

War in the Women's Studies Classroom: Feminist Approaches to September 11

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September 11, 2001: It is my first day of class in a new tenure-track position. I am a sociologist who has been hired to teach Women's Studies at the University of Calgary, where I completed my master's degree some years before. At 9:00 a.m. I board the elevator in the basement of my building. We stop on the main floor and the doors open to reveal a television set surrounded by people. The last time a television was set up in the foyer was during the Gulf War in my grad student days. Through the crowd I see the caption at the bottom of the screen: "America under Attack." The doors close, we continue up.

By the time I get back downstairs, only a few minutes later, the television has been moved out to a larger area. Students sit and stand around it, eerily quiet. Some weep. I cannot see the screen so ask a young man what is happening. He chokes out that planes have been hijacked and flown into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. On a nearby bench is an old grad school friend who has reluctantly left her children at the babysitter's to come to work today. She had been watching the news at the babysitter's when the second plane hit. She tells me that exactly a year ago today, at this very time, she was standing in front of the World Trade Centre with her new son.

We know this is war. We cannot believe that anybody would purposely antagonize the United States. If they will attack America, then surely they will be unafraid to attack anywhere. In the following days, experts will say that Americans are in shock, feeling violated, that they are in disbelief that this could happen to them. As Canadians, this does not quite feel like it is happening to *us*. We have our own cultural identity even if we identify deeply with Americans. We do, however, share the disbelief that this could happen to the United States. We are deeply afraid of what the American response will be. We feel sharp grief for the innocents on the planes and on the ground; it is so easy to imagine being them. My friend and I hold hands and weep; for all we know, the world is ending.

Five hours later I enter the classroom. First-day classes are usually pretty quiet; this group is unnaturally so. Currents of panic arc through the classroom. I suspect that many of us are here because we do not know what else to do. The university has not cancelled classes so even though it would be nice to go home and draw loved ones near, we are forced to go through the rituals of the first-day of class. I hand out and discuss the course outline then let them go. The fun getting-to-know-you questionnaire that I had planned will have to wait. It is already clear that my vision for the first weeks of this class will have to change; our thoughts, concerns, and even dreams, will be permeated with the events of September 11 for some time to come.

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Teachable Moments

My question to myself was what tools could I, as a feminist sociologist, bring to the classroom to help my students think through a situation that seemed, at least at first, incomprehensible? It is part of my feminist pedagogy that my job includes empowering my students, facilitating their ability to be producers of knowledge who are possessed of critical analytical tools. Critical analysis is difficult when emotions run high and yet this is exactly the time when it is most essential.

My first few classes were meant to be devoted to helping the students get a sense of me and of each other and how/why we all ended up in a Women's Studies classroom together and to exploring and understanding what feminism is (or what feminisms are). But all thoughts were on September 11, so I strove to offer my students some feminist tools for understanding these devastating events and their aftermath. Concomitantly, I needed to be able to use the events, and sociocultural responses to them, to illustrate some of the basic principles of feminism and to show why Women's Studies exists as an academic discipline. The primary pedagogical tools I used are not new or particularly sophisticated: we talked, we watched a film in class and closely observed media coverage of events outside the classroom, and then we talked a whole lot more.

On the second day of class I asked the students to split into groups, introduce themselves and consider the question "what might Women's Studies, or feminism, have to contribute to thinking about, questioning and explaining the events of September 11 and their aftermath?" This question would be at the heart of our next several classes. Out of this first discussion, students identified that feminists are concerned with gender issues, but also with issues surrounding other kinds of inequalities such as those arising from cultural constructions of race, class, ability and sexual orientations.

This provided me with the opportunity to explain how second-wave feminism's concern with "sisterhood" and with the commonalities between women has developed into the third-wave concern with differences, diversities and multiple feminisms. The focus on women and women's lives has also been informed by the acknowledgement that "woman" is not an isolated category and that the genders exist, and are articulated, in relation (and often in opposition) to each other. We decided to start there, with the lived consequences of gender, and I thus asked my students to watch the media coverage of the war-related events over the next few days through a "gender lens."

When we reconvened the following week, the students were excited by their observations. There seemed also to be a sense that the information and images with which they were being inundated were less overwhelming if they had a classification system with which to organize them. The gender lens was one cornerstone of that classification system.

It was obvious that the terrorists, the leaders of the United States and Afghanistan and the Mayor of New York, the majority of the foreign correspondents reporting on the case, the majority of police officers and fire-fighters killed on the scene, and the majority of military leaders and spokespeople were male. It was apparent that men are more likely than women both to occupy positions of power and to be in occupations that place them directly in harm's way (and frequently to be the ones who have created the harm in the first place). The women who received the most media coverage after September 11 were Mrs. Bush, the grieving wives, mothers and daughters of men killed, and the abstract, oppressed "Afghani woman."

In trying to explain these observations, the students began to recognize and separate the cultural, social structural and personal dimensions of human existence. We examined hegemonic constructions of gender and saw that aggression, courage, leadership, self-sacrifice in the form of willingness to die for one's country, one's cause or one's job, and a thirst for revenge are all central to constructions of masculinity. Conversely, passivity, pacifism, self-sacrifice in the form of devoting

a life to nurturing and care-giving, vulnerability, and a desire for negotiation are all central to constructions of femininity.

Students had to confront the inconsistencies between their own senses of self and the genders they were expected to perform. The male student who said he would go into hiding if he was drafted was supported more warmly than the female student who said she deserved the right to be on the front lines "along with the men," killing "the enemy." The whole class was pushed toward recognizing that each of these positions is consistent with feminism and that feminism in Canada has secured women the right to enter battle. Ironically, however, second wave feminism in Canada grew largely out of the 1960s peace movement (whereas in the United States it was more closely associated with the civil rights and student movements, of which peace activism was only a part). The legacy of cultural feminism, which constructs women as naturally more "in tune" with the earth, nature, nurturance and the preservation of life, remains strong in Western feminism. This can be difficult to reconcile with liberal feminist notions of equality of opportunity in the workplace (which, of course, includes the military).

Despite the fact that Canadian women are free to enter the military, the women in the class were not worried about being drafted; many, however, were worried that men they loved would be. The general consensus was that if conscription was brought in, women would not be drafted, or at least not in large numbers, because somebody has to be left to look after children and because, my students were pretty sure, more women than men would simply refuse to do it. This raised the questions of why we assume that it must be women who look after children and men who will be willing to fight and die for their countries. The central question really was what does the state want of us and how/why are these expectations differentiated by gender? How is it that one sex has traditionally been considered expendable in the service of war while the other sex has been required to birth and raise the citizens of the state (and the soldiers who will defend it)?

A particularly compelling set of answers to these questions is offered in the film *The Gods of our Fathers*¹. This is a film created and distributed by the National film Board of Canada and written and narrated by Gwynne Dyer, a military analyst. Dyer traces the emergence and continuance of patriarchy through human history. Briefly, Dyer argues that early, agrarian settlements were independent villages that were small enough to be run by negotiation and consensus. They were fairly egalitarian because men's previously valued work of hunting was no longer needed. People worshipped a variety of gods and goddesses. As the population grew, nation states formed and populations became too large to be self-governing. Leaders emerged who had to enforce their rule, which they did through terror. As Dyer argues "a mass society without mass communication [which many contemporary leaders can use to try to convince people to follow them/vote for them] has to be a dictatorship." He illustrates his argument with the pictures and carvings that can be found, dating back several thousand years, which depict the violent ends that would come to anybody who resisted the rulers. There was no need, however, that these early rulers be male, even if they frequently were. Dyer dates the beginnings of patriarchy to the beginnings of mass militarism. Nation states that wanted to invade other territories or to protect their own had to have mass armies. Two things had to happen: men had to be convinced to die for their people and women had to produce sufficient numbers of sons to keep the armies populated. Dyer reasons that men were basically offered a deal; in exchange for being the foot soldiers of the state, they would be given power over women. The gods and goddesses would be reduced to one god, who would also be male, as would his priests, and the new religious beliefs would support and reinforce the superiority of men. Women were contained, their social value dependent on the number of sons they could produce, the power to control their reproduction taken from their hands. Dyer points out that many vestiges of early patriarchy remain with us, both in the form of social institutions and customs and in the form of internalized beliefs and attitudes.

I had explained to my students that “patriarchy” is a neutral descriptive term for a social structure wherein the majority of the positions of power, in the majority of social institutions, are held by men. When we look at major social institutions such as the government, the economy, religion, the military, education and the media, we cannot deny that we still live in a patriarchy. It is not that women never occupy positions of power, but that they are certainly not equally represented in the top positions. Additionally, the passionate conflict we have seen in the past few decades over women’s reproductive self-determination indicates that the patriarchal interest in controlling women’s reproductive practices is still tenacious.

After viewing and discussing this film, my students were able to see how features of the social structure impact their lives and beliefs. We were able to more closely examine how both femininity and masculinity are constructed and lived and to gain some insight into some of the inequities they had noticed through their media observations. It was, of course, much easier for them to view Afghanistan as a patriarchy than to recognize that Canada and the United States are also still patriarchal in structure; that, in fact, patriarchy is a global presence.

We were also able to question how gender is used, or invoked, by nations (or their leaders or representatives) when constructing and selling acts of terrorism or war to their people. Thus, the class suggested that Afghani women had become the motif of “innocent victimisation,” the further proof of the “evil” of the terrorists and the necessary rationale for reacting against Afghanistan with violence; in other words, it is more culturally acceptable (and more consistent with North American constructions of honourable manhood) to defend or save innocent women and children than simply to retaliate in an act of blind vengeance. Or, as we witnessed with the simultaneous dropping of bombs and food packages, vengeance is perhaps neutralized by compassion.

Related to sex and gender, some students had noticed the heterosexism of both the media coverage, and of the official, state-sanctioned constructions of the war-related events. The concept of “family,” for example was evoked frequently, especially the families of those who had been killed, directly or indirectly, by the terrorist attacks. That family, however, was almost always an “intact” family that had been torn apart by the events and it was almost completely without exception heterosexual. Students had to go to gay and lesbian news websites to get information about gay and lesbian people who had been killed and about the family members they had left behind.

Having become critically attentive to representations of “family,” the students themselves brought to class some key observations later in the semester when the bombing of Afghanistan had begun. They observed that the lavish attention paid to the agonizing minutia of familial grief on which the media glutted itself in the aftermath of September 11 was entirely absent in the news coverage of the attacks on Afghanistan. Dead Afghans, apparently, leave no families weeping on the streets. The students argued that selective media coverage, and the framing employed by state spokespeople, gave the impression that the good old, traditional, heterosexual, male-headed American family had been viciously attacked by people who do not even occupy recognizable families; when “they” do occupy families, these apparently non-weeping families are marked by a distasteful tendency toward poverty and an over-zealousness in their male privilege. “They” are, as evidenced by their family lives, very foreign to “us.”

The next level of inquiry was to look beyond sex and gender to other forms of social inequality and to observe how these inequalities were being manifested, perhaps even created, in the aftermath of September 11. I asked my students, as we headed into the third week of class, to think explicitly about race/ethnicity, and social class as they processed their thoughts and observations of war-related events.

Once the students began really attending to questions of race, it became rapidly apparent that not only are the majority of positions of power in the main social institutions held by men, the vast

majority of those men, in Canada and the United States, are white. The majority of the people who were making life-and-death decisions for the population were white; the majority of media figures, and those to whom they gave airtime, were white. The United States' attempts to counter accusations of racism and to encourage, and create the appearance of, multicultural tolerance through such events as interfaith memorial services, were noteworthy; such events actually drew attention to how rare such events are. The students noted that the coverage of such multi-racial, multi-faith, multi-cultural events was always preceded and followed by the standard, predominantly white and Christian coverage of predominantly white and Christian people claiming to represent the whole population.

These observations created an opening to discuss the social construction of race and ethnicity. We were able to decenter the notion that "race" is "real" and intrinsic to people and look instead at how race is an arbitrarily created system of organizing people. The students could see that as an organizational system, race has life and death consequences for people; that in its lived consequences, race is all too real. Students were also able to identify the symbolic dimensions and uses of race. They revisited, with new interest, cultural equations of "goodness" with whiteness and of "evil" with blackness and were able to see how these symbols were being used to frame both the attack on America and the responses to it.

Students also began to become aware of social class as a stratifying system rather than simply as the lifestyle outcomes of individual efforts. They could see on local, national and global levels, that wealth, material goods, opportunities and access to education, employment and income are neither equally nor randomly distributed. The people in political power, the ones making the decisions that would impact the lives of so many, were all from wealthy backgrounds. With Osama Bin Laden, it was easy to see how his wealth had translated into power. With George W. Bush, this has been obscured by the rhetoric of American "work-hardism," and equal opportunity, but the connection is there nonetheless. Students noted that one of the wealthiest nations in the world was launching an attack on one of the very poorest. An act that in many circumstances would look like bullying, even if it was an act of retaliation, had to be packaged in the rhetoric of good versus evil, and threats to Western freedom, to make it at all palatable. The students observed that it was the wealthy nation that had the power to declare that all who were not "with them" were with the enemy and would be treated as the enemy. Wealth, and a massive arsenal, gave the United States the power to intimidate the majority of world nations into siding with them in war before diplomatic or other options were seriously considered.

Reflections

These were not easy discussions for the students or for me, but then, as we all know, it was not an easy time. In addition, Women's Studies is not an emotionally easy topic to teach. It is my duty to go into the classroom and disabuse young students of their blind faith in fairness, equality and meritocracy and to facilitate their process of coming to conscious awareness of the social structure, opportunities and constraints in which they exist. By giving the students a few leading questions and directing their attention to the issues with which they were captivated anyway (the attacks of September 11 and the aftermath thereof), I witnessed their coming to consciousness in a profound and grounded way.

Abstract concepts of gender, race and social class were played out every evening on our television sets. The concept of "social construction" (of gender, race or class, for example) was exemplified by competing constructions appearing side-by-side in the evening news. The students were empowered by having a conceptual schema with which to approach and organize the information they were getting. Other courses, in other disciplines, offered other schemata. Students brought

economic, evolutionary and psychological paradigms to the class and our discussions were only enriched. They shared the excitement of realizing that all these seemingly disparate courses that they take can actually be brought together in genuinely useful ways to help them form their own world view.

Students expressed to me that they had initially doubted that feminism would have anything to say about the events of September 11 and their aftermath. Although they could guess that feminism would be concerned with sex and gender, and perhaps with other stratifiers, it was not immediately apparent how any of these factors were relevant to terrorism or war. Sexism, racism and classism are the bogey-people in our cultural closet; we seem to believe that if we deny their existence they will simply go away. It is thus not common practice to wear “gender lenses” or “race lenses” or “class lenses” when analysing social or political events; we prefer to believe that gender, race and class are benign or irrelevant elements of our social lives.

It is one of the central mandates of feminism to bring these elements of social existence out of the closet and to find ways of ending their tyranny. The benefits of these guided discussions in my Women’s Studies class were multiple. By offering the students some feminist analytical tools, students were empowered to begin making some sense of the devastating events of September 11 and afterwards; concomitantly, their analyses allowed them then to see the sorts of issues with which feminism is concerned and how Women’s Studies courses offer a vital academic service. They also experienced themselves, and for some this was a relatively new experience, as people who could create knowledge by taking “facts” and analysing them from a critical perspective. Not least, the conversations we had, and the intensity of emotions that were shared in the process of doing so, created a warm and tight cohesiveness in the class. These early discussions laid the groundwork for sustained, mutually respectful examinations of a large number of feminist issues and perspectives.

In the end, it was not just the first few weeks of class that were changed to accommodate and utilize the intellectual and emotional needs created on the morning of September 11. A class in which I had envisioned doing a fair amount of lecturing (it was, after all, an introductory class and there was much foundational material to be covered) became as much discussion as lecture. The students’ enthusiasm for actively and critically producing and consuming knowledge, rather than passively absorbing bits of information, remained unquenched throughout. With any topic I brought up, I had very little time to explain some of the basics before the students were off and running with it, flexing their nascent feminist analytical skills. It ended up being one of my most enjoyable and rewarding teaching experiences in seven years of teaching. Judging from the course evaluations, the students shared that assessment.

Notes

1. *The Gods of our Fathers*, written and narrated by Gwynne Dyer and directed by Anne Henderson, was released by the National Film Board of Canada in 1994. More information can be found at <http://www.nfb.ca>

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