Winter 1979

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Women’s Studies in West Germany:
Community vs. Academy

By Tobe Levin

Rape, abortion, homes for battered women—these would appear to be the issues of paramount concern to West German feminists at the present time. But high on the list of priorities for 1978 has also been the question of women’s studies, a subject of passionate, often bitter debate in recent months, with sides clearly drawn between proponents of differing allegiances. As in the United States, but with sharp differences, the discussion in West Germany focuses on the relationships among women’s studies, the women’s movement, and the community.

Activists here have been debating the proposed establishment of a “Women’s Research Institute” at the Free University of Berlin. This proposal is opposed by two articulate groups of movement women with alternative projects in hand, the first group consisting of Berlin activists engaged in planning a “Women’s Research, Information and Education Center” to exist independently of the university; and the second group, founders of a feminist professional society called “Social Science Research and Praxis for Women, Inc.”—the first new nationally-based feminist organization aimed at women employed in social work and teaching.

Spokeswomen for these two projects have made frequent use of the feminist media in recent months to announce their objections to a Berlin university institute. Articles have appeared in the feminist publication Courage; in the Munich frauen-info (women’s information); in a Frauenoffensive (feminist press) pamphlet; in a recent special issue of the left-wing review alternative devoted to the “new feminist science”; as well as in Emma, the largest West German feminist magazine.

But to speak of a “debate” is somewhat misleading, since the term calls for two parties to a discussion, and voices in favor of the “Women’s Research Institute” have not been heard in the feminist media. As a result, the point of view of feminist reporting has been unanimous in its opposition to the university project, while the idea of the university institute has been discussed—as far as I am aware—mainly before academic audiences in Berlin.

Since I am writing from Munich, not Berlin, and since my major sources of information are the feminist media, it is somewhat difficult for me to deal fairly with both sides of the issue. I have nevertheless attempted to give a clear presentation of the points of view as they have been argued in written sources. It is important to keep in mind that opposition has not focused on whether or not women’s studies courses should be given at the university. Feminist courses, offered by individual women faculty, exist on many West German campuses and no feminists oppose these. The question is, rather, whether there should be a central coordinating institution for women’s studies on the Berlin campus. For the opposition, it is a question of priorities. They ask: because scarcity of funds forces us to choose between one type of feminist project and another, shouldn’t we prefer a women’s education center in Berlin to an academic institution on the university campus?

The “Women’s Research Institute”
at the Free University of Berlin

The present controversy can be traced back to January 1978, when Hanna-Beate Schöpp-Schilling, a feminist literary critic and former Assistant Professor of American Studies at the John F. Kennedy Institute (at the Free University of Berlin), talked with Berlin Senator Peter Glotz, responsible for the allocation of funds to educational projects, about the establishment of a central institute for women’s studies at the Free University of Berlin. A detailed plan was submitted to the authorities in May 1978, and on July 7 financial aid from the Berlin government was granted in support of a two-year planning phase, during which two academic women and a secretary are to draw up specific guidelines for the practical functioning of such an institution.

Schöpp-Schilling’s initiative stems from her first-hand knowledge of women’s studies in the United States and from a survey of American women’s studies research centers which she had undertaken with support from The Ford Foundation. She published her findings in an article entitled “Women’s Studies, Women’s Research, and Women’s Research Centers in the U.S.A.,” which appeared in an academic journal, Neue Sammlung: Zeitschrift für Erziehung und Gesellschaft (March/April 1978). Here she describes the women’s studies movement as a political strategy meant to contribute to radical social change through “reform” in three areas: in the content of learning, in pedagogical methods, and in institutional structures. She takes care to emphasize the connection between women’s studies and the larger community—the fact that the former exists primarily to serve the interests of the latter. In this regard, she points to the self-criticism coming from American women’s studies pioneers who warn against complacency with merely superficial changes:

We should not engage in individual initiatives aimed primarily at increasing the numbers and status of women in intellectual professions if the conditions leading to discrimination against all women in the job market are not radically altered.1

In other words, an institutionalized Women’s Studies Program should not exist to serve the interests of queen bees. On the contrary, solidarity with nonacademic women workers is of the utmost importance in the struggle against oppressive conditions both on campus and in the community. As Schöpp-Schilling has written:
Feminist science is... more than simple research on women. It is not morally neutral, value-free, but aims to eliminate discrimination against women in and through science and society, thereby effecting long-term changes in both.\(^2\)

Not simply research on women, but research by and for women: feminist science is a form of explicitly committed, politically oriented practice.

No one, I think, would choose to quarrel with this view of the purpose of women's studies. Debate thus tends to focus less on goals than on means. Can a university institute avoid contamination by the very structures it hopes to influence? How effectively can change be produced from within the academy itself? Critics are highly skeptical, pointing out that the very formulation of the university project, undertaken without the cooperation of the Berlin women's movement, is already witness to the rift between campus and community, which a central institute—it is feared—would merely perpetuate. Critics are also uneasy about the institute's ability to deal with points of tension between university and non-academic women.

The "Women's Research, Information and Education Center"

Historian Barbara Duden, Irene Stoehr, and a group of approximately forty others working within the Berlin Women's Center since February 1978 have animated public discussion concerning the need for an autonomous "Women's Research, Information and Education Center." In a recent Bavarian radio broadcast, Barbara Duden described the project as follows:

"We want financing for a women's research, education and information center... a project we have been discussing for some time. We believe that women's research, the discussion of results and their distribution should be coordinated, but we do not want just a ghetto in the university. On the contrary, we want our own house outside the university for the use of teachers, journalists, housewives... The university is so incredibly shut off from the rest of society that we must at all costs break out of it.\(^3\)

What the group wants, she writes again in *Courage,*\(^4\) are a house, a garden, and a sandbox: they want to exist for the sake of women working in adult education who may be in need of material; for teachers wishing to bring feminism to the classroom and therefore in search of materials and guidance; for housewives and working women who need information concerning previous attempts to organize; for academic women by providing a framework for discussion as well as research services; for women in social work, unions, family counseling and birth-control centers, etc. Above all, she writes, they wish to maintain an intimate relationship between research and educational activities: "so that research on women by women experts does not remain in sterile isolation from those whom it concerns," gathering dust in the ghetto of university 'women's studies' centers.\(^5\)

Distrust of "experts," of "hierarchies," of "planners," "directors," "leaders," characterizes the critique of the Free University project. But more thought-provoking are the objections voiced by Irene Stoehr in her article, "The Highroad to State Feminism? On the Relationship between the Women's Movement and the State on the Occasion of the Debate concerning the Institutionalization of Women's Studies at the Free University of Berlin."\(^6\) Given the Senate's approval of the Central Institute, Stoehr asks the pertinent question: "What does it mean when the state not only presents itself as not 'repressive' towards the women's movement, but even appears in the guise of the champion or leading light of the movement?" The answer: cooptation. She points out that the Berlin senator responsible for university projects, Peter Glotz, has publicly admitted his wish to avoid "a full confrontation with feminist organizations which are growing in strength." He further recommends, according to Stoehr, that "established left-wing parties and trade unions should indeed adopt a feminist attitude" while feminism is still able to be 'integrated.' There is a danger, he says, from the women's movement precisely because it threatens to break out of the traditional framework of public, political debate. "The smouldering conflict that refused to burst into flames in the streets or in the workplace is doing so in the kitchen and in the bedroom," she quotes Glotz with agreement.\(^7\) One can sense the fear that, given the increasingly repressive character of the German state, such official support is really meant to act as a brake on the more radical potential of the movement.\(^8\)

Social Science Research and Praxis for Women, Inc.

A national women's studies organization, the association for "Social Science Research and Praxis for Women, Inc."\(^9\) was founded in February 1978 by social scientists who had first formed a feminist caucus within the German Sociological Society. Their recognition of the essentially interdisciplinary nature of feminist studies led to the formation of an autonomous organization aimed at promoting interdisciplinary research, teaching, and praxis on the national and international levels, through stimulation of discussion, coordination of projects, exchanges of information, and publications. The first national congress took place on November 24-26 in Cologne, with the theme: "Feminist Praxis in Social Work and Teaching." It provided teachers, social workers, and other activist women with a forum in which to discuss the problematic relationship between feminist consciousness and a corresponding praxis, to develop strategies for incorporating feminism fully into our professional lives. Among the discussion groups were (1) principles of feminist pedagogy: favoring girls vs. "equal treatment"; sensitivity to the "undemonstrative" forms of resistance in girls vs. a teaching method concerned only with the demonstrative/disturbance culture of children who actively draw attention to themselves, etc.; (2) feminist attitudes and strategies vis-à-vis the ruling ideology of the family; (3) the historical development and function of social work as socialization of the woman's role (as the professionalization of housework); (4) the mother-child relationship as the basis for social resistance; (5) consideration of the possibilities of resistance in the field of reproduction; (6) feminist research methods; (7) principles and strategies for the promotion of feminist research oriented toward praxis.\(^10\) In sum, the practical orientation of the
The congress was meant to guide us in becoming more effective feminist workers.

The association for "Social Science Research and Praxis for Women, Inc." has also taken a stand on the proposed Berlin university project, in their "Circular Letter No. 3":

The planning of a "Central Institute"... cannot be recommended for the simple reason that the plan does not include the wider public of "those affected" (at least those who are already pursuing women's research), or has not started out from such initiatives. This is not "only" a moral argument. If women want more than simply to be added to the existing canon of institutionalized knowledge as a new object of research or academic discipline, then they must not allow such an institute to be thrust upon them by the state. 11

Of course even alternative projects need financial support from the state, and clearly one of the major reasons for the virulence of the opposition to the Berlin project is the fact that the various educational initiatives are in competition with one another for the allocation of scarce resources. As Irene Stoehr admits: "The problem is precisely that we can under no circumstances do without state funding, but that we must fight to get as much money as possible on terms which do not weaken our struggle." 12

In sum, what West Germans see as the hallmark of feminist studies is its Ganzheit—its wholeness. Indeed, the development of the women's studies movement here has been marked by an emphasis on the essential sisterhood of all parties to the enterprise: researchers and the subjects of research—all are women standing in a dialectical relationship to one another. The bitterness of the current debate, though regrettable, is nevertheless witness to a keen interest in defending the fledgling movement from suspected sources of contamination. There is certainly a thin line between cooperation with government and cooptation, as Schöpp-Schilling herself points out. She writes:

A feminist political science, whose goal is the creation of a more humane society, has to deal critically with the concepts of "politics" and "power" in order to understand "the complex interrelationships between entering into an ongoing system and transforming that system into one that is in fact capable of meeting the needs of humans, female as well as male." 13

Such an awareness on the part of supporters of the university institute is, I feel, suggestive of their ability to maneuver between the Scylla and Charybdis of movement and government. Indeed, discussion has tended to be somewhat distorted by the necessity of taking sides, and it is probable that, if the Berlin Senate were willing to finance both on- and off-campus projects, the feminist movement would indeed be less critical of a university institute. But if one is forced to choose, it seems preferable to cast one's vote on the side of independent educational projects, where the teachers would not be candidates for the civil service and would therefore be free from government harassment, censorship, or dismissal for their political views. Such initiatives would also be more likely to reach women outside of academia. Indeed, the West German ideal would seem to follow the model of the Volks­ hochschule, the praxis-oriented, community-based program with its broad appeal, which brings women to school and feminism to the people.

Tobie Levin is an American who takes graduate courses at the University of Munich and is writing a feminist dissertation for Cornell in comparative literature. She teaches French in a German elementary school to earn her living. She is on the advisory board of Frau enoffensive, a feminist press in West Germany.

Notes

2 Ibid., p. 163.
3 Barbara Duden, quoted by Gabriele For g and Gardiner-Sirrl, Wenn Frauen über Frauen Forschen. Manuscript copy of a radio broadcast by the Bayerischer Rundfunk on 15 August 1978, p. 20.
5 Use of the term "ghetto" with regard to the university probably needs clarifying. In West Germany, there are approximately 100 institutions of higher learning (universities, technical universities, teacher training colleges, art institutes, etc.) serving a population of over 50 million. Compared to the more than 2,000 such institutions in the United States (whose population is only four times that of West Germany), it is clear that the university is truly accessible to a tiny minority of intellectuals, and that the mystery surrounding it is especially intimidating to women, whose general level of formal education is even lower than that of men. On the other hand, the alternative feminist culture has itself been viewed as a ghetto, especially in its radical exclusion of men. My own feeling is, however, that an off-campus educational center, like the Berlin women's centers located in immigrant and working-class neighborhoods, would have a far better chance of reaching out to the average woman than would a university institute.
6 In alternative: "Der 'andere Blick'—Feministische Wissenschaft?", Nos. 120-21 (June/August 1978), p. 174.
7 Ibid., p. 176.
8 When I speak of the "repressive character of the German state" I am referring specifically to the increasing persecution by the government of left-wing intellectuals, including numerous cases of professional disbarment and a particularly watchdog attitude vis-à-vis the teaching profession. The various German states handle the problem differently, while the Bonn government pretends it doesn't exist; but in many states the civil service—which includes teachers at all levels, kindergarden through university—subjects candidates to a thorough "security check," and teachers are not accorded the status of government employees if they are suspected of communist sympathies. In other words, they can't teach. The situation is too complex to describe in detail here, but many have compared the current political climate to the McCarthy era; and the significance of this for the debate concerning a university institute is clear. In fact, a large number of qualified women active in the alternative women's studies movements would probably be barred from teaching in the university because of their political views. And the reason why opponents of the university institute have not raised this point themselves within West Germany is stated in an interview with the editors of Courage in the November 1977 issue of the French feminist newspaper Histoires d'Elle: they are afraid of government reprisals.
9 The person to contact for further information concerning this organization is Dr. Carol Möller, Herwarthstr. 22, 5000 Köln 1, West Germany.
11 Rundbrief No. 3, Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung und Praxis für Frauen e.V., Köln, p. 2.
12 Stoehr, "Der 'andere Blick'", p. 180.
13 Schöpp-Schilling, p. 165.