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Feminism, Scholarship, and the University Curriculum

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Elizabeth Langland and Walter Gove, Editors. *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy: The Difference It Makes*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983. 162 pp. \$5.95 paper.

How has the feminist perspective altered the academy? Has it changed curricula, revised materials, transformed knowledge? Vanderbilt University invited distinguished scholars from nine disciplines to assess the extent to which feminist perspectives have influenced research and teaching in their respective disciplines. The edited lectures then appeared in the winter 1981 issue of *Soundings: an Interdisciplinary Journal*. Langland and Gove's book is a 1983 edition of that issue.

The disciplines discussed include humanities and social sciences. In the humanities, Patricia Meyer Spacks assesses feminist-inspired changes in literary criticism,

Nancy S. Reinhardt points to new directions for the theatre, Rosemary Radford Ruether discusses feminist influences in religious studies, and Carl N. Degler analyzes the effects of the women's movement on American history. The influences of feminist perspectives in the social sciences are assessed by Nannerl O. Keohane in political science, Nancy S. Barrett in economics, Judith Shapiro in anthropology, Janet T. Spence in psychology, and Cynthia Fuchs Epstein in sociology. A discussion of feminist influence (or lack thereof) on science and technology would also be illuminating since both scientific methods and questions chosen for research are also greatly affected by male bias.¹ The editors conclude that the feminist perspective has begun to affect scholarship but has had little impact on the traditional curriculum, mainly because feminist analyses challenge deeply held beliefs and vested interests in each field.

Langland and Gove's book offers a concise progress report on the actual and potential effects of the feminist perspective on scholarship and curricula in the university. The disciplinary articles, while differing from one another in the themes pursued, give the reader a flavor of the degree to which feminist influences have infiltrated the traditional academic arena. The one exception to this, Spence's article in the area of psychology, deals with changing concepts and measures of masculinity and femininity without giving an overview of feminist influences in other areas of psychology. The authors usually agree with earlier or contemporary surveys of new scholarship on women and gender roles.² The unique contribution of this volume is in the overview it affords, rather than in detailed study-by-study review of new feminist literature. *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy* will be useful to women's studies program staff and supporters as they assess how far they have come and how far yet they must go. It will be useful as well to academic deans and other college administrators as they try to understand the import of feminism and women's studies for their college as well as for the entire enterprise of knowledge creation. Courses in science and society, sociology of knowledge, and social or cultural change might use the volume as a case study, while an overview women's studies course might utilize it to succinctly summarize progress and barriers to progress in the area.

What is the feminist perspective that Langland and Gove's authors discuss? The editors borrow a statement of feminist assumptions from Annette Barnes to describe "feminist." All feminists, she notes,

would agree that women are not automatically or necessarily inferior to men, that role models for females and males in the current Western societies are inadequate, that equal rights for women are

necessary, that it is unclear what by nature either men or women are, that it is a matter for empirical investigation to ascertain what differences follow from the obvious physiological ones, that in these empirical investigations the hypotheses one employs are themselves open to question, revision, or replacement (p. 3).

The feminist perspective in the academy, then, seeks first to uncover and question the unspoken assumptions about women and men that have molded the academic enterprise and, second, to take women's work and experience seriously by including them in scholarship and curriculum. Additional knowledge of women and women's experience is "*perspective transforming* and should therefore transform the existing curriculum from within and revise received notions of what constitutes an 'objective' or 'normative' perspective" (pp. 3-4).

Langland and Gove seem to use the terms "women's studies" and "feminist perspective" interchangeably. The study of the female experience from a feminist perspective (that is, "women's studies") is clearly needed to fill the knowledge gaps created by the male oriented disciplines. Ultimately, however, it is the study of female *and* male experience from a feminist perspective that will most transform our understanding of human behavior.

Several basic themes emerge as the authors assess the impact of the feminist perspective on their disciplines. These themes include:

- (I) the history of male bias in academia;
- (II) challenges to basic assumptions, paradigms, and methods that the feminist perspective can potentially offer, with the promise of an exciting reshaping of knowledge;
- (III) actual changes in scholarship and curriculum, barriers to changes;
- (IV) future predictions and hopes.

-I-

The academy has yet to address the significance of gender as a social fact. In

fact, the emergence of women's studies as an area of study reflects the degree to which the standard academic curriculum actually forms in Shapiro's words, a "men's studies program" (p. 111-2). All of the authors agree that their disciplines have been strongly androcentric. Some of the older disciplines can trace their male bias back for centuries. Reinhardt, for example, notes that Aristotle's patriarchal standards for a good tragedy are still influential in theatre criticism, while Reuther states that, with the exception of the very early Christian church, women were historically excluded from religious leadership in Christianity and Judaism and also from advanced theological training. Even the younger disciplines, like psychology and sociology, were clearly androcentric in their development. Spence points out the psychologists disproportionately studied men although the findings were often generalized to all people. Epstein suggests that long standing neglect or misinterpretation of women in the social sciences did a great deal of damage to the development of science. Since half of the human world was neglected, "incomplete and wrong assessments of human behavior were conveyed" (p. 149). A feminist perspective can repair this scientific damage by giving us a more complete understanding of our world.

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To repair this damage, however, feminist humanists and social scientists must challenge assumptions and paradigms that form part of the foundation of the disciplines. New methods must be developed to gain access to this new information and to view accepted knowledge without what Epstein calls "masculine blinders" (p. 152). The articles are replete with examples of feminist challenges to traditional ways of academic thinking and doing. The most basic assumption to be challenged in all

disciplines is that "women don't matter." The special angle of vision provided by asserting that women *do* matter leads to the challenging of other assumptions and approaches. For example, Turner's frontier thesis which informed historians' analyses of the western frontier period in American life is clearly based on men's experiences. Only men found exceptional opportunities on the frontier, according to Degler. The cities, on the other hand, offered more opportunities to women. Including women's experience as well as men's experience in historical study may well lead to different periodization and different emphases, as well as different content. Barrett, the economist, clearly and concisely shows that feminist analysis challenges the very foundation of neoclassical economics. Neoclassical economics assumes that free enterprise, competition and individual choice lead to efficient resource allocation, including efficient allocation of human resources. That employed men have much higher earnings than employed women is consistent with the neoclassical view only if women (as a group) compared to men (as a group) are: inherently less productive; or prefer to acquire less education, training or job experience; or prefer lower paying, less responsible jobs. Economists have not, however, been able to show that women's inferior economic status is justified by the characteristics of women as a group. This then throws into doubt the basic neoclassical assumption of "efficient markets." Successful challenging of a reigning paradigm is fraught with difficulty, but feminists are proceeding with their work in all disciplines.

Answering questions about the female experience may require different methods of gathering or interpreting information. A few of the articles seem to indicate that the old methods can serve the new vision. Reuther discusses the discovery of alternate

religious history and traditions that include women, but doesn't mention new methods of study necessary for this process. Epstein notes that sociological methods are not deficient; the major deficiency has been in the failure to question gaps in knowledge about all but the dominant groups. Another reviewer of feminist sociological research disagrees, however. Gould states that feminist sociologists are experimenting with a variety of new or newly revived methods including "oral histories, textual analysis, and a more politically self-conscious ethno-methodology."⁴ She further quotes Judith Long Laws, a social psychologist, who states that "the underlying assumptions of patriarchal social science invariably give rise to strategies that limit the range and depth with which the world may be perceived."⁵

Many of the articles, though, mention the development of new methods in the creation of feminist scholarship, but they are notably deficient in describing examples of the new methods now evolving. Feminist historians have made use of previously unused sources, like women's diaries or correspondence written while they were travelling west. Has the use of these new sources required new analytical methods? Anthropologists have found women's views of their culture are often very different from men's views. Shapiro discusses one writer who claims that the usual anthropological tools do not enable anthropologists to hear or understand women's views. What new methods, then, are developing to meet this deficiency? Epstein asserts that political sociologists are beginning to expand the kind of "political behavior" studied, and Keohane notes that such expansion is necessary. Will this require new methods of study? Spacks suggests that one of the strengths of feminist literary criticism is methodological flexibility. She also suggests

that feminist criticism doesn't have to sound the same as traditional literary criticism. It might be useful, or at least truthful, to "insist on multiplicity and partialness and even tentativeness, . . . acknowledging the uncertainties implicit in an approach which values the personal" (p. 15). New methods and new ways of communicating insights may, then, be developing in some fields, but Langland and Gove's book does not specify them in detail.

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The actual changes visible so far in each discipline are variable. Authors from a few disciplines report that work from a feminist perspective is just beginning or accounts for a miniscule amount of the total work in their areas. Reinhardt reports little change in theatre, though she notes that feminist film criticism is burgeoning. Keohane states that feminist analyses in political science lag behind those in the other social sciences because political science by definition deals only with political activity in the public arena; the subjects studied are most often confined to male decision-makers in public offices. Informal exercise of power, where women's participation is likely to be stronger, is not defined as appropriate subject matter in political science. Barrett notes that feminist analysis is not an accepted part of economic analysis. She suggests that the main barrier to acceptance is the threat feminist economic analysis poses to a dominant economic paradigm.

The other authors report the development of exciting and growing areas of feminist analysis in their disciplines. Spacks, for example, notes that there is a great deal of feminist literary criticism and that women writing about women writers are sometimes heard by others in the discipline. It is no longer acceptable, she says, to put down Jane Austen as trivial and

confined. Degler notes a variety of historical areas that are being reshaped by feminist scholarship. These include areas as diverse as the American Revolution and the history of childbirth in America. Spence states that psychologists no longer accept a system that confines women to subordination in the home and that psychologists' goals no longer include the production of "properly" sex-typed behavior in girls and boys. Epstein describes three sociological areas that are beginning to respond to feminist analysis: socialization, political sociology and stratification.

All of the authors, however, note that much of the exciting, potentially revolutionary scholarship has developed as a separate area and is confined to the margins of the disciplines and has only occasionally entered into the mainstream. Feminist analyses usually do not appear in the most prestigious disciplinary journals, or if they do, they are confined to a "special issue" which is often ignored. All the authors agree that new feminist scholarship is likewise poorly integrated into the traditional disciplinary curriculum. Reuther suggests four stages of curriculum development:

- (1) A general "women in the discipline" course is taught occasionally by a marginal faculty member.
- (2) The same course becomes part of the regular curriculum and is taught by a regular woman faculty member with other courses unaffected by feminist scholarship.
- (3) The "core" disciplinary courses include a short section on women.
- (4) The feminist perspective is integrated into the "core" disciplinary courses (pp. 61-2).

Reuther suggests that curriculum development in religious studies is somewhere between stages 1 and 2. A few other disciplines may have attained a somewhat higher stage. But in no discipline has the fourth level been reached.

The process by which feminist analysis

develops in scholarship and then becomes incorporated into the curriculum in some form is little discussed by these authors. Such discussion could be revealing. Reuther suggests that curriculum changes do not occur unless women students demand them. The development of a strong women's caucus in the national disciplinary association, a national association of women in the discipline, or a strong interdisciplinary women's studies association can and has provided the encouragement and critical audience necessary for continued feminist scholarship and curriculum development.¹⁵

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What will the future bring? Most authors predict only that there will be more feminist analysis in their field. Although they do not discuss the incorporation process, they strongly believe that the feminist perspective *must* be incorporated into the disciplines or the disciplines themselves will continue to provide only partial explanation and interpretation of the human experience.

In sum, Langland and Gove's collection gives a brief, accurate overview of the feminist challenge to traditional humanities and social science disciplines: the need for such a challenge, the changes caused so far by this challenge and the paths yet to be travelled by the challengers. The choice is clear. We academicians can continue to be able to partially explain and interpret only some human behavior, or we can attempt to transform our perspective, explore new ways of knowing, and grow in our understanding of the human condition. The promise is great, but the path is perilous.

NOTES

1. See Ramey's article on "male cycles" (in Kaplan and Bean, 1978) and Rothschild (1983) for examples.
2. See, for example, the following article from the journal *Signs: Register*, 1980; Gould, 1980; Carroll, 1980; Carroll, 1979; Norton, 1979; Parlee, 1979; Kahne, 1978.

3. Gould, 1980: p. 465
4. From a conference paper by J.L. Laws, "Feminism and Patriarchy."
5. Consult the newsletters of the Association for Women Psychologists, Sociologists for Women in Society, and the National Women's Studies Association for examples of this kind of encouragement and critical thinking.

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