

# BOOK REVIEWS

## Career Beginnings

**Gender and the Academic Experience.** Berkeley Women Sociologists. KATHRYN P. MEADOW ORLANS and RUTH A. WALLACE, Eds. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1994. xii, 266 pp., illus. \$35 or £32.95; paper, \$14.95 or £13.95.

It is easy to forget that the debate over the place of feminism on college campuses could not have happened even as short a time ago as 1970. For better or worse, this controversy is an inevitable by-product of the remarkable transformation in academic life that has occurred in the intervening period. *Gender and the Academic Experience* reminds us of what things were like before female professors were commonplace and the study of gender had become an integral, if contested, part of the university curriculum.

Narrower in scope than its title suggests, the book actually consists of 16 autobiographies written by women who were among the first to earn doctorates in sociology at the University of California at Berkeley. These women, who entered graduate school between 1952 and 1972, candidly and bravely recount what led them to pursue graduate study, how they navigated the minefields of academia, and where they ventured after receiving their degrees. Since we do not hear from their male counterparts or from women in other departments or universities, we cannot know how representative their experiences are. Nevertheless, the book offers an intriguing look into the process of academic change through the lens of a strategic group who had common experiences, were exposed to similar events, and helped forge the gender revolution on college campuses. Their stories provide some clues about how, under propitious circumstances, social institutions can be rapidly transformed.

The theme of marginality permeates these lives, and not simply because the actors were women in a male-dominated world. Shirley Hartley explains how poverty made her feel "that I didn't belong," and Lillian Rubin tells how "it wasn't my gender that defined me as an outsider. It was the grinding poverty, living in a fatherless family, being called an orphan

and feeling like one." Few were poor or fatherless, but most could identify something that made them feel different and outside. Similarly, very few entered graduate school with well-formed ambitions. Their goals were, as Jacqueline Wiseman acknowledges, "limited."

Yet their sense of marginality and constraint gave way to unanticipated success. Almost all of these women moved unexpectedly from vague desires for personal growth to committed professional careers. They became tenured professors, accomplished authors, and political activists. Only one chose not to pursue a work career.

How did this change happen? Aware that their lives, in the words of Ruth Dixon-Mueller, "could have turned out a thousand different ways," most felt that chance played a key role. Like Harriet Presser, they recognized that "seemingly small events can direct one's future in unexpected ways." Taken together, however, the stories reveal a more orderly process in which women from diverse backgrounds were propelled down similar paths. They entered a world where widening opportunities for professional growth combined with private and political struggles to spur personal metamorphoses. Amid Berkeley's exciting intellectual environment, they found inspiring professors, supportive friends, and male mentors who offered financial and moral support.

Events outside the classroom also nurtured ambition and prompted personal change. The civil rights and women's movements triggered new views of the self and society. Graduate-student culture became politicized, and women built informal networks and formal organizations to provide support and further feminist goals. For many, divorce and single motherhood forced a reassessment of work and career. All of these factors converged to encourage, in the words of Dorothy Smith, "a reshaping of the self." Although these felt like chance events, they were not random. Social institutions were changing in ways that would inescapably transform women's lives. In this revolutionary context, these women found a way to convert adversity into opportunity. Metta Spencer thus speaks for the group when she proclaims that "what I

prize most about my life is the excellence of my problems."

These are stories of survival and success. Yet only one-fourth of the women who entered Berkeley during this time received their degrees, and the book is silent about those who did not. Did the women who left have different experiences from the women who stayed, and does this explain their dissimilar fates? Would those who did not fare so well have presented as kind and gentle a picture of colleagues, friends, and mentors? And what about the men who entered the program at the same time, two-thirds of whom also did not complete their degrees? Without this comparative perspective, we can only speculate about how gender shaped the experiences of survivors and dropouts alike.

Any book that relies on personal autobiographies can have a dual purpose. Does it advance our understanding of social institutions or provide a practical guide to those facing similar situations? This book does some of both. While too anecdotal to make a clear theoretical statement, the life histories provide support for theories that stress the role of adult opportunities and active choice in determining women's fates. These narratives tell us that social change takes place not just because new social conditions emerge but also because marginal groups actively resist the dictates of childhood socialization and adult constraint.

The book can also reassure young women that the road to personal fulfillment is rarely straight and the destination rarely apparent at the outset. These memoirs thus provide useful lessons for today's women, even though they face a very different context. As the barriers to women's participation in the public sphere have eroded, the new challenge is to transform that sphere into one that also honors private pursuits. As Arlie Hochschild notes, it is time to move beyond the "clockwork of male careers" to fashion a workplace that respects the importance of family life. Constructing such a world will require the active efforts of those who feel the most constrained. Let us hope that this time the pioneers include men too.

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