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Inhaltsverzeichnis

ZWISCHENRAUM

VERHANDELTER RAUM

Victoria Robinson

Internal and External Shifts and Constraints on Women's Studies and Gender Studies: Implications For the 'Canon'

Introduction

In writing this paper I have assumed, as Mihaela Frunza and Theodora-Eliza Vacarescu (2005) do in discussing a gender seminar that took place in 2004 in Romania, that we are here from different countries not to give final answers to the East/ West divide (or, I would add, solve the problematics of a feminist canon), but to bring these issues to the fore, to share experiences, analyse different contexts of feminism and indeed, different feminisms.

Rosi Braidotti (2000) argues that no perspective in Women's Studies can be truly European unless it addresses the need to produce non-exclusionary and non-ethnocentric models of knowledge and education. For this work to succeed, discussions are needed in a comparative framework with women from all over Europe, the USA and developing countries. However, she also writes that no discussion of Women's Studies' international perspective is complete unless it rests on a lucid analysis of one's inscription in the networks of power and signification that make up one's culture; that unless we do so, we run the risk of postulating an international perspective that would be just a form of supra-nationalism.

Therefore, this paper will incorporate "local" context in the form of autobiographical detail based on my own involvement in UK Women's Studies and Gender Studies since the mid 1980s. Firstly, I will briefly examine the current position of Women's Studies and Gender Studies in the academy in the UK and then go on to consider factors for their relative decline in some contexts, but, also, refer to their continued presence in the academy. I will then, through considering the publication of a text book in Women's Studies and Gender Studies which I have co-edited, explore shifts and changes in the concept of "gender", both in terms of terminology and conceptual meaning and what this might mean in a comparative context for the feminist theoretical canon.

My own institutional and intellectual location has been in the context of both Women's Studies and Gender Studies, at the UK Universities of Sheffield, Manchester and Newcastle. In that time, I have initiated a part time degree in Women's Studies at Sheffield in the 1980s which now no longer exists. I have been director of a Women's Studies Centre at the University of Manchester for 3 years in the late 90s, during which period the emphasis of the Centre changed from Women's Studies to one of gender and culture. I have also been Programme Director of an MA Gender Studies at Newcastle, and am now back at the University of Sheffield teaching courses on gender in a Sociology department, where such courses have recently been recognized as a curriculum priority. With other feminist colleagues I am also currently establishing a cross faculty gender network. Thus, I have been engaged in teaching and organizing separate Gender and Women's Studies courses and with establishing gender teaching in the disciplines for over 20 years. In that period, it is something of an understatement to state that much has happened to Gender Studies and Women's Studies in the UK, and worldwide, due to political, economic, social and intellectual changes.

Institutional Locations

The choice of whether to name courses Gender *or* Women's Studies has been made in UK universities for a number of diverse reasons; from pragmatic desires to establish courses where perhaps "gender" was seen as less threatening than "women", to intellectual reasons, where some have argued that "gender" is a more inclusive term, allowing both women and men to be studied. (See Robinson and Richardson 1994) At the very start of the 1990s, the general mood regarding both Women's Studies/Gender Studies in the UK was still an optimistic one, and undergraduate and post graduate Women's Studies/Gender Studies courses had been established in many universities and higher education institutions. The old debate about whether Women's Studies/Gender Studies should enter the "malestream/ mainstream" no longer existed, and in general, their establishment in the higher education system was seen as a positive move, bringing feminist theoretical ideas and pedagogical practices to a wider audience, transforming the disciplines and the academy more generally from "within".

However, it could be argued that from the mid-nineties onwards, separate Women's Studies and Gender Studies undergraduate degrees especially began to decline, though, it should be noted, some long established courses, for example at the universities of Hull and Lancaster, still exist. This decline has also been documented in the USA where Bystydzienski (2004) argues that in the context of declining support for US education, Women's Studies programs may not see adequate funding for a long time. Looking back, it is surprising few people realized that a decline in Women's Studies at undergraduate, and to a lesser extent, post graduate levels was occurring. However, given feminist academics' intellectual, personal and practical commitment to Women's Studies/Gender Studies, this can perhaps explain why it was not really until the later 1990s that collective concern for the future of Women's Studies/Gender Studies began to surface.

It is interesting to note some of the debates which took place between 1999 and 2002 in the then named Women's Studies Network (UK) newsletter, which raised a number of concerns about the state of Women's Studies, in particular in the UK. Reasons given included: the falling number of mature students (who have been traditionally attracted to such courses), the introduction of tuition fees (Matthews 1999), the perceived unemployability of Women's Studies graduates themselves (Hope-Forest 2000), the negative impact of UK higher education quality assurance practices such as bench-marking and QAA (seen by some as stifling innovative inter-disciplinary work [Evans 2001]), and the relative invisibility of Women's Studies in the last RAE exercise (Shildrick 2001). (Which is an assessment of the quality of research in UK higher education institutions and, as such, also has funding implications.)

It has been argued that an earlier acknowledgement of the changing market-led model of higher education, and adaptation to it, could have perhaps halted the loss of some Women's Studies programs (Livesey 2002). But, as Bird (2001) argues, the decline of Women's Studies courses (and I would add to that, Gender Studies courses also), cannot be attributed to any single cause. The complexity of reasons for Women's Studies / Gender Studies lack of growth and relative decline in the UK needs to be recognized, as do the disparate factors behind course closures. Overall, there has been a collective mourning for Women's Studies and Gender Studies, at least in the form they had been originally conceived and established. Others, though, are still optimistic: "there is still every reason to maintain an energetic voice for all those engaged with issues that

concern feminist theory, women's perspectives, and/or gender relations" (Shildrick 2002:5), whilst an editorial of the WSNW newsletter in 2004 highlights moves being made to intervene in such issues as the RAE agenda and the different funding council's policies in relation to Women's/Gender Studies. Post graduate Women's Studies and Gender Studies in some areas and institutions continues to thrive, and gender is established across many of the disciplines in the social sciences and arts and humanities and attracts high student numbers. It is, however, important not to construct a linear trajectory which firstly sees the initial "malestream" higher education resistance to such programs, with eventual acceptance in the 1980s and then, since the mid 1990s, a steady decline. Such a straightforward perspective ignores the diversity of positions and scenarios in UK higher education on the continued existence and future of Women's Studies and Gender Studies.

However, that much feminist scholarship is still treated with suspicion or even derision in some quarters, despite its impressive record in intellectual endeavour across the disciplines, is apparent, so that being "inside" the academy has brought with it its own set of issues and problems for women in countries like the UK, the USA and Canada (Abbott and Wallace, 1997; Delamont, 2004; Webber, 2005). Kate Reed (2005), for instance, asks of British Sociology, who makes up the "canon" of sociology – and who doesn't? And does sociology need a "canon" in the first place? She argues that the exclusion of theorists – who are female, black, or both – from the mainstream of the social theorising is still evident.

How this trajectory for Women Studies/Gender Studies (or at least the trajectory as I have conceptualized it as based on my own experiences and institutional locations) compares with other countries and women whose institutional and intellectual locations are different to my own, will be a matter for reflection in this volume. One immediate question that arises from this is raised by Braidotti (2000), that is the question of whether the term Women's Studies, in itself a North American invention, can be applied systematically across Latin, Catholic, Southern and Eastern Europe. This is very debatable because of such different cultural, religious, political and educational practices. Is therefore, the Women's Studies concept respectful of cultural diversity today? Temkina and Zdravomyslova (2005 and in their contribution included in this volume) point out that in Russia in the 1990s, Gender Studies has been connected with grassroot organizations, whilst "Feminology", which they define as Women's Studies, was connected to the Russian political movement "Women of Russia", which

follows a social protectionist policy. In Slovenia, however, it has been suggested that the Slovene word for Women's Studies should be replaced by the safer, more neutral, term "studies of the sexes" (Bahovic 2000). (Such international differences I will consider further in the next section of my paper.)

Terminologies, Conceptual Differences and the "Canon"

In the following, I want to discuss the shifting fortunes and some of the developments in UK Gender Studies/Women's Studies in relation to some of my own published work undertaken with other feminist colleagues. This also illuminates wider theoretical changes around the term "gender" in particular, which can be seen both in relation to terminology and in the conceptual use of gender as a category of analysis.

A collection co-edited by myself and Diane Richardson, *Introducing Women's Studies: Feminist Theory and Practice*, was originally published in 1993. I want now to comment on the first edition, the second edition published in 1997, and the third edition, now in progress, to be published by Palgrave in 2007, to raise issues about changes in the market, specifically the publishing world, for Women's Studies/Gender Studies publications in a Western European context. To look at the collection as a whole can be seen in some ways as symbolic of shifts and changes in the area of Women's Studies/Gender Studies from the late 1980s to the present in the UK.

In the first edition, there were fourteen chapters including mine, on Women's Studies as a field of study, race, feminist theory, sexuality, violence, popular culture and film, literature, family, motherhood, reproduction, health, work, history, and education. The second edition also contains entirely new chapters on methodology, science and technology, and social policy, reflecting areas and perspectives within Women's Studies which should have been included in the first edition but were not included because of lack of space, and the publishers keeping costs down and thus the price of the book, or areas and perspectives which came to prominence in Women's Studies between 1993 and 1997. The third edition, entitled *Introducing Gender and Women's Studies: Feminist Theory and Practice*, due in 2007, sees more changes which again reflect shifts in Women's Studies, such as an unplanned change of title to include 'gender.'

For the third edition, we will further have new chapters on masculinity, queer theory, development and globalization, cyber/new technologies, and one on the concept of gender, reflecting shifts in intellectual developments and theoretical trends or even fashions. Nor are these without controversy in terms of their contemporary ascendancy. For instance, there are politics around the current emphasis on masculinity, both as the subject of analysis as a category, and the rise of masculinity studies, which some have asserted is dangerous to the feminist project (see Cuddihy, 2001).

The publishers' chief concern was that the focus of the book be a more "gender" centered, as opposed to a "woman" orientated, text than in the previous two editions and how this would be achieved in the framework we proposed. That the publishers' marketing and profit concerns are the bench mark around which intellectual decisions are made is of course not surprising. However, it is the emphasis on gender, in terms of it warranting a chapter on its own, its star billing with Women's Studies in the title and a more gender-orientated rather than "woman-focused" framework overall, which are the most striking proposed changes. What has happened to Women's Studies since 1997 in a UK context that leads a publisher to suggest and /or encourage such radical changes? Also, what has transpired in my own intellectual and personal history from initially championing separate Women's Studies that I can contemplate contributing to those theoretical moves around gender?

I would argue that, overall, a combination of different factors have led to these changes. These include: a hostile climate to Women's Studies courses, the recognition by the Women's Studies/Gender Studies collective community of declining student numbers, a changing theoretical landscape where innovative work, for example on gender as a concept and critical theorising on masculinity, was occurring, the problematizing and re-working of the category "woman", the demands of the market place in relation to the likelihood of publishers' commissioning work which was primarily woman-centred, and, finally, my own autobiographical institutional shifts.

I am aware that having to grapple with publishing the 3rd edition of a text which has achieved a cultural hegemony in the UK and USA may seem like a luxury more likely to be had by Western European feminists than by those in other parts of the world, who may well have to cope with the dual burden of having to deal with a hostile institutional climate and having to develop teaching and research materials, as well as being affected by major political upheavals.

Jirina Smejkalova (2004), in discussing the transformation of Czech feminist sociology in the late 1980s speaks of the avenues through which feminist ideas and their couriers, i.e. Western feminist scholars, "traveled" to the Czech context after 1989. She asserts that many Eastern European women, in this process, felt they had been exposed to intellectual colonization when having been offered a "singular feminist theory" as the solution to their problems in the post communist era. She also contrasts the hunger for new information on one hand, to the problems of accessing both international and local research on the other. Veronika Wöhrer, in discussing so-called "Western missionaries" and "conservative Eastern women's" relationships, involved in "border crossing" amongst feminists engaged in mutual discourse, asks the question "Who can afford not knowing which concepts and publications?" (Wöhrer 2005: 1). When speaking of Czech and Slovak feminist scholars, she also highlights the lack of books, access to the internet and the financial implications involved in accessing foreign publications.

But it is not merely a question of equality of access to resources such as books, important as that is. For these shifts seen in a wider international context are interesting in other ways. An issue to consider here is whether the shift to gender is seen in the same way, or even makes intellectual "sense" to all concerned. What, for example, of those countries which do not have a tradition of Women Studies and/or do not utilize the category "woman"? What of those countries which prefer the term "gender" for being more inclusive or more politically acceptable and less threatening or less bourgeois? This also raises questions, then, around shifting intellectual trends, and the place of hegemonic concepts and their relationship to the canon. This effectively involves both matters of terminology and the intellectual usefulness of the category of gender in different countries and cultural contexts. For it could be argued that, according to Smejkalova's conception of an imported "singular feminism", the question needs to be asked if gender as a concept both survives translation and serves as an illuminating concept which is capable of being challenged and transformed through discourse with feminists outside of Western Europe.

As I argued with Diane Richardson in 1994, in an article in the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, differences in terminology and translation existed, and clearly, still exist. For instance, in Scandanavia there are no separate words to cohere with the Anglo/American sex/gender distinction (Lempiainen 2000). In Slavic languages, the same word is used

for both terms (Bahovic 2000). In Germany, the term gender has several meanings, including a grammatical, and it serves as a biological/social category (Wischermann 2000).

It is still important to acknowledge linguistic differences, but it is also crucial to avoid any straightforward cultural relativism raised by considering differences in terminology. As we also argued in 1994, supposedly simple linguistic issues are not in themselves inconsequential but reflect complex, and sometimes controversial political, practical and cultural issues, which have an impact no matter if and in what form Women's Studies and Gender Studies exist. Also, I would add that it is necessary to note that, in order to avoid a simplistic and homogenising Eastern/Western dichotomy, it must be acknowledged that in countries such as the UK and elsewhere in Europe, Australia, and the USA, the debate on whether the category 'woman' or the concept of gender is best suited for feminist theoretical purposes continues. Gender itself is debated as a suitable category of analysis both inside and outside of Western European contexts.

For example, Braidotti (2000) argues that gender as a concept is too polyvalent to be useful or acceptable as universal. Sylvia Walby (2004), however, in discussing the European Union and gender equality, asserts that (Western) conceptions of gender have an intrinsic problem, in that various gender models are unable to theorize variation and changes in gender relations. Bogdan Popoveniuc (2005), then, goes as far as to say that the present humanist goal of a two-gender humankind should change to a non-generic human universality, and that Eastern feminism, particularly Romanian, should not follow Western feminism on this but choose its own means and approach.

In these discourses of different international debates on the meaning and usefulness of the category of gender, a central issue is how to both acknowledge hierarchies of power in resources, but also in terms of who has the power to name and define and on what terms. Elaine Weiner (2005) cites the Czech Sociologist Jaroslava Stast, who argues that since 1989, Western social scientists have largely driven the debate and transferred, often uncritically, their concerns about, and concepts of, the role of gender into the context of Eastern and Central Europe. And Weiner argues that gender, according to Central and Eastern European social scientists, is perhaps more complex and multi-dimensional than Western interpretations currently suggest. For her, gender as a concept needs reconceptualizing (in economic transition) culturally, socially and historically.

It is crucial, then, that Western theorists miss the mark by not looking at the interpretative frameworks of non-Western scholars and only seeing their own experiences. There is also, I would add, a danger of reifying how gender is theorized elsewhere in the world, of ignoring different historical and current debates on gender which emerged out of "local" contexts, themselves sometimes at odds with each other, and therefore often made invisible in theoretical exchanges.

Wöhrer's argument that there is a need to "balance the relationship between the 'knowing' and 'learning' parties of international gender discourses and to rethink the perceptions of 'relevant' or 'important' knowledge in this field" (Wöhrer 2005:10) is useful to bear in mind here. Her idea that having a field of research that is reflective and deals productively with differences and hierarchies between scholars is also relevant when thinking through the conceptual issue of gender. To do this in a way which is not apologetic or defensive, in a way which resists the lure of stereotyping Eastern/Western divides, in a way which grounds mutual discourse in both theoretical and empirical exchanges, would mean a refusal by feminists to remain entrenched in cosy conceptual frameworks and comforting canons, if such revisionings are to occur.

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