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Introduction to the World of Women's Studies

CHANGES IN THE STATUS OF WOMEN are undoubtedly among the most important social developments of the twentieth century. Each demand for equality has been contested; each step has made a vivid impression on the women who lived through it; each advance has become part of the birthright of the next generation. Despite the apparent lull in—and to some extent, even reversal of—women's gains during the 1950s, the contemporary feminist movement in the United States, now in its fourth decade, has carried the redefinition of women and their roles steadily forward.

In important ways, both intellectual and practical, this movement's agenda was shaped by the work of feminist scholars in the academy. The result of their efforts has been an enormous flowering of Women's Studies programs, feminist scholarship, and women's culture, as well as an increasing public awareness of job discrimination, domestic abuse, sexual assaults, and other impediments placed on women in the public and private spheres. Complementing all this attention, albeit on a more modest scale, have been political and economic gains for at least some women.

Women's Studies, which began in the late 1960s as individual courses typically offered through humanities departments, proliferated throughout the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. Now, after two and a half decades, there are more than six hundred

undergraduate and several dozen graduate programs at colleges and universities. This success drove, and in turn was driven by, a spate of scholarly publications in various fields. During this time, too, the use of gender as a powerful conceptual tool and a key category of analysis in the humanities and social sciences transformed entire fields, of which feminist literary criticism was the first to attain national prominence and respectability.

Why, after these successes, have Women's Studies programs turned into such a combat zone? Some reasons are fairly ordinary. One is their anomalous position, which made them simultaneously contest and exploit established institutional structures. Another is frustration not only over the difficulty of getting more faculty positions but also over the slow pace of material change generally. Paradoxically, discontent and infighting also reflect the great achievement of Women's Studies. The study of gender is no longer news, and thus Women's Studies may seem to have lost some of its revolutionary appeal. Incoming students are no longer astonished to find Women's Studies programs in place; they take such programs for granted and are either attracted or hostile to them in advance.

Then, too, given the current economic and political climate, there is less optimism that the academic study of women and gender is itself an effective agent of change. Women's Studies programs also continue to experience conflicts over their acceptance in academe, and it is hard, over the long run, to sustain feminism's moral presuppositions and activist style unless new issues can be found around which to crusade.

But the deeper and far more disturbing reasons for the problems currently visible are, we believe, to be sought elsewhere: they are the direct result of self-destructive habits and assumptions that have grown up within Women's Studies itself. Long before the term "political correctness" gained currency in its present conservative/ironic sense, ideological policing was a common feature of Women's Studies programs. Women appraised one another; and, too frequently, found reason to judge others deficient, undeserving of the accolade "feminist."

Whereas feminists originally argued for a loosening of gender roles, now there is great pressure from within for conformity. Feminists used to urge women to explore their own sexuality freely, but now there is a figurative policing of the bedroom. At an early stage of second-wave feminism, consciousness-raising groups helped women work toward self-actualization and develop a nonstigmatized identity, but now women are pressured to conform to the microstereotypes of identity politics. In feminist pedagogy, the new valorization of women's modes of communication and interaction has led to the use of sentiment as a tool of coercion. Many feminist classrooms cultivate an insistence on "feeling," which, on examination, turns out to be the traditional split between intellect and emotion recycled, with the former still assigned to men and the latter to women. The characterizations of male and female have not changed; instead, the plus and minus signs associated with each gender have been reversed.

In yet another significant area of feminist endeavor, the early assumptions about women's "commonality" gave way to crucial realizations that not only gender but a variety of other important factors such as race, ethnicity, and sexual identity shape women's private and public selves and their life opportunities. In particular, "minority" women have increasingly entered feminist debates, which had too often neglected the problems these women face. But this valuable corrective now threatens to degenerate into a host of particularisms that could turn feminism into little more than a gathering of competing narrow "identities," each hotly promoted. Such wars have already been fought over sexual orientation, and we know how destructive they can be.

In each of these instances—as in many other aspects of contemporary feminism that we will explore in this book—we are witnessing the progressive deterioration of a vital movement. This has now reached the point that, today, distinctions between style and substance are blurred, escalation of rhetoric replaces real gains, and ostentatious posturing is taken for achievement. In the process, many women have come to feel marginalized by the coercive treat-

ment received at the hands of some feminists and, as a result, are increasingly alienated from—and puzzled by—a movement they once embraced.

What troubled us most was that many of the aspects of Women's Studies that distanced, and in some cases drove away, women were the very features in which advocates took particular pride. The still-hopeful supporters of Women's Studies with whom we spoke often revealed, through their own accounts, the same landscape as that portrayed by the disillusioned. Where critics objected to emotional coercion in the classroom, advocates talked about the importance of transforming students' consciousness. Where dissenters saw feminist ideology distorting scholarship, advocates praised the virtues of research guided by political commitments. Where exiles complained about an atmosphere rife with hypocritical avoidance and shunning, advocates claimed to have found a sanctuary from patriarchal strife in groups based on the cultivation of women's "difference."

From the outset, Women's Studies occupied an unusual position in academe. It was not just multidisciplinary but had a dual agenda: educational (the study first of women and then of gender) and political (the correction of social injustice). As stated in the constitution of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA):

Women's Studies is the educational strategy of a breakthrough in consciousness and knowledge. The uniqueness of Women's Studies has been and remains its refusal to accept sterile divisions between the academy and community . . . between the individual and society. Women's Studies, then, is equipping women to transform the world to one that will be free of all oppression . . . [and is] a force which furthers the realization of feminist aims.¹

Inevitable tensions have resulted from this grand, not to say grandiose, vision. As a brave new field that sprang up from grassroots efforts—first motivated by the student movement of the 1960s, and later spurred by the example of Black Studies programs—Women's Studies faced many obstacles within the university. The legitima-

tion of any new academic field is a long process, but feminists believed that the challenges they faced were invariably manifestations of sexism. This sense of vulnerability contributed to the development of a siege mentality.

At the same time, Women's Studies was always allied with university reform: affirmative action, offices of women's affairs, and so on. Commitment to good causes meant that Women's Studies, in order to be effective, could not withdraw but had to play academic politics. This entailed a constant negotiation between feminist ideals (even assuming all feminist faculty agreed about what these were—which was hardly the case) and the pragmatics required to build a program in an academic setting. In the post-1960s atmosphere where in-your-face political activism was valorized above all else, feminist academics were often accused of being ivory-towered recluses, far removed from the barricades, and many academics accepted this characterization and felt guilty. Today, women "in the movement" are still leveling such charges against feminists in academe.

Confronting competing demands and pressures, Women's Studies adopted two self-defeating practices: academic separatism and a deference to political activism. These two strategies, as we shall see, are closely connected and reinforce each other.

Separatism has been a dominant theme since the inception of Women's Studies. The biblical injunction to "set yourself apart and be a separate people" describes a time-honored method for building group solidarity and is undoubtedly an effective way for a minority community to resist assimilation. But it cannot be a good long-term strategy for changing the ambient culture, and it is certainly incompatible with creative intellectual inquiry.

Today, separatism in Women's Studies is readily and graphically illustrated by the widespread exclusion of male authors from course syllabi, assigned reading lists, and citations in scholarly papers. In particular cases, there can, of course, be practical reasons for mentioning only female sources, and probably scholars in every field tend to overcite close colleagues and allies. But a systematic refusal to read or respond to male authors harms feminist scholarship in

many ways. In addition, the separatist agenda has caused many Women's Studies programs not to seek collaboration with and support from male colleagues, as if mere association with men would contaminate feminist purity. Such moves are debilitating to the cause of feminism, and they may lure female students into the—obviously false—belief that all intellectual work produced by males is irrelevant to, or in conflict with, feminist projects.

Some feminists would argue that they were forced to set up their own programs, found their own journals, and form their own intellectual networks because the academic mainstream (or "malestream") would have nothing to do with them. This may well be so. But even if academic separatism was necessary in the past, it seems clearly counterproductive today, for gender analyses and the study of women have succeeded in making widely acknowledged contributions to the humanities and, increasingly, to the social sciences as well. In the hard sciences, feminist scholarship has been less influential, but the best way of gaining recognition there is by engaging in open dialogue with both male and nonfeminist female scholars. Separatism unavoidably discourages such dialogue. Instead, it favors dogmatic assertion, a standard tactic of ideologically inflamed movements, whether religious or political.

While academic feminism has tried to keep the rest of the university at bay, it has energetically fostered an intimate relationship with feminist political initiatives, both inside and outside the academy. Arguably, some forms of participation in these initiatives have been appropriate. For example, a professor might give her textbook order to the local feminist bookstore, thus offering financial support to a woman-owned business while also ensuring that her students are exposed to the novels, T-shirts, records, buttons, and periodicals of feminist popular culture.

But at other times academic feminism has made itself subservient to activist agendas. Consequently, in many programs, the appointment of faculty has hinged on the candidates' commitment to community organizing or other forms of feminist activism, rather than on the strength of their academic credentials. Some programs have

adopted course and instructor evaluation forms that encourage students to judge the quality of their education in terms of its direct relevance to a rather narrowly defined and constantly shifting political agenda. It is not uncommon for students to be urged to engage in nonscholarly internships and practicums, for which they are able to earn academic credit. The degree of supervision of these internships, like the extent to which they include academic components (such as writing a final paper), varies enormously from program to program.

The American university accommodates many academic units that, like professional schools, provide intellectual service to various constituencies in the "real world." But these units typically maintain a certain critical distance from their practical objectives. Schools of education, for example, train teachers, but they also theorize about pedagogy and school policies. Forensic science departments offer courses of use to police officers and probation counselors, but they also scrutinize the operations of the criminal justice system. The ivory-tower model of inquiry has always been recognized as freeing the scholar from the need to demonstrate practical relevance, and the whole point of academic freedom and tenure is to protect the scholar from political pressure.

An unfortunate reversal of these tenets occurs when a program sees itself as a site of correct political action and therefore promotes not independent inquiry but adherence to a particular line of analysis and to the activities that follow from it. In such cases—as we find in some Women's Studies programs that attempt to minimize the difference between themselves and groups engaged in feminist activism outside the university—educational aims are made entirely subordinate to political goals.

Academic units that manage to balance these internal and external values do so by maintaining high intellectual standards while also using as texts some material selected for its political utility. Thus, a sociology department, for example, may have a Marxist orientation while insisting on excellent scholarship and publication records from its faculty and all-around competence in sociology from its majors and graduate students. Such a department sees its mission as

providing a solid education shaped, but not outweighed, by a political commitment that many (but rarely all) faculty in the department share. But Women's Studies has never even acknowledged that achieving such a healthy balance is a worthwhile goal as well as an inherently difficult feat. Instead, both academics and activists have tended to repudiate the very desirability of such a balance and have agreed that "Women's Studies is the theory and activism the practice"—as if the relationship between the two were both comfortable and obvious. And because "activism" has had the brighter luster in feminist rhetoric, many Women's Studies programs have felt compelled to embrace and promote an activist stance.

The yearly NWSA conferences have always dramatically exhibited the uneasy mingling of academic and nonacademic concerns within Women's Studies—and this quite apart from the charges of racism that nearly destroyed the organization at its 1990 meeting in Akron, Ohio. Thus, the typical NWSA program includes not only symposia on Emily Dickinson or on the depiction of women in Hindu temple art, but also panels on how feminist organizations can get tax-exempt status or on how lesbian couples can practice do-it-yourself artificial insemination. Publishers' displays of academic books stand side by side with booths featuring crystals, drums, massage oils, and the other paraphernalia of "women's culture." Over time, the nonacademic components of the annual meetings have come to predominate, perhaps because activists outside the academy provide an important portion of the market for books in Women's Studies. Not surprisingly, many serious scholars stopped attending the annual NWSA meeting because (so they told us) they felt it was no longer a worthwhile professional endeavor. Here, too, people could, after all, vote with their feet—the "exit option," as some political scientists call it.

Activism as a legitimate goal of Women's Studies has certainly been communicated to students. When we put the question "What do you think Women's Studies is all about?" to approximately 150 undergraduates in Women's Studies courses at two contrasting insti-

tutions—one a large research university in the Northeast with a twenty-year-old, highly political program, the other a former teacher's college, now a university, in the Southwest, whose Women's Studies program is less than ten years old and quite unpoliticized—most answers touched only the practical side. Students wrote: To "raise women's self-esteem," "create a less patriarchal society," "break down sexism," "empower women," "lessen discrimination against women," "help women find a career centering on improving women's lives," and so on. When we asked "What do you think *other* students at your school think Women's Studies is all about?" the vast majority of the respondents answered with some form of the notion of "male bashing"; and a few added "a touchy-feely class," "militant," and "raging militant feminists." This negative image, too, should be of concern to those responsible for Women's Studies.

The twin tendencies toward academic separatism and deference to activism have developed in concert. Academic feminists who either felt rebuffed by the established disciplines or wanted to develop a radically different approach often turned to the welcoming audience of cultural feminists and activists. As they elaborated their writings in response to the concerns of this largely nonacademic audience (an important market even for university press books), much of their research tended to become both less accessible and less acceptable to colleagues in the mainstream disciplines. Traditional academics, moreover, could readily be denounced for their "elitism" and narrowly academic concerns. As a result, those Women's Studies faculty whose own research remained connected to the conventional disciplines have come under increasing pressure from activist students to base their courses on more radical or less scholarly texts.

In such an atmosphere, scholarship itself becomes suspect as faculty members feel constant pressure not to betray the cause. One result is the rhetorical assertion that scholarship *is* politics, an insistence that only signals the devaluation that scholarship has already undergone. A feminist professor who says, "My scholarly work is my

form of activism,” or even, “Teaching is my form of activism,” is thus inevitably affirming that “activism” is indeed the correct measure of all aspects of Women’s Studies.

Women’s Studies, in its early phases, had a choice. Its justified critique of much traditional knowledge as biased and limited (if not overtly misogynist), and therefore ultimately erroneous, could have led it to claim the high ground by insisting on broader, more balanced, less biased curricula and research. But this is not the choice many programs and Women’s Studies faculty made. Instead, at every juncture at which feminist bias emerged, it was justified by reference to the prior bias of men—as if emulation of the thing being rejected had, unconsciously, become the feminist agenda. Such inconsistencies are unworthy of a feminism that hopes to have a future. By capitulating to them, Women’s Studies has become the defender of the faith within the academy’s walls. In the chapters that follow, we explore the ideology constituting that faith and see why it has become impossible for some feminists to adhere to it.

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Cautionary Tales from Women Who Walked Away

WHEN WE BEGAN conducting our interviews for this book, we expected to elicit strong opinions from our subjects, for Women’s Studies is not a field that attracts the dispassionate or the impassive. We were not disappointed. The stories we collected from faculty, students, and staff members in Women’s Studies programs are vigorous, concrete, and often eloquent. The experiences recounted in them—many happy, many painful—were vividly recollected and proved highly informative. Most of all, we were struck by the sharply contrasting judgments we heard. Some students had “found their voice” and gained self-confidence from feminist classes; others felt they had been “silenced” and ostracized. We heard from professional and clerical staff with intense personal commitments and loyalty to the programs they worked in, and from others who found their allegiance sapped by selfish or hypocritical faculty and students.

But it was the interviews with faculty members that proved most revealing—and most disturbing. Even the most enthusiastic among these women acknowledged serious tensions. We encountered tenured members of Women’s Studies programs so dissatisfied that they had quietly withdrawn or taken inner flight: they continued to teach their courses, though estranged from the whole Women’s Studies enterprise. Others had taken the next step and actually