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THE WOMEN'S STUDIES CONFERENCE IN BERLIN:
ANOTHER CHAPTER IN THE CONTROVERSY

By Peggy McIntosh

Those who read the Winter and Spring issues of the Women's Studies Newsletter in 1979 may remember accounts of controversies among women which surrounded feminist thought, teaching, and research in all of West Germany, and especially in Berlin. The next chapter in the controversy, though far from the last, occurred last April at the Free University of Berlin, where three hundred people attended a conference on "Aims, Content, and Institutionalization of Women's Studies and Research," sponsored by Berlin's Senator for Education, and by the President of the Free University of Berlin. Foreign participants were invited from Sweden, France, Italy, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. German participants included university faculty, administrators, students, and leaders of women's professional groups as well as women from the government, the Common Market, and the German Federation of Trade Unions.

Perhaps as significant as the list of participants were those who did not attend. At the opening session, the introductory remarks of the Senator for Education and the President of the University were interrupted by heckling, and immediately afterward, before the day's program had begun, there was an orderly walkout of about fifty women who represented thirteen women's organizations boycotting the conference. A long, carefully-written declaration was then read, while German and English transcripts of the statement were distributed to the audience. The declaration explained the boycotters' conviction that the conference played into the hands of those in power in the government and the university who do not want to improve the status of women and who, in fact, will take over feminist work and destroy it while purporting to support it.

The issues raised by the declaration surfaced repeatedly in subsequent sessions of the conference during the next two and a half days. Many participants who shared the conviction of the boycotters that the government and the universities are determined to undermine the women's movement chose to attend nevertheless, in hopes of using the conference—however cynical its government sponsors—to make some gains for women in the universities. Margherita Rendel of the University of London said, "We must learn to ride on the backs of those who intended to ride on ours."

For overseas visitors, professional and volunteer interpreters translated sotto voce into English or German as needed for whatever groups huddled around them. The cultural distance was lessened by those who provided background, explaining that the women's movement in Germany grew not out of a civil rights movement as in the United States, but out of the Marxist student movement of the late sixties and seventies which attracted the energies of both men and women until, disaffected with male-dominated communes and Communism, women formed their own feminist groups. Rifts developed between women of the left, of the center, and of the right; between university and non-university women; between those living with men and those living with women; between feminist community workers and family women. The rifts are multiple, as are the women's groups. We understood that the conference was taking place at the center of at least five concentric rings of particularity, each of which required special understanding: the position of women in Germany generally; of women in German universities; of women in West Berlin specifically, in the aftermath of the student movement; of women at the Free University, where initiatives for women have
been the subject of many disputes; and of
women at this particular conference, funded
by a Senator who was making good on a
campaign promise to do something for
women at the Free University.

As preface to the conference, planners
Gisela Steppke and Kerstin Dörhöfer had
distributed a statement about the low status
of women and women’s research at the Free
University of Berlin. They had discussed
various forms of institutionalization,
including the establishment of a Central
Institute for Women’s Studies and
Research, and had asked which form of
organization would best serve women in the
university. The foreign speakers and
panelists tended to answer, “Many forms,”
and to describe a wide variety of strategies
and programs which have characterized the
institutionalization of women’s studies and
women’s research in their countries.
Finding niches and toeholds, women have
fitted in and grabbed hold where they could:
there is no one best pattern. In fact, many
said that diversity is key to any increase of
women’s strength on campuses. Women
making changes at every level with many
different strategies have had some collective
effect which is harder to undermine than
single structures are.

Foreign speakers attempted to identify
those issues which could bring together
women from inside and outside the
academy. Margherita Rendel spoke of the
important “credentialing power” of the
universities. Diana Leonard of the United
Kingdom spoke of the need for
acknowledgment by liberal women of the
help which radicals give to make the liberal
deem acceptable. Andréé Michel of the
National Center for Scientific Research in
Paris reminded us of the need for support
from outside the university in order to
mobilize faculty and students within the
university to demand and to provide courses
with a feminist focus. Hanne Schroeder, a
German faculty member at the University of
Amsterdam, said that it was nonsense for
those outside of the university to reject
university women as “elite”; women, she
said, are the proletariat at the universities as
they are everywhere: overqualified,
derpaid, harassed, and repressed as
much inside as outside of the academy.

Speakers from all of the foreign
countries testified to common problems in
their university environments: among the
few women who survive to reach the “top”
in elite systems, comparatively few
understand or care about feminist issues;
quota systems may increase the number of
women on faculties but not necessarily
the number of feminists; the state of women’s
studies on most campuses is marginal even
if students are supportive; women are hardly
visible in university curricula; most
universities make changes only when forced
by political or financial considerations to do
so. Because of the peripheral nature of
women’s studies courses, faculty
undertaking them get more-than-usually
exhausted. Ginevra Conti Odorisio of Rome
said that all women doing paid work have
double jobs to begin with, and to add on
women’s studies work gives a woman a
triple job.

On the second and third days of the
conference, German women discussed their
most acute problems, which stem from
increasing control of the universities and
steadfast resistance on the part of both
university and government to all
manifestations of the women’s movement.
There is a scarcity of women in tenured
positions; courses on women are peripheral
in nature; there are few or no funds for
research on women; and because all
university jobs are government jobs, the
government monitoring of women’s
behavior off-campus can threaten
professional life. The word “control” was
heard often. Many speakers agreed that
since 1969 there has been increasing
government control over speech, thought,
and behavior. Although the role of the
autocratic professor has lessened, the role
of the state and of the university bureaucracy
increases. Many women on university
faculties dare not take part in
demonstrations or be openly associated with
the women’s movement outside of the
universities. Demonstrations are considered
to be incompatible with loyalty to the state,
and one is likely to be subtly harassed by the
government if one chooses to live within a
commune. One German graduate student
told me later that she thinks the atmosphere
in West Germany today resembles that of
the McCarthy era in the United States.

Even those who do survive in the
university to do research on women are
constantly accused by their university
colleagues of being “unscientific,” which
also translates into English as
“unsystematic” or “non-objective.” The
politics of feminism are said to make
women’s study of women “unobjective,”
whereas it is assumed that the politics of
male domination in no way made the male
study of men “unobjective.” Strongly
feminist researchers, resisting research
methodology which reduces women to
“object,” constantly encounter hostility.
Ilona Kickbusch of the women’s caucus of
the German Sociological Association
cautioned that we must not “use” women in
sociological research and in doing so simply
add to the history of oppression, instead of
altering the conditions of women’s lives.

Some women who had spent time in the
United States expressed a qualified
admiration for the pragmatic principle that
one simply works for women at all possible levels and in all possible ways, saying not "either/or" but "both/and" to women's projects. But they cautioned that it is dangerous in Germany to proceed without political planning and without a feminist theoretical basis for decision-making. For example, if one merely stipulates that the university must set quotas for women faculty, it will appoint antifeminist women. If one insists only on money for research on women, the money will be given to men to do the research. If one leaves women's studies work within the departments at the Free University of Berlin, it is at the mercy of almost universally hostile senior faculty. On the other hand, if one establishes a Central Institute for Women's Studies at the University, in hopes of strengthening women, one risks having all the individual departments simply get rid of their staff or their own responsibility for women's studies by shunting them off to the Institute, which will in turn be controlled "from above." As Suzanne Seeland of the Daily Mirror reported, "The planners and most of the participants at the conference consider a Central Institute too dangerous because then all the individual departments can send all that is specifically women-oriented to the Institute" (italics mine).

Given a unanimous agreement that feminist issues and people are repressed both in and outside of the German university system, but given strong theoretical disagreements about the best way to proceed, the conference participants resolved to demand: first, a plan for hiring female professors in all disciplines; second, the anchoring of women's studies in the individual departmental curricula, study plans, and examinations (the latter very important in the German system); and third, priority to be given to women's research in the distribution of research funds within the universities and in the financing of women's educational centers outside of the universities. The final stipulation is important, because the conference participants were recommending support for research by autonomous women's groups such as the one which had organized the boycott.

The significance of the final resolution of the conference is that despite the warning that further organization of women's studies at the university would make it vulnerable to cooptation, the conference participants were voting both to support the boycotters and to demand further funds and faculty for work in the universities. Whether this "both/and" approach will persevere in Berlin and whether coalition will lessen cooptation remain to be seen.

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### WOMEN'S STUDIES INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FORMS

In July 1980, an idea—to hold a series of seminars and roundtables for an international group of women's studies participants—became a "network." At the Forum for Nongovernmental Organizations, held in Copenhagen last summer during the UN Mid-Decade Conference on Women, more than 500 persons from 55 countries attended four seminars and 14 roundtables on a variety of subjects. The core topics were women's studies research, teaching, texts, and public policy issues. At one of the large final sessions, several hundred people discussed the possibility of an international "network"; and Vina Mazumdar of New Delhi, the director of a new Center for Research on Women and Development, and former director of the Women's Studies Unit in the Indian Social Science Research Council, and Florence Howe were asked to co-chair the development of such a network. A lengthy report will be featured in the first issue of 1981.

Opening seminar in Copenhagen: "Developing a Body of Knowledge about Women—for Women." Translators' cages at left. Participants, left to right: Florence Howe, welcoming the audience to Women's Studies International; Hanna Papanek, Center for Asian Development Studies, Boston University; Vina Mazumdar, Director, Center for the Study of Women in Development, New Delhi; Gloria Bonder, Director, Center for Research on Women, Buenos Aires; Laura Balbo, Director, Group for Research on the Family and Feminism (GRIFF), Milan. Photograph by Mioko Fujieda.