

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL:
THIRD WAVE FEMINISM AND THE STUDY OF GENDERED ORGANIZATIONS

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This paper is dedicated to the students in the Winter 2000
"Feminist Organizations" class, with the hope that I have honoured
their voices and that they benefited from the class as much as I did.

GENDER STREAM

Teaching a course on “Feminist Organizations” reconnected me to my radical-cultural feminist roots, but, for my students, this insistence on the transformative power of feminine values epitomized essentialism, and they rejected it. Moreover, whereas “the personal is political” to me means “The problems I face as a woman are due to patriarchy, not my personal inadequacies,” implying women as a group need to work collectively to change the patriarchy, for my students “the personal is political” means “I self-define as a feminist; feminism is a political stance; therefore, any and all of my actions have political import and significance.” Young women’s feminism has been shaped by the sense of entitlement that comes from the successes of second wave feminism and the backlash against feminism that those successes provoked. The lesbian and gay rights movement, multiculturalism and the predominance of poststructuralist analyses have made young feminists conscious of the many ways in which women differ. All these make acting on a unified basis much more difficult than was true previously. Young women’s ambitions and aspirations are individually focused, self-defined and self-oriented. However, we know that achieving their ambitions may be frustrated or stopped by the gendered nature of organizations. To what extent does what we know about that aspect of organizations speak to, reflect or anticipate their experience? I would argue that our paradigm of gender and organization does not serve young women well, because, as it has developed, we have lost contact with some of its feminist roots.

Two years ago, after having taught in a management school for some thirty years (and having taught a class on gender in organizations for nearly 25 of those years), I became the Chair of the University of Alberta’s Women’s Studies Program. As part of my responsibilities as Chair, I developed and taught a course on Feminist Organizations, an experience that was both exhilarating and frustrating. The exhilaration and the frustration were intertwined, and they are what led to this paper.

The subject matter of my course grows out of radical-cultural feminism. It is this form of feminism that focuses on new ways of organizing, ways that grew out of consciousness raising groups: accepting female values such as equality and community, and rejecting male values such as hierarchy and control through “power over” (see Crow, 2000). To my students, however, this stress on the transformative power of feminine values epitomized essentialism, as did any and all of my statements that began “women are” or “women tend to be,” and they rejected it and them. My suggestion that there are biological differences between men and women and that these differences must have *some* impact was also dismissed. When I asked why biology seemed to matter to me, but not to them, they agreed that they probably did not pay enough attention to biology. They then immediately began a lengthy discussion of the right of the intersexed to be raised with their ambiguous genitalia intact until they are old enough to decide for themselves whether or not they wished to have hormonal and/or surgical treatment.

Despite, or because of, these differences, my students and I enjoyed the class immensely. However, when the term was over, and I had the time to think in depth about what had transpired in the class, I found that one difference continued to bother me. My students had frequently commented, in passing, that “the personal is political” in a way that was puzzling to me. It was

not until near the end of the term that I fully grasped what they meant. To me, “the personal is political” meant, and still means, “Personal experiences have political causes; the problems I face as a woman are due to the patriarchal nature of society, not my personal inadequacies.” To my students, “the personal is political” means “I self-define as a feminist; feminism is a political stance; therefore, any and all of my actions have political import and significance.”

My definition of “the personal is political” implies the need for women as a (biological) group to work collectively to change patriarchal practices, whereas my students’ definition implies individual, not collective, action. Consequently, they were willing to accept an activity such as women’s body-building as feminist, while I saw it as women aping the worst of male behaviour, and, needless to say, not at all feminist. Given this, I felt I needed to find out how and why this change in the definition of “the personal is political” came about. I therefore decided to read some of the “third wave” feminist writing, books such as Barbara Findlen’s *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995), Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake’s (1997) *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, and Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards’ (2000) *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, books that my students enthusiastically endorsed.

As a result of my reading, while I can not and do not claim to speak for young feminists, I do feel I have a greater understanding of their feminism(s). This understanding has led me to reflect on the extent to which the ways we approach the study of the gendered nature of organizations speaks to, or responds to, my students’ experiences and feminism, and this paper is the result of my reflections. It is reflections and questions, not answers.

To start, my students’ interpretation of “the personal is political” is not atypical. For example, a self-described “fat girl,” writing about her struggle to deal with her body image, says:

Sometimes I feel my whole identity is wrapped up in my fat. When I am fully conscious of my fat, it can’t be used against me. . . .The punk scene gives me tons of support that I know I wouldn’t get elsewhere. Within the punk scene, I am able to put out zines, play music, do spoken-word performances that are intensely personal to me. I feel really strongly about keeping nothing secret. I can go back to the old cliché about the personal being political, and no matter how trite it may sound, it’s true.” (Lamm, 1995: 93-94)

However, believing that one’s actions have political significance if one is self-defined as a feminist creates dilemmas:

It was a long time before I would call myself a feminist, a long time before I thought I was strong enough to deserve that name. But I still have doubts: Can I call myself a feminist if I say mean things about other girls, even if they were mean to me first? If I don’t always explain myself, if I don’t correct everyone who calls a girl a bitch? (Doza, 1995: 255).

The authors of *Manifesta* try to provide a solution when they comment:

Maybe you aren’t sure you need feminism, or you’re not sure it needs you. You’re sexy, a wallflower, you shop at Calvin Klein,

you are a stay-at-home mom, a big Hollywood producer, a beautiful bride all in white, an ex-wife raising three kids, or shave, pluck, *and* wax. In reality, feminism wants you to be whoever you are – but with a political consciousness. And vice versa: you want to be a feminist because you want to be exactly who you are. (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000: 56-57)

But what is a political consciousness? A young woman who is anorexic states:

Reading feminist literature. . . I digested the connection between a nation of starving self-obsessed women and the continued success of the patriarchy. . . As young feminists, we must place unconditional acceptance of our bodies at the top of our political agenda. We must claim our bodies as our own to love and honor in their infinite shapes and sizes. . . . We must challenge ourselves to eat and digest, and allow society to call us too big. We will understand their message to mean too powerful (Chernik, 1995: 80, 84).

Reading and thinking about these and other statements reinforced in my mind just how different the world in which young feminists have come to feminism is from the world in which I came to feminism. Their feminism has developed in a world of, among other things, technological change, the Internet, globalization, organizational downsizing, and AIDS. The lesbian and gay rights movement, multiculturalism and the predominance of post-structuralist analyses have made young feminists conscious of the many ways in which women differ. Most important, young women's feminism has been shaped by both the sense of entitlement that the successes of second wave feminism have enabled them to have and the backlash against feminism that those very successes have provoked (including critiques of feminism by women who define themselves as feminist).

All these factors make finding and acting on a unified basis much more difficult than was true previously. Heywood and Drake (1997: 4) argue that young women are attempting to privately consolidate the public gains of second wave feminism in this context of complexity and contradiction. They further argue that third wave feminism contains elements of the second wave critique of sexual abuse, beauty culture and power structures, but at the same time makes use of the defining power, danger and pleasure of those structures. Key sites of this struggle are sexual politics and cultural production.

One illustration of this is "Girlies," who are reacting to what they perceive to be the "antifeminine [and] antijoy emphasis" of second wave feminism (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000: 80). Girlie assumes that women are not dupes of the patriarchy. Instead, Girlie assumes that cultural and social forces (such as the portrayal of women as sex objects, the stress on beauty and fashion, and even pornography) that were once used against women can be used by women (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000: 141). Accepting and, indeed, reveling in the stereotypical feminine is thus an indication of confidence in both one's self and one's culture. Consequently, using makeup, for example, can be "sexy, campy, ironic or simply decorating ourselves without

the loaded issues” of apparently yielding to the influence of the market place and male gaze (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000: 136).

While these young feminists celebrate traditional femininity, others define themselves as feminist and male-identified. They enjoy “being one of the guys,” participate in masculine culture, or have a campy gay-boy identification: “If I want to wear makeup or if I want to dress up femme, I’m being like a gay man in drag, rather than identifying with a traditional, feminine culture” (Cox, Johnson, Newitz and Sandell, 1997: 180-181). In this context, female body-building is a feminist act. It is a sign of confidence in one’s ability to pick and choose from a multitude of options as to what to do with one’s appearance and body. Biology may not matter, but the body is of inordinate interest – as text, to be shaped, constructed, reshaped and reconstructed¹. And that shaping, constructing, reshaping and reconstructing is seen as feminist activism.

However, this activism is “constrained agency” (Bhavnani, Kent and Twine, 1998: 576), in that young women are not agents with total or absolute free will. Although they may represent themselves, and be represented by others, in ways that do not rely on a portrayal of women as vulnerable, their agency is still constrained by such limits as age, class, ethnicity and so on. The successes of second wave feminism have allowed many young women to grow up with the confidence that they “can do anything,” only to discover that they can be stopped:

I assumed that I should be treated equally to and taken as seriously as any boy. In fact, I was so convinced of this that the reality of gender inequities took years for me to swallow. Being treated as an individual seemed like an obvious right of birth to me. (Lennon, 1995: 124-125)

When they are stopped, the experience is “disappointing, humiliating, shocking. It can take away your breath, your hope, your faith in yourself, your faith in the world” (Findlen, 1995: xvi). It is when they are stopped that they learn they need feminism because “feminism is what helps us make sense of the unfairness by affirming that it’s about political injustice, not personal failure” (Findlen, 1995: xvi). In other words, they learn they need to understand that “the personal is political.”

The need to understand that “the personal is political” will be particularly strong when they enter the world of (I hope) full-time, permanent paid employment. In my experience, students (in both women’s studies and management programs) are naïve about this world: the discriminatory or oppressive experiences that they might suffer in their part-time jobs are dismissed as occurring because the jobs are part-time, and in the belief that “things will be different” when they have permanent jobs. They also believe themselves to have control over, and responsibility for, what happens to them, and they will be encountering organizations that are only too willing to encourage this belief, a belief that these organizations themselves know is false.

Many current motivational practices (e.g., encouraging autonomy and empowerment) are based on expectancy theory, which focuses on the processes through which individuals make decisions about the extent to which they can achieve given levels of work performance, and whether or not

¹ My thanks to Lise Gotell for this insight.

that performance level will lead to outcomes that they desire. In Porter and Lawler's version of expectancy theory, one of the determinants of peoples' expectation that they can achieve a given level of work performance is their role perceptions, which are the types of effort believed to be necessary for effective job performance. In actuality, these role perceptions are individual traits, specifically "forceful, imaginative, independent, self-confident, decisive, cooperative, adaptable, cautious, agreeable [and] tactful" (Porter & Lawler, 1968: 105). The rewards for effective performance that will be satisfying, valued and hence lead to greater future effort are based on a modification of Maslow's (1943) needs hierarchy. For example, the prestige of one's position satisfies the need for esteem, being given the opportunity to participate in setting goals satisfies the need for autonomy, and being given the opportunity for personal growth and development satisfies the need for self-actualization (Porter and Lawler, 1968: 191).

Expectancy theory thus defines work effort as personal traits (such as self-confident and imaginative) and work outcomes as attitudes and feelings (such as a sense of personal growth and development). This stress on internal reactions to external realities deflects an examination of those external realities, and, more important, an examination of the actions that can be taken to change them. Given this, individuals can be encouraged to feel personal responsibility for their careers and discouraged from examining the organizational structures and practices that affect those careers.

This is particularly significant for women because a focus on the issue of individual self-development occurs throughout the women in management literature. Although the advice that follows from this focus is contradictory, self-development is still the ultimate key to career success. Women do not achieve success, it is argued, because they view a career as a personal goal known only to the woman herself (Hennig and Jardim, 1977), or career success as a sense of personal growth (Hardesty and Jacobs, 1987), rather than as movement up the organizational hierarchy. At the same time, however, the lessons from *Breaking the Glass Ceiling* stress personal development: the aspiring woman manager must, for example, learn the ropes and take control of her career (Morrison et al, 1987: 75, 85).

However, even when organizational factors are considered, women can still be held responsible for their success or failure to the extent that these other factors are seen as a matter of individual reactions and interpretations. For example, one organizational or situational factor that can or does hinder women's advancement is their (male) co-workers' discriminatory attitudes. While acknowledging this factor can lead to a recognition that the organization needs training programs for the co-workers, it can also lead to advice to women on how to cope with these discriminatory reactions. Once she recognizes that her gender, not her job performance, determines how others respond to her, she is then supposedly able to handle the situation. Furthermore, if she is able to manage or change these reactions, she then becomes the change agent, and the organization does not need to provide training programs for the discriminatory co-workers. If their attitudes persist, it is her responsibility. A stress on individual perceptions of an organizational situation implies individual, not organizational, responsibility for that situation.

And what happens when, rejoicing in their femininity, Girlies "carrying Hello Kitty lunch boxes dust off the Le Sportsac from junior high and fill them with black lipstick and green nail polish and campy sparkles" (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000: 136) and arrive at the office? While

they are familiar with sexual aggressiveness, what happens when that aggressiveness is backed up by organizational power? Brewis and Linstead (2000: 89-91) have pointed out that, while the traditional sexual harassment discourse (powerful male harasser, powerless female victim) may cause women to feel they can not fight back, the “power” feminist position (that women are the primary recipients, but not necessarily the victims, of sexual harassment) is also problematic. In the latter discourse, women are held responsible for both their own behaviour and the behaviour of the harasser: if the woman does not respond in a way that causes the harassment to stop, then she is accountable if it continues.

I think the reasons for my concern about what will happen to young feminists when they enter the world of permanent paid employment is clear: their sense that they are creating political changes through their individual, self-defined acts will be reinforced by organizations that will encourage them to think just that, in full knowledge that such actions do not have any effect on the organization.

At the same time, however, young feminists know that some sort of unified political action is necessary, since, as another Women’s Studies student said to me “How do you make a political statement as an individual?” What they struggle with is how to achieve unified political action, given that what will be necessary is coalition politics, a feminist movement defined by difference (Heywood and Drake, 1997: 9). The authors of *Manifesta* argue that, since the first two waves of feminism had clear political goals, the third wave needs political goals as well, and wrote their book to encourage this activism. Their 13-point agenda includes issues such as reproductive freedom, the double standard in sex and sexual health, participation in all parts of the military for women who want this, adolescents’ right to be free from harassment and bullying, and so on. What they want in the workplace is:

To make the workplace responsive to an individual’s wants, needs and talents. This includes valuing (monetarily) stay-at-home parents, aiding employees who want to spend more time with family and continue to work, equalizing pay for jobs of comparable worth, enacting a minimum wage that would bring a full-time worker with two children over the poverty line, and providing employee benefits for freelance and part-time workers. (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000: 280).

But how is this different from the second wave agenda? I do not quote this to be critical of their agenda. Rather, I quote it to illustrate my concern that, although we may have given young feminists sophisticated analytical tools to understand their situation, we do not seem to have given them any practical tools to deal with it. What might those practical tools be?

One tool is knowledge of past and present feminist organizations, as examples of how coalitions could be created and maintained. But what knowledge should we focus on? In my “Feminist Organizations” class, the framework I used was Martin’s (1990) article on “Rethinking Feminist Organizations.” Martin discusses ten dimensions on which feminist organizations can differ, dimensions “that can be used to frame comparative research” (1990: 183) on these organizations. These ten dimensions are feminist ideology (the rationale for the organization’s existence), feminist values (its normative preferences), feminist goals (its action agendas), feminist

outcomes (the consequences of its actions for its members, women and society), founding circumstances (the relationship of its founding date to the women's movement), structure (its intended internal arrangements regarding the distribution of power and decision-making), practices (what actually occurs regarding the distribution of power and decision-making), members and membership (who can belong and the regulations of belonging), scope and scale (local versus national, and membership numbers), and external relations (the nature of its ties to entities beyond its boundaries). She then suggests that an organization is feminist if it meets any one of the first five criteria (feminist ideology, feminist values, feminist goals, feminist outcomes, or was founded during the women's movement as part of the women's movement), and further suggests that an organization with, for example, only one of these characteristics is no less feminist than an organization with all five of them. Finally, she stresses that "a particular internal structure is *not a defining characteristic* of feminist organization (Martin, 1990: 188, italics in original).

My students and I struggled with Martin's dimensions and criteria throughout the term, in part because, although we accepted the first four criteria she named (feminist ideology, values, goals and outcomes), we had difficulties with actually applying them. For example, her description of feminist ideology includes the questions, "Does the organization officially endorse feminist beliefs associated with the women's movement? Does the organization unofficially endorse feminist beliefs?" (Martin, 1990: 188, italics in original). Can an organization that does not identify itself as feminist *be* feminist? We had a number of guest speakers (selected and invited by the students) who added to our confusion. When we asked "Is your organization a feminist organization?" the elected president of a volunteer organization that promotes the use of midwives said "Yes, but we don't identify ourselves that way because it would scare off some people," the owner of a wholesale health food distribution company said "Yes, because I operate it according to feminist principles," and the owner of our local feminist, gay and lesbian bookstore said "No, because I am the owner and a feminist organization is a collective."

Furthermore, we were not at all sure we accepted Martin's contention that an organization's internal structures and practices are not relevant. Is an organization whose structure and practices empowers some of its staff, but not others (see, for example, Morgen, 1997), or empowers its staff but disempowers its clients (see, for example, Murray, 1988) a feminist organization? As we struggled with these issues, my students and I were sure that there was such an entity as a "feminist organization," but as a group we were never able to clearly define it, let alone decide what its characteristics were.

As I thought about this aspect of my course, I felt not so much puzzled as guilty. We had had a wonderfully stimulating discussion, but had my class been anything more than that? Did they really leave with any insights that they could put into practice? This year, I again began the course with Martin's (1990) "Rethinking Feminist Organizations" (and we again struggled with the same issues) but ended it with her "Feminist Practice in Organizations: Implications for Management" (Martin, 1993). Feminist management practices, according to Martin, are: (1) "asking the woman question" to expose the gender bias in supposedly gender-neutral norms, values, etc.; (2) using feminist practical reasoning to challenge the claim of universal rules that apply to everyone; (3) using consciousness-raising to relate personal experience to general principle and general principle to personal experience; (4) promoting community and

cooperation and de-emphasizing status differences and winning and losing; (5) promoting democracy and participation, through, for example, sharing information and resources; (6) promoting subordinate empowerment because, in a position of authority, one is obligated to do so; (7) promoting nurturance and caring by recognizing that employees have multiple obligations and helping them to deal with those obligations; and (8) striving for transformational outcomes for women both individually and collectively, as well as for men and the corporation (Martin, 1993, pp. 283-288).

I would argue that Martin's first, second and eighth points (asking the woman question; using feminist practical reasoning; striving for transformational outcomes) are a feminist consciousness, while her third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh points (consciousness-raising; promoting community; promoting participation; promoting empowerment; promoting nurturance) are feminist practice, specifically radical-cultural feminist practice. However, promoting cooperation, participation, empowerment and nurturance are also characteristics of the female leadership style (see, for example, Roserer, 1990). I hear my students' voices: "Essentialism!" But perhaps what we need is essentialism, or, at the very least, a return to our roots.

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