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International "Feminology" Conference

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[FEMINOLOGY *n.* 1. a Danish term used for scholarship concerning women's position in society, past and present; 2. an interdisciplinary field of study and research about women]

It was a European first: The Dutch/Scandinavian Symposium on Woman's Position in Society. I stumbled onto the conference plans while researching international feminism in Amsterdam, received an invitation, and soon was en route to the University of Nijmegen, a conservative Dutch institution where women comprise only 23 percent of the student population—an ironic sponsor for a conference whose events would become strongly political and thorny during June 8-11, 1975.

The symposium began with more than customary enthusiasm: after all, this was a history-making gathering of 70 scholars, professors, doctoral students and writers, almost all of whom were women from Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Belgium, The Netherlands and the U. S. (Cheri Register from Minneapolis, Verne Moberg, formerly of The Feminist Press, and myself). The Dutch/Scandinavian organizing committee had selected four disciplines as subjects of the main lectures, *viz.*, philosophy, theology, sociology (social history) and arts (literary history). Throughout the packed days that followed, at plenary sessions and in workshops, participants heard well-researched topics such as: "Feminological Methodology," "Women and the Creation of Art," "What Were the Ideas Behind the Early Rights Movement in Sweden?" and "A Feminist Theology Versus a Patriarchal Theology." And at lunches and in evening socials, women crossed cultures toward new friendships. Then the dynamics changed. Why the dissension by the third day?

Perhaps some clues can be found in the symposium's history. For more than a year, women in The Netherlands' universities had fought job discrimination and struggled to get support for woman-focused research. In fact, Burnier, a feminist writer, introduced in 1974 the concept of a separate women's university, but this was rejected by women in academe as a ghetto idea. The Amsterdam University women had started an action group, "Women and Science" (*Wetenschap*), whose idea spread rapidly, and soon different university groups were studying the position of women in science. There were similar organizations formed in the fields of political science, law, history, psychology, economics and sociology. From these "sproutings" grew the idea of a congress, with information exchange from Scandinavian women who seemed to have a "tradition" of "feminology."

This history reveals that political activism in unmistakably feminist form had led to the Congress' creation. But once underway, participants found most lectures positivist: feminology stood apart from feminism—the allegedly objective scientific approach *sans* politics. There was strict adherence to the traditions of university style and discussions: lectures, limited discussion in large groups and only two microphones in a good-sized hall. Some people were perfectly comfortable with the format and engaged by the content; others were not.

Marjan Sax, a political science student from Amsterdam, was one of those who was not. She felt that feminist scholars saw no connection between the congress and the larger struggles of women. At one session, in a burst of energy, she "captured" the microphone and floor and eloquently proposed symposium support for the Lyon prostitutes then protesting their working conditions.

She argued that the women at the congress and the Lyon prostitutes were both victims of the same oppressive system. Her argu-

ments were mostly in vain. The motion especially disturbed some Scandinavian women who denounced prostitution as a capitalist phenomenon and, refusing to recognize it as a woman's issue, walked out *en masse*.

Those who opposed the first resolution offered a counter-resolution demanding free abortion in all countries represented where it was not yet available (The Netherlands and Norway are two of these). This motion was seen as more palatable and closer to the concerns of those who proposed it. But Marjan Sax and those who suggested the resolution supporting the Lyon prostitutes insisted that the symposium endorse both: after all, there are endless oppressions to fight.

For two days, the halls of ivy bristled with debate and amendment. Finally, at the end of the congress, the abortion motion gained general support, but the first resolution was sent to Lyon with fewer signatures than had been hoped for: politics and positivism had not mixed well.

Nevertheless, women who had come primarily for information were not disappointed. One learned that Scandinavian interest in archives and libraries serving research in women's history and women's condition in society has grown. The Women's History Archives in Gothenburg, Sweden, were established in 1958 as a private foundation and, since 1971, the collection has been nationalized and now constitutes a part of the Gothenburg University library. Denmark's Royal Library in Copenhagen is developing special catalogs for literature on feminology, and an archivist employed at the Commission for Archive Collections in Oslo is collecting and registering all unprinted materials in Norway relating to women. The material itself is not kept in a central collection but registered and then placed in different archives to be preserved for future research. In Bergen, Norway, a part-time position at the university library was granted over a year ago for the purpose of handling documentation services in the field of feminology.

Before the conference closed, resolutions supporting multiple efforts to promote research concerning women in all academic disciplines passed unanimously. The demands were threefold: 1) support in the form of grants to institutions, projects and individual scholars; 2) support for university women's studies courses (few now exist) and 3) support for a center for the collection of information, coordination of research, compilation of bibliographies and registration of foreign and native publications. The congress members made it clear to their respective universities that women's studies is a necessary and growing field.

It was hard to say good-bye at the end. Even though the feminism-in-feminology question still gnawed, there had been many positive contacts—good feelings in knowing that many women in different countries were working on the same issues. Perhaps Belgian writer Monika van Paemel summed it up best in a closing address: "First I came in the drip, then in the rain. But now it has been thunderstorming for three days. Thank you, sisters."

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