

For feminist consciousness in the academy

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I was recently invited to reflect on the conditions of women in British universities with a group of students and colleagues exploring the politics of the corporate academy. Rather than trying to speak in some hackneyed way for ‘women’, I decided to reflect on the anti-feminist nature of the neoliberal rationalities now dictating academic life within universities, and on the subversions of critical feminist ethics, methodologies and pedagogies in higher education today. I had hoped that this might open space for discussion about how hegemonic masculinities and femininities are being reconstituted through our everyday practices of teaching – including of feminist theory – research, professional labour, and political resistance inside institutions. But while I anticipated challenges to my particular readings of feminist critique and understanding of the intersections of patriarchy, racism and class power in neoliberal institutions, I was unprepared for the hostile reactions to the invocation of feminism itself. ‘Isn’t it sexist’, one woman asked, ‘to keep talking about an ideology that doesn’t include men?’ Another agreed. ‘Feminism has gone too far’, she suggested. ‘It’s not that we don’t know what women went through before, but these things just don’t affect us now. And maybe women want too much’. Finally, there some change of heart, but one attached to a disorienting demand: what is the Feminist Movement’s answer to neoliberal power?

I stumbled through these discussions with a growing awareness that even this critical space was permeated by prejudices against feminist thought and practice, themselves attached to deeper beliefs about the value of particular forms of work, politics and everyday life. As the conversation turned to statistics on gender inequalities in higher education, such questions seemed to slip off the horizon entirely. This situation was not unique. Versions of it are enacted regularly across the academic world, and scholars have already produced a richness of reflection on the transvaluation of feminism into commodity form (McRobbie 2008; Power 2009), popular aversions to feminist identities and imaginaries (Cronin 2009; Gill and Scharff 2011), and the turning away from revolutionary feminist projects on the whole (Brown 2005). However, it is difficult to communicate the gravity of this condition, for post-feminist articulations of anti-capitalist critique do not simply condone the clawing back of many of the rights that have been secured through centuries of women’s struggles. They also enact a closing down of possibilities for seeing the structural and cultural practices of domination which increasingly exclude, discipline and alienate all those people, and all the ways of speaking and being, that do not serve the interests and demands of capital. The silencing of decades of work in feminist theorising and politics has suddenly become very audible indeed.

In recent reflections on the affective politics of ‘austerity’, Lauren Berlant suggested that following the collapse of the post-war social settlement which had legitimised ‘public investment in everyone who wanted a shot’ at education and career, W. E. B. Dubois’ question ‘how does it feel to be a problem?’ has been replaced for some by ‘how does it feel to be a bad investment?’ (Helms *et al.* 2010, p. 5). This question arguably permeates academic subjectivities today. For where the worth of work is judged according to how much

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surplus economic or cultural value it generates in competitive commodity markets, all workers are haunted by perpetual threats of devaluation, exclusion and 'redundancy'. Under these conditions, academics labour to prove that we are *not* unproductive, unprofitable and unfit for purpose, often being pressed into competing against or disregarding each other in order to do so. Not being discovered to be a bad investment is exhausting and divisive labour.

While there is no monopoly on suffering under this economic discipline, women's experiences often render its gendered politics most visible. And while individuals may not share common experiences across or even within institutions, the redefinition of academic labour within the neoliberal frame is contributing to the restoration of institutional cultures in which masculine domination is normalised and celebrated, and certain forms of femininity and non-hegemonic masculinity are suppressed or treated as professional problems and investment risks (Raddon 2002). Pressure for individuals to compete for increasingly scarce resources of funding and prestige, for example, is exerted on fields of power that are known publicly to be deeply unequal. Similarly, the fashion of evaluating a person's professional commitment and worth by attempting to measure how much material 'value' they add to an institution's strategic capital ignores how the temporality and spatiality of creative production, pedagogy and research are shaped by our material conditions, the quality of collegial and political relationships, the demands of care for ourselves and others, and the vicissitudes and rhythms of life itself (Munn-Giddings 1998).

As the neoliberal restructuring of the university progresses apace, however, there are also more subversive mechanisms of power working not only to normalize hegemonic masculinities and femininities, but to re-institutionalise them as mechanisms of discipline in everyday practice. Consider, for example, the general enthusiasm for cut-throat competition as a method for 'driving up the quality' of intellectual work and pruning out 'weak' performers. Consider the derision that is attached to 'soft' forms of institutional organisation like participatory democracy and collaboration, and the privileges bestowed upon powerful managers who are willing to bracket democratic ethics in order to make 'tough' decisions in 'hard times'. Conversely, consider the reconstitution of hegemonic femininities in professional training programmes that promote multi-tasking and conflict management as necessary for 'flexible' management. Consider the abandonment, in both cultural and economic terms, of institutional commitments to scholarship which privileges or even acknowledges the experiences, needs and problems of the most radically excluded people in society, and the admiration for work which speaks to the needs and desires of the powerful. Consider the structural enclosure of possibilities to experiment with feminist and other critical methods in teaching and research, and the division of organised knowledge into 'strategic' (science, technology, languages of commerce) and 'non-strategic' (humanities, social sciences, languages of communication) fields of study, despite the fact that the former are known to be still heavily male-dominated (Gibney 2011). In other words, anti-feminist subjectivities are not simply privileged within the university, as is historically the case. They are rather being re-elevated to prerequisites for participation in academic life itself.

Thus, although it is instructive to attend to current reports on how, for example, women comprise 19% of the professoriate and 67% of part-time academic workers in the UK (HESA 2011), or how 'women in management' has become a specialised field of inquiry in its own right, it is also important to reiterate the well-worn point that occupying spaces of power in order to reproduce them is not a strategy of radical feminist liberation (Power 2009). But how can we make space for such forms of thinking and practice that are anchored in, to paraphrase Judith Butler (2004), a mode of existence which is presently unintelligible within the worldview of corporate capitalism? Or as she asks – like many critical scholars are asking of

themselves now – ‘what happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place within the given regime of truth?’

One response has been to reconcile feminist projects with the logic of this new regime. The model of the financially independent, intimately unattached, economically productive, consuming and politically hard-nosed woman easily promises joy for capitalist development (Reisz 2012). Framed thus, there is little dissensus between the dream of the emancipated bourgeois woman and the necessities of capital accumulation, and there is no disruption created by recognising the multifarious ways this idealised subject continues to be racialised, classed and sexualized (Turner 2002; Turner *et al.* 2011). But as critical consciousness is devoured in this scenario, familiar habits and formations of subjugation begin to rearticulate, and the theoretical languages we have learned to speak often no longer allow us to articulate their critique (Mills and Berg 2010).

Perhaps there is a need, therefore, to reflect again on the conditions of feminism’s emergence as a militant and creative response to experiences of silencing, marginalisation, exclusion and violence. There is much to learn from the women whose work catalysed the creation of radically autonomous knowledges and practices in situations where the creation of conditions of these possibilities was itself repressed. The writings of Patricia Hill Collins, Adrienne Rich, Gloria Anzaldúa and others open windows onto the importance of practices of self-valorisation, oppositional consciousness and collective solidarity in political struggle within institutions of knowledge production and higher education. Self-valorisation is vital wherever institutionalised criteria for achievement, recognition and human worth are not only rigged against one’s own conditions of possibility, but actively negate them. As the development of self-value against dominant norms and representations of both selves and value is likely to increase dislocating experiences of alienation and exclusion rather than bring the recognition that conformity might, the cultivation of oppositional consciousness is necessary for navigating this re-cognised world. And, to undertake this work, it is vital that we build relationships that offer spaces, times and resources for weaving new ways of thinking and speaking into transformative practice, and these into alternative forms of life.

Building such relationships and communities of struggle can be frustrating and painful work, particularly if such alliances are to be successfully formed across existing and often unarticulated divisions of class and race, and across different epistemological and political positions. Some tensions have already arisen between women in the present movement against the privatisation of higher education. There is also sometimes an unspoken sense that understanding relationships in a feminist frame would either be embarrassingly anachronistic, unfair or offensive to men, and discount or threaten formal relations of equality that are believed to exist. Feminist analyses, languages, politics and methodologies are thus often notably quiet in women’s relationships with one another within the academy.

Struggles to resist the imposition of capitalist logic in the university must be embedded in our reproductive and productive labours as well as in intellectual and political action. Some banners hung at recent campus occupations, for example, have read: ‘fighting your cuts is a full-time occupation’. This may be true. As a slogan, however, one of its potential effects is to alienate anyone who has other full-time occupations, which may include intimate relationships with other people. The structural inequalities and prejudices that prevent women who do not or cannot conform to the logics of power from being regarded as successful or valuable in the corporate world do not dissolve when we decide we want to be useful somewhere else; often, it feels we cannot be fully part of the resistance, either (Motta 2011). If, as Silvia Federici (2008) argues, ‘we have to ensure that we do not only confront capital at

the time of the demonstration, but that we confront it collectively at every moment of our lives', what sorts of work might we undertake to allow more people to participate more fully in the long-term project to realise the emancipatory ideals of the university?

This is not a struggle that can be waged by women alone, particularly as women are complicity in imposing some of the most virulent forms of hegemonic masculinity and femininity within the academy, as in other professions (Charlebois 2011). It is also not one that we know how to make together, yet. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) wrote of black women's struggles for recognition in the US academy, struggles against matrices of domination must be engaged on structural, hegemonic, disciplinary, interpersonal and subjective fronts. The times call for a new project of radical feminist re-imagination, not only of our contemporary problems but of possible futures as well. They also call for the collective cultivation of concrete political strategies to defend both hard-won rights of gender equality and more fragile progress in democratising critical, anti-patriarchal forms of thought and ways of life.

Ironically, it may be precisely because critical feminist epistemologies are presently so illegible within neoliberal rationality that they offer some of the most fruitful resources of resistance, particularly in clarifying the forms of gender power that are deployed to disarticulate the conditions for the development of collective oppositional consciousness. As Adrienne Rich wrote more than a decade ago, in conditions where it seems 'almost everything that has fertilized and sustained my work is in danger', this is, 'in fact, the very material I have to work with: it is not "in spite of the times" that I will write, but I will try to write, in both senses, out of my time' (2001, p. 159). To answer the initial question of whether feminism has gone 'too far' in the academy, I would say it has indeed gone much too far away, and that it is well past time to relearn some of its enduring lessons.

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