

Rising Up Angry and Falling Down Tired

Un commentaire sur l'énergie
et la conscience politique
féministe dont une femme
a besoin pour enseigner
les études de la femme
dans une institution académique
pendant une temps relativement long.



I became involved in the women's movement (then called women's liberation!) when I was a university student in the States. It was a heady, exciting period personally and politically. It was a time when it became clear to me and thousands of other women that the personal was political. Through consciousness-raising groups we learned that our private pains and private angers were not so private. These internalized feelings had external structural causes. We learned that through joint action, through sisterhood, we could support each other emotionally and struggle against systems that oppressed and denied us.

One thing we did as students was to fight for Women's Studies courses. We demanded to know our past, to write our own history. We wanted recognition and we wanted to change our present and our future.

Harriet Rosenberg

We rose up angry.

I think of anger as an important political fuel. But now, 14 years later, we are in the midst of an anger energy crisis. The anger of women is being drained off and diverted. Like all corporations in the midst of this latest crisis in capitalism, the university has the upper hand. Through fear and cooption it has pacified women and depoliticized Women's Studies.¹

I have spoken with many university women in the last few weeks and they talk with bitterness of harassment, compromise and sell-out.²

We rose up angry but now we are falling down tired.

What follows is a personal statement of my feelings in relation to the status of Women's Studies at the university. I also believe that it is a political statement. My aim is to get some of these bad feelings out and to encourage others to share their experiences with me.

Diary Notes

Here it is March 6 and I realize, with a stab in the gut, that I taught my class three days ago without so much as a mention of International Women's Day. Has it come to this? Have I become so disenchanted with university level Women's Studies that I didn't even discuss International Women's Day with my students? I, a former co-ordinator of a Women's Studies Program; I, who have organized Women's Day meetings; I who have posterred, sold buttons, arranged for speakers; I, who have hectored and harangued for women's courses and women's programs.

I forgot.

I'm tired but I don't need Freudian analysis to realize that something deeper is going on than mere professional absent-mindedness.

I am finding university-taught Women's Studies so contradictory, so remote from the ideals of feminist liberation that it simply didn't occur to me to talk about Women's Day in such a—dare I say it—reactionary environment.

I'm beginning to feel about Women's Studies the way I feel about *Ms. Magazine*. I recently picked up a copy of *Ms.* and found the following line: 'Support Can Be Beautiful.' A nice sentiment. Unfortunately, it was not about sisterhood or women's solidarity. It was an ad for a brassiere—a 'lacy, sleek, feminine, fashionable Lycra, Spandex, Playtex' brassiere. The advertising boys at DuPont must have had a good chuckle over that choice bit of ideological cooption. Argh. . .

Makeup ads in *Ms.* and no daring, challenging, or remotely offensive articles. Just like Women's Studies. Clean,

CONVERSATIONS OVERHEARD

Male tenured professor:
'Women's Studies is all that touchy-feely crap.'

One woman professor to another:

'How did you get into teaching women's stuff?'

'Well, I was hired to teach economic anthropology. Last one in under the wire to get a tenure-track appointment. They looked around the department for someone with a uterus and I qualified.'

Sad laughter and nodding of heads.

Male graduate student to female graduate student:

'You won't have any trouble getting a job. All they want is women these days.'

Women students within earshot hoot with derisive laughter. Many shout: 'Are you out of your mind?'

Woman graduate student talking about a conversation with her adviser in a highly respected American graduate program in Women's Studies:

'So I said this area of lesbian history is really important. And she said: "Well, couldn't you call it the history of single women?" I'm ready to quit.'

Eyes roll heavenward. There is no laughter.

Group of women talking after a lecture:

'All these women started women's courses five years ago. Then the university suddenly discovered they weren't qualified. They "reviewed" all the courses, killed most of them, and got tenured women who had no

real interest or experience in the field to teach what was left. They just wore us down.' 'Absolutely the same story where I teach—uh—taught. . .'

One woman to another at a sherry party:

'Typical. How they have the nerve to call it a Women's Studies program beats me. They've got this anti-feminist male teaching one of the key courses and the bloody director is a man. The undergraduates don't stand a chance.'

Discussion at a Women's Studies faculty meeting: 'On International Women's Day we should all march together under a University of "X" banner.'

'That's got nothing to do with the program. If you want, you should just go along as a private individual.'

Undergraduate students' assessments of women's courses:

'She's a good teacher, but she's got a feminist bias.'

'An excellent course but it didn't fit the calendar description. It was supposed to be about sex roles but it was really about the oppression of women.'

conforming, and respectable. No politics. Wouldn't want to alienate the advertisers or the administrators.

When I first began teaching Women's Studies six years ago I told my students that I thought the field had three basic components. They were (1) consciousness/anger, (2) research, and (3) political action. I argued that the field had no validity without some combination of all three elements. Consciousness and anger are essential to motivate and to launch joint actions. Only through such action can issues be validated and research projects undertaken. And research on some level should be geared to social change. After all, Women's Studies is about the struggle against inequality and oppression. To ignore political action would be base and cruel. To do so would make Women's Studies teachers careerists, exploiting women for their own gain. I did not wish to deny the value of independent scholarship, but neither did I want to deny the political essence of the field.

These were the thoughts I had when I first began to teach. I used as my examples the issues of female orgasm and housework. I talked with my students about how these areas became research issues. I talked about the angers and frustrations of women, about the struggles against so-called experts who told women that housework was not work and that their sexual feelings were to be defined and interpreted by others and not themselves. We talked about how these issues were politicized, and how that politicization fueled academic research as well as direct action. We talked about how households and communities fought to reform the sexual division of domestic labour. We talked about how women took on the psychiatric establishment and fought to seize control over the definitions of their own sexuality and their own orgasms. They fought to disseminate information about this struggle as widely as possible. We talked about women's health collectives as well as about the latest anthropological findings on primate sexual behaviour.

I remember long talks with my students about research and action. Not all research had to be specifically geared to some political action but I thought that we should never lose sight of an integrated approach to Women's Studies. We talked about bread and roses.

And now it is March 8 and snowing. I walk with 2,000 women, celebrating sisterhood and expressing anger about cutbacks, harassment, and violence. I look around. Where are my colleagues? They always manage to turn out for conferences. But where are they when the issues of women's rights are on the streets?

The university is no place for feminism, I think to myself. Career dominates. They're desperate for jobs, desperate not to offend.

More Diary Notes

It's April and most of my women friends and I sit and wait to hear whether we will have jobs or pieces of jobs in the fall. We wait for the crumbs to be doled out and we are told that we should be happy that even these are available. After all, there's the economy, the oil crisis, cutbacks, and hiring freezes. Sorry, but you just came down the pike too late. It's nothing personal. . .

The university marginalizes women and Women's Studies. Despite the numerous resolutions passed by professional associations urging that preferential hiring be given women until department sex ratios are equal, women are still systematically not hired for secure, tenure-line, high-paying jobs. They are pushed into part-time Women's Studies jobs and then discriminated against because their major experience is in the 'soft' areas and not the 'hard' theoretical areas supposedly demanded by graduate students.

With a very few token exceptions women are the housewives of the university world. We take care of the kiddies; we teach the high enrolment, low status, introductory courses. Meanwhile, the men — the administrators, deans, principals — have the power to control budgets and shape priorities.

Women make the 'house' into a 'home' by doing the majority of the emotional housework with students. Women faculty members do enormous amounts of interpersonal tension managing and mediating. We faithfully go to our office hours and to our appointments with students; we dispense advice and bibliographies while running down the hall to the toilet before the next appointment. Look around. Outside of whose offices are all those long line-ups of students? And why? Because we are so damned responsible.

We are good mothers. And we hope that if someone sees us doing our jobs well we might get some recognition in the form of permanent, full-time jobs. Fat chance. We, like all women in personal care industries, are told we aren't doing it for the money but for the personal rewards. How lucky we are to be paid off in love. But does it pay the rent? ☹

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¹ In this I disagree with Staton's 'A Decade of Women's Studies,' *CWS/CF* II, no. 2 (1980). I am more in tune with Haber's stimulating assessment in 'Is Personal Life Still a Political Issue?' *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 3. I find it more multi-dimensional than Carey's 'Personal Life is Political,' *CWS/CF* II, no. 2 (1980).

² In this case women don't mean sexual harassment, although God knows it is still going on. What women are being harassed by is academic backstabbing. Promises broken, budgets cut, colleagues fired or not rehired, journals controlled and manipulated.

Teachers of Women's Studies about their students:

'I'm so discouraged. I feel like I have to apologize for being an activist. Do biologists apologize for working in the lab?'

'I talk to my students about rape and they accuse me of telling only one side of the story.'

Woman editor of a feminist academic journal:

'We're being ghettoized. We've got to stop writing only for ourselves, to ourselves. We've got to publish in established journals. We're just not being taken seriously.'

Me to a former student who took Women's Studies five years ago:

'What do you think of Women's Studies? Does it belong in the university?'

'It's terrific. Very important. It changed my life. It gave me a framework and a way of asking questions. It should be compulsory.'

It's not the same, I think to myself. It's not the same anymore.