7 Feminist Academics: Disruption, Development and Disciplines

BECOMING FEMINIST ACADEMICS: ROUTES, ROADBLOCKS AND REWARDS

In this chapter, feminist academics apply political understanding to teaching, research and writing in the academy. They consider knowledge production, career development, voluntarism, isolation, networks and feminist research. Academic feminism is problematised particularly in relation to the linkage of the two terms. For many, academic feminism is a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron, selling out feminism’s commitment to everyday praxis. Yet, on the other hand, academic feminism is also frequently viewed by the establishment as insufficiently academic (Morley and Walsh, 1995).

The academic/activist divide is a popular binary, with shifting weight attached to each polarity (Warwick and Auchmuty, 1995). Women’s studies has been described as the intellectual arm of the Women’s Liberation Movement (De Groot and Maynard, 1993), yet activists outside the academy question whether the struggle against gender-based oppression can be effectively mounted in academic provision, where elitist, class-bound traditions of white male abstract logic threaten to dilute or co-opt radicalism (Morley, 1995d). Currie and Kazi (1987: 77) asked whether academic feminism is the graveyard of radical ideas. Equally, while feminist theory has become increasingly sophisticated since the early days of second-wave feminism, levels of abstraction and academic rigour have not always necessarily been matched with women’s social and political advancement (Faludi, 1992; hooks, 1993). It is hard to have this debate without adopting a judgemental position and imposing hierarchical binaries of what constitutes effective feminism. Rose (1994: 55) argues that:

“to speak of feminist activists and feminist theorists is not to create
an antagonism, but to acknowledge that over time, because of the shifts in the movement’s structure and to some extent as the price of feminism’s success in entering the academy, a division of labour has developed between feminists.

But McNeil (1993: 166) wondered if there has been a ‘hermetic sealing of intellectual labour’. She believed that the ‘relationship between our production (critical knowledge) and feminism outside the academy is not clear’. Much of the debate implies that the central division is between feminists inside and those outside the academy.

However, my study and feminist theory in the wider sense is full of diversity among feminists inside the academy. Warwick and Auchmuty (1995: 184) describe how feminists were motivated to enter and change the academy and how they encountered tensions and paradoxes between their political commitment and organisational structures:

we wanted to challenge the patriarchal curriculum and provide the current generation of students with less alienating courses than we ourselves had experienced as undergraduates and postgraduates.

But our victory – and it was a victory with practically all British universities offering women’s studies by the mid 1990s – was won at a cost. In entering the patriarchal structure of higher education, we lost some of our control over what, how and whom we taught.

As the above quotation illustrates, some women enter the academy after a history of involvement in the women’s movement, and find themselves ambiguously located in hierarchical organisations. This group, like Gramsci’s organic intellectuals, often views academic feminism as an expression and extension of their political commitment. But the situation is changing as women enter feminist scholarship who have not been exposed either to organising principles or campaigns of political movements on the left. This group may become politicised via academic studies. The following two accounts, both from university lecturers in my study, exemplify different routes into women’s studies lecturing:

I’ve been a feminist for a long time and I went back to university as a returner when I was 30 and took history as my subject and was appalled all the way through my degree how little of the staff were women, and how I always had to construct my own courses around women so ... I got together a Women in Society-type course and really learnt from that way, from my own personal