

“Current Issues in Women’s Studies in the U.S.A.”*

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When I am back in the United States, many people act surprised when I tell them about the interest in women’s studies in Japan. Because of recent attention to international issues, feminist educators are aware of the excellent work being done in the field of women’s studies in Japan. But much of the general population in America still holds on to tired old stereotypes about Japanese women: the *geisha*, the bar hostess, and the kimono-clad Japanese wife who walks five paces behind her husband. Some Americans are thus surprised to learn that there are women professors and scholars in Japan. They are even more surprised to learn that there is interest here in women’s studies.

Of course, the stereotype of the subservient Japanese woman is both racist and sexist. More to the point, it persists in America out of nostalgia (“Why can’t American women be more submissive—like Japanese women?”) and also from an unearned sense of self-congratulation (“See how lucky American women are! We don’t need feminism here because American women are equal to men *already*.”) As Edward Said notes in *Orientalism*, such stereotypical views of “the Orient” allow Westerners to be complacent about themselves, their own shortcomings and their own prejudices. It is one important function of women’s studies—whether in America or in Japan—to jostle people from their complacency.

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I wish to focus on some positive and some negative aspects of women's studies in America. I would especially like to address the challenges facing women's studies in the last portion of the twentieth century. Whereas some Americans think all Japanese women are subservient, in Japan I sometimes encounter the opposite stereotype about American women. According to this stereotype, all American women are independent, all are feminists. By extension, some Japanese colleagues assume that American women enjoy privileged status in higher education and that American women's studies programs are thriving. Relative to Japan, this may well seem to be the case. From the point of view of an "insider," however, the fight goes on: it seems that women's studies programs must continually justify their existence, especially in these economic times when education, in general, is suffering from a lack of funding. Outside the university, it is currently fashionable to make fun of feminism, especially in the media. And, even more seriously, women's studies programs face the heady challenge of having to reshape themselves to the needs and assumptions of a new generation of American college students—a generation that seems to prefer rock star Madonna to Gloria Steinem, founder of *Ms.* magazine and perennial advocate of women's causes.

In short, in America too there are many challenges to be faced, and I am sure there is much Americans can learn from the work being done here in Japan.

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How does one teach women's studies to the current generation of American women students? I would like to address this large question in historical, theoretical, and practical terms before I turn my attention to the specific trends and issues being addressed by American women's studies scholars. The question of what women's studies has to say to a new

generation of American women seems to me the most basic question—a question, even, of survival.

Although enrollments in women's studies courses continue to be strong in American universities, a number of feminist educators have predicted that there will be a decline in the next half-decade. If there is such a decline, the current interest in women's studies will fall into a pattern that has recurred almost since the founding of America as a nation. I refer to the *cyclical* nature of feminism in America. As has often been noted by historians, women's history tends to follow a cyclical rather than an evolutionary pattern. By this I mean that there are times of intense interest in women's issue and in improving the status of women in society followed by periods where women are virtually invisible from the historical record as well as from the social concerns of the day. For the historian of women's studies, this cyclical pattern is particularly frustrating for it means that different generations must "reinvent the wheel": that is, one generation "rediscovers" women's past only to be forgotten in the next generation and then be "re-re-discovered" later on.

For example, one can argue that women's studies began in America in the late eighteenth century. Susanna Haswell Rowson founded her progressive Young Ladies' Academy in 1797 and then ran up against an obstacle familiar to women's studies educators today. She sought to improve female education but discovered that the textbooks of her day were geared to the nation's sons. Thus she wrote *A Spelling Dictionary* (1807) that explicitly invited girls to be as literate as their brothers. She also wrote a geography textbook, in 1805, that discussed the status of women in various countries around the world and she included biographies of famous women in world history in her *A Present for Young Ladies* (1811).

But at the same time that Rowson was writing her textbooks, the first

feminist movement in America was already being forgotten. In 1808, the Reverend Samuel Miller noted that "there was a time indeed" when a number of radical women had advocated that "all distinctions of sex ought to be forgotten. . . and that females are as well fitted to fill the Academic Chair, to shine in the Senate, to adorn the Bench of Justice, and even to lead the train of War, as the more hardy sex. This delusion, however, is now generally discarded." This first flowering of American feminism was, in fact, so "generally discarded" that, by mid-century, women such as Margaret Fuller or Lydia Maria Child complained that textbooks did not pay attention to women and thus they, like Susanna Rowson before them, set out to redress that inequity by writing their own histories of women.

The same pattern of periods of interest in women followed by periods of neglect can be traced in the twentieth century as well. To simplify somewhat: there were the turn-of-the-century suffragists as well as myriad intellectuals who wrote studies of women's history; then, in the 1930s, an energetic group of researchers explored the economic, legal, and social role of women; and, later, with the current 1970s women's movement, women have again become the focus of active intellectual investigation.

Two points must be emphasized; first, there is nothing new about the current women's studies movement in America; and second, unless we are aware of the cyclical pattern of women's history, the current movement is just as likely to be forgotten as were its predecessors. If contemporary women's studies programs cannot reach out to a new generation of women students who have new assumptions and new concerns, then women's studies is doomed to extinction—again!

One might ask the reasons for this cyclical pattern in women's history. Speaking most broadly, one might note that most reformist social movements have recurred cyclically in America, with periods of social

ferment followed by periods of social apathy (or, depending on one's point of view, social contentment). In this sense, the current women's studies movement has actually outlasted other movements of the 1960s and 1970s such as the Leftist student movement or even the Civil Rights movement. Several commentators have noted that feminism remains the last vestige of an earlier radical time. But I think women's history has two reasons of its own for following a cyclical pattern, two reasons that must be acknowledged in order to address the current generation of women students: first, the founding principles of feminism are obvious; second, the social changes required to put those principles into practice are discouragingly difficult.

Let's look first at the concept of obviousness. Women's studies is based essentially on a principle of fairness. It is not fair to exclude half the human race from intellectual or scholarly attention. It is not fair to discriminate politically and socially against half the human race simply because of gender. Such issues, for the fair-minded, are so obvious that it seems almost a waste of time to discuss them: few "enlightened" souls would actively argue against the basic principles of feminism. For example, in a capitalist democracy, it is difficult to argue against the concept of equal pay for equal work. Control of one's own body also seems a fundamental human right, nor is it fair that women, crossculturally, are so often the victims of male violence. On a more academic level, why is traditional history so often the history of men and wars, not of women and families—surely equally significant in our understanding of the past? Or, in my own field, literature, why not teach women writers—especially when there are so many good ones to teach?

All of these concerns seem so obvious that women's studies teachers can sound tiresome or even trivial advocating them over and over again—especially to young women who have heard these principles quite literally

their whole lives. It must be remembered that a first-year college student was born in 1968 or 1969, about the same time as the current women's movement. They have been weaned on a rhetoric (not necessarily on the reality) of feminism and often they do not need (or want) to be reminded again that they are likely to be the victims of unfairness simply because they are women. No wonder they find Madonna's tough, sexy, defiant, sultry image so appealing! What 18-year old wants to hear, yet again, that she is a victim?

I hasten to add, however, that simply because the issues are obvious does not mean they are easy. And this may be another reason for the current resistance to women's studies and to feminism. Many women students today want to believe society has changed. If they believe society has changed, then they do not have to work to change society. On one level, I can sympathize with them. Social activism is hard work—hard and often very disillusioning. For instance, the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, after years of feminist agitation, seems, for many young women, to prove that it is impossible (and therefore pointless) to legislate women's equality. Many young women react to this defeat by insisting they want individual fairness and equality, not the legislation of equality. Because they are young, perhaps, they also assume that they will be treated fairly as individuals within the society even without protective legislation guaranteeing their rights.

Unlike most women's studies teachers, women's studies students today have heard about feminist issues their entire lives. The young female student has had to face many of the same sexist social situations her mother faced but she has also learned a rhetoric of sexual equality that her mother never heard in the classroom or in the home or even on the playground among her schoolfriends. No wonder so many students never want to hear the word "feminism" again. Feminism sounds, to the

young woman of 18 or 19, like the status quo, something, perhaps, to rebel against.

Yet even those women students who insist they are not feminists often assume feminist values that their mothers never dared to dream. We should feel gratified by this, for it suggests the vitality of the women's movement. Female students in 1987, for example, typically assume they will have a challenging career, a supportive spouse, and children, too—exactly what college-educated men have always assumed was their due but which women who came of age in the 1950s and the early 1960s seldom aspired to. Our women students assume that they can "have it all." They anticipate glamorous and well-paying jobs. They assume that they will either have excellent, inexpensive day care for their children or that they can stop working for the years their children are at home and then resume their careers, without penalty, once their children are in school. A recent poll of female college students shows that most of them are very optimistic about their future and believe that their options are virtually limitless. This sense of possibility is, again, partly due to feminism. It was Susan B. Anthony, after all, who coined the rallying cry of the suffragist monement: "Failure is impossible!"

However, the women's studies teacher today is in the awkward position of having to go along with a revisionist post-feminist fairy tale of "happy ever after" or of taking on the equally unappealing task of disillusioning youth. This would all be very depressing but for one pattern: as Gloria Steinem notes (and as numerous polls have shown), women are the one identifiable group who tend to become less(not more)conservative in their social attitudes after they leave college. Steinem is convinced this is because women don't fully encounter sexism until they enter the workforce or until they watch the obstacles their young daughters must confront to be socialized into the society. As they grow older, many

women tend to become not only angry but often activist.

Another reason why there is some resistance to women's studies among the current generation of students, however, is actually cause for some optimism. The students in American women's studies courses have benefitted from certain social changes that the founders of the women's movement worked for. These students, for example, have access to birth control and to safe, relatively inexpensive abortions. I will later discuss some of the negative aspects of this phenomenon but wish to emphasize here that the college student today has no memory of that time (still true when I was in college) when a woman who became pregnant and who did not want to bear a child had to face the dangerous prospects of illegal abortion—the horrific spectre of the kitchen table and the coat hanger. Certainly with AIDS and the spread of other communicable diseases, young women today are rightly reconsidering the so-called "Sexual Revolution" (which never really was a feminist revolution). But women's groups are still investing much energy and money into keeping abortion legal (in the face of opposition from the current administration), a right students often take for granted.

Contemporary college students also take for granted another social change brought about by the current women's movement. They have access to information about women in the present and in the past through the variety of women's studies courses offered at most American universities. Speaking autobiographically, I will note that as a student first in physics and later in philosophy, I never had a woman teacher and, in fact, I was the only female student at my college majoring in these subjects. Even after I changed to English, a traditionally female field of study, I had no women teachers on the graduate or postdoctoral level and read virtually no women writers in any of my courses. In contrast, there are eleven women in my department at Michigan State University (out of

a faculty of 45). These women represent as wide a spectrum of ideological views and disciplinary fields as the men in the department. Again many students today assume the presence of women as professors and administrators as the status quo; "Affirmative Action" seems superfluous because there already is an affirmative presence of women in their intellectual lives.

Does women's studies have anything new to say to today's college students? I think so. Obviously one task of women's studies now (one I would not have anticipated ten years ago when I taught my first women's studies class) is pointing out the differences between one's assumptions about an equitable society and the reality of being a woman in American society. Many middle-class women in white collar jobs now do receive starting salaries roughly equal to their male colleagues. But what about the so-called "crystal ceiling," the invisible barrier that keeps women mostly at middle management, low responsibility positions? We can think of this as an "invisible" problem, but one which is worthy of more careful attention.

Similarly, women's studies cannot afford to be racist. The proportion of women living below the poverty line in America is constantly increasing. Women's studies cannot be class-bound. We must also consider the lives of poor and working class women and of minority women, the explicit focus of this year's recent meeting of the National Women's Studies Association. "The feminization of poverty" is a crucial issue, in America and globally. Finally, contemporary students are often surprised to learn that, over the past thirty years, there has been virtually no statistical change in the percentage of women who work "pink collar" jobs (typically low-paying service jobs such as salesclerk, hair dresser, typist, receptionist—jobs that duplicate woman's service-function in the home). And there has also been little change in the percentage of

women in traditionally female (and traditionally low paying) white collar jobs: teaching, nursing, and secretarial jobs. This is why women's studies economists have focused attention of late not just on "equal pay for equal work" but on "comparable worth": the idea that an elementary school teacher, for example, has as much responsibility as a truck driver and therefore should receive the same salary.

I think Gloria Steinem is correct when she notes that many women of college age do not really have to face these issues until they are out of college and on their own. The student who has a fantasy of "having it all"—the great job, the supportive husband, the well-behaved children—confronts another reality the first time she has an important meeting to attend when her child is down with the measles. Working-class women, in the past, have had to face the "double shift"—working a full-time paid job as well as the other full-time role of wife and mother. Now the majority of middle-class women in America also have jobs outside of the home and face the unglamorous pressures of "having it all"—housework and meal preparation, juggling one's own working schedule against one's children's needs. Ironically, we are now facing a new generation of college students who have had working mothers. Some of these students have seen the fatigue of their mothers. In reaction, some of these young women have a fantasy of traditional domesticity: a husband who will support them while they stay at home with the children. There is certainly nothing wrong with this aspiration; motherhood is not the only option for women but it is certainly one of the most important. However, I am suspicious when slick magazines and Hollywood starlets suddenly "discover" motherhood as if it were the latest fashion trend, like shorter hemlines.

I am also suspicious when motherhood is seen as somehow antithetical to feminism: as if, now that American women want to have

children, they need no longer worry about women's rights. And this, it seems to me, is the final point to be made when addressing this generation of college students in our women's studies classes. Women in America now have more options available to them than ever before. But without dedicated attention to those options, we can lose them again. We have in the past. And, as we know, "those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Remembering our past is, of course, a primary function of women's studies and one of the most important trends in women's studies is to recall and revitalize that past. In America, the current women's movement has produced a truly remarkable range of books about women's literary, cultural, philosophical, spiritual, political, economic, and social traditions. Some studies focus exclusively on women. Other studies—by both women and men—now pay attention to women's contributions and women's role. In my field of literature, there has been a virtual explosion of books about women writers, of anthologies exclusively of women writers, and of reprints of books by a wide array of women authors. Perhaps even more important, many of the standard textbooks taught in our universities now include selections by first-rate women writers. Perhaps the most important of these books is Nina Baym's superb new edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. The *Norton Anthology* is used in more literature classrooms than any other American literature textbook. Baym and her co-editors have made a remarkable contribution to contemporary American education by including the work of excellent women writers and by being sensitive to women's issues in their introductions to even "canonized" (or "classic") male writers. This, it seems to me, is a landmark in women's studies: when general textbooks, taught in general courses to both men and women, are also sensitive to women's issues.

But if one function of women's studies is to look to the past, another is to look ahead to the future. I refer especially to the relationship between women and technology and I will focus here specifically on the technology of reproduction. Here too issues have changed radically in the two decades of the present women's studies movement. Whereas two decades ago the "technology of reproduction" generally meant the birth control pill, now that phrase refers to a whole, complex range of medical breakthroughs that change the definition of "birth" and "motherhood."

Let's consider a few of these contemporary issues. The pro-choice movement advocated abortion; sonar technology and pre-natal monitoring also allowed a woman who discovered she would be bearing a handicapped child to abort the fetus. In many countries, prenatal tests now determine not the physical condition of the fetus but its gender. In countries, such as China, where the government has restricted the number of children allowed in each family, the technology of prenatal testing allows mothers to abort female fetuses. Already there is a statistical increase in the number of male children born in China, an increase significant enough to have a major social effect in subsequent years. Women's studies researchers must ponder the ethics of this kind of gender selection. But this whole issue raises difficult questions about the morality of testing for healthy children too.

Similarly, as we face the future, women's studies advocates must confront the ethics of surrogate mothers, in vitro implants, artificial insemination, and the various other forms of "curing" infertility. While these new technologies are said to help infertile women, it must be noted that most of them actually insure that the male genetic line will be carried on—often at the cost of using another woman's body for that purpose. Is it ethical for rich parents to "rent" the bodies of poor women? Or is this

a contemporary variation on prostitution? Adoption, too, is at issue when one considers the phenomenon of affluent, white Americans "buying" babies from poor women in the United States or in Third World countries. Clearly, babies—and the female bodies that produce them—can become commodities. Women's studies more and more must address the ethics and economics of these new variations on traditional motherhood.

Finally, health issues continue to be important to college students today and continue to be one focus of women's studies in America. The epidemic of various communicable sexual diseases on American college campuses make health issues vital and relevant to today's woman student. Today the term "sexual freedom" is not simply the freedom to have sex; it is also the freedom not to have sexual relations if one so chooses.

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Many other issues are addressed by women's studies researchers in America today. I have not discussed spiritual issues, for example, even though many colleges now offer courses such as "Women and Religion" or "Female Spirituality." Nor have I discussed lesbian issues—issues also given new weight by the "homophobia" engendered by AIDS. But, to conclude, I would simply like to emphasize that, whatever the individual issues, our energy must be mainly directed at having something new and vital to say to this younger generation. The issues faced by scholars and teachers of women's studies are now more complicated than ever. The students we need to reach often come to us with a naive view of their own power in the world. Women's studies in America today faces the challenging task of both supporting the young woman's sense of her own opportunities while also making her aware that truly feminist change has but barely begun.

〈要 約〉

アメリカの女性学における今日の問題

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どのようにして今のアメリカの女子学生たちに女性学を教えたらいいのだろうか？ 女性学は、一つの研究分野として対抗する (oppositional) 学問として始まった。それは、従来の伝統的な学部の外で機能しはじめ、また大学内と社会全体に新しい問題をなげかけた。しかし、私たちがクラスで現在教えている若い女性たちは女性学の根底となる多くの考え方をもって育ってきた。たとえばすべてを手に入れることができる (キャリアへの挑戦、協力的な夫、行儀のいい子供たち) と思う若い女性は年々増えてきている。彼女たちは、同一労働に対する同一賃金を当然と思っているし、また生殖の自由も当然と思っている。歴史のなかで女の地位が認められている教育を平等に受けることを当然のことと思っている。これらのことを当然視するのは正しいのだろうか？ どれだけアメリカの女は本当に変わったのだろうか？

現在、今まで女たちが得たものが、将来抹消されてしまわないように、新しい世代にこうした問題を問うことが重要である。今日の女性運動はアメリカの歴史のなかで第三期になる。女性の権利のためのエネルギーあふれた運動は、18世紀の終わりと19世紀におこっている。しかし、そのような女性が行動した時期の間には、フェミニズムに対する反動および反フェミニズムの時期があった。過去の歴史を考慮して、広大な社会的意味をもつ一つの研究分野として1988年度における女性学の働きを考えることが大切である。