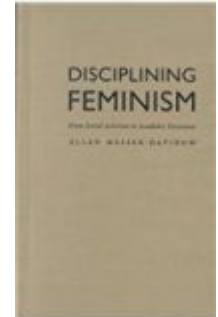


Ellen Messer-Davidow. *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002. ix + 413 pp. \$89.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8223-2829-2.



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Reconnecting with Social Activism: Women's Studies as an Intellectual Endeavor

The development of women's studies programs, and the need to reorient those programs toward activism, is the focus of Ellen Messer-Davidow's book, *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse*. Messer-Davidow, a professor of English, centers her argument around a key question about the development of the field of women's studies in institutions: "how did it happen that a bold venture launched thirty years ago to transform academic and social institutions was itself transformed by them?" (p. 1). Her position is that women's studies has become a part of the institutional system, largely engaged in intellectual scholarship too removed from its activist components. The point of her book, she writes in her introduction, is to determine "what deflected our academic initiatives and speculate on how we might redirect them now" (p. 13). A re-orientation is needed, she argues, to reach the goals originally set in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and to achieve those goals (and pre-

serve the gains made) now requires new thinking about strategies, tactics and organization.

Messer-Davidow raises large questions in her book, and seeks not only to document the narrative of events but also to explain why the programs evolved as they did. At times a "top-view" analysis, *Disciplining Feminism* also includes case-study examples of specific programs informed by participants' viewpoints to illustrate the larger arguments presented. Interviews as well as observations of specific classes and programs are critical sources in her ethnographic study. The author effectively crosses disciplines to illuminate why women's studies has evolved as it has, and offers suggestions on new routes to combat an increasing backlash against many of the gains secured before 1980. Although not a study of history, it is an important examination of feminist studies relevant to all interested in the field's future and those seeking to find ways to connect, or reconnect, to community activism.

The book is organized into three parts. The first details the state of academia and institutions (its "sex patterns") before the 1970s, and how

women experienced, challenged and sought to reshape the system. The first chapter focuses on four key disciplines, including physics, art history, sociology and literary studies, and analyzes the effects of two disciplinary functions, including the "socialization of disciples and the ordering of discourse" (p. 21). Messer-Davidow emphasizes the importance of disciplines (and the departmental organization) in universities and how their individual discourses shaped the experiences of women in those disciplines. None were friendly to women, but some, such as sociology, offered theoretical ideas that enabled feminists to understand their position within that discipline more effectively. Not surprisingly, the disciplines' discourses left little room for women's experiences or voices, and in different ways silenced women. In the case of literary studies, argues Messer-Davidow, the discourse actually obscured women's identity: "to be regarded as capable, the female student would have to endure the obliteration of her female identity that resulted from performing its male-centered, female-negating practices" (p. 39).

Messer-Davidow analyzes the institutional structure of academia, and how both the universities and disciplines created and sustained "sex patterns" that limited women's abilities to advance and succeed. This "systemic discrimination" resulted in both sex segregation (women ghettoized in certain disciplines) and sex stratification (women rarely found in the higher ranks of academia). The organization of the university by discipline, and the courts' acceptance of that organization as independent of higher university administration, limited women's ability to use affirmative action laws to gain access to the higher reaches of academia. Judges often saw the departments and disciplines as the core decision makers, and refused to see the university administration as party to that decision-making process. Too often, Messer-Davidow argues, courts viewed each woman as an individual rather than as a member of a group, in part due to a departmental vision of the university structure, and thus rarely

would certify class action suits. The author later connects this trend to current affirmative action decisions. The courts refused to see decision-making operating at all levels of the university, and instead limited it to the department/discipline, which often was where the process returned disputed decisions about tenure or promotion. The result, she continues, was "discursive gymnastics" with little opportunity for women to break through. It was not until a 1978 decision on a University of Minnesota case, when a judge questioned the lack of responsibility of the wider university administration (including the Regents), that the tide began to turn.

The second part of *Disciplining Feminism* describes the rise of feminist studies, with the key dilemma centered on whether the field would focus on activism or intellectual pursuits. Messer-Davidow argues that while it should not have been an either/or choice, in practice it was. Feminist studies scholars increasingly emphasized the production of scholarship and knowledge about women, and de-emphasized, although not consciously, direct community activism. She parallels the development of women's studies and its institutionalization with the feminist activism in both the American Sociological Association and the Modern Language Association to gain attention to women's issues and to reshape the discipline. Feminists in both associations used institutionalization—gaining access to the organizational structure—to achieve change. Messer-Davidow does not fault this strategy, and argues that with hindsight this was likely the only practical way to develop a women's studies program. Developing one outside the academy would not have been possible, as education was not a key priority of the 1960s movement, and the resources and structure to maintain such a program were not available.

While feminist scholars changed the decision-makers in the associations and gained access to decision making in the academy, however, they did not alter the decision-making structure, which

limited the change they were able to make. The promise was not realized, she argues, and documents the inability to bridge the activism/academy divide in three programs and conferences. Messer-Davidow points to discipline discourses and identity politics as the key reasons for the splintering and fracturing in these programs. "The feminist groups ... had failed to manage two interactive processes--project formation and collective identity formation--that are required to launch a venture in any already structured arena" (p. 123).

Too many activists used a discourse that presumed a fixed identity to each individual, capable of "accommodating only one allegiance and one agenda. When feminists deployed it in their own groups, they typed the speakers, bent the meaning of their statements, and thereby generated the differences that thwarted their work of building the collective agent of activism" (p. 122). The discourse divide limited the different viewpoints from congealing into an effective organization to launch programs and projects. "[B]y using the divisive discourses of the movement and the academy feminists could not form the collective identity and action they needed to launch the hybrid projects they had envisioned" (p. 124). The author does not claim that this occurred everywhere, but does point to the key role discourse played in fracturing some of these efforts.

Women's studies became more entrenched in academia and more separated from community activism in part because of an increasing emphasis on scholarship on the part of academic feminists. Messer-Davidow points to several factors in this trend, including the academic tenure review system. Publications (journals, monographs and edited anthologies) were the measure of academic "success" at many institutions, and also were "proof" that the field held academic and intellectual value. Much feminist work appeared (and still does appear) largely in feminist journals, such as *Signs* and *Feminist Studies*, since mainstream disciplinary publications were slow to

publish feminist work. Both journals turned to more traditional academic writing in their publications, and in the case of *Feminist Studies* drew heavily on women's history. Although different from the more mainstream publications, "they had similar effects on the formation of feminist studies. On the one hand, these venues functioned as the instruments of change by publishing the new work that in turn constituted the authority of the practioners. On the other hand, they functioned as the instruments of discipline by etching the scholarly conventions into the published work that in turn was used (as Foucault would have said) for the correct training of practioners" (p. 143). These feminist journals articulated and defined, at least in part, the discourse of the discipline, and that discourse increasingly became separated from community activism.

Disciplinary divides again come into play in this part of Messer-Davidow's book. She points to the structure of many women's studies programs, which even today are often department-based. Faculty in the different departments teach women's studies courses, but are not solely assigned to women's studies. Often feminist faculty gained little professional credit for teaching women's studies courses, and the uneven availability of feminist scholars also affected the ability of women's studies programs to expand. They held little leverage in the 1970s to dictate and establish programs as they envisioned, and worked within the framework given. Disciplinary alliances also tended to divide feminist scholars, as most operated within their disciplinary discourse. Often that position exacerbated divisions, further fracturing the program. Messer-Davidow argues that the structure of women's studies has changed little since 1976. Some offered internships in activism, but activism training was not found in many courses. Social change was often integrated into courses about specific topics, such as women's movements or organizations, but was rarely centered on the practice of social change. In hindsight, Messer-Davidow sees this trend as a result of institutionaliza-

tion, particularly given the resources available at the time. The hope of meshing the intellectual with activism was not realized, she writes, "but not for the reasons anticipated" (p. 165). Feminists understood the power of institutions to limit and exclude, but "what we did not understand was the power they could exercise by letting us go forward with our projects" (p. 165). The processes of academic institutions played a key role in the formation of women's studies and are in large part responsible for their structure today.

Identity politics also played a role. Despite the three decades of affirmative action, the racial make-up of faculties has remained frighteningly static. As with feminist work, publications often ignored work by and about African-American women. If published, such works often went quickly out of print. This trend did not change until the mid-1980s. Messer-Davidow does assess the criticism that feminists ignored race, class, ethnicity and sexuality. She concludes that while it did not happen instantly, several feminist scholars, including Gerda Lerner, Gayle Rubin, and Pauli Murray, did begin to interrogate the complexities of those categories and theorize how to address them. The demand for a more nuanced discourse continued, but this resulted in specialization and fragmentation.

In addition, while attempting to reconcile their drive for inclusiveness and equality with difference (and the multiplicity of perspectives), feminist scholars operated within the rules of academic institutions. Such rules often limited their ability to have an inclusive and equal faculty that reflected the differences they tried to analyze. Conservative "equal rights" feminists also criticized the programs and sought to recapture feminism from those engaged, they argued, solely in identity politics. Many began to lament the disunification of the field, and historians will find this theme familiar. Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*, of a decade ago, echoes similar themes of division in the field of history. Messer-Davidow does not

lament the differences, but does argue that difference needs to be addressed in more effective ways.

In the book's final section, Messer-Davidow turns to the contemporary and shifts her focus to analyze the training practices of both conservative and liberal/progressive leadership as well as policy programs attended by some young activists. She does this in part because of the intensely successful conservative backlash of the 1980s. The backlash is the result of not connecting feminist intellectual thought to reality and action, according to Messer-Davidow. She argues that there is no returning to the 1970s and that new modes of activism are needed. Feminist organizations lack the funding of conservative groups, as well as a "long-range vision" and "robust purposefulness" (p. 222). Conservative fundraising has far outpaced feminist and liberal/progressive groups, and the numbers she presents are staggering. Conservative groups are better able to cross sectors or organizations and build links and coalitions in ways that feminist groups are not. In her analysis of the varied groups, she finds that while all experienced multiple viewpoints and diverse experiences, they differed in the ways they responded to them. Some (conservative) programs simply obscured or minimized such difference, while others (progressive/liberal) sought to teach ways to manage difference and conflict. She does not advocate adopting conservative tactics to address difference, but does see a need to build bridges between academia and activism.

An analysis of decisions affecting affirmative action, largely through the court system, closes out *Disciplining Feminism*. In this chapter, the author seeks to examine the world in which we now live, and the consequences of the ineffective action by feminist and progressive groups. American society is moving toward "that hegemonic moment when patterned injustice can no longer be seen and said" (p. 269). The key is the laws and policies that distribute resources as well as access

to resources and opportunities. She traces the history of affirmative action and the backlash that began in the 1980s. This chapter builds on her earlier discussion of feminists' use of affirmative action laws to gain entry into academia in the 1970s. A key problem she points to is one she raises earlier: the tendency of judges to focus on individual rights rather than groups and to attempt to make "group discrimination disappear" (p. 275).

She analyzes the decisions and comparisons made, and provides a comprehensive discussion of recent decisions and laws that have sought to dismantle affirmative action. Messer-Davidow argues that the problem was that feminists, liberals and progressives, "made ourselves vulnerable by internalizing to academic discourses what we set out to analyze and change in society" (p. 287). In the process, they lost sight of the reality of societal transformation. She closes her study with a brief discussion (and list) of possible changes to reorient feminist studies in the hopes of effecting more significant alterations. Although brief, her suggestions offer a starting point for departments, feminist scholars, and community activists to begin to rethink their strategies and to consider methods of change. She believes the price of not changing is too high. The construction of knowledge is well under way, but the question she asks is "knowledge for what?" (p. 289).

This study is a thought-provoking read for any scholar engaged in feminist studies or university administration. Messer-Davidow's effective cross-disciplinary study includes a useful theoretical framework for understanding the development and organization of women's studies. This review only scratches the surface of the details in her book. Her position is clear; she obviously sees women's studies as activist-oriented and provides examples of programs--at varying levels of success--to bridge the divide between activism and academia. She does not seek to blame those who established these programs. The author was on the forefront of the development of women's stud-

ies and opens her book with a narrative of those experiences in the late 1960s and early 1970s when she was a female graduate student contending with the existing academic structure. Rather, she seeks to redirect the focus of women's studies programs toward activism, both in training and content.

The practicality of this trend for some programs is questionable. The commitment of universities and colleges to women's studies is varied, and a more direct emphasis on feminism and activism may threaten an already precarious acceptance on the part of university administrators and departments. Funding is of course an issue, and without resources the programs will not exist. But Messer-Davidow's redirection also invites explorations into new ways of funding through non-academic sources. If not relying solely on university funding, women's studies programs could then gain autonomy to pursue the avenues their faculty wishes, rather than abiding by the rules of academia. Such questions are for scholars to consider in the context of their departments, programs and universities, and Messer-Davidow's book provides a starting point to think and debate the future of women's studies.

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