

The Past and Future of Women's Studies

-R. Bridenthal

It is a special privilege for me to speak to you today, as, so to speak, a ghost of Christmas past. . . of how it was in the "old days" of Women's Studies, especially at Brooklyn College. I wish I could transport you back ten years, when over a hundred women came together here, from all corners of the college, ~~to~~ uniting in a common purpose: to overcome a myriad of abuses of omission and commission, from outright discrimination to neglect and more subtle forms of repression. Two groups formed and worked together with euphoric energy: the Brooklyn College Women's Organization of faculty and staff and the Women's Liberation Club of students. We broke into committees working on particular projects: the issue of day care, the establishment of a women's center, employment discrimination, the construction of a women's studies program. Within three years, we had a day care center and a women's center, we had instituted a class action suit against all of City University for job discrimination (which went to court last summer and is now pending the judge's decision), and we had a Women's Studies Program, authorized in 1975 by the Board of Higher Education to offer a collateral major. Our Program has had a steady enrollment of about 800 students per semester, quite a feat and a statement in the face of steadily shrinking college-wide enrollment. And we continue to expand our course offerings.

All of the students whose commitment, enthusiasm, and energy helped create these new worlds have graduated and are bestowing their talents elsewhere. Some of the faculty, sadly, are also no longer with us -- victims of retrenchment, which hit untenured

younger faculty, where women predominate, hardest; they became case examples of the very problem they were trying to solve. But many of us remain, and we have made Brooklyn College the flagship of women's studies in this city.

Please excuse this parochial excursion. I could not contain my pride. And I did want to convey to you something of the strength and love and creativity that came out of the early women's movement and flowed so generously into women's studies.

It was a national phenomenon. Now there are about 150 courses in women's studies in about 20 institutions in New York City alone, according to a slightly incomplete Guide to Women's Studies Courses in New York City published by the New York City Commission on the Status of Women (hold it up), and there are over 400 programs nation-wide. The most recent addition is Princeton University, where the faculty virtually unanimously endorsed its adoption. Graduate programs are also blossoming: the newest ones being Ph.D. degrees in women's history at New York University and the University of Wisconsin. City University's Graduate Center has an expanding women's studies program in several disciplines. In the high schools, too, interest is growing, as your presence here attests. John Dewey High School was an early pioneer, and has a newsletter, Fireworks, which would do any college proud. Elsewhere, with less institutional support, courageous individual teachers introduced new courses in women's studies. There have been two summer institutes for secondary school faculty in women's history, one at Sarah Lawrence and one at Stanford University. The Brooklyn College Institute pioneers in integrating women's studies in general into

the high school curriculum. It is an idea whose time has come.

We know that women's studies is here to stay from many other signs as well. There is a burgeoning literature coming off the presses: books, scholarly journals, newspapers, popular works. We now have our own professional association: the National Women's Studies Association meeting at ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ the University of Conn. in May on the subject of Racism and Women. Individual disciplines women's caucuses have grown to be virtual associations on themselves, such as sociology's Sex Roles in Society and history's Berkshire Conference in Women's History to be held in Vassar this June. The conferences they hold establish a wonderful Womanspace for us to grow in: nurturant, buoyant, and creative. In the arts, we have also made our mark: museums, concert halls, and theaters have opened their doors to women's creativity. No medium can ignore us; at worst, it can try to co-opt our message, as when advertising promotes a "new" woman^s who is really the "old" woman in drag. No matter. The point has been made and everyone has heard it. Our early struggles merely to be heard are over.

Does that mean our battle is over? You know as well as I that it has just begun. When we study the subject of women, we must note some sad facts. For every new anchorwoman on television, ~~there~~ millions of women suffer a wage gap that continues to widen, and it is worse for women of color, who remain at the bottom of the income pyramid. Day care has made very little progress, though women's employment is increasing. Our needs with respect to reproduction are more severely challenged than ever, with even contraception being questioned now. The very civil rights of lesbians are not assured.

Globally, the problem is even worse: Asian women work seven days a week for 50¢ a day, sewing garments or assembling electronic equipment for companies who have sought this "more favorable business climate" abroad, leaving thousands of women unemployed domestically and recreating sweatshop conditions here for them and for illegal aliens who had fled just that greater exploitation abroad. It looks like a vicious circle.

But what has that to do with women's studies? you might ask. Aren't we getting into politics now?

Yes, ~~I am~~ ^{we are}. And it does have to do with women's studies. Not only because those are among the facts we must notice when we study the subject, but also because women's studies was born out of the women's movement and continues to draw its vitality from it. Those who have cut the placenta have become bloodless and irrelevant. The future of women's studies, like its past, is with the women's movement in general and implies its political maturation. And therein also lies the responsibility of women's studies.

~~xx~~ The role of the intellectual is large and varied: we must be resource people, providing information and offering analyses. We should not mistake ourselves ~~as~~ ^{to be} leaders and strategists, but neither should we efface ourselves. We are part of a collective enterprise. As such, we have much to offer and much to receive. I have learned at least as much from endless meetings and actions as I have learned from my library research. Practice has informed theory and vice versa. Now, when I do my research on German women's organizations before Hitler, I know what

they are talking about in terms of structure, tasks, strategy, power relations within and without, and so on. Women's Studies are richer if the studier (and teacher) has first hand experience of women in action.

And what do we have to offer? What is our future, in terms of our responsibility?

Our major offering is demystification: an end to myth. We must tell the truth and explode stereotype and illusion. For example, anthropology (Pat Lander's field), debunks our ethnocentric mythology, by unfolding alternatives and allowing glimpses into possible origins. History (my field) debunks presentism, lifts the veil of social amnesia, by ~~re~~ revealing the process of change within our own culture, which is by no means one of unilinear progress, especially not for women. Psychology most directly challenges the androcentric myth, which has assumed the male experience to be standard and has defined the female as deviant. At bottom, all these myths have been androcentric, making men's experience the text, and women's marginal or a footnote.

But the task of women's studies is not merely to insert women here and there, digging up forgotten names and inserting them into the text. That would be merely compensatory. Our task is larger: we must redefine and rewrite much of the text, so that women's experience is organically integrated, making the text more true to its claim for universality. Most of the texts are still in error, to put it politely, in claiming to speak of the general human condition, since they have not yet adjusted for the difference made by woman's condition. By fulfilling this task, we raise

consciousness -- the true meaning of educating -- and we multiply the forces for change.

Our second major offering is that of context: an ^aanalysis of the larger social forces that impinge upon us. Context has created us the way we are -- our time and place, our race and social class, our economic and political system. We, in turn, re-create that context as historical actors. But we serve ourselves best when we do it with full awareness of that mutual interaction. Freedom is the recognition of necessity, and power comes from an accurate assessment of forces. That does not mean that our reach should be no further than our grasp; the ultimate goal ^{remains} ~~is~~ not merely to understand reality and to stay within its limits, but to change it.

So the future of Women's Studies is a broad horizon. We are still pioneers. We still have the same purpose that Lucy Stone, the American feminist, expressed in 1855 -- a full century and a quarter ago:

"In education, in marriage, in religion, in everything, disappointment is the lot of woman. It shall be the business of my life to deepen this disappointment in every woman's heart until she bows down to it no longer."

And I would add: until she has her birthright of self-respect, freedom, and joy.