



Consciousness Raising 101

Inside the gender studies classroom

FOR THE SECOND year in a row, I have had the fascinating experience of playing a role in which I never expected to find myself: professor of a gender studies course.

In 2001 David Hendrickson, then chairman of the political science department at Colorado College, contacted me about teaching a short course. Colorado College, a small, selective liberal arts school in Colorado Springs, has a unique system in which a semester is divided into four "blocks." Each student takes one five-days-a-week, three-and-a-half-week course at a time. The system allows the school to make liberal use of visiting professors.

Given a chance to design my own course, "Beyond the Gender Wars," I decided to offer a survey of different approaches to contemporary gender issues, with a focus on challenges to orthodox feminism offered by writers such as Christina Hoff Sommers (*Who Stole Feminism?*), Warren Farrell (*The Myth of Male Power*), and Katie Roiphe (*The Morning After*). I fully expected the experience to be educational for me as well as my students, and I wasn't disappointed.

It is something of a truism that while young women today reject the "feminist" label, they embrace the feminist principles of equal opportunity and flexible gender roles. Both my classes—the first comprising six women, the second nine men and six women—bore this out. Only one student in the first class, and three in the second (one man and two women), had previously taken any courses studying feminism. Most had paid little or no attention to gender issues; they had so little knowledge of the women's movement that the phrase *consciousness raising* did not ring a bell with anyone. Most were turned off by feminism's radical image.

Yet these young people were not only overwhelmingly supportive of broad "equality feminist" goals but strikingly predisposed to believe various claims of inequities toward women in modern-day America. Thus, it was universally taken for granted—at least when the topic was first brought up—that the gap between male and female earnings was due to discrimination against women and amounted to proof that sexism was alive and well.

Our readings and discussions, however, had some effect: Late in the course, when we got around to reading Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards' "Third Wave feminist" book *Manifesta*, which espouses "pay equity" as a key item on the feminist agenda, many students questioned without prompting the authors' use of statistics on unequal pay.

For most students, the "myth-debunking" critique of orthodox feminism—the exposés of bogus and manipulated facts and statistics—proved powerful and eye-opening. One of my most amusing moments came this year, after I assigned four readings for the discussion of domestic violence: two representative feminist pieces purporting to document a domestic violence epidemic caused by sexism and tacitly abetted by society, and two critiques explaining the dubious origin of such claims as "battering is the leading cause of injury to American women." One student lamented that he had read the pieces "in the wrong order"—the "dissidents" first. "By the time I read the last two," he said, "I kept going, 'That's a lie!'" Interestingly, he and a few others said that our readings about ideologically motivated statistical shenanigans had left them with a healthy skepticism of *all* statistical and factual claims, by feminists, anti-feminists, or anyone else.

The women, including those most inclined to identify with feminist views, were perhaps most receptive to the argument that treating women as perpetual victims becomes a self-fulfilling, infantilizing prophecy. Thus, Roiphe's scathing indictment of "rape crisis feminism," with its dogma that women are imperiled by male brutes at every turn and that verbal pressure is just as bad as physical violence, was largely well-received, even if some students felt that Roiphe was too dismissive of the problem of real acquaintance rape.

Even more positive was the reaction to the readings from Daphne Patai's *Heterophobia: Sexual Harassment and the Future of Feminism*, which examines the politics of the "sexual harassment industry." Not one student favored ridding the workplace or the classroom of all sexual innuendo, bawdy humor, and other expressions of sexuality, and most shared Patai's view that it's impossible to eliminate all unwanted sexual attention without intolerably policing the welcome kind.

Other challenges to conventional feminist views turned out to be more controversial. With few exceptions, female students were wary of the view that biological differences between men and women could at least partly account for gender-based disparities in the workplace—a topic that prompted one of the most heated exchanges in the class this year.

"Bullshit!" cried Nan, a fragile-looking blonde, when a male student remarked that men were more physically fit than women for some jobs. (All names of students mentioned in this column are pseudonyms.) Nan's exclamation elicited a more verbal outburst from George, a tall, broad-

shouldered, baby-faced young man from a working-class background. "I don't care if you beat me up," George said. "I've spent a lot of summers doing heavy labor, like loading boxes and laying railroad tracks, and I swear, I don't think there is one woman who could have done the work we did."

Interestingly, some students' views on the social implications of biological differences flip-flopped when we got to another contentious topic: male reproductive rights. None of the students had given much thought to the paradoxical situation created by *Roe v. Wade*, which allows women but not men an "out" from the consequences of unwanted pregnancy.

Proposals for a "male abortion"—a legal procedure by which a man could terminate his paternal rights and responsibilities early in the woman's pregnancy—sparked a debate that divided the students more or less along gender lines. The men tended to be sympathetic to accidental fathers trapped into 18 years of child support; the women tended to be sympathetic to abandoned mothers who, they worried, might be pressured into having abortions even when they wanted to raise the child if they knew they couldn't count on financial support from the father. Suddenly, Nan was arguing that sometimes we just have to accept that biological differences place men and women in unequal situations.

Perhaps the strongest feelings emerged from our reading of *The Myth of Male Power*, which turns many conventional feminist arguments on their head, highlighting the ways in which both traditional gender roles and modern feminism disad-

vantage men. Curiously, the all-female class I had last year was noticeably more sympathetic to Farrell's arguments than this year's mixed-gender class; it may be that in a mixed environment the women reacted more defensively to Farrell's often critical view of female attitudes and behavior, while the men were reluctant to take his side for fear of appearing sexist.

The students' largely sarcastic reaction to *The Myth of Male Power* was partly a response to Farrell's often hyperbolic complaints of male victimhood (e.g., his characterization of high school football as "male child abuse"), perceived by most as an attempt to one-up the "victim feminists." To some extent, however, it also showed a deep-seated discomfort with the idea of men laying claim to gender-based disadvantage.

This year, right on the heels of Farrell, we read excerpts from Peggy Orenstein's book *Flux: Women on Sex, Work, Love, Kids and Life in a Half-Changed World*, which supported some of Farrell's claims: specifically, that many young women want to enjoy the fruits of equality but also see it as their prerogative to be financially supported if they want to give up, suspend, or scale down their careers when they have families, and that as a result women today have much more flexible options than men. Several of the women sheepishly admitted that this claim seemed much more plausible coming from Orenstein.

I can only hope that our lessons had some lasting effects. ■

Contributing Editor Cathy Young
(cathyyoung2@cs.com) is a columnist for *The Boston Globe*.

The Spirit of '73

An ugly nostalgia sweeps the globe

WHEN GEORGE W. BUSH selected mummified diplomat Henry Kissinger to head his investigation into pre-9/11 intelligence failures, he outraged everyone. The left blames Kissinger for extending the Vietnam War and instituting lethal realpolitik; the right blames him for losing the war and turning Nixon red. But there's a deeper message in seeing a bureaucrat three decades past his sell-by date get a new job—even one he resigned from almost immediately. All over the world, the keys of government are held by people for whom the world clock stopped sometime around 1973.

This collective nostalgia is widely dispersed. India thrives under the leadership of Atal Behari Vajpayee, a Hindu Mussolini whose militantly anti-Muslim vision seems more suited to the 1971 Indo-Pak war than to the era of high-tech Bangalore. Across the Kashmiri divide, Pakistan's president, Pervez Musharraf, boasts a more venerable legitimacy, having seized power in a military coup identical to the ones that installed Gens. Muhammad Ayub Khan in the '50s and Mohammed Zia ul-Haq in the '70s.

A continent away, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe plays such Super Sounds of the '70s as rigged elections, land seizures, and wholesale nationalization. A more restrained New World version of this rusty iron-man model can be seen in Venezuela, where Hugo Chavez took a case of economic malaise and socialized it into full-blown economic

metastasis. The jury's still out on Brazil's new leader, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, but if he holds to the moth-eaten socialist nostrums that built his cult of personality, Brazilians can look forward to the kind of financial security not seen since Pelé signed up with the New York Cosmos. It's surprising that Kissinger didn't figure out a way during his brief tenure to assassinate all three leaders—though the Bush administration's tacit backing of an anti-Chavez coup attempt was an honest start.

The Middle East is a regular Brady Bunch reunion of '70s characters and policies. Syria and Jordan are both controlled by the idiot sons of Nixon-era dictators. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's application of Yom Kippur War tactics to the age of suicide bombers has helped send record numbers of both Israelis and Palestinians to heaven. By all appearances, Yasir Arafat hasn't changed his clothes in 30 years. Egypt, Libya, and Iraq are all run along socialist/nationalist models that last seemed viable when Skylab was flyin' high.

Across Western Europe, calcified labor unions and welfare systems form obstacles Evel Knievel himself would have had trouble clearing. Gerhard Schroeder leads Germany with a stagflationary combination of socialist economics and old-school America baiting. Jacques Chirac, perhaps the West's most lucid leader, gets nowhere against France's all-powerful bureaucracies. Tony Blair's

New Labour Party has bogged down, with the United Kingdom engaging in vintage arguments about whether its health and security bureaucracies are prepared to fight terrorism. The only difference between now and the '70s is that Al Qaeda is providing the terror while the IRA catches its breath.

In such sterling company, President Bush is far from the most objectionable case, but he is certainly the saddest. With a crabbed combination of compulsive secrecy, protective tariffs, erosion of privacy, an expanded federal role in education, and the creation of a new cabinet-level agency, the Bush administration recalls the grimly alienating and ideology-free Nixon administration more than it does the sunny, confident Reagan legacy to which it lays claim.

None of this would matter if it were as easy to ignore government as it was a few years ago. While the free market was busy developing cellular telephony, the consumer Internet, a high-employment global economy, and 24-hour mattress delivery, it was possible to forget for a while that leaders of nations were still working on the political equivalent of the swine flu vaccine. But the ability to keep the government out of your life and plans is yet another casualty of 9/11. Is it a relief or a pity that Spiro Agnew isn't around to replace Dick Cheney on Bush's '04 ticket? ■

Tim Cavanaugh (tcavanaugh@reason.com) is reason's Web editor.