

Flexible girls. A position paper on academic *generational* politics¹

by María Puig de la Bellacasa
PhD student, Université Libre de Bruxelles

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This paper is based on my intervention during the round-table *Transitions and Transmissions: two-way traffic* at the conference *Gender Studies in Europe* the 2nd April 2001 at the European Institut, Firenze. I would first like to comment on this title, chosen for the discussion by one of the organisers, Dawn Lyon. These preliminary notes mark the paper thoroughly.

The idea of a “two way traffic” going on between generations responds to a certain kind of time trade familiar to the feminist *generational*² politics I have had the occasion to experiment. The conference gave good examples of this: on the one hand, ‘baby-boomers’ foot-note with humour their re-affirmation of personal-political engagement as ‘maybe old-fashioned’; on the other hand, ‘twenty-thirty something’s’ supposedly less politicised or at least politically different, paradoxically also claim this engagement, driving back in a two-way traffic flow. I will come back to this (mis)understandings and (un)coincidences between generations’ engagements.

Secondly, the title could also signify our times, specially the assumption that we live in a back and forth flowing world, where boundaries are difficult to draw,

¹ This paper is in « dialogue » with another written for Athena Network (Panel 1A) on current transformations of the university. That paper offers further analyse and research resources on today’s transformations in the academy (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2001).

² I borrow the notion of ‘*generation*’ to the Nextgender@tion European network, yet I do not ‘represent’ the network here. I am not an active member of the network and I have not participated to their performances and writings. Nevertheless I have participated to some meetings of the network and have built personal political friendships with active members. I am also member of the mailing list. The present article is inspired by the sharing of experiences that this friendships have made possible.

I take *generation* here as a ‘concept’ that is not unproblematic. The way I have seen it used by the European feminists is far from designing a political closure or any kind of *youngism*. It stands rather as a starting point for reflecting and engendering collective meanings on the ways we are situated by the times we live in and by intergenerational perceptions. The emergence of other networks as the Italian 30something reflect an increase of interest focused on this open issue during the nineties. During the European Summer School in 2000 I had the opportunity to participate to conflictive debates that reflected interrogations and explorations of what feminist *generational* politics may mean, more precisely concerning the positioning of feminist today’s students within the history of feminist politics in the academy.

and power relationships (too?) complex to be tracked. We live in the middle of a process, struggling to build meanings for extremely fast changing realities. As a white western privileged city woman, fast on-going traffic appears to me as a recognizable image for this accelerated and fluid existence, constantly needing ‘stress management’ and ‘adaptability’. Madonna’s ‘material girl’ better be today a ‘flexible girl’. This contribution will address critically this ‘flexible paradigm’.

1) New generations’ corridor talk : personal and political

The main concern motivating my intervention in the conference was today’s working conditions in the academy because I feel concerned with the increasing depressing predicaments expressed by young researchers and academics.

I have been working at the university as a full-time PhD researcher for three years now. This might seem short, but it has been long enough for me to notice a dominant depressing ethos among young researchers and academics. ‘Colleagues’ meet in corridors and make cynical comments on their overloaded day, their careless boss, their colleague on depression leave, their ‘I don’t have the right stuff’ (Stengers, 2001) feeling etc, etc... Little enthusiasm or even respect for their own work is expressed, considered of little use and interest. In our ‘post-’ contexts, the regrettable arrogance of academic tribes (Becher, 1989) has left all place to an equally regrettable academic nihilism. So be it. I nevertheless feel concerned by the way many young academic workers see their bad feelings and unsatisfying work as personal failure. But these complaints are too frequent to be ‘personal’.

The sharing of these feelings with feminist ‘colleagues’ in feminist meetings has been richer because their discourse is not cynical. The symptoms are not very different, but in younger feminist environments the issue is often formulated as a contradictory tense feeling where a feminist politically engaged standpoint enters in conflict with increasingly disempowering academic work and relations: *do we want to maintain this?*... asks a young feminist researcher. Among young feminists there is no nostalgia for academic arrogance and self-confidence – criticised in the past by V. Woolf (1996). The feminist anti-nostalgic tradition is a strength to cultivate. Nevertheless, the present academic cynicism doesn’t represent an alternative. There is political desire at stake and meanings to be built.

European feminist networks are a precious opportunity to share experiences. This sharing is a joyful and empowering practice that helps to transform personal predicament in political claims and resistance. I have noticed that academic working conditions are often discussed in feminist conferences and

meetings I have had the opportunity to attempt *but...* they remain blocked in corridor discussions, dinners and room-mate's talk. This paper is an attempt to speak out these discussions and contribute to this personal-political sharing.

Among the many interesting observations concerning the university and Women's studies that were expressed during the conference, I would like to highlight two visions : Rosi Braidotti, stressed the use of the university as a "centre of resistance", as a "space of freedom" and "critical thinking" where "education for the sake of understanding" may focus on "issues not commercially valuable" (Braidotti 2001). Secondly, Gabriele Griffin stressed the fact that originally women's studies were not only about "description" but more about 'transformative analysis' and the 'need for change' (Griffin 2001). This statements show that are other paths for academic ethos than arrogance and/or nihilism.

From this two visions put together results an unpredictably fertile critical and constructive composite and in spite of the well spread rumour that young feminist students and researchers are less politicised than the ones in the seventies – an observation also expressed during the conference - many young feminists in the university (and students) affirm this political motivation. *Tell them we want our teachers to be more feminist* - says a young feminists when talking about the intervention I am preparing for the conference.... *Generational misunderstandings?*

In a challenging and illuminating article in the review *Feminist theory* Liz Stanley and Sue Wise suggest that the promotion of a feminist elite of theorist that are producing 'feminist theory with a capital T' separated from feminist practice (Stacey 1993) is among others due to the 'successive cohorts' that after the 70s 'came to feminism' through the text rather than through political practice' (Stanley & Wise 2000, 278). The *generational* issue is not explicitly treated by the authors, they rather point to an 'us' of academic professionalised feminists that constitute the 'fans' that support the feminist 'star system' (267). Nevertheless, feminist historicized time is present in the vocabulary used through their paper : 'older' feminists (from the 70s) are opposed to the 'successive cohorts' of 'recyclers and neophytes' (274) and an 'earlier' critique of theory has suffered of 'collective forgetting'. They certainly have a point (among many others) into which I cannot deepen now, but because it is not the first time I encounter this kind of vague suggestions of the apolitical ethos of new *generations* of feminists I still *burn* to ask : are *older* generations of feminist scholars and academics more engaged *today* in feminist practice than their younger counterparts and students? Is still true today that feminist academic practices challenge inside and outside traditional academic barriers and how? Indeed, there is no age to demonstrate, constitute discussion (may I

say CR?) groups, alternative conferences and symposiums, there is no age to use our knowledge to share empowering practices and reinvent political strategies. The lack of political engagement among intellectuals and academics is not exclusively a generational affair and in spite of the linear temporality involved in their vocabulary, Stanley and Wise don't affirm that, they rather criticise increasing academism among feminists.

I would like to suggest the addition of another kind of temporal axe to their diagnose of 'academism' : I am tempted to say that many academics, old and young, have increasingly little *time* to invest themselves in the women's movement! How many academic women a day do you hear complain on work overload, physical fatigue and mental exhaustion? My argument here is that the deterioration of working conditions in the academy, the feeling of instability and increasing competition are accentuating the decline of political desires to "make the difference" throughout the building of feminist academic structures. The pressure of elitist academic success is not fading out but getting worst and feminist academics of all ages are also subject to this stress.

Tell them we want our teachers to be more feminist! In present contexts, it seems as if feminist political *practice* among students and younger colleagues is not really respected and cherished among many feminist teachers that continue to insist on the links between the movement and its "academic arm".

But is it fair or even interesting to drive back the "apolitical" verdict from one generation to another? Isn't it more constructive to find other kind of meeting points to turn this traffic jam into a multiple-way traffic debate? Isn't more interesting to make a 'common' problem of it? If there is no ready made general solution or formulation of these issues, there is at least a need to reassess 'glocally', openly and collectively our strategies to overcome the mere day-to-day survival ethos and promote constructive feminist practices in the academy. I am not saying that these concerns have not been explored yet in feminist environments (Aaron & Walby 1991; Morley & Walsh 1995, 1996; Stanley 1997; Morley 1999). I am just suggesting that, if we take seriously the persistent new generations' corridor talk, this issues have not been stressed enough and are often marginalised or ignored. There is a need to speak out, in an intergenerational discussion, our academic predicaments in order to stop considering them as personal failure and address them collectively, politically.

If academics, including feminist, 'put the pressure' on younger researchers it means that the pressure is *real*. Publish or perish, network or die... You better have the 'right stuff' because the old abstract principle of academic excellence

and competition will not get better through today's openly capitalist conception that measures knowledge through credi(t)bility³. Feminist academics are not free of accepting or not this social neo-darwinist ethos: survival in the academy depends on individual adaptability and availability to an ever-changing environment while the phantom of "knowledge *per se*" plans over the place arousing culpability over bad done work and lack of motivation. Among feminist academics you may add the contradiction between the 'I am in it for the cause' feeling with the feeling of abuse among overworked employees. Many young feminist researchers' political wings seem damaged because of these contradictory exigencies of academic representations and specially by the lack of intergenerational discussion on this issues.

Which kinds of 'mutilations' are necessary to survive in the academy? This is not a *new* question of course, but a question we shouldn't cease to ask through different periods and social contexts. For contemporary feminist generations of academic workers a question to ask could be : how are our political desires and projects being affected by contemporary managerial ethos of profitability and competition in the academy? A transitional generation is caught between the perception of the university as a place of resistance, freedom, critical thinking... as 'another place of struggle' (Griffin & Hanmer 2001) where to implement women's studies in order to develop transformative analysis and the perception of a working place where they are increasingly 'proletarianised', brain capital evaluated through publication production flows, where critical thinking becomes an old fashioned ethos (Seller 1997, 31) and reductionist visions of applied research dominate. A place where the value of education is more and more conceived regarding a paradigm of 'employability' that implies 'flexible adaptability'.

As an (implicated) witness the vision expressed here can only be partial. In addition this is a *position* paper which means it attempts provisional political positioning. Nevertheless, this position is not arbitrary or irresponsible. In what follows I have tried a personal-political understanding of this situation. Adding elements of the socio-political background underlining 'intersubjective' (Passerini 2001) corridor discussions on working conditions helps me to build a political understanding and depersonalise this everyday predicaments.

2) Socio-economic context : Neo-Darwinism?

Universities have always been *in* and *part* of society. However, this is increasingly true today because of their 'sociological opening' (Scott 1997, 41), specially since the sixties. It is not anymore possible to imagine that the walls of

³ See B. Latour (1995) for an account of academic knowledge as "credit" in "scientific capitalism".

the Ivory Tower protect academic worlds from the influences of ‘outside’ worlds. From my feminist standpoint this is of course a positive thing, it seems difficult for people engaged in emancipatory politics to be nostalgic of the academic gardens portrayed by Virginia Woolf in *A room of one’s own* and *Three Guineas*. Knowledge *per se* and disinterested pursuit of truth are Edens of which feminist not easily long for. On the contrary, the critique of this ideals is at the heart of feminist knowledge politics⁴.

Nevertheless if the opening of the academy is to celebrate, a critical awareness should remain alive to be able to track new distributions of power relationships. A question could be : opening to *what*? Accountable to *whom*? Opening to challenging knowledge practices and emancipatory conceptions of knowledge and science that account for power relations built on gender, race, class and environmental preoccupations? Opening to management practices of knowledge trade within global capitalist competition? Accountable for social relevance? Accountable to a restricted version of economic relevance? Are we forced to chose, as some seem to think, between elitism and supermarketing?

University has always reflected the society that feeds it. The current situation of academics and researchers in the academy, specially among « non tenured » generations, reflects a general degradation of working conditions and a normalisation of precariousness. Academics are ‘workers’, surely of a certain ‘privileged’ kind, but still workers in a capitalist competitive environment. So not only the ‘personal’ sense of failure and lack of meaning is less personal that it seems when discussed within the academy but it appears to be more ‘social’ than it could seem when discussed with ‘outsiders’. Same sense of pressure all over the place.

Yet, a confident discourse, quite dominant, describes the changing patterns of labour markets. The job-for life model dreamed by middle-classes, by mediocre *petit bourgeois* is supposed to be dead (Brown & Scase 1997, Scott 1997). Today, people ‘create’ their own ‘job portfolios’ and social order modelled by class gender and race is being replaced by ‘stratification’ through ‘life-styles’ (Scott, 1997, 44). A certain discourse among employers, specially popular since the last years of the 1990’s, claims the need for flexible workers, out of rigid and boring bureaucratic profiles. A new recruiting ethos valorises the ‘creative’, ‘entrepreneurial’ and ‘individualist’ qualities of ‘charismatic’ personalities. ‘Suitability’, ‘capability’ and ‘acceptability’ are preferred to old organisational fidelities (Brown & Scase 1997, 96). Innovation requires creative people capable

⁴ I prefer to speak of feminist knowledge politics instead of ‘feminist epistemology’. I have tried to justify this choice through a paper published on-line in the website of the 4th European Feminist Conference, (Puig de la Bellacasa 2000).

of ‘adapting’ their skills, ‘up-grading’ their competencies and re-programming themselves during their working life cycle through long-life learning (Alaluf 2000, 2001; De Meulemester & Rochar 2001).

Another discourse, that overdeterminates the precedent, must be read against an European background of an everlasting unemployment crisis. A dominant argument says : unemployment is due to a lack training and flexibility among labour force (Alaluf 2000, 2001; Giovannini, 2001; De Meulemester and Rochar 2001). The knowledge society imposes ‘challenges’ we have to face, to which we need to *adapt*, in order to *survive* in the international competition (Alaluf 2000). Therefore, long life-learning and increasing flexibility (in addition to deregulation of labour markets) are the solution to European uncompetitiveness. A patent discourse of the famous White Paper *Growth, Competitiveness, Employment. The Challenges and Ways Forward Into The 21st Century*.

The social neo-Darwinist accents of this discourses are patent (Alaluf 2000, 54). Today’s economic and social conditions are naturalised, reified: it is *reality*, we have to adapt to it. And reality is an inevitable jungle. In a period of scarcity the feeble die out and the stronger survive. Today, aptitude to survival depends on individual adaptability, flexibility and mobility: be innovative, autonomous, polyvalent, multifunctional and never stop learning in order to seduce your successive employers. Employability. On-going education is not any more a collective emancipatory purpose but an individualistic survival necessity (Alaluf 2000, 2001).

Universities are not exempted of responding to this *challenges*. It is proclaimed to be their destiny to play an ‘active’ role on the globalised economy of knowledge. To be ‘competitive’ because markets are getting ‘impatient’ with slow ‘old style’ academics and their ‘archaic’ world vision (Gray 1999). In the knowledge society universities are to some extent out of the run, because information is everywhere and knowledge ‘that counts’ is delocalised. Conversely, intellectual capital, universities’ main resource, gives them an advantageous position in the knowledge economy (Robertson 1999), to the extent that knowledge workers (Drucker 1994) accept the rules of this *reality*.

Storytelling Interlude: this is not politics, it is reality

Modernity was boring, our ‘post-...’ worlds are fun : you never now what will happen to you tomorrow, isn’t it exciting?

An information session at my university. ‘Scientific staff’ (untenured teachers, PhD students, assistants...) from the Arts Faculty (Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres) is being informed of a forthcoming reform (restructuring?).

The Deans are interpellated about the social consequences of the reform and about the lack of solidarity, protest and resistance of ‘tenured’ academics

against such politics. Answers: The university owes you nothing. It prepares you for the outside world. In addition this is not politics, it is reality.

Private employment agencies : job shops in search of atypical profiles? Innovative people looking for the next two-months job, for the next part-time contract...

Job shop ads claim : no job for life, live before you get caught up, don't let them encapsulate you, all men are born equal we make you unique. Models photographed, two thirtysomething's, a guy with abundant piercing and a young girl with an afro-haircut. Another ad shows employers miming obscene positions through whorehouse windows to attire employees.

A woman in her forties with a poncho dress, long hair and big boots quits a 'job-shop' in a winter afternoon leaving her CV behind. We'll call you the young employee says. The boss to the employee: don't send freaks to our clients.

Intellectual capital transfers.

A department in my university, a colleague has just lost his job. He has been working for years with six-months contracts. A new rule limits the number of successive fixed-term contracts. The rule intends to promote secure contracts : at a certain point the researcher must be engaged with a permanent contract. But the department has no money to engage the person under this social advantageous conditions (e. g.: accounting for length of service). A newcomer is appointed with a six-months contract to pursue the work of his expensive predecessor.

A woman teacher worried for the career of a young researcher ?

If you ever get pregnant during your PhD contract I will retire my support to you.

Less people, bad pays, more work. Act I)

Liege, Belgium : a young manager from Quick (Belgian equivalent of MacDonald's) declares to a news paper that the pressure in the company forces him to work more hours with less people and that he is at the same time held responsible for all functioning failure. He works more and more and the salary remains the same. He gets fired for this declaration.

(Alaluf 2000, 87).

Less people, bad pays, more work. Act II) Somebody cares out there?

I hear at the radio that in England a survey reveals increasing illness (mental and physical) among workers caused by stress, overwork etc...Companies get worried they say because performance and efficacy are decreasing.

(Belgian news broadcast, June 2001)

A women's world indeed. Women have always been flexible, able to do lot's of things at the same time⁵. Homework economies have feminine futures in the information society (Adam & Green 1999).

A young part-time assistant works for two teachers in the History department. She has a part-time job somewhere else. In her academic time she has to assure seminars, correct exams and write her PhD (of course she has twelve years to do it). Feeling schizophrenic she wants to quit the other part-time job to be able to make her PhD. But she is a single mother. Gently her two bosses propose a second academic part-time job to be able to finish her PhD... The job means to become the assistant of three more teachers with their respective seminars to lead and exams to correct.

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This is not politics, it is reality. Before getting angry against conformist realism it must be said that this 'reality' is one of a pro post-welfare Europe where public services, specially social insurance and first need services (health, transport, water supply) are being privatised or are adopting corporate functioning encouraged by governments. Public interest is gone, better buy your individual survival kit. The university is no exception, its 'public' status (of the institution and of the knowledge produced) is fading (Melody, 1997).

The storytelling just proposed witnesses for a generalisation of work precariousness. Academics are in privileged positions regarding many other workers still, the new knowledge economy and the consequent proletarianisation of academic work offers to knowledge workers an occasion to recreate solidarities over the ruined walls of universities and try other answers to reality's *challenges* than mere adaptation. An opportunity to enact an opening of the university in other directions than those inspired by dominant discourses of managerial capitalism and the new knowledge economy.

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But what has all this to do with feminism and *generational* politics?

3) Feminist projects and the '*new spirit of capitalism*'

I am concerned with the challenges this contexts suppose for feminist projects, particularly academic women's studies. I first will focus on two challenges for feminist politics that appeared through the paper and I'll end with a general remark on *generational* politics.

⁵ For an homage to women's flexibility see Catherine Bateson (1990).

What follows concerns language and meanings. The new economy of knowledge and managerial capitalism communicates through celebratory ‘post-...’ language⁶ giving off a scent of increasing autonomy for everyone and breaking with modern rigidities. L. Boltanski and L. Chiapello (1999) have analysed this discourses that express for them ‘the new spirit of capitalism’ and G. Chatelet (1998) referred to this culture as the ‘festive naiveté’ of ‘techno-populism’. Boltanski and Chiapello have pointed the use of emancipatory vocabulary - specially of the 68’s generation - within this discourses. Le Goff has stressed this also (De Meulemester & Rochar 2001). Emancipatory discourses are metabolised (Braidotti 1996) by capitalism. What I would like to stress is the importance for feminist projects to resist their assimilation to these discourses, to nurture the differences they are proposing to make.

Flexible girls?

The first example of this discourse, approached earlier in this paper, proclaims the end of modern (e.g. fordist) ways of working and shows the ‘creative’, ‘autonomous’ profiles that new workers have to practice in order to invent ‘innovative carrier paths’ in post-bureaucratic worlds. Flexibility and mobility are part of the credo. A new social and geographical mobility : no more gender, class and race? (Scott 1997,44) No more borders? While these discourses flourish old power relations get reinforced, exclusions proliferate and geographical mobility gets restricted to the ‘have’s’. The mobility of the ‘haven’t’ is (savage) delocalisation.

Don’t take me wrong... I am in no case nostalgic of the middle-class dream of a job for life and permanent stability... but I don’t believe in the current alternative either. Trying to make a difference?

Flexibility, I have suggested, is a feminine word. Women have always been flexible and are therefore prepared to shifting existences. As they could easily be ‘material’ in the eighties they could easily espouse the flexible paradigm of the late nineties. Moreover, ‘mobility’ (*nomadism* in the ‘deleuzo-guattarian’ formulation developed by Braidotti (1994)) is a feminist project entailed by networking desires and alliance needs. European feminist academic projects have stressed the need to mobility of students, teachers and researchers. The Athena TNP⁷ to which I have the opportunity to participate is an example of this

⁶ That paradoxically shows exaggeratedly modernist in its permanent obsession to highlight the “overcoming” of modern rigidities.

⁷ ATHENA, Advanced Thematic Network in Activities in Women’s Studies in Europe, supported by the Erasmus/Socrates Programme. Coordination Rosi Braidotti and Esther

promotion of mobility through a networking project. Moreover, the Athena group (Panel 1A⁸) I have worked with is concerned with the career paths of women's studies graduates under the imperatives of the contemporary 'employability' paradigm : are this graduates following 'innovative career paths'?

If we stop at this level, and recall Boltanski and Chiapello's analyse, European feminist networks seem managerial-capitalism-compatible. Without being purist it is possible to be critical and attentive to our use of dominant discourses' vocabulary. Fortunately, feminists are well-trained to 'parasite' strategies: camp on a concept and undermine it, transform it, build new meanings on it (e.g.: woman, objectivity, nature). '*Squatting*' as the Next Generation member Sarah Bracke conceptualised in Bologna. A strategy to 'avoid capitalism's cannibalistic incorporation' (Bracke 2000, 160). A kind of survival politics that doesn't aim at adaptation. As another Next Generation network member, Ingrid Hoofd, said quoting an LA street poet : *if you only have one strategy, you don't survive this days* (Hoofd 2000).

Does this seem 'apolitical'?

However, 'reflexive parasites' shouldn't forget in which aims they are using the current language of power. Feminist projects of academic women's studies in European universities cannot afford to ignore the implications of current ideologies underlining contemporary European educational projects (Alaluf 2000, De Meulemeester & Rochar 2001; Stroobants 1993).

An example of feminist use of the current language of power that hides other aims than those of managerial capitalist employability is for me Utrecht Next Generation's network contribution to Athena Panel 1A : a survey on 'innovative career paths' and 'atypical profiles' taken by Women's Studies graduates. The project aims to see how WS graduate's 'expertise and knowledge is useful and valued in a range of professional contexts', but also if they introduce 'gender perspectives into the labour market' in 'innovative and unconventional ways'. The study also aims to analyse WS graduates' career choices and see if they use them as strategies of contestation, and if they consider Women's Studies as a 'brand of political resistance' that may 'work in contemporary European Society' (Vonk and Anders 2000). It seems to me that what is meant by 'innovative' and 'atypical' is quite different from the dominant axes of the flexible paradigm.

A bridging open question for *all* generations: Flexible girls? Yes maybe... but flexible for *what*?

Vonk, Utrecht University. Website : http://www.let.uu.nl/womens_studies/athena/index.html
Contact : athena@let.uu.nl.

⁸ Panel 1A. Evaluation of women's studies in relation to the job prospects of its graduates. Coordinator Nina Lykke.

Knowledge that counts?

The second example of the (un)coincidence of feminist language with managerial vocabulary is the ‘academic opening’ of the university and the stressing of its ‘social relevance’ and its contribution to local communities through ‘accountability’. Accountability is popular. Modern elitist universities based their identity on a principle of academic freedom that served also as the alibi of disciplinary and academic corporatism. Since the end of the Second European War and specially since the sixties, universities are identified also as ‘socially relevant’ and services to the community or the society are part of their official ‘missions’ together with education and research. Therefore, universities’ new identities are better suited to accountability towards public and private sponsors.

But still the outside world is ‘impatient’ because academics ‘resist to change’. Economic relevance should be enhanced. Therefore, remains of elitist practices should be evicted because ‘communities’ need their universities to participate to their ‘competitive’ economy and ‘development’ (Gray 1999, 8). You can find this imperative on theoretical analysis of university management (Gray 1999) but you can also track it through European commission official papers (De Meulemeester & Rochar 2001) as in the famous White paper quoted earlier. The alternative proposed by managerial capitalism and its discourse (that reduces social relevance to a reductionist economic relevance) is between Oxbridge and Coca-Cola universities.

Before encountering this discourses, accountability was for me a concept-tool used by feminists to struggle against a science and knowledge grounded on irresponsible ‘god tricks’ (Haraway 1991). Moreover, ‘social relevance’ was a feminist urgency as ‘investment in the community’ was a feminist practice. Today I find these words in managerial-oriented writings but they don’t mean the same thing. Feminist accountability in practices related to knowledge production and its transmission aims at ‘knowledge that counts’ through criticising and enlarging the meanings of ‘who counts as a knower’. Managerial-capitalist meaning of accountability reduces ‘knowledge that counts’ to a mere accounting formula : it *counts* if it contributes to economic competition. Insistence on ‘social relevance’ of knowledge means breaking barriers between theories and practices, academics and activists; academic investment in the community means working for women’s social and political empowerment at a local level : through permanent education with emancipatory aims. But for managerial capitalism ‘social relevance’ is cut down to a reductionist version of economic exchange that seems inspired by social neo-Darwinism and ‘long-life

learning' means an 'up-grading' of human resources in order to give the market what the market needs.

Generational politics in the academy

1930's : V. Woolf refused to acquiesce that daughters from educated men '*had not time to think*' because '*daughters of educated men had always done their thinking from hand to mouth*'. Again, women have always done many things at the same time, they have developed flexible brains and flesh. She exhorted us to think, because '*think we must*', in *offices, omnibuses, marriages and funerals*. Think we must she said, '*let us never cease from thinking "what is this "civilisation" in which we find ourselves?"*' (Woolf, 1996, 176)

2001: Today, some generations after, if women *in* the academy have little time to think to their politics, '*bazaars*', '*rents to pay*', '*cradles to rock*' aren't maybe the (sole) reason. We are at the place we are supposed to think '*under green lamps at study tables*'. We have Women's Studies and a whole tradition that has attempted to address critically Woolf's question : *where in short is leading us the procession of educated men?* But as thinking is a situated practice in time and space, we may need to add other issues to Woolf's picture, specially now that many women have joined *the procession*.

One of the issues is that today the '*right stuff*' of the academic remains grounded on what I. Stengers has pointed as a double exclusion: on the one hand, exclusion '*of those that can't or don't want to engage themselves in a career where all that means "loosing your time" (take care of children or get interested to "undisciplined" aspects of knowledge)*' is an handicap; exclusion, on the other hand, *of issues and interests that don't get translated directly in disciplinary terms (accumulation and competition)* (Stengers 2001). Feminist knowledge politics have aimed specially since the seventies at destabilising this exclusions. Today, the ethos of the new spirit of academic capitalism is not contradicting but reinforcing this idea of the 'right (academic) stuff'. Moreover, job precariousness and competition, are also reinforcing other 'qualities' of the profile: '*meritology*', '*personal patronage*' and '*compliant conformist behaviour*' (Brown and Scase 1997, 91). Elitism and supermarketing are not incompatible. Managerial capitalist practices may promote a certain kind of flexibility but maybe not the kind of flexibility needed to think.

It is not politics, it is reality. Could feminist lips ever pronounce such a statement? It is important that feminist academics resist this *wise* saying. But there is no one-way mean. Yet, it seems as if younger generations get the impression of an acceptance of today's academic increasingly competitive ethos as 'it is' with little interrogation and solidarity among generations. Feminist teachers under pressure, students and researchers under pressure and little time to have politised talk on it. You better have 'the right stuff'. Yet, a collective

endeavour is needed to resist this pressure. Collective understanding and meaning building are traditionally feminist tools for resistance. Politics starts and ends in daily life. The point is not only to have academic women's studies everywhere... the aim has *always* been also 'transformative analysis' (Griffin 2001) and practices. 'Reality' indeed shows that universities 'as usual' are ready to espouse global competition and corporatised practices. Some women will probably make it... but how much are we to loose of our political desire? Last, but not least, there is also a *body* issue here: '*there are limits and their threshold is sustainability*' (Braidotti, 2000). Negotiate the thresholds in a flexible world, a challenge indeed.

It is not politics, it is reality. If feminist women had accepted this *wise* saying a century ago and before, I would not be writing this today and if born white and privileged, I would probably be the daughter, sister or wife of an 'educated man'. I feel grateful to a personal-political feminist tradition that helps me to refuse to acknowledge this 'reality' as an external naturalised thing that I should accept as a 'challenge' to which 'adapt'. Far from a political purism that would refuse cooptation with reality I prefer a practical embodiment of 'agential realism' (Karen Barad 1996): acknowledging the 'real' stubbornness of the world 'as it is' without accepting it as the natural(ised) fate reified in social neo-Darwinist managerial economies. The present world is challenging indeed, but there are other answers to challenges than *adaptation* to current practices and discourses. Far from nostalgia, if our 'post-whatever' worlds offer chances for positive transformative experimentation, we may want to be able, in and outside the academy, to invest our 'innovative' 'material' & 'flexible' feminist flesh & brains for other purposes than those of the 'new spirit of capitalism'.

(Un)conclusions

Standpoint under construction yearning for connections.
To be continued...collectively

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