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Review Essay

Fighting Complacency: Assessing Women's Status in Higher Education

Mariam K. Chamberlain, ed., *Women in Academe: Progress and Prospects* ***(New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988), 415 pp.***

Carol S. Pearson, Donna Shavlik, and Judith G. Touchton, eds. *Educating the Majority: Women Challenge Tradition in Higher Education* ***(New York: American Council on Education/Macmillan, 1989), 491 pp.***

Elizabeth Minnich, Jean O'Barr, and Rachel Rosenfeld, eds., *Reconstructing the Academy: Women's Education and Women's Studies* ***(Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 312 pp.***

Harvard Law School professor Derrick Bell attracted a good deal of attention recently with his boisterous announcement to the law school community that he would take an unpaid sabbatical until the school tenured a black woman onto its faculty. Of course, this attention was exactly what Bell and his supporters wanted. The idea was to find some dramatic way to protest the fact that the tenured law school faculty of sixty includes only five women and three blacks (none of whom is a woman)—a meager total after nearly twenty years of affirmative action.

That flamboyant move accomplished its job of drawing attention to the Harvard Law School and to the larger issue of women and minority tenure rates. The *New York Times* and other prestigious publications jumped in to cover the protest and the underlying situation. (Might we cynically suppose that some people enjoyed the opportunity to see Harvard on the hot seat?) The articles about Bell cited the low numbers of tenured women and blacks across the country, dutifully acknowledging the larger social issue at hand when faculties (or student bodies or administrations) are so slow to include women and minorities into their ranks.

I read most of the articles about Bell that crossed my breakfast table or my desk, solemnly nodding agreement with the charges and mentally

urging Professor Bell to continue the good fight. Then one day at work, while I was responding to a Boston reporter's questions about the issue, I experienced a moment of hesitation—not so much self-doubt—but more a flash of concern about the attention directed toward Bell's protest.

The reporter had just served me what baseball players call "a fat pitch," asking me—a committed feminist who helps direct a women's research center at a women's college—why it is important to have women on faculties. As I began my familiar litany about equity, role models,and diversity of viewpoints, I hesitated. This reporter sounded quite young, and although he had clearly done his homework on the issue of faculty diversity, I wondered whether the arguments I was offering meant anything in his view of the world. I experienced the same feeling I sometimes have in an undergraduate classroom when I sagely try to tell young women and men about the discrimination women face in "the real world," even if they haven't seen much evidence on their idyllic campus. We who teach women's studies have come to recognize the skeptical or tenuous looks that students give as they wryly attribute these views to those who lived through the turbulent, war-torn 1960s.

This experience with the reporter crystallized some questions that have been rumbling around in my head for a while. How much progress has been made toward increased diversity? Is the need to advance women's issues still strong? And most notably, why do we value diversity? Diversity has been such a clarion call in higher education over the last twenty years that institutions tumble over themselves to include the word and its various messages in every official document they produce. A popular Boston magazine recently culled statements on diversity from the admissions sections of catalogs from a dozen New England institutions: each of them trumpeted a similar claim (accompanied by photos as proof) for the incredible, multifaceted diversity of their student bodies, faculty, and wider college communities.

During the two decades since Title IX and the executive orders prohibiting sex discrimination, colleges have become accustomed to sorting and counting their employees and students, trying to balance gender and racial status—that is, to achieve diversity. But incidents like the Harvard Law School protest raise the question of just how and why we value diversity on our campuses. Will a protest like Bell's actually cause Harvard's dean and faculty to see the light and bring in a black woman professor, along with apologies for their delay? I doubt it, because I doubt that the benefit of having someone like this on the faculty has been translated into a value that many faculty members and administrators truly hold. (By no means do I denigrate the efficacy of protest actions to achieve change. In fact, some of the most notable advances for women in higher education have occurred

because a few women have undertaken the arduous and painful task of bringing affirmative action lawsuits.)

These three books—*Women in Academe: Progress and Prospects*, *Educating the Majority: Women Challenge Tradition in Higher Education*, and *Reconstructing the Academy: Women's Education and Women's Studies*—produced by the best-known women activists and scholars in higher education, offer responses to these troubling questions. They not only assess the progress that has been made toward campus diversity, but they also reassess the reasons why it is so vitally important. The books seem inspired by the same worry that I feel, a worry that issues of women's access are becoming tiresome to some observers or that curriculum integration is seen as merely the latest feminist fad. The three volumes also represent an awareness on the part of experienced women advocates that sufficient time has passed for these movements to be recorded historically and evaluated freshly.

The three books succeed with several tasks. First, they assemble and explicate the most recent data on women's participation as students, faculity members, and administrators, providing a wealth of material in convenient form. Second, all three volumes begin to record and analyze the history of women's recent push into higher education, especially the phenomenal development of women's studies over the last twenty-five years. Such an analysis is particulary useful for readers who were not involved in this development but wish to understand its directions. Third, these authors cite, explain, and analyze several of the newest directions in feminist scholarship about women in the academy. Readers who have wished for an entree into issues of curriculum integration, the psychology of differences, and feminist thought will find such chapters most helpful.

Two of the three volumes—*Women in Academe* and *Educating the Majority*—do the best job with the first of these three tasks, that is, analyzing women's progress in higher education. In fact, *Women in Academe* intends to focus exactly on those figures, presenting itself as a follow-up study to Alice Rossi and Ann Calderwood's 1973 assessment in *Academic Women on the Move* (Russell Sage.)

How much progress has been made since the early 1970s? How should we feel about the prospects facing women in the 1990s? Mariam K. Chamberlain, the general editor of *Women in Academe*, concludes with the same finding that Rossi and Calderwood used seventeen years ago: we have cause to be "moderately optimistic" (p. 370).

We all know and take heart in the fact that women now constitute 52 percent of the students in higher education generally; hence, *Educating the Majority*. Their progress at the graduate level has been strong as well: women now earn one-half of all master's degrees and 34 percent of all Ph.D.s. Gains in the professional schools have been most striking: "Women

now comprise 38 percent of new law school graduates, 30 percent of new medical school graduates, and 21 percent of new dental school graduates" (*Educating the Majority*, p. 5). Their movement into collegiate faculties and administrations has been steady but not spectacular through the 1970s and 1980s: women hold 27 percent of full-time faculty positions and 30 percent of managerial administrative positions.

Do these figures suggest, then, that the time for a concerted push for women is past? Is Derrick Bell simply out of step with the times? The many authors in these three volumes suggest otherwise. They note that "affirmative action has been a premier force in theory and practice for women in higher education" over the last two decades (*Women in Academe*, p. 186). Without that push, it is doubtful that such gains would have occurred. Yet, as Chamberlain warns, "the greatest foe to affirmative action in the next decade may be complacency, a feeling that the battle is over when it has simply entered a new phase" (*Women in Academe*, p. 187).

As with most sets of aggregate figures, those cited here cover a host of problems and discrepancies in women's participation in academe. The editors of *Educating the Majority* dissect these data to reveal several "troubling signs":

> Salary discrepancies between men and women still exist at every level of the college and university hierarchy. Women hold only 10 percent of all college and university presidencies, and only a handful of those in research institutions. If all women administrators at the dean's level and above were equally distributed among all institutions, there would be only 1.1 per institution. Women faculty are tenured at about the same rate as a decade ago and continue to report difficulty breaking into the very system that produced them. (*Educating the Majority*, p. 5)

Even though women have made strong gains as students, including in many "non-traditional" fields, they have not made similar progress onto those faculties. Generally, women have stagnated at the lecturer, non-tenure track, and assistant professor levels. No longer can we use the old argument that there are insufficient numbers of qualified women in the academic pipeline. Instead, the problem seems to occur with promotion and tenure. As Chamberlain explains:

> Field by field, the proportion of women among assistant professors slightly exceeded their presence in the relevant PhD pools. However, the rate of promotion for male assistant professors was markedly higher—by more than 50 percent in the case of the top 50 institutions. (*Women in Academe*, 214)

She examines possible causes for these different promotion rates, investigating research and productivity, limitations on geographic mobility, marital and family status, concluding that:

> When all of the evidence is weighed,... about half of the overall sex difference in career outcomes can be accounted for. The only rational explanation for the remainder is discrimination. (*Women in Academe*, pp. 218–219)

Besides gathering data about women's participation, each of these volumes also reminds us that to examine "women" in academe as if they were a monolithic, undifferentiated group is grossly misleading. How ridiculous to seek out women in order to enhance diversity, and then lump them together as if they all brought the same backgrounds, skills, needs, and learning styles to the campus.

In analyzing the specific needs and contributions of different groups of academic women, *Educating the Majority* is the indispensable volume. Although the other books treat the issue concisely, *Educating the Majority* offers eleven separate chapters which summarize and explicate the current knowledge about different women. For example, there are the focused chapters on Hispanic women, Asian women, and American Indian women that I have looked for as guides to the current scholarship. Likewise this book offers good analyses of changes in "traditional" and "reentry" college women as we enter the 1990s.

The second area that these three books skillfully tackle is writing the history of the recent women's movement in academe. As with all good historical analysis, the writers attempt two tasks: first, they seek to record the events and the actors of the past, and second, they try to discern the important themes or directions suggested by that history. Here the analysis is performed by some of the most notable participants in this movement over the last twenty-five years. It is instructive to read contributions by Florence Howe, Donna Shavlik, Mariam Chamberlain, Bernice Sandler, Elizabeth Minnich, and others as they put the past into perspective, now that "the first great wave of change is over" (Chamberlain, *Women in Academe*, p. 24).

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Reading their histories makes us realize more clearly than before how important the network of women's groups has been to the advancement of women in any single area. That is, to read about the successful outcome of one sex discrimination case is to see how several professional organizations provided support and data for the claimant. To read about the ad-

vances made by faculty women on individual campuses is to connect with the various programs (e.g., rosters of women scholars) created by the scholarly societies to enhance women's visibility. To read about the success of women's studies curricula is to note the support and flexibility of women's centers across campuses. The present size and scope of women's issues makes such obvious connections less visible, but no less necessary, today.

Another strong historical contribution in these volumes is the analysis of women's studies. In the early years of the women's movement, affirmative action and women's studies constituted two simultaneous efforts. Although affirmative action has certainly produced success, women's studies has defied all early predictions for its growth and its quality. Administrators and faculty on all campuses—especially large ones like metropolitan universities—have now become accustomed to their local women's studies departments or programs, but perhaps without fully understanding the nature of the work. These studies, especially the chapter by Marilyn Boxer in *Reconstructing the Academy*, offer a superlative introduction to the issues and theories of women's studies.

Boxer goes beyond explaining the various stages of women's studies work, although she does cite early formulations by Florence Howe, Catharine Stimpson, and others about how feminist scholars moved from the first stage of rediscovering "exceptional" women in history to reconceptualizing the entire traditional historical canon. In doing so, Boxer explains how women's studies moved from a view of itself as "compensatory and ultimately, if successful, self-liquidating" to its current stage, which demands integration of knowledge about women across the entire curriculum (Boxer in *Reconstructing the Academy*, p. 79). Boxer's article also discusses the politics, structures, and theories of women's studies in a lucid, straightforward analysis that may help those outside women's studies departments better understand how and why integration of women's perspectives is so important.

The most exciting and challenging chapters in these three books speak to the third area they undertake: to explain and analyze the newest directions in feminist research. Many of the articles in these sections are review pieces in which an author summarizes the range of material currently available and analyzes the state of a field. (See, for example, Sally Schwager on education and Linda Alcoff on feminist theory in *Reconstructing the Academy*.)

However, when assembled and grouped by the editors, these pieces assume an enhanced purpose. They examine environments and theories that have been developed by women as their "response to exclusion or discrimination" (*Educating the Majority*, p. 147). Together they suggest answers to the question posed by the editors of *Educating the Majority*: "If an institution were to commit itself fully to meeting the educational needs of women what would it do?" (p. 1).

The "responses" that are presented include a few efforts that did not achieve their promise. For example, the separate women's colleges receive considerable criticism for not taking the lead in the academic women's movement. Even though scholars like M. Elizabeth Tidball continue to examine ways and reasons for the enhanced career success of some women's college graduates,other researchers cast doubt both on this definition of success and on those colleges' resistance to playing a feminist leadership role. And although "curriculum transformation" projects receive thorough and excellent coverage in all three books, one of the most interesting pieces is an analysis by Susan Hardy Aiken, et al., of the "hydra-like" problems and resistance their team encountered during four years of curriculum work. (See "Trying Transformations" in *Reconstructing the Academy*, pp. 104–124.)

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Given the widespread interest across higher education in both feminist psychology and its pedagogical implications, these books might have devoted more space to analyzing the work of Carol Gilligan and Mary Belenky and her colleagues. *Educating the Majority* has one chapter on applying Gilligan's work to "the learning environment," but that piece only cites the Belenky, et al., book in its article form (see *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, Basic Books, 1986) and it includes little discussion of other work on feminist pedagogy. Feminist scholars are questioning the implications of a psychology of differences, and the topic would been served better here with additional essays on this issue, including some that critically examine pedagogical and theoretical implications of this work.

The field of "curriculum transformation" is, however, very well treated throughout these volumes. Feminist efforts to integrate the growing knowledge about women into all disciplines has been the most exciting and focused effort in women's studies over the past dozen years. As this effort—variously called "integrating," "balancing," "reconceptualizing," or "mainstreaming" the curriculum—reaches a wider range of campuses, it demands that all faculty and administrators familiarize themselves with the theory and the importance of this work. It is no longer acceptable (should it ever have been?) for the hoary professor of literature or history to scoff that topics about women belonged only in a few women's studies courses where (as everyone knew) the theoretical and evidentiary underpinnings for the work were almost nonexistent. (Interestingly, Chamberlain notes that "the preponderant structure of women's studies programs as they now exist and continue to be formed suggest that the case for women's studies as a

discipline has not yet been made" [*Women in Academe*, p. 159]. This issue represents one unresolved debate about the structure of women's studies programs.) Each of these books does a solid job of explicating these curricular projects, not from a "how-to" approach but rather by analyzing the theory behind the efforts.

Two outstanding analyses are the chapters by Elizabeth K. Minnich, "From the Circle of the Elite to the World of the Whole," and Peggy Means McIntosh, "Curricular Re-Vision: The New Knowledge for a New Age" in *Educating the Majority* (pp. 277–293; 400–412). McIntosh succinctly explains the need for curriculum transformation: "Access to a sexist and racist curriculum is not sex or race equity" (p. 400). She reminds us that bringing diversity to our campuses merely by increasing the number of women or minorities without changing the campus or the curriculum is a very shallow definition of diversity, indeed. Minnich is more pointed:

> The full absurdity of assuming that a Black woman, studying a curriculum that is by and about white men, is having the same experience, learning the same things, as a white man studying alongside her is still not fully evident to some educators. (p. 286)

In the end, these two scholars sound a call that is echoed by all the authors in these volumes: we must examine our interest in diversity, and examine squarely whether our institutions have valued and integrated the perspectives that "new" students have brought. As the subtitle to *Educating the Majority* proclaims, "Women challenge tradition in higher education." Historically women have received access to collegiate institutions that were built by and for men. Women have always functioned within those constraints, but only recently have they begun to demand actively that the institutions themselves change. In our present course, we run the risk of supporting what Margaret Wilkerson calls "gender apartheid" (*Educating the Majority*, p. 27) when we downplay women's needs and demands because they do not fit well into the system already established.

Derrick Bell's colleagues would do well to read these three books—to read even one of these three books. Not only will they find some facts to use in their debate, but they will also encounter some new ways to frame their discourse.