

Pnina Werbner

An Obituary

Claudia Liebelt

Professor Pnina Werbner, 3 December 1944 – 17 January 2023

Pnina Werbner was a British social anthropologist, a brilliant thinker and an engaged intellectual renowned for her prolific contributions to debates on Sufi Islam, multiculturalism and diaspora, as well as urban and legal anthropology. In January 2023, she died unexpectedly during a holiday with her husband, the anthropologist Richard Werbner.

Born in South Africa in 1944, Pnina immigrated to Israel with her parents when she was six years old. She obtained her bachelor's and master's degrees in English literature and philosophy from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and in sociology and social anthropology from Tel Aviv University before moving to Manchester in 1970. In 1976, she received her doctorate from the University of Manchester, where she had studied with the late Max Gluckman, the South African social anthropologist and founder of the Manchester School, who also happened to be her uncle. She joined the University of Keele faculty in 1997 and became a full professor of social anthropology in 2001.

For more than five decades, Pnina studied Muslim South Asians in Britain and Pakistan, research that spanned different themes and places and was published as the so-called Migration Trilogy: three single-authored books entitled *The Migration Process* (*[1990] 2002), *Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims* (*2002) and *Pilgrims of Love* (*2003).

Though Pnina's research crossed geographical and continental boundaries, her contributions to the anthropology of Europe are significant: in a time when most of her colleagues at the University of Manchester embarked on research in Asia or Africa, she did fieldwork in the place where she lived, the Manchester region – an 'anthropology at home' *avant la lettre*. She continued to publish on issues of immigration, politics, xenophobia and racism in the United Kingdom and Europe throughout her career. In *The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe*, which she edited with Tariq *Modood (1997) as the outcome of a co-convened European Workshop at the University of Manchester in 1994, the editors coined the notion of the 'New Europe,' that is, the Europe of the post-communist nineties. They brought together ethnographic and conceptual contributions from Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, Southern



Europe and the ‘contested heartland of the European Union’ (1997: vii) to tackle the rise of xenophobia and racism in the early 1990s, a transitional moment in European history after the fall of the Berlin Wall and on the background of the civil war in Bosnia.

Many of Pnina’s PhD students and research assistants did their research in the UK and became invested in the anthropology of Europe and/or of Britain: Katharine Tyler, for example, remembered that it was her PhD supervisor Pnina Werbner who encouraged her to create the network for the Anthropology of Britain in the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) of the UK, which has been active for almost twenty years now.

In Pnina’s publications, British South Asians are presented not as part of encapsulated immigrant communities but as creative agents of complex and transformative lives in a diaspora, engaged in border-crossing journeys and networks of mutual support and gifting. Engaged in intellectual debates with many postcolonial theorists and feminist thinkers, Pnina wrote about the translocation of culture, the gendered experiences of migrant women and citizenship, and the role of imagination, sensual embodiment and creativity in the migration process long before these topics became more widely addressed in social and cultural anthropology.

As a public intellectual, she prominently spoke out against essentialist thinking and the ‘failure’ of multiculturalism, offering, for example, *a nuanced reading* of the so-called Rushdie affair following the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (*Rushdie 1988). She famously interpreted the protests sparked by the publication as a clash between different aesthetic grammars – an Islamic aesthetic of the Sublime and a secular-modernist narrative style – calling for a multiculturalist ‘politics of recognition’ rather than a blind enforcement of ‘freedom of speech’ (Werbner 1996: S55).

More recently, she co-edited *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring Uprisings and Beyond* (with *Webb and Spellman 2014) and wrote *The Making of an African Working Class: Politics, Law and Cultural Protest in the Manual Workers Union of Botswana* (*2014) and, with her husband Richard Werbner (2022), *African Customary Justice: Living Law, Legal Pluralism, and Public Ethics*. She continued to travel and publish, regularly attending academic conferences as well as the University of Manchester’s departmental seminar on Mondays. Her lists of publications, awards, honours and grants are long.

In her academic work, Pnina often stressed the embodied and sensual aspects of social interaction, the ‘creativity and transgressive

“fun” of [...] everyday life’ (**Liebelt and Werbner 2018*: 3), among the female migrants or the (trades union) activists she studied and worked with. Pnina herself invested much in creating an inspired, vibrant and fun intellectual community, for example, by co-organising the long-standing annual Lake District Pakistan Workshop. Her and her husband’s house south of Manchester functioned as a place where scholars of different generations came together for celebrations and lively conversations over delicious food. For me, Pnina’s house became like a home away from home after I started working as her research assistant within the framework of an Arts and Humanities Research Council–sponsored project on ‘Sociality, Caring, and the Religious Imagination in the Filipina Diaspora’ (2007–2010).

Pnina Werbner was an energetic and visionary spirit and – according to one speaker during a wake organised for her in early March 2023 – a force to be reckoned with. In 2006, she single-handedly organised the ASA UK Diamond Jubilee Annual Conference at the University of Keele after a dispute over organisational matters.

She is remembered by colleagues and former students for her intellectual generosity, humour and warmth. For them, she was utterly supportive, almost motherly and an intellectual sparring partner in the best sense of the term.

RIP, Pnina, you will not be forgotten.

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