

What Does It Mean to Call Feminism 'White and Middle-Class'?

Australian Women's Studies Association conference, Perth, Western Australia

(January 2004): I sent another version of the 'White and Middle-Class' paper to the organisers of the AWSA conference to be held in Perth, Western Australia. They rejected it, too. To give the conference organisers their due, the reason they gave—that the paper had already been given elsewhere—was a sensible one, and they did give me the opportunity to submit another paper. But for a number of reasons, the decision was not as sensible as it appeared at first sight. The time was short and I didn't have another paper immediately available. There had been no indication in the pre-publicity for the conference that previously presented papers would not be accepted for this conference. And then there was that question raised at the AGM of the UK Women's Studies Network at the conference in Stirling—when did the policy of accepting all submissions to feminist conferences change, and why? I found these circumstances highly suspicious, and said so.

This was hardly likely to influence the organisers to feel kindly towards me (as my friend pointed out—see below). But there isn't any nice way to say I think you've made a mistake. And my suspicions were confirmed next year, when one of the organisers, in her role as Australasian and Asian editor of the journal, *Women's Studies International Forum*, rejected a longer version of the paper on the advice of two readers who couldn't read what I said. All three wanted me to re-write the paper in line with the framework I was criticising. I declined.

To and from the conference organisers

Centre for Research for Women
The University of Western Australia
May 31st, 1996

Dear Denise,

Thank you for forwarding an abstract of the Paper you would like to present at our forthcoming Conference. The Conference Working Party will be meeting after June 15th to decide on the final format of the programme and will let you know if your paper has been accepted.

Yours sincerely,

[...]

Centre for Research for Women
The University of Western Australia
July 2nd, 1996

Dear Denise,

The Working Party for the conference has considered your abstract and taken into account the fact that it was presented at the recent 6th International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women. They have been overwhelmed with proposed papers and are very keen to provide an opportunity for new ones to be aired. Therefore they have not accepted your paper this time.

Despite the fact that the date for receipt of abstracts has passed, they would be happy to consider another submission from you if you would like to resubmit a paper closer to the principal theme. If you do intend to resubmit we would ask that you do so as soon as possible as programme details are being confirmed as I write.

Yours sincerely,

[...]

Feminism 'White and Middle-Class'? Reply 2 - Denise Thompson

6.7.1996

Dear Conference Organisers,

Why are you accepting some papers and rejecting others? Why have you decided to rescind the usual policy for feminist conferences that all proposals be accepted? You say you are 'overwhelmed' with papers, but is that a good enough reason for imposing criteria of exclusion? Surely a large number of proposals is a cause for rejoicing not dismay, especially given how far Perth is from the populous centres of the east coast, and how poor women are. You say that my paper has been rejected because it has already been presented at the Congress on Women. But papers presented at the Congress were sparsely attended (unless they were presented at plenaries by someone more important than the rest of us), and hence were heard by very few women. Any paper presented there is going to be 'new' to most women.

The paper I proposed for the AWSA conference is the culmination of months of work, including 2 or 3 previous versions. It is simply not possible to write anything 'new' in the time available. I am what is euphemistically known as an 'independent scholar'. In practice, that means being excluded from academic employment (money, in crude terms), status and recognition. Feminist conferences are the only access I have to public forums of debate, and I have had that access only because feminist conferences have had a policy of non-exclusion. As soon as criteria of selection are applied, my experience has been that my proposals are invariably rejected, despite my years of work. Whether that is because what I say is unpopular in certain circles, or whether it is simply that my work is unknown (and saying unpopular things is the best way of staying unknown). the result is the same. What little access I have to public debate is blocked.

As a consequence of your decision, I and others who proposed papers which were presented at the Congress have been excluded from the AWSA conference in terms of a rule we knew nothing about. If that is the 'future of feminism', I want nothing to do with it.

Yours faithfully,

Denise Thompson

A letter to a friend

6.7.1996

Dear [...],

Since talking to you on the phone, I've changed my mind about the implications of the AWSA conference policy decision not to accept papers presented at the Congress on Women. [I don't know now what this change of mind was]. So you were right to be anxious about my reaction. I've included a copy of the letter I sent to the organisers.

Thanks for sending me the extract from the BSA [British Sociological Association] Newsletter, but I don't know what you thought I could do with the information. I'm unlikely to be in the UK next year, and even if I were, there is no way that anything I said would be accepted for the 'Transformations' conference, since I disagree so fundamentally with that paradigm. Despite what they say, they don't want to 're-think' anything. There is a dogma afoot here, viz. 'the questioning of "woman" and "women" as foundational categories, and the Black and post-colonial critiques of ethnocentrism in white feminist discourse'. Any attempt to make inroads into the dogma just creates confusion at best, and antagonism at worst. If the conference were happening here I'd give it a go, but only to add yet one more rejection to my growing pile.

'Paranoid', you say? But I can't ignore the evidence. I've had to learn painfully that challenging entrenched doctrine carries penalties. Naively, I didn't expect it. I thought that I was simply clarifying the nature of feminism in order to get beyond certain paralysing political contradictions. I should have realised that the contradictions only existed because there were vested interests in keeping them on the boil. Nonetheless, I have learned a few things. One of the most recent is a peculiarity of the arguments opposing what I say. Both in the case of defining feminism, and in the case of what I say about the 'race' debate, no one has challenged what I actually say. What has been challenged is my right to say it. No one has disagreed with the *content* of what I say. Instead, I am told that I ought not to be saying it. For example, I have been told that I ought not define feminism—because I have no right to say who is a feminist and who is not, because defining feminism is some kind of dogmatic imposition, etc.—but not that the definition I propose is wrong. I have been told that I ought not to say what I am saying about 'race'—because I will be attacked, because 'we' ought not to criticise 'them', because race politics is entitled to its polemical stances and has nothing to do with truth, etc.—but not that what I am saying is wrong, how it is wrong, or how it might

be improved.

You yourself have said something to the effect that the problem with what I say is that I set up my own paradigm and then make everything else to fit. (Have I understood you correctly?) But why is that a problem? Not only do I explicitly acknowledge that that is what I do—it is the crux of my argument about feminism being a moral and political commitment—who doesn't do it? *No one* speaks from outside systems of meaning and value. The only difference between what I do and what happens anyway, is that, whereas I can see the importance of struggling to acknowledge the moral and political stance I am taking, relations of ruling proceed as business as usual to the extent that they remain covert and disguised. We cannot afford a 'tolerance' which allows complicity with male supremacist meanings and values to pass unchallenged, especially when they masquerade as 'feminism'. The problem is that you and I have had too few chances to talk and argue things through. Unfortunately, I don't see that changing in the near future. Oh, well.

Lots of love,

Denise

Advice from a friend

10.7.96

Dear Denise,

It doesn't look to me as if you 'changed your mind', it seems rather that you moved back into the framework for understanding what's happening that I spent most of the week at the conference [the Congress on Women] protesting about. It's not that I think it's 'wrong' or that there's something 'wrong' with you for persisting with it, it just seems unproductive to me. For instance, how does anything you say in the letter challenge your marginalisation as an independent scholar and increase your access to feminist debate? Can't see that it does anything to alter this. Your letter is fine protest, but it is not effective in altering the situation for you. Nor does it open discussion with me about those issues, for it's just too antagonistic. To me, it looks like you are not so much excluded from the dialogue as choosing not to participate for your own reasons. I respect that choice, would willingly discuss your reasons, but I don't agree you are forced to take it. I won't defend the decision taken [by the AWSA Conference Working Party], for that's not my business. I have trouble with your arguments though. Eg, I can't see how the procedures used for selection are 'complicit ... with

male supremacist meanings and values'—I feel you would need to spell out how this is the case. And I am really not happy about the slippage from the rejection of a repeat paper/rejection of content/exclusion of yourself as a scholar: does rejection of a paper in these terms invariably lead to or include the last two? This is what I meant by your 'framework of understanding' when we spoke at the conference—and I felt I had to constantly point to it as a barrier to dialogue between us. As to the content of what you say, I utterly agree, but I guess you knew that. And, yes, I agree that we have had few chances to talk things through, but I don't think that is the problem here. Wouldn't your experience of academic marginalisation post honours belong within the residual category you referred to as 'ancient history'? I don't mind which way you move in terms of your own academic participation, as long as it works for your well-being. I'm not sure that your reaction to the AWSA organisers does this for you, and as a friend who values your intellectual efforts and participation, I am not afraid to say so to you.

Love to you and yours,

[...]

A reply to a friend

15.7.1996

Dear [...],

We really are talking past each other. Let me take your objections to what you see as my arguments first:

1. I did not say that 'the procedures used for selection' by the AWSA organisers were 'complicit with male supremacist meanings and values'. You have drawn an inference which isn't there. My reference to 'male supremacist etc.' was in the context of my discussion of 'systems of meanings and values' and the importance of making those explicit because they happen anyway. That discussion followed on from my comments on the 'Transformations' conference in the UK. Except for the first paragraph, I didn't discuss the organisers' decision at all in my letter to you.
2. You say that you are not happy with what you refer to as 'the slippage from the rejection of a repeat paper/rejection of content/exclusion of yourself as a scholar'. You then ask whether the first 'invariably leads to or includes the last two'. Why do you interpret my letter to the AWSA organisers that way? Let me suggest a different interpretation:

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a. I started by asking the organisers why they had decided to rescind the usual policy at feminist conferences of accepting all proposals. (By the way, the question is not original to me. It was asked by a woman at the annual general meeting of the UK WSNA about the organisation of the WSN conference at Stirling in Scotland last year. She did not get an answer). I said that I was not convinced by their reasons, firstly, because a large number of papers is a good thing not a bad one, and because the papers at the Congress were heard by very few women, the sessions being sparsely attended, and hence would be new to most women.

b. My references to my own experiences in the second paragraph were intended to illustrate the consequences of exclusion for whatever reason, with the only case study I have access to, my own. Nowhere did I say that the organisers had rejected my paper because of its content, nor that they had rejected me personally. I do not have access to sufficient information to know whether that is the case or not. I was pointing out that the consequence for me (I don't know about anyone else) was that the organisers' decision meant that I was prevented from participating in the only public forum I have access to. Since there are personal historical reasons why feminist conferences are my only access to public debate, I gave a brief account of what I thought were the most relevant ones.

c. I concluded by pointing out that they were excluding papers in terms of a rule which no one knew about.

This interpretation is less 'antagonistic' than the letter (isn't it?). Nonetheless, it is possible to interpret the letter itself in the terms outlined above. By interpreting it in the way you did, you are implying that I was making snide insinuations about the organisers' motives. You ought to know me better than that. If I know that something is the case, I say so, I don't rely on sly hints.

When you refer to my 'unproductive' and 'too antagonistic' framework, are you saying that this is what is responsible for my 'marginalisation as an independent scholar', and my 'exclusion from the dialogue', as you put it? But I was perfectly polite when I made my initial proposal to the AWSA organisers. I only got antagonistic after my paper was rejected. In fact, I've been polite for years. It's only recently, since I have felt I had a large enough body of work to justify it, that I've started complaining about being excluded. And there is still the general political point I made that exclusions have consequences. The consequence which most concerns me is the exclusion of radical feminism from one of the few

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public forums left. I am not talking about anyone's intentions or motives here. I am talking the structural realities of academic feminism. Whether you know it or not, 'women's studies', and even more so, 'gender studies', is dominated by frameworks antagonistic, or at the very least indifferent, to radical feminism. As a consequence, exclusionary policies are going to hit radical feminism hardest.

I've reached the end of the page, so I'll finish here.

Love,

Denise

From the conference organisers

Centre for Research for Women
The University of Western Australia
July 22nd, 1996

Dear Denise,

I am responding to your recent fax, on behalf of the sub-committee organising the AWSA conference to be held in Perth at the end of this year. As you were so angry about our decision not to accept the abstract, we took your fax back to the next meeting of the subcommittee for a further discussion. We have decided to stick with our decision. The decision has nothing to do with the quality of your paper. One of the committee in fact attended your presentation at the Adelaide conference and reported very favourably on your work. Rather we are driven by the desire to produce a conference in which sessions are matched up in a coherent fashion so that discussions can be more focussed and productive. We have had over 100 abstracts offered for the 3 day conference. Our preference is to, within the above desires, give priority to papers which have not yet had a public airing, and certainly not so recently, and at such a major conference as the Adelaide one. None of this prevents you from submitting an abstract for another paper or, if you believe this is impossible, then even for the work you have done on the topic of your Adelaide paper since that presentation. We would welcome your participation. But we do not want a repeat performance.

As for the other arguments you presented in your fax: We appreciate the work that goes into preparing a paper for presentation, whether you are an independent scholar or an overworked academic. It is, however, an argument that applies to many of the contributors who have submitted abstracts for AWSA, quite a number of whom also presented work at the Adelaide conference but are offering different pieces to us.

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Secondly we are not practising a policy of exclusion, and it is nonsense for you to suggest we are, or to imply that our decision is motivated by some disapproval of your political position or your ideas. Indeed, in comparison to previous conferences we are endeavouring to be more tolerant and inclusive of the breadth of feminist positions and interests. None of that removes from us the right to make a selection and to package the conference presentations in such a way as to produce the best possible conference we can. On that score, can I also respond to your opening gambit: I must confess to being completely unaware of any 'usual policy for feminist conferences that all proposals be accepted'!! In fact, I can think of some very notable examples of 'feminist policy/practice' operating in precisely the opposite way (the routine exclusion of men from attending and presenting for example, or the various versions of the postmodern/rad fem debates). Of course we have the discretion to organise this conference in such a way that it will be the best that we can manage, and of course we have the right to decide on how to select/solicit contributions, and we will. Struggles over who is occupying the higher moral feminist ground are beside the point here!

As I said above, Denise, you are most welcome to come and present to the AWSA conference, but please give us something different, and at minimum carry the conversations over your Adelaide paper forward another step or two ...!

Yours,

[...]

For and on behalf of the AWSA Conference Working Party and Selection Panel

To the conference organisers

5.8.1996

Dear [...],

Thank you for your letter and detailed explanation. I appreciate your attempt to clarify the situation. I also appreciate the conference organisers making the time in what I am sure is a very busy schedule to discuss the issues raised in my letter. However, there are still misunderstandings which I would like to try and clear up.

Perhaps the best way to start is by trying to remain on the level of the political, rather than the personal (although the two will keep getting entwined, since I can only know the political through personal experience). I started my letter to you with a political question about why you had decided to rescind the usual policy at feminist conferences of accepting all proposals. That question has a history. It is not original to me. I heard it asked by a woman at the WSN conference at Stirling in Scotland in June last year. At Stirling, the

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answer the questioner received was that accepting all proposals was not a Women's Studies' policy because it wasn't written down, and that therefore the conference organisers had no obligation to inform WSN members before changing it. The questioner persisted with her inquiry by saying that it may not have been a written policy, but that it was a policy nonetheless in the sense that it was standard practice, and she wanted to know when it had changed. The response was simply to reiterate that conference organisers had no obligation ... etc.

The question's history also includes a conversation I had with Sheila Jeffreys about the change in policy. She said that it was becoming more common in the UK to apply selection procedures to proposals for Women's Studies conferences, and that this was having political consequences. I said did that mean that radical feminism was being excluded because it is unpopular in academe, and its proponents were less likely to be well-known, and hence more easily excluded, and she said 'yes'. This is in fact the crux of my political worry about policies of selection and rejection, that is, that it is one more strategy in the 'academic feminist' war against radical feminism. Let me hasten to say that I do not think that this is so in the case of the Perth conference. I do not believe, and I nowhere meant to imply in my first letter, that the conference organisers were motivated to reject papers on political grounds. I accept your assurance that your decision was not motivated by disapproval of my political position or my ideas. I have sufficient knowledge of your own work, [...], to know that that would not have been the case. But what I have called a 'strategy' is not always deliberate (although given the sheer volume of attacks on radical feminism, it is sometimes shockingly overt). There is no need for a conspiracy theory when the academic system operates as business as usual, and radical feminism is already excluded. All I am saying to you (collectively) is that you are participating in a precedent which has worrying implications for radical feminism's future on the public agenda. In my first letter, I was simply drawing your attention to something you seem not to have considered, i.e. the political implications of applying selection criteria.

You say that you are 'completely unaware of' the policy I am talking about. In fact, you disagree that there ever was such a policy. You refer to 'the routine exclusion of men' as evidence that feminism has never had a policy of accepting all proposals for papers at conferences. But why do you equate the exclusion of men with the exclusion of other feminists? Where is the equality here? There are very good feminist reasons why men have

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been excluded from feminist spaces and occasions—men tend to dominate wherever they are included, and women tend to be reduced to silence because they find it difficult to intervene in the flow of masculine certainty. That the exclusion of men from feminist occasions is justified, is amply demonstrated by the rise and rise of 'gender studies' and 'queer theory'. What are the feminist reasons for excluding work by self-identified feminists? There may indeed be reasons—self-identification as a 'feminist' is not sufficient guarantee of feminist politics. But surely the reasons need to be feminist ones.

Still on the question of feminism's supposed past exclusions, the reference in your letter to 'the various versions of the postmodern/rad fem debates' doesn't say who is doing the excluding of whom. In my experience, it is postmodernism which is hegemonic, and radical feminism which is excluded. Is that what you mean? In that case, are you defining postmodernism as (a) feminism? I don't. I see it as anti-feminist, as part of the backlash against feminism masquerading as 'feminism' itself. (I have argued the case in more detail in my paper in the anthology edited by Diane Bell and Renate Klein, *Radically Speaking*, and in my PhD thesis, *Against the Dismantling of Feminism: A Study in the Politics of Meaning*, of which [my friend] has a copy). In fact, it is this hegemony of postmodernism which is currently the chief cause of my worry about selection criteria being applied for inclusion at feminist conferences. Although the Perth conference's selection criteria are not postmodernist, are you really sure they're feminist?

The reasons why I believe that such a policy did exist stem from my own personal history. (This is what I was attempting to convey in my first letter). It is true that I have never seen the policy written down, nor even heard it stated aloud. The only indication I have that it was policy is the fact that my proposals were accepted. In contrast, whenever selection criteria are applied, even at feminist conferences, my proposals are invariably rejected. Only sometimes are those rejections based on identifiably political grounds, e.g. the HRC 'Sexualities' conferences in Canberra (although even there, the 'reasons' given were not acknowledged as political—instead, I was given some waffle about dropping off the agenda or some such). Usually, though, the selection criteria are not political in intent (like your own, for example). One of the reasons I referred to my own personal experience was to point out that I am peculiarly placed to be able to raise doubts about the political wisdom of applying selection criteria for whatever reason.

I am sorry you saw my letter as 'so angry'. ([My friend] saw it as 'antagonistic'). Yes, I am

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angry, although not with you. I agree that conference organisers have a right to make their own decisions. It's a thankless task, the rewards small or non-existent, the criticisms many. (This was another reason for including my personal history in my letter to you—to indicate that my exasperation had a wider focus than the decision of the Perth conference).

However, conference organisers also have a responsibility towards the feminism which they represent from a relatively powerful position. They are gate-keeping feminism's access to the public arena. It is therefore crucial that organisers of feminist conferences be aware of what feminism is and what it is not.

You appear to have assumed that I was asking you to reverse your decision and accept my paper. I was not, for the reasons adduced in the paragraph above. If I had been I would have said so. Anyway, reversing your decision only in my case would have failed to address the political point I was making: that selection criteria have consequences. I illustrated those consequences with the only case study I have access to, my own. But these personal details appear to have masked the political point I wanted to make. They also appear to have led to misconceptions. For example, my point about being an independent scholar did not relate to how busy I am. In comparison with full-time academics I'm not busy at all. It related to my limited access to arenas of public debate. And my point about the amount of work I have put into my proposed paper was not connected to being an independent scholar, but to the impossibility in the short time available of proposing anything new.

And what do you mean with your reference to 'struggles over who is occupying the higher moral feminist ground'? This is not a struggle I'm engaged in. Why have you interpreted my letter as moralistic? It was certainly critical of your decision, and that implies a judgement that that decision was wrong. But putting it in terms of a 'high moral ground' trivialises what is surely a right to criticise decisions which have consequences both personal and political.

The point of this lengthy epistle is to open up debate. I am not asking you to do or not do anything in particular. I am merely drawing your attention to something you seem to have overlooked. What you do in response to that (including nothing at all) is your decision.

Once again, thank you for taking the time to respond.

Yours

Denise