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ATHENA and Gender Studies

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INTRODUCTION

This paper offers an overview of the main points of consensus about the key-concepts and the main terminology of the field of gender and women's studies in a European perspective. The latter refers to the concrete experience of institutional co-operation and joint activities with a large number of universities within the SOCRATES programme of the European Union. All references to "Europe", therefore, are to be taken in this sense.

The process of developing European perspectives into the curricula and the research projects in the field of gender and women's studies involves a number of difficulties which all come to bear on the task of institutionalizing this area. In this paper I will address them and attempt to provide some answers on the basis of the experience of European co-operation projects.

Women's studies as a term is a North American invention; it was quickly and easily adopted by the Anglo-Saxon world because of the strong cultural ties existing between the two geo-political areas the North of Europe also followed. Whether this concept can be applied systematically right across Latin, Catholic, Southern and especially in Eastern Europe is, however, a very serious question. I am not saying this to be excessively Euro-centric but rather to try and be alert to the differences in culture, religion, political and educational practices, which could well make the American-based model of women's studies not a universally applicable one.

The question can then be raised: to what an extent is the very concept of women's studies today respectful of cultural diversity? How does it relate to and take into account the problems of women in less advantaged or in developing countries? How does it compare to the wealth and variety of cultures, even of feminist cultures, within Europe today? Ever since their beginnings in the late 1980's, the European cooperative projects, joint activities, exchanges and networks in academic women's studies have had to confront this complex reality.

The whole field of women's studies has been marked by a series of debates and questioning about the aims and scopes of its very enterprise. This has given rise to areas of divergence and uncertainty; let me try to give you some example of these.

TERMINOLOGY

Even the simple and apparently straight-forward "women's studies" did not strike a note of adequate simplicity. Some groups prefer the more explicitly political: "feminist studies"; others go for "sex-role or gender studies", which aim at greater objectivity by suggesting a higher level of scientific precision. The slightly older "female studies" may sound neutral but is far too limiting in political scope; "feminine studies" will probably please the Lacanians but it does beg the question. "Feminology" was suggested and recently the term "clitoral hermeneutics" was brought forth (Schor, 1987). More than anything else, this semantic euphoria stresses that the term "women's studies" was never more than a compromise solution, revealing the depths of hesitation surrounding the very signifier "woman".

The point about the instability of the category "woman" has been emphasized over the last ten years by the so-called post-structuralist wave of feminist theory; it is complex enough to deserve a better treatment than I can warrant here. Suffice it to say that the question remains: how do we define the referent "woman" and what epistemological value do we attribute to it in developing a field of study called "women's studies"? What does the human being embodied female study, when she studies women's studies? I will return to the epistemological issues later on in my presentation.

The polyvalence surrounding the terminology reflects a much larger variety of views concerning the very nature of the women's movement. It is just as difficult today to analyze and map out the locations of the movement as it is to codify the practices of women's studies. This is due partly to the relative invisibility of the movement in the social sphere and partly to the proliferation of groups and sub-groups which actually defies classification. A special issue of *Women's Studies International Forum* devoted to the assessment of the second wave of feminism identified three main criteria of definition of the women's movement: firstly, it covers the general evolution of the lives and ways of thinking of women in general, even and especially those who do not claim to be feminists.

Secondly it refers to the impact that feminist values have had on the cultural and social representation of women in all societies but especially in those white industrialized countries where the "problem without a name" (Friedan, 1963) became a key political factor.

Thirdly it refers specifically to the multitude of groups in the feminist networks. Out of this complex, polyvalent web of meaning-making groups we can detect common areas of concern, or coalitions of interest that make the movement into a political machine governed by the common will to improve the status of women.

DEFINITION OF GENDER

Gender research at the international¹ and the European levels² has undergone considerable and significant developments in the last 10 years³. Most of them are the result of systematic and intense networking on the part of different social actors, both male and female, within a variety of institutions in Europe today. The final Report of the evaluation of women's studies activities in Europe⁴ states as the main aim of gender research and education the pursuit of the political, cultural, economic, scientific and intellectual concerns of the struggle for the emancipation of women. Gender research challenges scientific thought and it aims at enlarging the meaning and practice of scientific research so as to further reflect the changes in the status of women. Gender research is trans- or multi-disciplinary and it engages in a constructive dialogue with a number of established academic disciplines and scientific practices.

Those unfamiliar with gender research tend to assume that this field constitutes a unified framework for analysis. This is partly true, in so far as 'gender' plays the role of a constitutive concept. It does not, however, provide one monolithic framework of analysis. It rather caters for a

¹ See Sandra Harding and Elizabeth McGregor (eds) *The gender Dimension of Science and Technology*, extract from the World Science Report, UNESCO, 1995.

² *Women and Science. Proceedings of the Conference*. Directorate General XII of the Commission of the European Union, 1999.

³ See Jaina Hammer (ed.) *Women's Studies and European Integration. A report to the Equal Opportunities Unit, DGIV*, April 1994.

⁴ Rosi Braidotti, Ellen de Dreu, Christine Rammrath *Women's Studies in Europe. Final Report of the Evaluation of Women's Studies Activities in Europe for the SIGMA Network and Directorate general XII of the Commission of the European Union*. September 1995.

variety of different methods, which can be accounted for and evaluated with reference to specific theoretical traditions. In this paper, I will take three such traditions into account: empiricism, standpoint theory and deconstructive gender research⁵.

The working definition of gender I want to present is the following. The concept of gender refers to the many and complex ways in which social differences between the sexes acquire a meaning and become structural factors in the organization of social life. Gender is a cultural and historical product, as opposed to essentialist definitions of the physical differences between the sexes.

A gender approach in research focuses on:

- the study of the social construction of these differences;
- their consequences for the division of power, influence, social status and access to economic resources between men and women;
- the impact of socially induced differences upon the production of knowledge, science and technology and the extent to which these differences control access to and participation in the production of knowledge, science and technology.

According to this definition gender refers primarily but not exclusively to women. Not only does it include men, but it also defines 'women' as a very broad and internally differentiated category which includes differences of class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and age. All these variables are highly relevant to gender research.

Gender being a multi-layered concept, it needs to be investigated on three levels, according to the useful classification system provided by the feminist epistemologist Sandra Harding⁶:

- 1) Gender as a dimension of personal identity. On this level gender is investigated as an inter-personal process of self-consciousness. It also studies the dynamic relation of self-images to the individual and collective identity.

⁵ I take inspiration here from the categories proposed by Rosemarie Bulke and Anneke Smelik in their useful: *Women's Studies in Cultural Studies. A feminist Introduction*. London, Zed Books, 1994.

⁶ Sandra Harding *The Science Question in Feminism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1986; *Feminism and Methodology. Social Science Issues*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987; *Whose Science, Whose Knowledge?*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991.

- 2) Gender as a principle of organization of social structure. On this level, gender is investigated as the foundation of social institutions ranging from the family and kinship structures to the division of labour in social, economic, political and cultural life.

- 3) Gender as the basis for normative values. On this level, gender is investigated as a system that produces socially enacted meanings, representations of masculinity and femininity which are shot through with issues of ethnicity, nationality, religion. These identity-giving values are organized in a binary scheme of oppositions that also act as principles for the distribution of power.

In short, gender research aims at providing methodological and theoretical tools that study the visible and invisible power mechanisms that influence women's access to posts of responsibility in social economic, political, religious intellectual and cultural life. Gender research emphasizes issues such as culture, sexuality, family, gender-identity and the power of representation and language. It gives high priority to women's experience and women's access to and participation in democratic processes, with special emphasis on decision-making mechanisms. It aims at revealing the full extent of women's lives, which has been hidden because men were the predominant subjects and objects of knowledge, and most importantly, they aim at improving the status of women in society.

STRUCTURE OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Women's studies as a practice exists for the moment mostly at university level. Women's studies has also been strong in adult education classes, re-entry and access to education classes and in some countries even literacy classes. Throughout Europe, women's studies also exists as extra-mural and extra-institutional training. It is the case however that nowhere is women's studies taught at secondary level. This situation places extra responsibility on the women's studies teachers and feminist academics to define our relationship to the university as an institution of higher training and research. This raises a number of questions that are relevant not only in the strategic sense of the term.

What vision of the university do we espouse from within women's studies? In thinking and planning for our own growth, what educational values do we uphold? In our relationship to the institution of learning, what notion of the university is at work: is it the idea of a liberal island of

progressive thinking or rather the view of the university as a vehicle of social control? Does women's studies lend itself to the growing commercialization of university teaching and research, or does it on the contrary remain loyal to classical ideals of education for its own sake? Where are the feminist blueprints for a university that will answer and live up to the challenges of our times? Could we not see women's studies as a laboratory for the re-working of the very scope and function of higher education?

Such questioning is particularly needed at this point in time, when the institution of the university as a whole suffers from the post-modern disease: lack of legitimation. The university, even more than any other institution of higher learning, is under increasing pressure to fulfil the requirements of productivity and competition of the market economy. The question of whether it is equipped to do so and of whether this aim is compatible with the university's century-old vocation: the pursuit of excellence *per se*, is an open question.

The moral and economic imperative of training people so that they are employable after they graduate must be set up against one of the most prominent features of the contemporary university system: the obvious feminisation of the student population at least in the humanities and social sciences. Regrettably, the feminisation of the professorial body seems somewhat slower in coming. In fact, the position of women academics in most faculties in these areas still follows the classical patriarchal pyramid: the higher the rank, the fewer the women. As far as the students go, however, the over-presence of girls in the humanities and social sciences coincides with the relative depreciation of these fields in the eyes of the educational authorities and policy-makers, who miss no chance to introduce budgetary reductions. I am struck by the perversity of the system, by this constant association of feminization with depreciation: it is as if the presence of women were synonymous with decline and crisis. The eternal historical delay of women plays a role here: as if we were condemned to occupy the spaces, the monuments that patriarchy has already deserted. Thus, well may we wonder why women are not present in any significant number in the hard sciences faculty (Fox-Keller, 1985; Hubbard 1984, 1990; Nagl, 1987), in mathematics, in all the advanced technologies? The complex relationship that "gender" as an academic field entertains with the institution of the university, and with other symbolic structures is the counterpart of the issues surrounding women's exclusion from socio-political rights, i.e.: what is commonly known as "power". In other words: women's exclusion from

the city of letters is symptomatic of our exclusion from citizenship at large. As relative newcomers in the world of legal and intellectual rights, women have the advantage of a more critical outlook. No discussion of women's studies international perspective is therefore complete unless it rests on a lucid analysis of one's inscription in the networks of power and signification that make up one's culture and its institution of learning and research. The issue of institutionalization of feminist knowledge, in other words, raises that of citizenship and women's participation in larger social processes. National identity is included in this cluster of very complex questions. The issue of nationality and of the sense of national identity is especially relevant in an international framework, such as that of inter-European co-operation projects.

Moreover, as Gabriele Griffin has pointed out⁷, it is impossible to establish a one-to-one relationship between women and "own country", not only because identifications are not one-dimensional, but also because in the multicultural societies of Europe today they are not easily classifiable in terms of "national" versus "international". Griffin also argues that it is questionable whether, under the impact of globalization and the repoliticization of religious affiliations as markers of identification, the "nation state" still functions as a major point of reference in identity-formation. It is in the context of the crisis of the concept of the nation-state that I would situate the debate on "internationalism". The European union project is like an ideal horizon, which often raises high expectations. It is as if the lifting of the national boundaries were lifting a burden off our chest; as if a trans-national entity called the EU could come and deliver us from a problem we have never ceased to grapple with: the nation-state. Although I accept that all identifications are troubled, contested and politically implicated, I am wary of using the "international" as a way of avoiding local realities. How do we assess our belonging to a nation-state? Why have we written so little about it? The topic of the State has been put on the feminist agenda: why not that of the nation? With the exception of the studies on women in totalitarian regimes (Bock, 1986; Thalmann, 1986; Koonz, 1987) we still lack adequate analyses of our relationship to a nation-state, that is to say ultimately of our own sense of citizenship.

The agenda and content of the field
Women's studies is a field aimed at challenging the premises and epistemological foundations of the disciplines. Feminism is a form of

⁷ ATHENA meeting, Leeds, November 1999, panel 1c.

critical theory. The actual topics covered by the feminist agenda encompass everything from the organization of the brain to socialization and motherhood, without forgetting the feminization of poverty, feminist theology or women's role in musicology. Clearly, it is not by focusing on the topics of the agenda that we can hope to reach a compromise, but rather by stressing common forms of approach and methods.

The debate over the foundations of the discipline is translated into a political issue: should women's studies be an autonomous area of its own, or should it aim at the integration into the disciplines? The integrationists aim at including women's studies into existing curricula and thus force the disciplines to evolve; the autonomists, on the other hand, believe in radical disruption and in the specificity of women-based knowledge.

In the early stages of the women's movements, such a debate acquired heated political connotations. Here in Europe the arena where a great deal of these discussions were assessed and in some way resolved were the European networks for women's studies. The issues that emerged as crucial are: the structure and importance of the disciplines and of disciplinary in the university today. Can we speak, for instance, of a European tradition of reflection and critique of the disciplines that differs considerably from the eclectic pragmatism of the Americans? Is the epistemological and symbolic value that we Europeans give to the disciplines different from the American epistemological "melting pot"?

How far does a new field of inter-disciplinary work like women's studies actually fit in with the university structure? Is the mono-disciplinary tradition of universities on the continent not a formidable obstacle to the development of an inter-disciplinary women's studies curriculum? Is autonomy a better structure for women's studies education than integration? Let me simply quote the prophetic words of Virginia Woolf, who in *Three Guineas* (1939) warned us against integration as being a one-way street into the conventional, safe, white, middle-class, heterosexist world of the learned powerful few. As later theorists (Duell-Klein, 1987) were to point out, integration can become a form of invisibility.

There is also another political issue at stake here: how is the process of institutionalization of women's studies likely to affect the often fragile alliance between women of different classes, races and sexual preferences? How does the confrontation with mainstream discourse

affect the working-through of the differences among women? Does an emphasis on gender guarantee respect for diversity?

In this respect one of the points of consensus among women's studies teachers cooperating in the European networks is the creation of a class of trans-disciplinary translators, who can transpose the assumptions and methodologies of one discipline into those of another and of different cultural traditions into each other. This task-force of conceptual translators could well become the core of what could be rightly called a feminist intellectual and academic task-force. And in so far as no translation can ever be perfect duplication, approximations, deletions, omissions—the vast array of subjective factors are integral part of the process of interchange which alone makes intellectual processes possible.

Moreover, hiding the complexities of cultural differences among women under the convenient umbrella of a universal, or global sisterhood (Morgan, 1984) seems to me both unfair and unworkable. This epistemological side, connected to the critical discussion about the signifier "woman" has been made necessary of late by the emergence of the question of "differences among women". This movement has resulted in the rejection of the univocity of the term "woman" also and especially within feminist theory. The political urge to develop this issue has come from specific sectors of the movement: firstly from psychoanalytic feminism (Trigaray, 1974, 1977, 1986; Melandri, 1977; Molino, 1986; Chodorow, 1987; Rose-Mitchell, 1982; Benjamin, 1986; Flax, 1987). Secondly from the so-called "post-colonial" discourse of third-world feminists (Lorde, 1987; Mohanty, 1987) who have analyzed the way in which the category "Third world women" has been constructed by feminist discourse. Thirdly, the lesbian discourse, its theory and practice (Johnston, 1973; Rich, 1981; Dworkin, 1982; Wittig, 1973; Spivak, 1988).

Another argument for translation as an epistemological stance is that, unless we submit our own discourses to the test of feminist transdisciplinary translation we run the risk of re-inventing the wheel, i.e.: of borrowing sloppily from the terminology and the conceptual framework of other disciplines. Sloppy loans may induce a false sense of creativity; thus, an idea from sociology applied to literature may seem revolutionary, though it is absolutely commonplace in its own originalary discourse.

It seems to me that the key idea in all these cases is that of cross-disciplinary, or cross-cultural comparison. The focus is on the cultural differences such as they become manifest in our own theoretical practices. As an example, do we think that the Anglo-Saxon idea of "gender" has an equivalent in, say French or Italian? Inversely, is the idea of sexual difference or "différence sexuelle" translatable in a meaningful manner? Instead of taking shelter behind a facile sort of cultural relativism, should we not take seriously the conceptual challenge raised by these questions? Should we not ask whether women's studies, feminist theory or the women's movement as a whole possess a common language? Are we talking about the same sort of project? Do we share the same vision? Is the mixture of critique and creativity, which for me lies at the heart of the women's studies project a trans-cultural, trans-historical truth? Is the term precise enough to re-present the gesture which unifies us in one common political goal? These questions have been the focus of a great deal of research and serious discussions in women's studies over the last twenty years.

Following Harding's three-fold classification of different feminist epistemologies, in the next section I will analyze three dominant frameworks for gender research.

1. Empiricism

This assumes that the practice of science disproportionately represents men's interests, needs and expectations. It consequently aims at repairing, the under-representation of women at all levels of science research, teaching, implementation, policy-making and dissemination of data and information. Openly stated as one of the aims, this approach is to promote women throughout the scientific and university practice of research, at both community and national levels.

One concrete way in which empirical gender research contributes to the issue of women in science is by furthering the understanding of the macro and micro causes that hinder women's access to and participation in science education, career and practice. Gender research supports the cause of women in science because of the insight it provides into factors which:

- affect science education and help to explain women's drop-out rate in science and technology;
- influence the entry and the retention of women in science and technology education programmes;

- determine the effect of scientific and technological advances on women as a group.
- As a strategy, gender equity joins forces with the battle for equal opportunities for women and it aims to:
- achieve basic education in science for women and the struggle against masculine domination of the educational resources in science;
 - equal opportunities for women in science employment, advanced training and careers;
 - to achieve gender equity in policy-making at all levels of institutional life;
 - to ensure that men and women have equal access to information and scientific knowledge and that the dissemination of scientific findings occurs among women especially;
 - to pay special attention to women who are under-privileged by class, ethnicity, race or other social factors, such as immigration or 'minority' status;
 - this translates into a broad sense of equal opportunities.

What I find significant about the empirical or equity-minded approach to gender research is that it sides resolutely and unequivocally on the side of scientific rationality and objectivity, without questioning any of its tenets, including the distinction knower/known. It adheres to the neutral procedures of observation by a knowing subject. In fact, it takes these principles so seriously, that it applies them to the analysis of the practice of science itself. It therefore argues that gender bias and discrimination against women is a failure of scientific rationality. In other words, gender biased or downright sexist scientific practices make for bad science, thus they constitute a fault in the proper, objective use of scientific objectivity.

It follows that, in this methodological framework, re-dressing the gender balance is science amounts to cleansing science of some of its irrational features. Scientists of both sexes can thus work towards the improvement of scientific objectivity by fighting the specific form of irrationality that consists in identifying objectivity with male domination of scientific processes. The masculinist bias is the error of judgement that needs to be eliminated in order to produce a type of scientific practice that would be truly worth of the ideals of objectivity and rationality. Proper scientific objectivity can and must be restored by fighting male domination of the use of reason.

I see two problems with this approach. First, this approach tends to remain restricted to repair-work, that is to say in mending the gender gap in science and technology. This is undeniably important considering the persistence of factors of inequality and of discrimination against women. In the long-run, however, an equity-minded approach runs into structural difficulties. The experience of years of state-sponsored equal opportunities for girls and women in scientific educations and careers in countries such as the Netherlands, in fact, has pointed to a vicious circle. Namely that a great deal of the resistance against the advancement of women in science as in society is due to 'invisible' factors. These have often to do with cultural habits, traditions and mind-sets which cannot be removed by formal means or by quotas alone. More complex strategies and frameworks of analysis are needed in order to tackle the continuing issue of male domination of scientific and technological knowledge. In order to break the vicious circle, issues of power and identity need to be raised. These challenge the conceptual framework of what we have learnt to recognize as 'scientific objectivity' in European culture.

Secondly, most equity-minded projects tend to essentialize the category of 'women', flattening out the wide and widening range of differences among women. Diversity is underplayed in the name of an over-arching principle of equity of equality, which often begs the very question it asks, namely: 'science for women' is a worthy ideal indeed, but for whom and by whom can it be implemented?

2. *Standpoint gender theory*

This gender approach starts off from the dilemmas disclosed by the previous one. It recognizes that the differences between the sexes play a major structuring role in societies and culture at large. It argues that increasing attention must be paid not only to the quantitative issue of women's access to and participation in science and scientific policy-making, but also to the development of new insights, innovative analytical tools and scientific and social methods that rest upon the experience of women and on their struggle for equality. A standpoint feminist approach sees women as agents of change for science as a whole and aims at developing problem-solving tools that, while redressing the gender gap in science participation, would benefit the scientific community as a whole.

The standpoint feminist approach assumes that because of their different social roles, activities and socialization patterns, men and women also have culturally different interests which also translate into different ways

of doing science. Difference-minded or standpoint feminism covers a variety of methods, which have in common a critique of empirically-minded gender equity.⁸ The grounds on which 'difference' is defended as a positive value, and not merely as a signifier of inferiority or oppression, vary greatly. Some rather essentialistic brands of gender research—not very popular in feminist circles—argue for hormonal, brain-size differences; others are based on psychological characteristics or psycho-sexual ones such as verbal ability, finger dexterity, visual-spatial coordination. Women's ethical powers and sense of moral responsibility, including a willful rejection of competitiveness and aggression have also been quoted as a positive source of difference. Of special relevance here are the French and Italian scholars of sexual difference.

In terms of its relationship to science, this gender approach is far more critical than the previous one.⁹ Scientific objectivity is challenged from without and a more radical critique is offered of the ways in which rationality and objectivity are implemented as a human, a social and a scientific ideal. The assumption behind this critique is that women's socially induced 'difference'; is in fact a capital, a human and scientific resource that needs to be infused into what our culture has codified as science. The aim here is the enlargement of the notions of rationality and objectivity, in order to make them less discriminatory and more inclusive.

Let me stress here that the emphasis that standpoint gender research places on the social construction of scientific concepts and practices and consequently also on the social responsibilities of scientists is not an attack against science. To reduce it to an anti-scientific position would be a serious misreading of both the aims and the arguments produced by this gender methodology. In fact, standpoint feminism argues that to question the objectivity and the neutrality of science need not be dissonant with accepted notions of what constitutes good science. Evelyn Fox-Keller¹⁰ even suggests that to question these basic premises is precisely one of the elements of excellent scientific enquiry in these days of fast-changing technological developments.

⁸ For a very enlightening account of this, see Sue V. Rosser: "Applying feminist theories to Women in Science programs", *Sigmas*, 1998, vol. 24, n.1, pp. 171-200.

⁹ See Ruth Bleier: *Gender and Science*, New York, Pergamon Press, 1984.

¹⁰ Evelyn Fox-Keller: *Reflections on Gender and Science*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985.

A very important element in this approach is the critique of power relations and the relationships of domination and exclusion which operate within science and scientific projects. We are a long way here from the unquestioned acceptance of scientific concepts of the empirical gender tradition. For instance, the dualism mind/body; subject/object or knower/known; nature/culture comes under scrutiny and is taken as the mark of a hegemonic way of thinking that favours masculine domination.

For standpoint feminism, all knowledge is socially produced and therefore mediated by the subject's position in society, which can be analyzed in terms of variables such as gender, class, race and ethnicity, religion, age and sexual preference. In particular, this gender approach stresses the positive contribution that women and other socially marginal groups can make to the production of scientific knowledge. It assumes that position of social marginality are ideal sources of knowledge in so far as they do not defend any vested interests and thus end up being more objective and more impartial.

Far from rejecting the notion of truth altogether, standpoint gender research uses the insight of psychoanalytic methods in order to provide a rigorous account of how social and cultural mediation affects the production of science. The emphasis falls on the importance of the positionality of the subject of knowledge and on the social mechanisms that empower his/her access to scientific practice. It stresses issues such as identity-formation, identification, mothering, role-models and mentoring as major factors in shaping women's ability to access the production of knowledge and science, as well as other fields of social endeavour.

Nancy Chodorow and other object-relation theorists¹¹ have challenged the masculine bias of science not merely as an accidental or a statistical instance, but rather as a structural element in scientific practice. In other words, science is masculine not only because it is empirically dominated by men, but rather because it implies a male subject and object of science at each and every step of the making of science. This covers "the choice of experimental topics, the use of male subjects for experimentation, the way data are interpreted and theorized and the practice and applications of science" (p. 187).

¹¹ Nancy Chodorow: *The Reproduction of Mothering. Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978.

The masculine bias that is built into the practice of science reflects the codes of behaviour that are operational in society as a whole. Here, psychoanalytic studies of the psycho-sexual development of individuals cast an important light on the ways in which masculinity comes to be identified with autonomy and femininity with dependence (Benjamin, 1986; Kristeva, ?? and in refs). By studying how these translate into patterns of behaviour of male and female children towards their mother, and especially on how they negotiate their respective separation from the mother, this kind of gender research accounts for the cultural implementation of a pattern of socialization that favours respectively masculine self-assertion and feminine timidity. In turn this encourages men's access to the use of rationality, the well-defined rules and protocols of scientific objectivity and an inquisitive spirit that results in experimentation. In the female, insecurities and lack of assertiveness are implemented instead. Because girls and women are socialized into motherhood and care-taking, they find their access to scientific investigation and the uses of rationality seriously hindered by interpersonal and relational concerns.

As a strategy, this approach aims to:

- question scientific objectivity so as to enlarge it and to include the principles of social responsibility of the scientists;
- ensure that the needs and aspirations of women are equally taken into account in the designing of science projects and the setting of scientific priorities;
- to devise strategies to monitor attentively female students' access to a scientific education, by favouring for instance all-girls science classes;
- to work systematically on providing positive role-models and mentoring systems for women at all levels of their scientific career;
- to enlist the support of men in encouraging girls and women into science and dispelling the cultural prejudice that sees it as oppositional to their femininity;
- to recognize the value of local and alternative knowledge systems and even of gender-specific norms as source of knowledge that can be complementary with and not antithetical to modern science.

I find that standpoint gender theory, also known as 'the alternative science project' offers stimulating perspectives and useful strategies for the advancement of women in science. In so far as it challenges the alleged neutrality of notions such as objectivity and rationality, it contributes to a more thorough analysis of the epistemological structures

of scientific practice. By emphasizing the importance of social and cultural mediations, it also stresses the degree to which the positionality of the individual researcher—in terms of gender, class, age, race, religion—affects the kind of scientific projects s/he is likely to engage in. This is not to be confused with a relativistic position but rather with a systematic attention to power relations.

What constitutes the strength of this position, however, can easily turn into its main weakness. Many scientists, including women, have expressed scepticism at the claim of female difference. Statistical evidence about female scientists' 'different' work environment and genderized forms of organization and of interaction with other women do not conclusively point to systematic patterns of alternative scientific practice. Often, the emphasis on the social responsibility of scientists and the social accountability of science can be taken as an intrusion into scientific practice.

I think however that, in the light of environmental and health concerns¹², as well as in terms of basic principles of democracy and social justice, standpoint gender theory has a great deal to offer. Provided that it is taken as a strategy and implemented by consensus, I think it offers clear advantages over a straight-forward equity approach, although it runs the risk of essentializing women and the difference they are likely to make to science and scientific practice.

3. *Deconstructive gender research*

The critique of the essentialism implicit in standpoint gender theory is the starting point for the more deconstructive approach which I would like to defend in the last section of my paper. Whether it is based on a postmodernist, post-structuralist or post-colonial approach, this gender method fundamentally challenges the possibility to speak in one unified voice about women, including 'women in science'. The focus is entirely on issues of diversity and differences among women. By crossing gender-questions with a critique of the Euro-centric bias in science, this approach questions the idea that science and scientific knowledge can be truly universal. It rather tends to see it as an expression of western culture and of its drive to mastery. Increased attention is paid to race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and age.

¹² For a more detailed account see Rosi Braidotti, Eva Charakiewicz, Sabine Hauster and Saskia Wieringa: *Women, the Environment and Sustainable development. Towards a Theoretical Synthesis*, London, Zed Books, 1994.

Frequently bad-mouthed and seldom understood, deconstructive gender research is in my eyes a pragmatic response to two factors that have arisen simultaneously: firstly, the processes of globalization and the social and cultural transformations they have engendered. Secondly the loss of consensus about a unitary concept of 'women' and 'femininity'. Whereas empirical gender research effaces differences and standpoint feminism enhances them, a deconstructive approach takes off from them in order to transform them into stepping stones towards cross-border or transversal alliances. As a strategy, this approach tends therefore to emphasize differences among women, in terms of class and ethnicity but also of age, thus targeting especially the needs and aspirations of the next generations. Neither relativistic nor a form of sceptical suspension of belief in values, deconstruction is the simultaneous recognition of the ubiquity of power and the necessity of resistance.

In a deconstructive framework, science is taken not only as an attempt to explore and analyze, but also as a way to control and normalize. Scientific discourse is embedded in a network of power relations aimed at disciplining nature, its resources and the many 'others' that are different from an implicit norm of scientific subjectivity. This norm equates science with masculinity and both with white, Euro-centric premises. The recognition of the normativity of science and of the partiality of scientific statements as well as their necessary contingency¹³ has nothing to do with relativism. It rather has to do with a critique of falsely universal pretensions and with the desire to pluralize the options, paradigms and practices within Western science, so as to free it from some of its hegemonic habits. It also stresses the recognition of complexity and multiplicity and major traits of contemporary culture and of today's science.

In what I consider a radical critique of dualistic thinking, deconstructive approach emphasizes the extent to which power is a process of formation of pejorative 'others'. Here 'difference' plays a constitutive, if negative, role. 'Difference' has been colonized by power-relations that reduce it to inferiority; further, it has resulted in passing off differences as 'natural', which made entire categories of beings into devalued and therefore disposable others. Discourse, as Michel Foucault argues¹⁴, is about the political currency that is attributed to certain meanings, or systems of

¹³ For an illuminating account see the work of Donna Haraway, especially: *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, London, Free Association Books, 1991.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault: *Discipline and Punish*, London, Allen Lane, 1977.

meaning, in such a way as to invest them with scientific legitimacy: there is nothing neutral or given about it.

Take the examples of misogyny and racism: the belief in the inferiority of women—be it mental, intellectual, spiritual or moral—has no serious scientific foundation; the same goes for racist beliefs. This does not prevent them from having great currency in political practice and the organization of society. The woman or the black as 'others'—that is to say as both empirical referents and symbolic signs of pejoration—function discursively as shapers of meanings. That is to say that they organize differences in a hierarchical scale that divides man from woman, but also man from the animal, or non-human and the divine. The mark of differences fulfils the crucially important function of dividing the subjects along a set of axes of varying degrees of 'difference'. To divide, so as to conquer in a normative order the subversive or dangerous charge that is potentially contained in these 'others'.

As a corollary of the above: the pejorative use of the feminine, or of blackness, is structurally necessary to the dominant system of meaning. By being structurally embedded, these differences of gender or race become paradoxically both abstract and invisible, i.e.: are perceived as 'natural'. The real-life, empirical subjects that are associated with categories of 'difference'—women and blacks—experience in their embodied existence the effects of the disqualification (of the feminine and of blackness), which is effected at the symbolic level.

Thus, a deconstructivist approach to the analysis of power and discourse highlights the links that exist between scientific truth and discursive currency or power relations. As such, it primarily aims at dislodging the belief in the 'natural' foundations of socially coded and enforced 'differences' and of the systems of value and representation which they support. Secondly, a politicized deconstructive method emphasizes the need to historicize the analysis of the formation of scientific concepts as normative formations, thus it allows us to take on the historicity of the very concepts that we are investigating. In a feminist frame, this emphasis on historicity means that the scholar needs some humility before the eternal repetitions of history and the great importance of language. We need to learn that there is no escape from the multi-layered structure of our own encoded history and language.

The political implications are even more striking. It implies that there is no readily accessible uncontaminated or 'authentic' voice of the

oppressed, be it women of black or people of colour. This turns firstly into an attack on the essentialism of those who claim fixed identities of the deterministic kinds. It also undercuts, however, any claim to 'purity' as the basis for epistemological or political alternatives. Claims to 'purity' are always suspect because they assume subject-positions that would be unmediated by language and representation.

As a strategy, therefore, a deconstructivist approach is:

- Opposed to 'identity politics', while simultaneously stressing the positivity of difference. It is opposed to the counter-affirmation of oppositional identities, because they end up re-asserting the very dualism's they are trying to undo.
- A theoretical platform for a politics of diversity, because it makes a point of carefully avoiding and even undermining any attempt at re-essentialising 'gender', 'race' or 'ethnicity' as a natural given 'data'.
- Committed to a radical politics of resistance, which would be mercifully free of claims to purity, but also of the luxury of guilt.
- Committed to think the simultaneity of potentially contradictory social and textual effects, which cut across established ways of thinking and relatively simplistic dualistic, essentialized on 'natural' oppositions.

This simultaneity is not to be confused with easy parallels or arguments by analogy. That gender, race, class and sexual choice may be equally effective power variables does not amount to flattening out any differences between them. Any account of feminist theory and practice which gives the impression that simultaneity is merely a multi-layered version of one-directional thinking, is inadequate.

I could sum up post-deconstructivist strategies by saying that: all deconstructions are equal, but some are more equal than others. Whereas the deconstruction of masculinity and whiteness is an end in itself, the non-essentialistic reconstruction of black perspectives, as well as the feminist reconstruction of multiple ways of being women, also have new values to offer. In other words, some notions need to be deconstructed so as to be laid to rest once and for all: masculinity; whiteness; heterosexism; classism, ageism. Others, need to be deconstructed only as a prelude to offering positive new values and effective ways of asserting political presence of newly empowered subjects: feminism; diversity; multiculturalism; environmentalism. We need to fight passionately for the simultaneous assertion of positive differences by, for and among women, while resisting essentialisation and claims to authenticity.

THE ADVANTAGES OF NETWORKING

Whether one works with the empirical, the standpoint or the deconstructivist or with any other gender methodology, the crucial point remains the cross-comparisons, the networks of exchanges and the construction of discursive communities of individuals committed to fostering the cause of women as subjects, including as subjects of science and technological knowledge. Alternatively understood as a web of people with similar interests and concerns (empirical); as a community of similar-minded political and epistemological agents (standpoint); or a web of transversal alliances (deconstructive), networking remains central to the project of women in science as it is to gender research as a whole.

Experience has shown the advantages to be drawn from effective women's networking. The current explosion of telecommunication and electronic mail also offers new possibilities that were not available before. According to Osborn, networks are important in monitoring all-around the progress of women in science and technology, from the educational level, to job-finding, monitoring career progression, providing contacts, exchanging information and corporate tactics. Networks can act in such a way at EU, national and regional levels, but also in professional settings and in specific scientific fields.

This becomes especially important in the age of globalization and transnational economic flows of people, goods, data and capital. Intense transversal networking by women in all levels and dimension of science education, employment and research can constitute an effective platform for the next millennium.

As Kum-kum Bhavani put it¹⁵: "I am not simply a woman, nor Black, nor a university professor, nor Indian, nor someone who teaches social psychology and feminist studies, nor an aunt, nor heterosexual, nor a socialist. Each of these categories is both circumscribed and limited by other categories and each of them can always change."

Ultimately, networking is a way of doing justice to the complexity of our respective social, academic and political practices, as well as a positive reflection on the inner complexities of the sort of subjects that women

¹⁵ Kum Kum Bhavani: "Towards a Multicultural Europe?", *Bernadijn ten Zeldam Stichting*, Amsterdam 1992.

have become in the twentieth century, which will go down in history also as the women's century.

In conclusion, the discussion as to what a distinctly European perspective on women's studies could be, has been at the centre of many debates, which have tended to be rather polarized along a North-South divide. Countries in the South of Europe have been both culturally and intellectually more resistant to assimilating North-American methods and teaching material. Considering the structure of universities in these countries, the question of the creation of specific positions for women's studies has also proved quite controversial. In France, Italy or Spain there are practically no specific women's studies positions, though first-class work on women's studies is done by academics in positions that are 'integrated' in existing departments, and also by feminist groups outside the institutions.

The experience of setting up women's studies in a European perspective¹⁶ has proved to be a delicate exercise in cross-cultural analysis and comparison. In its daily practice, this has turned out to be a labour-intensive process of confrontation of differences among women, which has only just begun: we think it will keep us busy for years to come. One thing that is already clear to all concerned is that the idea of 'Europe' that we have in mind is critical of ethnocentrism and nationalism. Fortunately, most European feminists have taken their distance from the legacy of European nationalism and are deeply concerned by the rebirth of xenophobia, racism and anti-semitism on our Continent. Moreover, without turning our back on our historical heritage, many of us have also voiced pertinent criticism of the increasing isolationism and protectionism fostered by the idea of a 'United' Europe (Braidotti and Franken, 1991).

It is our hope that these concerns can be put to the task of contributing actively to the construction of a genuine European community spirit, where sexism, racism and other forms of exclusion will be targeted for elimination. As Helma Lutz so eloquently puts it: in the EU today, we need to put an end to that specific European habit that consists in holding onto a ethnocentric centre, confining the rest of the world to the position

¹⁶ For a detailed account of the experience attempted in Utrecht, please see the special issue on 'Women's Studies at the University of Utrecht' of *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 16, n. 4, 1993, edited by Rosi Braidotti. See also the special issue on 'Women's Studies in Europe' of *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, n. 3 and 4, 1992, edited by Angelika Kostler-Lossek and Tobe Levin.

of a necessary and necessarily under-rated periphery. Lutz explores especially the condition of immigrants in the EC today as a significant case of peripheral existence within the alleged centre of this community. In other words, women's studies is not only education for women, it is the re-education of a whole culture, to help it move away from discriminatory practices, so that it can give the best of itself to the development of a renewed sense of a common European house.

The experience built up over the years of inter-European teaching exchanges has allowed the members of the network to reach a common definition of women's studies. Women's studies is a field of scientific and pedagogical activity devoted to improving the status of women and to finding forms of representation of women's experiences which are dignified, empowering and which faithfully reflect the range of women's contributions to cultural, economic, social and scientific development. Women's studies is a critical project in so far as it examines how science perpetuates forms of discrimination and even of exclusion, but it is also a creative field in that it opens up alternative spaces to women's self-representation and intellectual self-determination.

Our experience has also highlighted another point: that in order to construct effective inter-European perspectives in women's studies, due attention must be paid to cultural differences and to the specificity of national contexts. Nothing in fact that both the terminology and most of the existing teaching material in this field is of North-American origin and consequently is available only in English. European women's studies scholars have been faced with a double task. On the one hand, they have had to struggle to get this new field of study accepted in their respective countries and institutions; on the other hand, they have had to develop their own instruments for teaching and in research. In this regard, the support that women's studies academics have been able to gather from the Commission of the European Community has been and remains crucial in many different ways. Whereas countries where this field is under-developed have benefited from both the financial and the moral support of the EC, well-endowed programmes in other countries have experienced the EC support as a form of international recognition and therefore of scientific legitimisation. In both cases, the impact of the EC 'stamp of approval' is enormous.

The feeling is strong among European women's studies academics that this field can only be genuinely 'European', if it addresses rigorously issues of ethnic identity, multi-culturalism and anti-racism. The issues of

cultural and of gender identity are intimately inter-linked and cannot be easily separated. We would even like to go as far as to suggest that no perspective in women's studies can be considered truly 'European' unless it addresses the need to produce non-exclusionary and non-ethnocentric models of knowledge and education. We think that the fostering of a European consciousness can only profit from the enlarged definition of knowledge, which women's studies imply and enact. In this respect, many women's studies scholars feel very strongly that they need to strengthen and to broaden the anti-racist European dimension of their work. More international exchanges are needed in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the cultural diversity of women's studies traditions and practices in the European community today. Moreover, for this work towards a common and yet diversified definition to succeed, discussions are needed in a comparative framework with women from Eastern and Central Europe, from the United States and from developing countries.

In fact, it is important to stress that although as citizens of the EC we do our best to participate in the creation of a shared cultural space that may contribute to lessening intra-European in-fighting and economic competition, we are also perfectly well aware of the limitations and the dangers of a unified Europe. In this respect, a multi-cultural anti-racist approach to the making of European women's studies seems to us essential at this moment of our history. In this respect also, "gender" cannot function alone, but rather as a bridge between different levels and layers of social inclusion and exclusion.

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