,” and, fourthly, the methodological nationalist perspective makes every move across national frontiers an exception to the rule of sedentariness within the boundaries of the nation state.

In *Towards a New Norwegian Underclass*, Wikan argues that when so many Norwegians, including herself, see Muslims as problematic, it is because they *are* problematic in many ways (Wikan 1995: 85). She formulates the problems in the following way: “One gets the impression that they distance themselves more strongly than other groups from Norwegian values. They practice segregation. They are opposed to their children having Norwegian friends.” Wikan underlines that these characteristics are not generalizable to all Muslims, but that they apply to “way too many” (ibid. p. 86). Wikan also argues that people who have a Norwegian passport, but dissociate themselves from “fundamental Norwegian values” and do not learn Norwegian, are Norwegian only in “name” (I navnet) and not “in practice” (gavnet). These “citizens in name” are also referred to as “convenience-citizens” (beleilighetsborgere) that benefit from Norwegian welfare without being committed to the community (ibid. p. 177). Their relationship to the system of social security appears as somehow illegitimate within the frames of methodological nationalism, because immigrants are perceived as outside of the national space of solidarity. The embracement of “fundamental Norwegian values” and relationship to the system of social security is not similarly questioned for those who are assumed to have a “natural entitlement” (through descent from the “original citizens”) to full citizenship (cf. Gullstad 2006a; Razack 2008).

In relying on an isomorphism between people, sovereignty and citizenry, Wikan establishes “Muslim immigrants” as foreigners to the community of shared loyalty to the state

and the shared rights that the state guarantees - the community of those citizens whom she assumes to be, by virtue of their descent, committed to a set of shared national values. In this construction, the question of whether the people constructed as the “Us” are integrated never arises. As Wimmer and Glick-Schiller point out, integration is thought of as being established, less problematical, and less fragile among those belonging to the national people within the frames of “methodological nationalism.” Quite symptomatically, Wikan defends “Norwegian” and “Universal” values by taking their content, and the assumption that they are shared, for granted. This is all the more puzzling as they refer to contested liberal notions of gender equality, autonomy, tolerance, and individual rights. Wikan is also concerned with describing pathways of integration into the national group. “Too much tolerance” and “cultural relativism” need to be replaced by making demands on immigrants to “function according to fundamental Norwegian values” and to “learn Norwegian.” Wikan, thus, reinforces the isomorphism between people and nation that underlies methodological nationalism.

*Towards a New Norwegian Underclass* is a debate-book, aiming at creating political debate and changes in policy making. However, I think that discussing the book in terms of the “methodological nationalism” that frames it is relevant for Norwegian immigration research more broadly, and also for research on “Islam and Muslim immigrants” elsewhere. Here, I can only make some brief suggestions as to why this is so.

9/11 spurred a reinforcement of an already existing tendency to focus on issues related to the political activity and loyalty of Muslim immigrants in a way that parallels the nation state’s interest in the supervision, limitation and control of the immigrant population. While many researchers counter allegations that Muslims should be less loyal to the state, they more rarely challenge the frames that naturalize a juxtaposition of “Muslim immigrants” to the unmarked members of the nation. This framing is also evident from the concern with how and to what extent Islam, in its different varieties, hinders or promotes integration into the nation state. The prominent concern with whether we see the development of “Norwegian Islam,” “Swedish Islam,” “and “French Islam” also tends to take the nation for granted, ignoring questions of how and through what operations of power

religious traditions are shaped by the nation-state. There is also a lack of attention to the ways in which concepts such as “Norwegian Islam” contribute to upholding a notion of a unified national society or culture. Further, and in continuity with the “territorializing” imaginary of methodological nationalism, certain research agendas tend to become prominent in relation to nationally specific concerns and policy issues regarding the “government” of Muslims.

Not least, since 9-11, perspectives rooted within a global or transnational framework have become prominent within research and politics, and new conceptual tools have been developed, including: diaspora, borderland, Third Space, and travelling Islam. Attention has also been paid to emerging transnational public spheres, transnational infrastructures of communication, and the emergence of global Muslim identities. While a number of new issues and focuses have emerged from this shift, the structuring of academic research, notably through national funding, tends to privilege research questions that are rooted within the epistemic structures of methodological nationalism and that give priority to solving what the government and/or the population understand as problems. I believe that part of the critique against the “relativism” of research on Islam and immigrants is precisely triggered by the kind of research that does not easily lend itself to such problem solving. Those researchers that attempt to investigate the discourses in and through which certain issues are constructed as social problems in the first place, are not seen as offering valuable critique, but, within a methodological nationalist framework, are seen as shying away from the “real problems.”

Since research funding is often allocated to areas that are defined as problems by national governments, in view of providing informed solutions, research that take as their point of departure what has already been defined and constructed as a “social problem,” tends to be privileged outside the so-called basic scientific research of the universities (“grunnforskning”). Moreover, the political-administrative framework tends to privilege “naturalist” or “realist” epistemological positions over “constructivist” ones. While such research may, of course, be as good as any according to scientific standards, there might be a tendency that research attention is drawn towards issues that are on the political agenda, to

the exclusion of questions that may, in a broader sense, throw light on questions central to the human and social sciences. I do not mean to indicate that there are no legitimate political-administrative problems to be addressed. I am simply arguing against reducing research related to Muslims and Islam primarily to this dimension. If social and humanist researchers are to contribute solutions to the political-administrative system, I think it needs to guard its methodological relativism and to explore in multiple ways the social phenomena that are constructed as social problems, thereby achieving a fuller understanding of these phenomena, and thus, also, a more effective means of dealing with them.

### **Conclusion**

The politicization of research in the human and social sciences, is, by no means, a new phenomenon, although the current political climate in the US and Europe has made research on Muslim immigrants and Islam a particularly contested field. By using Norwegian debate on research on immigration and Islam as a case, I have discussed some methodological, epistemological and ethical challenges that are also relevant to similar debates in other countries. While the current critique of research on immigration and Islam concerns important questions regarding the production and dissemination of knowledge, and the role of the researcher in public debate, the framing of these questions in terms of “cowardice,” “political correctness,” and “relativism” function more as rhetorical devices to authorize and de-authorize particular epistemological, methodological and ethical positions than to provide new insight about the challenges that face researchers in this field. Drawing on Wimmer and Glick-Schiller’s critique of methodological nationalism as an epistemic structuring of the social sciences, I have suggested another prism for critically reviewing both the research field and the critique that is currently being voiced. Although not necessarily involving a normative nationalism, methodological nationalism risks reproducing nationalist concerns with social order and the cultural boundaries of the nation state. The nexus between a political-administrative research paradigm, methodological nationalism, and anti-relativism results in a particularly forceful ethnocentric approach to the Muslim “others.” A “methodological relativism” enables researchers to critically reflect on the consequences of “methodological nationalism” for the demarcation of prob-

lems and phenomena for social science and politics and to critically engage with how the topics and problems we study, as well as the field in itself, is constituted in and through relationships of power from which researchers cannot be exempt.

## References

- al-Kubaisi, Walid, 2003: "Ytringsfrihetens grenser og islamforskernes dilemma", *Aftenposten* 15.12.2003.
- , 1998: *Halvmånens hemmeligheter*, Oslo, Pantagruel forlag.
- , 1996: *Min tro, din myte: islam møter norsk hverdag*, Oslo, Aventura.
- Andersson, Mette, 2007: "Migrasjon som utfordring: Kritikk av metodologisk nasjonalisme", In *Grenser for kultur?: perspektiver fra norsk minoritets-forskning* (eds) Thomas Hylland Eriksen & Øivind Fuglerud, Oslo, Pax forlag.
- , 2005: *Urban Multi-Culture in Norway: Identity Formation Among Immigrant Youth*, New York, Edwin Mellen Press.
- Borchgrevink, Tordis, 1997: "Et ubehag i antropologien", *Norsk Antropologisk Tidsskrift*, 11 (1): 26-36.
- Brekke, Torkel, 2006: "Intellektuelle og islam: Debatt som ikke rammer", *Aftenposten* 06.06.2006.
- Brochmann, Grete & Jon Rogstad, 1996: "Integrasjon, underklasse og marginalisering: noen refleksjoner omkring dagens innvandringsdebatt", *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning*, 37 (4): 554-576.
- Brown, Wendy, 2006: *Regulating aversion tolerance in the age of identity and empire*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.
- Brox, Ottar, 1991: "Jeg er ikke rasist, men ..." : hvordan får vi våre meninger om innvandrere og innvandring?, Oslo, Gyldendal.
- Cohen, Joshua, Matthew Howard, Susan Moller Okin & Martha C. Nussbaum, 1999: *Is Multiculturalism bad for Women?*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.
- Djuve, Anne Britt, 2006: "Må innvandringsforskere være feige?" *Dagbladet* 19.03.2006.
- Ellingsen, Anne, 2006: "Når verdier blir relative". *Aftenposten* 14.03.2006.
- Falck, Sturla, 1991: "God kritikk?" *Nytt norsk tidsskrift*, 378-380.

- Favell, Adrian, 2003: "Integration Nations: The Nation-State and Research on Immigrants in Western Europe", *Comparative Social Research* 22 (1): 13-42.
- Feinberg, Richard, 2007: "Dialectics of Culture: Relativism in Popular and Anthropological Discourse", *Anthropological Quarterly* 80 (3): 777-790.
- Finkelkraut, Alain, 1987: *La défaite de la pensée: essai*, Paris, Gallimard.
- Fuglerud, Øivind, 2005: "Inside out: the re-organisation of national identity in Norway," in Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (eds.): *Sovereign Bodies. Citizens, migrants and states in the postcolonial world*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- , 2003: "Generøst forræderi eller sosialantropologisk vådeskudd?" *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning*, 44 (1): 97-103.
- , 2001: *Migrasjonsforståelse: flytteprosesser, rasisme og globalisering*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget.
- Geertz, Clifford, 1984: "Distinguished lecture: Anti Anti-Relativism", *American Anthropologist* 86 (2): 263-278.
- Giertsen, Hedda, 1991: "God kritikk? II", *Nytt norsk tidsskrift*: 375-377.
- Gressgård, Randi E., 2005: *Fra identitet til forskjell*, Oslo, Scandinavian Academic Press/Spartacus Forlag.
- Gressgård, Randi E. & Christine M. Jacobsen, 2008: "Krevende toleranse: Islam og homoseksualitet", *Tidsskrift for kjønnsforskning*, 32 (1): 22-39.
- Gressgård, Randi E. & Christine M. Jacobsen, 2003: "Questions of Gender in a Multicultural Society", *NORA* 11 (2): 69-77.
- Gule, Lars, 2003: "Forord", In Ibn Warraq *Hvorfor jeg ikke er muslim*, Oslo, Humanist Forlag.
- Gullestad, Marianne, 2006a: *Plausible Prejudice. Everyday experiences and social images of nation, culture and race*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget.
- , 2006b: "Reconfiguring Scholarly Authority. Reflections based on Anthropological Studies in Norway", *Current Anthropology* 47 (6): 915-931.
- , 2002: *Det norske sett med nye øyne: Kritisk analyse av norsk innvandringsdebatt*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget.
- Herbjørnsrud, Dag, 2004a: "Islamfrykten fortsetter", *Aftenposten* 19.09.2004.

- , 2004b: "Norske akademikere sprer islamfrykt", *Aftenposten* 10.09.2004.
- Jacobsen, Christine M., 2006: *Staying on the Straight Path: Religious Identities and Practices among Young Muslims in Norway*, Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen.
- Lien, Inger-Lise, 1991: "En god forsker eller et godt menneske", *Nytt norsk tidsskrift*: 177-184.
- , 2002: "Konkurrerende paradigmer i innvandringsforskningen", *Nytt norsk tidsskrift*: 99-102.
- Lindstad, Merete & Øivind Fjeldstad, 1999: *Pressen og de fremmede*, Kristiansand, IJ-forlag.
- , 1997: *Innvandrere, fremmedfrykt og norske medier: en undersøkelse av utvalgte mediers dekning av saker knyttet til innvandrere og flyktninger, fremmedfrykt og rasisme*, Nesoddtangen, Norsk journalistlag, Utlendingsdirektoratet, Prosjekt innvandrere og medier.
- Lithman, Yngve G., 2004: "When Researchers Disagree: Epistemology, Multiculturalism, Universities, and the State", *Ethnicities*, 4 (2): 155-184.
- Mahmood, Saba, 2005: *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press.
- Martins, Herminio, 1974: "Time and Theory in Sociology", In *Approaches to Sociology* John Rex (ed.), London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Narayan, Uma, 1997: *Dislocating cultures. Identities, traditions, and Third-World feminism*, New York, Routledge.
- Næss, Kjersti Rogde, 2003: *Myten om muslimer : en analyse av mediernes beskrivelser av muslimske innvandrere i Norge i lys av Roland Barthes' mytebegrep*, Hovedoppgave, Universitetet i Bergen.
- Perusek, David, 2007: "Grounding Cultural Relativism", *Anthropological Quarterly*, 80 (3): 821-836.
- Punternvold Bø, Bente, 1991: "God kritikk?" *Nytt norsk tidsskrift*: 372-374.
- Razack, Sherene H., 2008: *Casting Out. The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law & Politics*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- Said, Edward W., 1978: *Orientalism*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

- Thorbjørnsrud, Berit, 2008: "Kritikk av relativismekritikken", *Samtiden*, 1/08: 96-104.
- , 2003: "Weeping for the Muslim Cinderellas. A Lament of Tears Shed though not Shared", *Tidsskrift for migrasjonsforskning* 4 (2): 133-145.
- Tjønnø, Halvor, 2003: "Humanetikere med bredside mot islam. Intervju med Lars Gule", *Aftenposten* 31.10.2003.
- Todal, Per Anders, 2003: "Islam: Vil forske, ikke fordømme. Intervju med Kari Vogt, Oddbjørn Leirvik, Knut S. Vikør og Lars Gule", *Dag og Tid* nr. 35, 08.11.2003.
- Warraq, Ibn, 2003 [1995]: *Hvorfor jeg ikke er muslim [Why I Am Not a Muslim]*, Oslo, Humanist Forlag.
- Wikan, Unni, 2003: *For ærens skyld : Fadime til ettertanke [In Honor of Fadime: Murder and Shame, 2008]*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget.
- , 2002: *Generous Betrayal: Politics of Culture in the New Europe*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- , 2000: "Citizenship on Trial: Nadia's Case", *Daedalus*, 129 (4): 55-76.
- , 1995: *Mot en ny norsk underklasse. Innvandrere, kultur og integrasjon*, Oslo, Gyldendal.
- Wimmer, Andreas & Nina Glick Schiller, 2002a: "Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences", *Global Networks*, 2 (4): 301-334.
- , 2002b: "Methodological Nationalism and the Study of Migration", *Archives Europeennes De Sociologie*, XLIII: 217-240.
- Ålund, Alexandra & Carl-Ulrik Schierup, 1991: *Paradoxes of Multiculturalism: Essays on Swedish Society*, Aldershot, Avebury.

Christine M. Jacobsen is Post-doc researcher at Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo. Her publications include:

- "Negotiating gender: discourse and practice among young Muslims in Oslo" (2004), *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 17 (1)
- "Religiosity of young Muslims in Norway: the quest for authenticity" (2005), in: Jocelyne Cesari and Sean McLaughlin (ed). *European Muslims and the Secular State* London, Ashgate

- “Muslim GenDerations. Questions of Identity in the Return to Islam” (2005), in: Mette Andersson, Yngve Lithman and Ove Sernhede (ed). *Youth, Otherness and the Plural City: Modes of Belonging and Social Life*. Stockholm, Daidalos
- and with Randi Gressgård, “Beyond 'Man': In Defence of Multidimensional Identities” (2006), in: Hakan G. Sicakkan and Yngve G. Lithman (ed). *What Happens When the Society is Diverse? Exploring Multidimensional Identities*. forthcoming, Edwin Mellen Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> My discussion will relate both to research on Islam and immigration. There are significant similarities between public debates on research in these two fields; similarities that may help identify some of the more general epistemological, methodological and ethical challenges that are raised. Further, debates on research in the two fields to a significant extent overlap each other.

<sup>2</sup> In Norway, anthropologists have been particularly active in public debates on immigration-related issues. Their engagement in migration research has also spurred debates on fundamental epistemological, theoretical, methodological and ethical issues within the discipline. Norwegian sociologists have not similarly questioned the fundamentals of sociological analysis in relation to migration research (Andersson 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Warraq is the pen name of an author that has written several critical books on Islam that have been widely translated and has reached a broad audience. The main argument of *Why I am not a Muslims* is that the teachings of Islam have caused disaster for human reason and social, intellectual, and moral progress.

<sup>4</sup> Gule is also a philosopher, with a specialization in Western and Arab-Islamic ideas of social and political change and improvement.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Kubaisi is a journalist and author and has been a critical voice in Norwegian public debate with respect to Muslims and Islam. He has published *Min tro din myte* (1996) and *Halvmånens hemmeligheter* (1998).

<sup>6</sup> The Department of Cultural Studies, where Vogt works, was charged by Gule and others for “censorship” of voices critical of Islam, because they deleted a student’s (allegedly a member of Forum Against Islamization) debate contributions and recommendation of Warraq’s book from the departments’ discussion pages (Classfronter) on the reason that it was without scientific relevance (Universitas 19.11.2003). Walid al-Kubaisi subsequently wrote a newspaper article about “the desperate effort of Islam-researchers to limit the freedom of speech” and their promotion of “a false picture that does not concur with reality” (al-Kubaisi 2003).

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the works of the same three researchers were positively named in Gule’s introduction to Warraq, where he recommends them as among “good books in Norwegian that deserve attention from those who want to learn more about the many aspects of Islam” (Gule 2003: 21).

<sup>8</sup> This debate extended over several months and similar allegations have since been made a number of times. It should be noted that Norwegian researchers have by others also been charged with “spreading fear of Islam” (Herbjørnsrud 2004a; Herbjørnsrud 2004b).

<sup>9</sup> In my opinion, sensitivity to the ways in which research sometimes contributes to stereotyping, and the effort to challenge such stereotyping is both necessary and important. However, as will be argued below, I think that the strategy of contextualizing, historicizing, and displaying internal variations and differentiation may not be sufficient in dealing with stereotyping of immigrants and Muslims. Rather, as argued below, I think a more thorough reconsideration of the very frames of analysis that are implied in humanist and social science approaches to immigration and Islam is necessary.

<sup>10</sup> Ottar Brox (sociology), Anne Britt Djuve (sociology), Inger-Lise Lien (anthropology), and Tormod Øia (sociology).

<sup>11</sup> The idea that these themes should be “taboo,” as well as the idea that it should be impossible to “criticize Islam or immigrants” is countered by a number of studies that conclude that representations of Muslims and immigrants in media and public debate are largely negative, affirmative of existing stereotypes, and

problem-focused (Gullestad 2006a; Lindstad & Fjeldstad 1997; Lindstad & Fjeldstad 1999; Næss 2003; Thorbjørnsrud 2003). The allegation that these issues are taboos within research also seems unfounded, as a number of studies deal with the mentioned issues (but in a way that is perhaps not recognized as such, since they might not share the problem-framing of the critics).

<sup>12</sup> I also participated in this debate, writing, together with three colleagues, a response to the charges that immigrant researchers were cowards.

<sup>13</sup> For a critique of Lien see Andersson 2005; Falck 1991; Giertsen 1991; Puntervold Bø 1991. Brox (1991) makes an argument similar to that of Lien.

<sup>14</sup> A further discussion of the “new realism” as manifest within the field of Norwegian Government bureaucracy is provided in Fuglerud 2005.

<sup>15</sup> That Gullestad and Fuglerud oppose a particular critique of multiculturalism does of course not imply that they embrace mainstream politics of multiculturalism.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, the guidelines outlined by the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and Humaniora.

<sup>17</sup> That these standards are subject to contestation, also within the disciplines, is evident if we look at critical discussions among Norwegian anthropologists involved in migration research (Borchgrevink 1997; Eriksen 1993; Fuglerud 2001; Grønhaug 1997; Gullestad 2002; Lien 1997; Wikan 1995)

<sup>18</sup> The religious historian Torkel Brekke also makes this point in a more clearly polemical way. In a reply in *Aftenposten* to Knut Olav Amå's critique of the refusal of Norwegian intellectuals to criticize political Islam, Brekke dismisses the view that “relativism” should be a plausible reason for this: “I still have not met any colleague who would be willing to say that all values, attitudes and practices are equally good. I do not know a single person that do not defend basic human rights, and reject aspects of political Islam colliding with such rights. Believe it or not, Norwegian intellectuals are mostly moderate universalists; they believe in universal values, that can be inscribed in democratic institutions and structures with global validity” (Brekke 2006). Brekke also writes that contemporary anti-relativism is one of the clearest characteristics of neo-conservatism – the political thought and practices at the basis for a “global war to create a universal empire founded on freedom and market liberalism.”

<sup>19</sup> Such a distinction between “our own” conceptual orders and those of “others,” are, of course, problematic and entail a risk of essentializing boundaries. I do not want to re-inscribe a radical alterity between Us and Them, however. As I have argued elsewhere (Jacobsen 2006), the people we study, are, like anthropologists, positioned at the intersection of different discourses, and their lives and moral horizons are shaped within this complexity.

<sup>20</sup> The following discussion is indebted to Lithman 2004, who argues that the works of Lien, Wikan and Brox in the 1990s, represent a “definitive shift towards a research clearly based on assumptions tied to the political-administrative system” and to what Wimmer and Glick Schiller term methodological nationalism (Lithman 2004: 163).