PERSONAL AND POLITICAL: FEMINISMS, SOCIOLOGY AND GENERATIONS OF FAMILY LIVES IN THE 'KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY'.

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Theme - Problematic futures: Educational Research in an Era of Uncertainty

PRESENTATION BY

Professor Miriam E. David, BA, PhD, FRSA, AcSS

Director of the Graduate School of Social Sciences &

Professor of Policy Studies,

Department of Education,

University of Keele,

Keele, Staffs, ST5 5BG, UK

Email: m.david@keele.ac.uk
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ABSTRACT:
This paper explores changing feminist research agendas in the context of political transformations over the last thirty years. I consider three phases of liberalism for emergent feminist research agendas, ranging from social liberalism, and movements for sexual equality, through economic liberalism, characterised by consumer choice, to neo-liberalism and transformations to critical feminist research ethnographies. Drawing on my own personal biography I review shifting agendas towards more personal, biographic, narrative accounts. I also consider the changes in generations of feminists in involvement in the academy and their perspectives on agendas that are increasingly about subjecting to critical and ethnographic gaze women's changing educational and work lives as personal, public rather than private matters. Studies of generations of women and young people will also feature, attempting to understand women's diverse, classed, racialised lives, and how they are theorised within the context of educational transformations and moves towards a knowledge economy. What does this mean for higher education, particularly postgraduate professional doctoral education, and the lives of women as researchers and students within the new knowledge economy? To what extent have feminist research agendas been transformed and the political become personal, whereas thirty years ago a feminist agenda was framed by the personal as political?

OVERVIEW/INTRODUCTION:
In this paper I will explore emergent feminist research agendas from feminist 'activism' of the 1970s, situating these in the complex context of economic, familial, political and social transformations over the last thirty years. I shall also consider especially the moves towards the knowledge economy and transformations in the academy, in particular highlighting feminist 'knowledges'. These focus especially on transformations between the 'personal and the political'. I locate the changes within three phases of liberalism, noting three shifting decades and their implications for changing feminist knowledges. I also want to question, in the context of neo-liberalism, what the opportunities and challenges are for the future of feminist knowledge and work. What does this mean for higher education, particularly postgraduate professional doctoral education, and the lives of women as researchers and students? And finally address the question of to what extent feminist research agendas have been transformed and the political become personal, whereas thirty years ago a feminist agenda was framed by the personal as political and a form of activism rather than theory?

In terms of my methodology or approach, I shall draw and reflect on my own personal biography (David, 2002; 2003 in press). This is part of a wider project of developing feminist pedagogy and methodologies of personal experiences within the academy (Morley, 1999) and also part of the 'auto/biographic turn' in the social sciences (Chamberlayne et al 2000). There have indeed been shifting agendas towards more personal, biographic, narrative accounts. I also consider the changes in generations of feminists in involvement in the academy and associate them with the three phases of liberalism.

These three phases of liberalism very loosely and broadly associated with the three decades over the last 30 or more years, are:

1. **Social Liberalism**, associated with social democracy or socialism. The period for these purposes is associated with the 1960s and 1970s in Britain, and to some extent the USA and also Europe. One key characteristic was the rise of social and
polITICAL MOVEMENTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE, SOCIALISM AND SEXUAL EQUALITY, AND FOR MY PURPOSES IN PARTICULAR THE RISE OF THE WLM, OR THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT AND MOVEMENTS FOR SEXUAL EQUALITY. THIS WAS ALSO LINKED WITH ECONOMIC GROWTH AND SOCIAL CHANGES IN FAMILY LIVES AND ESPECIALLY FOR WOMEN. FROM THE SECOND WORLD WAR, ECONOMIC GROWTH HAD LED TO EDUCATIONAL EXPANSION (ARNOT, DAVID AND WEINER, 1999). IN PARTICULAR, WOMEN’S INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION WAS BEGINNING TO LEAD TO THE OPENING UP OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR EMPLOYMENT, AND SOCIAL WELFARE CHANGES ALSO FACILITATED WOMEN’S PAID WORK (ALBEIT OFTEN PART-TIME) WHilst MARRIED AND RAISING CHILDREN. HOWEVER, THE EARLY RISE OF FEMALE PROFESSIONS SUCH AS TEACHING, NURSING AND SOCIAL WORK ASSOCIATED WITH TRADITIONAL FORMS OF CARE IN FAMILIES WAS ALSO BEGINNING TO TAKE PLACE.

2. **ECONOMIC LIBERALISM**, CHARACTERISED BY CONSUMER CHOICE, WAS ASSOCIATED WITH THE POLITICAL BACKLASH IN THE LATE 1970s AGAINST SUCH EARLIER FORMS OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND LIBERALISM. IN BRITAIN THIS WAS PARTICULARLY ASSOCIATED WITH THATCHERISM, IN THE USA REAGANISM AND THE RE-INTRODUCTION OF CONSUMERISM AND MARKET FORCES INTO PUBLIC SERVICES AND THE RISE OF A MARKET ECONOMY. HOWEVER, DURING THIS PERIOD THERE WERE CONTRADICTORY FORCES AT WORK, AND CHANGING FAMILY LIVES CONTINUED, INCLUDING WITH WOMEN’S CONTINUING INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION, AND NOW PARTICULARLY INCLUDING CHANGING FORMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION.


**CHANGING FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES & THE ACADEMY:**

THE INITIAL ‘SECOND WAVE’ FEMINIST PROJECT WAS LARGELY ‘POLITICAL’ IN THE SENSE THAT IT WAS ABOUT CAMPAIGNS TO TRANSFORM WOMEN’S LIVES, DEAL WITH ‘WOMEN’S OPPRESSION’ AND MAKE POLITICAL DEMANDS FOR SEXUAL EQUALITY. HOWEVER, THIS POLITICAL PROJECT WAS QUICKLY ASSOCIATED WITH DEVELOPING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND WRITINGS ABOUT MOVEMENTS FOR SOCIAL EMANCIPATION AND SEXUAL EQUALITY DURING THE 1970s.

1. **PERSONAL IS POLITICAL**

THUS THE ORIGINAL FEMINIST CREDO OF ‘THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL’ I.E. THE IDEA THAT WOMEN’S LIVES IN FAMILIES AND IN ‘WORK’ WERE NOT ONLY PRIVATE AND INDIVIDUAL BUT COULD BE UNDERSTOOD COLLECTIVELY BECAME THE BASIS NOT ONLY FOR POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING BUT ALSO FOR THE SLOW AND EVENTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF ‘FEMINIST’ CRITIQUES WITHIN THE ACADEMY. THIS BECAME THE BASIS FOR INITIAL FEMINIST WORK (WHERE THE TERM FEMINIST WAS NOT FULLY ACCEPTABLE) AROUND NOTIONS OF ‘SEX’
rather than gender and sexual divisions and the development of women's studies within the academy albeit highly contested and challenged.

2. The personal and political

As feminist work developed within the academy and as the academy itself was expanding, and incorporating more female students and academics, the developments in feminist theories within different disciplines and subjects mainly but not only within the social sciences began to grow. However, curiously this growth and development was often associated with a wider political (and theoretical) backlash against the feminist political project in the 1980s (Faludi, 1990). Yet feminist theoretical work continued to develop as new generations of women entered the academy. Moreover, there were moves towards theoretical developments away from sex and sexual divisions towards gender theories that became increasingly sophisticated and concerned with understanding how we know what we know and in particular 'women's ways of knowing (Belenky et al, 1986).

3. The political is personal

As the political project of economic liberalism shaded into neo-liberalism and more global social, economic and familial transformations were increasingly recognised, feminist theories began to flourish and become increasingly diverse. Thus as the academy in association with globalisation began to transform the kinds of knowledges created so too did there develop new kinds of feminist knowledges in association with this diversity. In particular, feminist theories became associated with more critical and post-structural perspectives and the development of critical feminist research around critical ethnographies and critical realism as different and diverse perspectives.

My own academic journey has been associated with these diverse theoretical and methodological developments. I want to identify some of these critical events and link them with those of others internationally and associate them with changing education and forms of liberalism.

Thus, I entered the academy as part of the 'first generation of post-war and second wave feminists' having been an active member of the women's movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I was part of the political movement for social and sexual equality and our associations were with socialist projects. It was very interesting and intriguing to read, for example, of Ann Curthoys' similar 'intellectual and social journey' to mine in Feminist Review's millennial edition (2000). She also mentioned her early feminist political projects and her reading of early feminist literature especially that of de Beauvoir and her attempts to transform her own life and living conditions, here in Australia.

We struggled to teach 'women's studies' and introduce feminist perspectives into the traditional academic curriculum in the 1970s. During the 1980s, however, as we became increasingly sophisticated in our feminist theoretical perspectives new challenges were mounted to these, more from a political than academic perspective. I personally became a 'feminist academic manager' during this period of political backlash in the 1980s and struggled to maintain any feminist critique and perspective.

It was what Australians rightly called 'a chilly climate' for these perspectives and theories, although for you Australians the chilly climate emerged later. Feminist involvement in both the academy and polity lasted longer and was apparently far more effective than it was in Britain and the USA. Indeed, the termed coined in Australia - femocrats (Yeatman 1990) and femocracy (Connell and Franzway 1996) - was not and could not really be applied in the British context to the kind of relatively effective struggles for feminist transformations in the
political and social arenas in Britain. (However, we as feminist academics did struggle with these kinds of feminist theoretical and methodological developments, particularly in our research and teaching of postgraduates, and subsequently within professional education.

However, during the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, feminists and feminist perspectives and theories have begun to flourish in the global academy despite the political projects to eclipse our kinds of work. However, these feminist theories and projects have become, on the one hand, associated with and incorporated into more social science perspectives and methodologies. They have also become associated with new traditions of ethnographies and ways of understanding and researching women's lives. Here the associations have been with developments and fascinations with the foregrounding of personal and family lives within a public arena, associated with changing generations.

**CHANGING FEMINIST THEORIES & KNOWLEDGES WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION:**

Thus it can be argued that there have been dramatic shifts in feminist perspectives and understandings through developments in what we can now call feminist knowledge associated with the new knowledge economy. However, this is a very unusual reading of the notion and concept of the knowledge economy. Thus we might argue that

1. Personal is Political - led to changing political theories whilst
2. The personal and political - led to more diverse social and methodological notions
3. The political is personal - led to more theoretical diversity associated with and incorporated into broader theoretical and methodological perspectives such as critical realism, ethnographies and/or post-structuralism.

This makes answering Ann Curthoys' question a complex and sophisticated one. She asked, I understand somewhat controversially, about whether Beauvoir's political project through her autobiographies of transforming family and personal lives had any relevance today to younger generations of women. Indeed, she went further and assumed that these books did not have the relevance that they had to her (and my generation) of relatively middle class and white educated women. She argued that social and political transformations in family lives had been such over the last thirty years and two or three generations as to render this work redundant and no longer relevant today.

However, it is possible to look at the now abundant research evidence, drawn largely from feminist ethnographies about new generations of young women to see to what extent their lives are different and transformed from those of generations of young women thirty years ago. There is interestingly and intriguingly a lot of comparative material on young people's and especially young women's lives in families, education and employment, that might address this kind of question.

1. Kenway et al's (1998) study of changing education and schools in Australia addresses the limitations in policy and pedagogical projects that would suggest continuities rather than changes.
2. Lyn Mikel Brown (1998) for USA looks at two contrasting working class and middle class communities and argues for limited changes in young women's lives, albeit with a stronger focus on expressions of anger than perhaps was evident in the past.
3. Walkerdine et al for GB (2002) also studied different groups of working class and middle class young women throughout the 1990s and concluded essentially that there had been transformations but not in the direction of making women's lives easier. On the contrary, they pointed to the deleterious effects of neo-liberalism on such young women's lives, increasing amounts of anxiety entailed in women's
educational and work lives, associated with increasing pressures towards academic and educational success.

There is also a growing feminist literature specifically associated with young people's perspectives on and attitudes to sex and personal education:

1. David et al (2002). We studied a community of young people and addressed questions of attitudes to sex and sexuality education and concluded that young working class women continued to associate their lives with bearing and raising young children rather than a strong attachment to new forms of 'work'.

2. Similarly Deirdre Kelly for Canada (2000) came to similar conclusions in her careful and sophisticated ethnographic study of pregnant teenagers in Canada.

3. Louisa Allen (2001) and Middleton (1998) both in New Zealand reached similar conclusions about the extent to which their had been transformations in young women's lives, their family and sexual lives as well as their work lives.

Indeed all these studies would suggest that despite the massive transformations in work lives, under regimes of economic and neo-liberalism there had not been equally major transformations in the lives of young working class and ethnic minority women, in relation to sex, sexuality and their personal lives in or outside of families.

However, these new feminist knowledges and discourses within higher education provide us with exciting and challenging new perspectives on feminist research agendas. These new agendas are increasingly about subjecting to critical and ethnographic gaze generations of women within families and new modes of education and employment. They are also about women's changing educational and work lives as personal, public rather than private matters. They provide rich new in-depth studies of changing generations of women and young people attempting to understand women's diverse, classed, racialised lives, and how they are theorised within the context of educational transformations and moves towards a knowledge economy.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES:

Thus I have argued that social, economic and educational shifts have been linked to the three phases of liberalism which themselves have been associated with changes in women's lives in work and education, including within the academy. These have entailed and entrenched both challenges and opportunities for theoretical and methodological understandings of how we study social and educational lives. These changes have led to new and complex ways of understanding the complexity of social, cultural, family and racial or ethnic changes. Indeed, the very transformations in education and the academy have allowed for both women's involvement and feminist theories and methodologies about how we understand the changes to grow and develop. Indeed, the process of feminist academics' involvement has led to inexorable shifts in the kinds of theorising in association with broader and even global shifts in social science and educational research. Thus, the initial challenges to feminist theory led to theories about private and family lives being more than personal and deeply political. The growing involvement of feminists led into ways in which feminists began to theorise the political (Butler and Scott, 1992) alongside the diversity of critical feminist theories, methodologies and ethnographies. Indeed, the political project of 'modernisation' developed in association with social science and feminist perspectives on ways of knowing. The two way influences of increasingly sophisticated social theorising and the cultural and social 'turn' led into attempts to now theorise the personal.
CONCLUSIONS:

In conclusion I have argued that changing complex and diverse feminist theories and methodologies have been linked to and been influenced by as well as influencing social and political transformations. These transformations have broadly been theorised as about globalisation and the knowledge economy or society. However, such developments have not often been associated with either changes in the academy or developments of feminist 'knowledge' or 'knowledges' within the academy. However, it is possible to argue that these shifts in knowledge and the knowledge society have been influenced by and influenced the ways in which we, as feminists, have tried to understand and theorise changing family, social and 'personal' lives. Thus feminist theories and methodologies have mapped on to changing generations and how we have studied and tried to develop ways of understanding and new 'ways of knowing' within the academy. Thus there has been, under regimes of neo-liberalism, a plethora and diversity of studies of new generations of women as subjects, students and feminist researchers within the academy. These have led to rich and diverse studies and critical feminist ethnographies that have led to 'feminists theorising the personal'. In particular, we have a rich seam of 'new knowledge' around sex, sexuality, personal education and issues of what is now commonly known as the 'work-life balance' for new and future generations of women both within and outside of the academy.

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