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A Critical View of Women's Studies

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A CRITICAL VIEW OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

[Below is a condensed version of Part I of an essay, to be called "What Matter Mind," that will appear next year in Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal. Part II of the essay describes the external opposition to Women's Studies, and Part III, a strategy for survival that aims to minimize internal dissent while reducing external opposition.]

Quarrels haunt all political movements. The more radical the movement the more vicious the internal struggles seem to become. One suspects that hostility first compels radicalism and then allies compel each other's hostility. The fights within Women's Studies have a unique flavor: the dislike women evidence for other women, which makes collective action emotionally perilous. To that dislike, women often add an atavistic, but well-documented, distrust of women in authority, which transforms potential leaders into possible ogres whom we hound. Women have apparently accepted the theory that womanliness and power may never converge in one person. The distrust has a special mode within academic circles: the public denunciation of women who have conventional credentials (e.g., publications or the Ph.D.). As feminism has become more fashionable, some women get attention, job offers, and mildly grave requests from foundations for advice. Such favors, if favors they be, become as suspect as a bibliography or a doctorate. (See Joreen, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," Second Wave, 2, 1 (1972), 20-25, 42, for general comments about elitism, the star system, and internal democracy.)

To be fair, women have asked for it, as we said in childhood fights. Nearly every Women's Studies meeting has had its share of reprint-pushers, title-mongers, and bookpeddlars. Part of this is the natural exuberance of women (continued on page 4)

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SEX ROLE STEREOTYPES

On November 24-26, the National Education Association held the first national conference on sex role stereotypes in elementary and secondary schools, under a grant from the Office of Education. Held at Airlie House, in Warrenton, Virginia, the conference drew about 200 participants, including representatives of such groups as the NAACP, the Feminists on Children's Media, NOW, Women on Words and Images, The Women's Action Alliance, The Feminist Press, as well as representatives from NEA affiliates from various sections of the country.

The conference had two fundamental purposes: to bring together as many resources as already existed so that information and materials might be shared by all groups involved; and second, to stimulate sufficient interest in the subject of sex role stereotypes so that NEA affiliates would replicate the conference in at least a dozen other parts of the country during 1973: in Florida during the first week in May; in Seattle in March, and later, in Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, and Massachusetts.

The conference framework focussed on sex role stereotypes as experienced by Native Americans, Asians, Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Whites—in relation to the school's involvement in teaching students political, economic, physical, and psychological survival skills. Speakers at the opening and closing sessions addressed these topics head on.

Elizabeth Koontz, Director of the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, opened the conference by stating that schools have done little to prepare students for the world. Citing the statistic that nine out of ten girls in high school today will work during their lifetime, she emphasized the urgency of the problem. Prince Charming won't arrive on white horses to fill the spaces of a woman's life, she explained.

Michele Russell, black women's leader from Detroit, Michigan, analyzed the economics of schools in a society (continued on page 8)
who, after years of being ignored by colleagues simply because they were women, find themselves within an acceptable, even an exciting, public force. They have come alive. Part of this, more sinister, is the vulgar egoism of any person who suddenly picks up power in a society that values power and revels in it. All credentialed women are also suspect because of the mewing and cowardice of many women scholars in the past. Modeling their careers on those of male scholars, believing that women must adapt themselves to the demands of the university, accepting the ways and means of a modern university, such academics have given the woman scholar a reputation so suspect that women who lack a Ph.D. assume that having one must be tantamount to disliking feminism, or any activism. . . .

People also falsely assume that learning and activism are incompatible; that the woman who goes into the library in the morning will never emerge to demonstrate in the afternoon; or that going into the library at all will infect going out onto the streets. The assumption, oddly totalitarian, implies that there is only one pure way to either justice or perfection. It both denies feminism the fertility of avant-garde thought and takes up the energy of women who must repeatedly defend their good faith. It creates an inner contradiction. The women who say that any scholarship is inevitably politically sterile are themselves a part of the academy. Degrading the academy, they degrade their own place. Ironically, they often patronize non-academic women. Announcing that a Ph.D. can only befuddle an average mind, they often say, "Who, after all, has a Ph.D.?"

People in Women's Studies tend to belong in one of five categories: 1) The pioneers, who took women as a subject of academic concern before the New Feminism became a public force; 2) the ideologues, who were feminists first and who then tried to adapt their feminism to their work, their politics to their profession; 3) the radicals, who place their feminism within a theoretical context of demands for revolutionary educational, political, and social overhaul; 4) the latecomers, who recently discovered that women were an interesting academic subject, and who may become ideologues as they experience sexual discrimination when they try to set up a Women's Studies course; and 5) the bandwagonneers, both men and women, whose interest in Women's Studies is more in keeping up with fashion and in bucking up enrollment than in Women's Studies. I am an ideologue who wavers toward radicalism. A commitment to institutional change, as well as temperance, keeps me from a hardening of radicalism.

The most bitter quarrel, because its antagonists are in some ways the closest, is between the ideologue and the radical. The pioneer tends to stay aloof. The latecomer is busy with discoveries. The bandwagonneer either drops out or fails to understand the elementary terms of the quarrels.

The radicals are the most apt to accuse others of elitism, of political cowardice, and of betrayal of equality in general and equality for women in particular. The ideologues are the most nervously sensitive to those charges.

A practical question, which programs have actually confronted, dramatizes political quarrels. Should a Women's Studies program take foundation money? An ideologue, though she might hesitate, would probably answer yes. She would argue that a Women's Studies program can use the money; that it can evade foundation control; that women might as well take what support is around. A radical would probably answer no. She would argue that foundations, like the universities, share in the moral, economic, and political sins of America. . . .

Psychologically at odds, hiding our fears behind political rhetoric, politically at odds as it is, people in Women's Studies go on to indulge in the flimsiest of self-congratulatory talk about intellectual adventurousness. We hurt ourselves because we deceive ourselves and because we risk contempt as we promise a Utopia of the mind and build another suburban tract. The current promises are: 1) interdisciplinary work, which will give the most spacious possible view of women and society, adequate knowledge, and rich conceptual models; and 2) team teaching and research, which will provide the human resources for interdisciplinary work, while it will eschew the future of the entrepreneurial scholar who treats a seminar as if it were an oil field and he a Rockefeller with a doctorate.

The tributes to interdisciplinary work are more odes to an ideal than analyses of practice. Our actual interdisciplinary feats, so far so tame, have consisted of remarks about the same subject (e.g., sexual initiation or the figure of the lady) made at one time by persons from several disciplines; or the resurrection of old practices within certain disciplines (e.g., a revived interest in the sociology of literature); or a simple blurring of strict disciplinary lines (e.g., using literary autobiography as a primary source in a history class). When persons from disparate disciplines do get together, they find that they know little or nothing about each other's jargon, models, and methods. . . .

The most ingenious team research seems to be done within one discipline, a practice scientists have long followed. Except for that, except for the odd biology course, Women's Studies has had little to do with science. This is ironic, if only because of the role of science in liberating women. . . .

I am sorry about the suicidal impulses within Women's Studies—not simply because I would mourn any such impulse; not simply because they reinforce the tired old theory that women are good only for food, sex, and babies; not simply because they hurt the most humane movement I know; but because they personally hurt me. The New Feminist has given many of us our life's work. It has helped to make our lives work. The self-destruction of the movement would spell our destruction too.