

PENETRATING THE LAST MALE BASTIONS

A few weeks ago I was invited to the University of Kent to attend a celebration of 10 years of women's studies being taught there, and in particular the MA in women's studies for which I am the external examiner. It was a most fascinating day of celebration, reflection and anticipation of the form that women's studies might take in the next 10 years. Invitations had been sent to all the students who had studied on the MA over the past 10 years and about 50 such women were able to find the time to attend to contribute to both the reflections and considerations for the future. A number of people, chiefly, former external examiners and teachers on the various constituent courses had been invited to sit on a panel or make small presentations around these themes.

Talk focused on whether there had been new developments recently or whether the themes for the next 10 years would remain essentially the same as those over the past 10 years. Curiously, many of the panellists wanted to develop new fields of inquiry and to demonstrate that in the past women's studies was too ethnocentric, concerned rather narrowly with the conditions in which women live their lives in Britain in particular and advanced industrial societies in general. New courses, it was felt, ought to be more international and developmental, comparing the lives of women in less developed societies such as India and Africa, and looking at the differences as much as the similarities of women's lives.

These ideas provoked a great deal of discussion. But in some

curious way the old issues of how to organise one's life to fit in studying with paid employment and child care, especially with very young children, continued to crop up, with the course organisers wearily trying to make light of it, given the continuing difficulties of trying to alter higher education bureaucracies, routines and predilections. However hard the organisers have tried such bureaucracies remain incredibly resistant to change of this kind, willing though they may be to consider new courses and curricula.

Higher education has, in the past 10 years, taken on board the demands of women especially for courses in women's studies. These now proliferate around the country, especially at postgraduate level, with courses on women and/or gender and/or the family either as an integral part of an MA or MSc or as a course, as at Kent, in its own right. The University of Kent was a market leader in the field: and it may be the case that its current search for new avenues of knowledge and curriculum development is also the beginning of a new era. This last weekend saw the third conference of the Women's Studies Network, which unfortunately I was unable to attend. The conference was billed as looking at the prospects for the 1990s and trying to bring women's



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studies in from the margins of higher education. It also intended to consider previously marginalised areas within women's studies itself, such as black women's studies and lesbian studies, and to try to include them in the mainstream of teaching.

It is undoubtedly true that women's studies, issues of gender and feminist research of a variety of kinds have influenced the nature of courses in higher education and many now are already part of the mainstream of humanities, arts and social sciences courses both at undergraduate and postgraduate

level: witness not only the proliferation of courses but books and other publications. And witness, too, the growth of groups of women campaigning around a variety of issues now in higher education. And yet the bureaucracies and systems of management in higher education do still seem to be strangely impervious to these developments which have been more than 10 years in the making. Part-time courses, for instance, still seem to be marginalised. But, more important still, management education, as well as management itself have not taken on board these issues. They remain in a time warp and are inclined to use very traditional, sexist forms of management.

Recently I contemplated moving into a purely management role, either in management consultancy for higher education or managing a voluntary organisation concerned with research on families and children. In both cases as part of the process I was involved in a series of management tests which aimed to define aspects of my personality and how I would "fit" into the "company" profile. I also had to do some verbal reasoning tests, souped up versions of the kinds of intelligence tests I had to do for the 11 plus, or for the American Graduate Record Examination (GRE) to get into

graduate school there. All of these tests were based on American material and topics, although the verbal reasoning had been Anglicised to the extent of having British company data. But the personality tests were straight "cribs" from the American, without even so much of a change of language or syntax. They were concerned with establishing whether one had a competitive personality, and wanted to "win" or was merely sociable. But most oddly of all, given the fact that American career women seem, at least on the surface of it, to have moved into management and business more successfully and obviously, and in greater numbers than in Britain, they were amazingly sexist.

In particular in the verbal reasoning, we were required to consider issues about the effect of hormonal replacement therapy on women's sociability and the issue of whether pregnant women should be "allowed" to continue in employment past the first trimester. I found it rather difficult to believe that these tests really could help organisations to decide how good a "manager" applicants were or might become other than in stereotypical terms.

All they seemed to be trying to test were whether or not I was one of the "boys" – and self-evidently I was not! I really do feel that the key issue for the 1990s for women's studies is to try to inform or penetrate the old male bastions of management and management education in higher education to try to bring about some changes which will achieve not only ideological but also institutional developments.