Feminist Interventions, Gender Equality and Academic Resistance – A Swedish Political History

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In Sweden as well as in many other countries in Europe, there is a continuous struggle around the question of the significance of women as students and researchers, a never-ending discussion. It is a century old conflict: what number of women is just right or how many are thought to be too many? There are also struggles going on with regard to the value of feminist research in the academy, the question being what kinds of knowledge production are accepted and legitimate.

I will base my speech on these two problems – who and what, presence and knowledge – and ask:

How are we to understand the conditions for women – different women - in the academy?
How can we understand the predicament in which feminist research finds itself?

To be able to find answers – although not complete - to these questions, we have to be aware of how gender is being mobilized or manipulated for various new – and old – purposes within higher education. My point of departure is that the gendering process is becoming more complex, and, thus, more difficult to interpret, but not necessarily more equal.

These disputes about the actual presence of women in the universities AND what they may say are political – of course.
Hence, I will talk about the political, about open and silenced conflicts with regard to the meaning of sex and gender in academia, and about resistance to change in terms of gender and knowledge.

At the centre of this talk are three producers of knowledge, each of whom is fighting to establish its view of the gender order. These are firstly women researchers as activists or gender researchers in association with the women’s movement, secondly state institutions and gender equality policies and thirdly representatives of academia.

The three groups correspond to Feminist Interventions, Gender Equality and Academic Resistance. The relations between these three groups are like a sort of domestic triangle. The salient pattern is that women academics and politicians unite in a criticism of a university ethos that resists change.

As early as 1987 the Norwegian political scientist Helga Hernes, in her book *Welfare State and Woman Power – Essays in State Feminism* described how an interplay had grown up, in the Nordic welfare states, between the women’s organisations’ demands coming from below and – what she calls - state feminism’s activity from the top.

My focus is the dynamic in the relations between these three groups. Also, I shall try to show how these three groups are diversified and complex in themselves. I will be talking political history from a 30 year Swedish perspective, starting with 1975, ending up with the situation today - though time is not the message here.
My aim is rather to show how support and resistance have been expressed, also how explicit support and concealed opposition can go hand in hand. Finally, I will present some thoughts about challenges for the future. My point being that we need to assess resistance in all its forms in order to find adequate strategies for the future.

To begin with: towards the end of the 1970s spontaneous women’s movements occurred locally in the universities in Sweden. The 1970s was a time of activism associated with a general radicalization of ideas about society, democracy and economy. One outspoken goal was more women in politics, in the workplace – and in the academy.

While the earlier history of the women’s movement meant a struggle for women to gain access to the universities, the early 1970s saw the beginning of the flowering of women’s studies in Sweden. The women’s movements at the end of the 1970s were concerned both with the conditions for women researchers AND with women’s research. In other words, there was a cohesive struggle for a female presence in the academy AND the production of feminist knowledge.

One such women’s movement, the Forum for Feminist Research in Stockholm, has just celebrated its 30th anniversary.

In 1979 those of us who started the association thought that a united front against the university was more important than possible political and theoretical disagreements amongst ourselves.

Our poster from 1981, reprinted this spring, shows a woman in a tree rejecting the apple, the traditional fruit of knowledge.
We all rather wanted to pick pears!
(The drawing is made by Margareta Matovic, a Swedish historian)

It can be noted that now, thirty years later, on the other hand, gender research is characterized by conflicting positions. I regard these conflicts as by and large nationally coded; that is to say characteristic of the Swedish scene, due to the intervening – and ambivalent – role of the state. There seems to be a division – or several – between those who are loyal to the national institutionalization of gender equality and gender research, and those who think that it is justifiable to criticize Swedish gender research particularly in post-colonial or queer perspectives.

Then, that is towards the end of the 1970’s, there was great faith in local women’s movements like these Centres or Fora that brought women academics from various disciplines together. These contacts have been of enormous value for many of us. But if the inspiration for these groups came from below, they lived on support from the state.

In 1975, during the first International Women’s Year, the Universities’ chancellor’s office published a polemic report entitled Gender Equality in Higher Education. This report pointed out the unequal distribution of the sexes in the academy. At the same time, the Universities were urged to add literature about women’s circumstances to various courses. That was how I was drawn into feminist research and lecturing at my department. This was the first time that a government body made an open connection between the uneven division of the sexes, on the one hand, and the uneven production of knowledge concerning conditions for women (and men), on the other – with particular address to the academy.
The state also gave earmarked funds to the newly started Centers or Fora at the universities. This was met by protests from the academy, not surprisingly. The mere fact of earmarking indicated a distrust of the academy, a distrust that was well founded. For example, Stockholm University tried various tricks to get hold of these resources - but luckily without success.

What we witness here is the parallel growth of the new women’s movement and official gender equality policies. It was in this context that an open alliance occurred between politicians, feminist bureaucrats – or femocrats – AND grass-root activists in opposition to an uncomprehending university establishment. It was an organized critique both from below and from outside.

Close connections between women researchers and women’s studies and trust in women as a source of change characterize the period from 1975 to 1995. These years also display a relatively untroubled confidence in the welfare state. This can be seen as a sign of a broader Swedish belief in consensus. Nonetheless, critical voices were heard warning that feminist scholarship would lose its edge if it became a mere tool for national gender equality aims. These voices argued that women’s studies should remain attached to the women’s movement.

During this period, from 1975 to 1995, there was an increase in the representation of women in various popularly elected bodies. This development also meant increased political support for women’s studies.

To summarize this part, the Swedish investment in gender equality and gender research at the universities has come about primarily thanks to political
decisions. This is evidently controversial in a world where academic autonomy – and gender neutrality – is emphasized.

(Tham chairs)
Two decades of persistent lobbying for women researchers and women’s studies had met with varying degrees of opposition both within and outside the academy. These disputes reached a peak in 1995. The trigger of this process was Mr Carl Tham, who had been appointed Minister of Education in the Social Democratic government that was formed after the September 1994 election.

Mr Tham very soon made it clear that he wanted to increase the number of women researchers and support gender research. The increased presence of women would be guaranteed by the creation of 31 discipline specific chairs – the so-called Tham professorships – as well as a number of post-graduate positions for the under-represented sex.

The production of new knowledge was to be ensured through the creation of six special professorships in gender studies, each with a research fellowship and a post-graduate position attached – all in all 18 posts. In addition a National Secretariat for Gender Research was set up to gain a general overview of gender research in Sweden and to disseminate its results.

As part of the package, a special inquiry was started, led by one of Sweden’s best known feminist researchers, Ebba Witt-Brattström, who was also a portal figure in the woman’s movement since the 1970s. Put together, these proposals constituted a gender-political research initiative without compare.

These moves made the alliance between politicians and women’s studies researchers, formed in opposition to the academic establishment, clearer than
ever before. Here women’s struggle for better conditions in higher education and research merged together with state support. Meanwhile the resistance put up by the universities was compact, aggressive and to some degree merciless.

It was the investment in 31 professorships for the underrepresented sex that gave rise to most criticism. The Minister of Education wanted to widen the academic field to allow for new research problems, and change scientific attitudes. He had a vision of a “democratic learning society” where gender equality and competence were not seen as being in opposition to one another, but as working in co-operation and improving quality. These ideas were not well received in the academy, to say the least.

When the chair professors were being appointed positive discrimination of the underrepresented sex might be used. This made no applicant hesitate. However, a report by Birgitta Jordansson in cooperation with the National Secretariat for Gender Research, has shown that applicants wavered between rejecting and recognizing the connection between gender and knowledge/qualifications. So did the individual departments when advertising the posts. The applicants wanted it to appear both as if they lived up to the demands of meritocracy – that is to say that special treatment was unnecessary, and as if circumstances were in fact a little different for women – that is to say that special treatment might be needed. However, everyone tried to maintain the principles of meritocracy – namely to keep the process as clean as possible from the corruption of sex and gender.

What I am talking about here is, in fact, the adding of 31 women chair professors – to a total of 2.177. But this increase of 1.4 per cent women was interpreted as a fatal deterioration in the quality of the universities.
Let me quote from one of Sweden’s largest – and conservative – morning newspapers in February 1995.

Carl Tham has found a completely infallible way of emptying the universities of ambitious, hard working men folk in order to fill them with mediocre women instead. The decline in standards that will be an inevitable consequence of this will not benefit any aspect of the woman’s cause. For those women who have got their positions on the basis of gender – how will they feel when faced by the inevitable contempt shown by the defeated, that is to say men who (also for reasons of gender) have been passed over? (Svenska Dagbladet 23 feb.1995 – my translation)

The most common counter argument was that a new kind of principle was in the process of being introduced into the academy, namely that gender, female gender, was a qualification in itself, something the critics called “the gender excuse”.

The issue of the underrepresentation of women was also turned against them. Women were accused of not measuring up to the standard – an argument that is well over 100 years old. As the women who got positions were not thought to be good enough, they would simply have to put up with being treated with contempt by men who thought that they had been unjustly passed over. Everyone – and especially competent women – would lose from the change. Women must be protected from becoming a B team, that was the idea. Men’s power to stop women was reformulated as a chivalrous and self-imposed defense of women’s interests. “The logic of masculinist protection”, to use the words of the American political scientist Iris Marion Young.

According to the minister of education, special positions for gender research were also needed. As I mentioned earlier, 6 professorships were set up to work beside the traditional disciplines in a way that would open up new research horizons. In the bill that the Social Democratic government presented to the
Swedish parliament in the spring of 1995 gender equality was defined as a subject of knowledge.

Lisbeth Larsson, a professor of literature and one of the six gender professors in question, is very critical of how the academy has administered the government’s investment in gender research. She has called the scramble for this money that took place in the universities and institutions of higher education the hunt for the gender gold. This was when all the universities and colleges in the country warmed to the topic of how just they had the competence in the field of gender, that was particularly suited to these chairs.

But when the money was safely secured there began a struggle to use the money for the normal business of the university and not for gender research at all. Professor Larsson even goes so far as to claim that the Swedish university system “even managed to use the reform designed to renew the system to reinforce it”.

So, why did the Minister of Education’s initiatives generate such powerful resistance from the academy?

One interpretation is that Minister Tham and the Social Democratic government put themselves on the women’s side. This can be understood as a serious break of principle with an old well-established alliance between men of the state administration and men in the academy.

Another answer is to be found in the method used, a kind of cautious allocation of positions to women, that was regarded as a new kind of political trick. The resistance to the Tham professorships has been interpreted by the sociologist Maria Törnquist as coming from how these positions were seen as a state sanctioned short-cut, a kind of cheating. Women would be helped to get into the academy with the unwarrantable assistance of the state.
This anxiety needs to be seen against the background of a belief that there is a “clean” apolitical way to reach high positions in the universities. Iris Marion Young has called this faith in neutral criteria the “ideology of merit”.

Putting the evidence together we see more open resistance to a tiny increase of women professors, that is to women as women, than to gender research as such. My interpretation of this continued opposition to women is that the academy is still an important arena – may be the most important one - for white, native born, middle class men to produce masculinity, knowledge and national value.

What Mr Tham did was to name those features. In reverse: He never constructed women as a problem. This was a new and challenging policy.

Carl Tham was only a Minister of Education during one term.

**What is the situation today?**

Women account for 60 per cent of higher education enrolments in Sweden, which some regard as an inequality to the detriment of men. The number of women full professors has increased from 7 per cent in 1995 to 18 per cent in 2008.

But if nothing is done, the share of women professors in natural science and technology will be considerably lower in 2030 than today, according to calculations by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education.

As regards gender research, gender-studies institutions have been strengthened while gender studies in the established disciplines have fallen behind in many places – certainly a backlash for feminist initiatives.
What do negotiations between the academy, gender equality policies and the women’s movement look like today?

*To start with, what is the language of the academy?*

First and foremost: the academy defends its autonomy from the state:

“’The institutions of higher education must be able to maintain their integrity”

“’There should be no detailed regulation”

“Basic research must be free”

Through these type of statements the academy rejects all steering of research and earmarked funding (including funds for gender research, of course).

Another keyword, in Sweden as elsewhere, is excellence – only the leading researchers and research environments are to be given funding.

The government’s aim is world-class research. Sweden must be promoted as a ‘nation of knowledge’. The Liberal Party wished for a Swedish Nobel Prize in the last election campaign, in the sciences.

However, I will give you one example: when the so called Linné funds for excellence were allocated it transpired that the whole sum went to male researchers. This led a group of women researchers to protest in a newspaper against the gendered implications of excellence.

In addition, the concept of excellence is closely tied to the idea of profitability. Research must pay off. For the nation.

The academy also acts against quotas (remember the resistance to the 31 professorships for women)
But in practice, it is men who get special treatment when being accepted for university courses in Sweden.

It is striking that while almost 8000 cases of sexual discrimination have occurred between 2006 and 2008, 94 per cent of these cases affected women in a negative way. Men have been the winners.

To sum up – and simplify - the universities’ attitude: it is autonomy from the state (nota bene, not from private funds), meritocracy and an implicit support of men.

*Secondly, what about the official language of gender equality?*

The former Minister of Higher Education Lars Leijonborg (liberal) maintained that the universities today have a dual problem: too few women at the top and too many in undergraduate education.

Therefore, the non-socialist government has just invested 60 million Swedish crowns in promoting gender equality in the institutions of higher education, with the particular aim of counteracting gender-bound educational choices and the low number of men applying for higher education.

The policy behind this move seems to be that the increasing proportion of women is as problematic as a predominance of men. Or expressed differently: the lower interest of men in academic studies today is just as important as the earlier formal and informal exclusions of women from higher education.

In the language of gender equality, equality presupposes sameness: only likes can be treated alike. So the problem is regarded as the same - but the other way around.

In this understanding of gender equality, women – and men – are disconnected from power relations in society.
Insisting that gender equality has been more or less fully achieved in society makes women more responsible for any unequal conditions that occur. Interview studies made by the Swedish sociologist Gunilla Carstensen show that women who have experienced sexual harassment lack a socio-political explanation for the individual discrimination that they experience. Thus, women blame themselves for having behaved in an unequal way.

When it comes to the state’s attitude towards gender research it can be seen as double-edged: it is at once a support of - AND a silencing of - gender research. There is a growing criticism of feminist research, particularly some research dealing with “men’s violence against women” and gender based violence. But there is also a critique of theories of gender as a social construction, theories recently called “bullshit” by the Minister of Social Affairs, also the Christian Democratic Party leader. The state and the non-socialist government do not wish to be seen as being in the grips of the gender researchers, particularly not the wrong ones.

My interpretation of the situation today is that men are in the process of conquering the field of gender equality policies, both as the object of active measures and as subjects/agents, without whose involvement no greater changes can be brought about.

This is a gender equality that tends to leave the masculinist gender in place. It is a policy based on a worry about reverse discrimination – the discrimination of native Swedish men.

However, despite these, to say the least, ambivalent gender equality policies, when it comes to funding, gender researchers on the whole trust politicians more than they do their academic colleagues.
Thirdly, what is the talk of the women’s movement or the feminist activists, the third part, in this domestic triangle?

Is it true, as maintained by Anita Göransson – a Swedish economic historian – that the women’s movement has established itself as a political and academic field in Sweden? This is an idea that fits in well with what other researchers believe; that feminist research can be seen as a social movement.

The argument being that if the women’s movement can be a producer of knowledge then the feminist production of knowledge can be seen as a movement. Meanwhile other feminists regret that academic feminism has lost its connection with social activism.

But how can the academic branch of the women’s movement be described? We can see it as internal polemics and polarization, as a tough battle for resources and as a competition for the few positions available.

There is also an unpleasant public debate going on, in which some more radical researchers have to run the gauntlet of disapproval, while others, who may be less challenging, are spared. However, suspicions directed at one researcher often affect the whole collective.

What I mean to say is that the increasing tensions within academic feminism should be regarded in the light of the domestic triangle that I have described; that feminist interventions are being undermined, on the one hand, by talk of the academy as a meritocratic, apolitical project and, on the other, by an idea that gender equality reigns for the most part – even that things may have gone too far. This means that women scholars are prevented from seeing their circumstances in the academy as formed by power structures. Any action against the academic order is made more difficult.
The fact that both the academy and the state have taken a position against “extreme” feminism also prepares the ground for conflicts.

**Finally, what challenges do I see for the future?**

Here, again, my starting point is that the situation is ambivalent and hard to evaluate. We are faced by what the American political scientist Zillah Eisenstein insists is a “cacophony of gendered meanings” which “splinters the meaning of the sexes, their genders, and therefore feminisms themselves”.

How can we talk about change and feminist interventions in this situation of gender fluidity?

I have some suggestions for our thinking about the future.

We, who work for equality, need to identify and name the gap between women’s individual achievements in academia and gender oppression at structural and systematic levels.

For women in the academy there is a tension between being accepted into the intellectual community on the one hand and being exposed to sexual harassment and different forms of discrimination and/or exclusions on the other.

We have to be wary of the fact that supporting some women – and some kinds of gender research respectively – does not necessarily mean a change in power relations, or equality. Support and so called defense of women’s interests might even hinder a power shift.

Inspired by Zillah Eisenstein and her book *Sexual Decoys* I would like to launch the idea that the inclusion of women in certain spaces should not be regarded as the opposite to their exclusion. As I have tried to show, the
language of gender equality seems to be inscribed into the idea that these processes are parallel.

In practice, inclusion and exclusion are based on different understandings of power. Also, inclusion and exclusion take place at the same time, one mirroring the other.

This, I feel, is a primary mission: to read or analyze different expressions of resistance against women as women and against feminist research. Resistance is to be found both on the part of the state and the academy, as separate actors or in conjunction.

We need to interpret how organizing concepts such as meritocracy, equality and knowledge have been kidnapped and depoliticized – while the whole field of women in higher education and the conditions for gender research is regarded as a problem, something that has to be penetrated and discussed, over and over again.

The academy is the perfect place for “power laundering”. Power is translated into truth claims, a belief in a production of knowledge that is independent of surrounding discourses. This is what the Danish researcher Cathrine Egeland calls the academic “culture of no culture”.

So here we are, facing individual inclusions and successes – which is a good thing – and an academic system defining itself as acting beyond gender, ethnicity, sexuality, power and politics.

This leads me to the conclusion that we, probably more than ever before, need to speak up about the political, about conflicting interests and the academy as part of a larger socio-political arena.
Only then can the premises of legitimacy, pertaining to presence and knowledge production, be revealed.

If the academy is to function as a democratic space and make up, what the postcolonial feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty calls a “free zone of non-oppression” – then we must reassert the political.

This would mean the reclaiming of depoliticized concepts such as merit, equality and knowledge.

But politicizing would also signify widening the discussion to problems of corporeality, hetero-sexuality, ethnicity, agency – and research as praxis, emancipation and change.

The political that is not called political is dangerous. The political that is not called political opens up for undemocratic practices.

This is my vision, let us be political, and make up groups:

Let us talk back! Be provocative and disloyal! Let us refuse to be part of the national project of excellence and profitability!

That is easy to say, I admit that. Collective action carries its threats. I agree with Adrienne Rich, the well-known American poet and feminist: As academic feminists, we have to take personal risks!

Particularly if we want to pick pears from the tree...!

Thank you for listening.
Feminism involves political and sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference, as well as a movement that advocates gender equality for women and campaigns for women's rights and interests. Although the terms “feminism” and “feminist” did not gain widespread use until the 1970s, they were already being used in the public parlance much earlier; for instance, Katherine Hepburn speaks of the “feminist movement” in the 1942 film Woman of the Year. Gender equality is a human right. Women are entitled to live with dignity and with freedom from want and from fear. Gender equality is also a precondition for advancing development and reducing poverty: Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities, and they improve prospects for the next generation. Still, despite solid evidence demonstrating the centrality of women’s empowerment to realizing human rights, reducing poverty, promoting development and addressing the world’s most urgent challenges, gender equality remains an unfulfilled promise. Week 4: gender, international political economy and development. 6. Questions: What are the roles and positions of women in the global political economy? The Dynamics of Race and Gender: Some Feminist Interventions (London: Taylor & Francis). Chatterjee, P. (1993) The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories (Princeton: Princeton University Press) Darby, P. (ed.) (1997) At the Edge of International Relations: Postcolonialism, Gender and Dependency (London & New York: Printer) Introduction and Chapter 1 Darby, P. & Paolini, A. J. (1994) ‘Bridging International Relations and Postcolonialism’ in Alternatives 19 pp371-397. Seminar presentation: Identify the gendered consequences of the discourse of globalisation. Their political agenda expanded to issues concerning sexual, reproductive and economic matters. The seed was planted that women have the potential to contribute just as much if not more than men. [Image from Pixabay]. Coming off the heels of World War II, the second wave of feminism focused on the workplace, sexuality, family and reproductive rights. During a time when the United States was already trying to restructure itself, it was perceived that women had met their equality goals with the exception of the failure of the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (which has still yet to be passed). Misconceptions… This time is often dismissed as offensive, outdated and obsessed with middle class white women’s problems. FEMINISTS THEORIZE THE POLITICAL