REVIEWS

Claudia Leeb: *Working-class Women in Elite Academia: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Bruxelles, Bern, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang, 2004, 220pp. £23.00, $38.95, ISBN 90–5201–979–7 (pbk).
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This was a really difficult book to review. I agree with so many of its intentions and objectives, but found the details of their execution problematic. The book demonstrates the difficulties of capturing the messy and contradictory complications of moving from one class to another. It has many strengths, but also a lot of flaws. One thing it certainly does not do is play safe. This is a book that does not pull any punches. It is a courageous book with no equivocation, but its spirited fearlessness also contributes to a number of weaknesses. Where to begin?

I will start with what I hope is a fair and balanced synopsis of the book. Leeb conducted 10 qualitative semi-structured interviews with women who identify their family origins as 'working-class' between October 1997 and March 1998. They were either pursuing a PhD or working as full-time or part-time professors in New York City's private academic institutions. Two of the women were from ethnic minorities, the remaining eight white. Leeb asserts that there is a 'working-class silence' in academia in which academics are not encouraged to explore their different class backgrounds in either their academic theorizing and/or personal interactions. The consequence is both a 'theoretical silence' with reference to the specific situation of working-class academics and a silence of working-class academics themselves. Unlike the UK situation where there has been a resurgence of explicitly working-class academic feminist work (Lawler, 2000; Reay, 2004; Skeggs, 1997, 2004), according to Leeb, American female academics from working-class backgrounds often try to 'hide' their working-class origins in the academic institution and exclude their working-class experiences in their academic work.

Leeb posits three questions in relation to 'working-class silence' in academic institutions:

1. How can we understand the processes of silencing working-class academics, processes that they need to counteract with self-disclosure in order to be heard?
2. What are the consequences of these processes of silencing for women in academia from working-class backgrounds?
3. How can women from working-class backgrounds disrupt these processes and hence find a 'voice' in the academic context?

In relation to the first and main question Leeb asks, she draws on three analytic tools. First she utilizes Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the Panopticon,

extending the panoptic to the academic institution, where middle-class academics attempt to police the bodies of working-class academics. In so doing, they subject them to the 'gaze of the bourgeois other', a gaze that gradually gets inscribed into the bodies of working-class academics as they are socialized into the academic world. One damaging consequence is that there is a bourgeois connoisseur residing within the consciousness of academics from working-class backgrounds, a classed equivalent of Holland et al.'s (1998) 'male in the head'. According to Leeb, it is this self-surveillance, expressed by most of the women in her study in terms of constant efforts to act, talk, walk and behave for the gaze of the bourgeois other, that guarantees the functioning of the academic institution to produce compliantly classed bodies.

Leeb also draws on Gloria Anzalduaís's concept of 'borders' and 'borderlands' as a theoretical tool to understand the processes of marginalization of working-class academics in academic institutions. The creation of borders between the academic and the working class is elaborated in order to understand what lies behind the need for the surveillance of working-class academics. Borders mark the realm of academia as a 'safe place', whereas it is the working-class world that becomes an 'unsafe one'. Those who cross over this border, who go beyond the confines that are considered as 'normal' within this border, have to live in a 'borderland'. Working-class academics who have crossed this border are the inhabitants of the 'borderland' in academia. It is the working-class part that is the forbidden and prohibited in academia.

But perhaps the key concept Leeb deploys is the psychoanalytic notion of the 'abject'. She uses the concept of abjection in an attempt to illustrate that the creation of 'working class' as 'abject' is an important factor in keeping working-class academics silent. The notion of the abject brings us closer to the process of working-class surveillance in academia: in order to become an academic, one has to become the bourgeois surveyor through identifying with the normative phantasm of the bourgeois individual. This identification implies at the same time a repudiation of one's working-class background, because it is the academic subject itself that can only emerge through creating a domain of working-class abjection. With psychoanalytic vocabulary, another explanation for the need for constant surveillance of working-class academics comes to light. The identification with the normative phantasm of the bourgeois individual is not a one-off process. It needs a constant re-identification with the bourgeois surveyor, because the working-class academic is constantly haunted by the voices of the working-class world. Only the designation of 'working class' as the abject, reinforced through the panoptical scenario, guarantees the constant re-identification with the bourgeois surveyor.

Working-class Women in Elite Academia raises some enduring theoretical concerns in relation to social class. Its pivotal question is what is legitimate academic knowledge? The introduction of the term working-class knowledge is an important factor in questioning bourgeois knowledge as the only legitimate form of academic knowledge, What has to be explored on a theoretical level is what working-class knowledge consists of and how it can be inserted into the academic canon. Relatedly, what can women from working-class backgrounds contribute to academic theorizing because of their working-class backgrounds. One suggestion Leeb makes is the introduction of working-class literature so that academics can start to confront their different class backgrounds and to loosen the academic/working-class divide. She

also argues that actual spaces should be created within academia in which effective communication between working-class academics becomes possible. This would allow women from working-class backgrounds to look over the dividing wall of academia and to start a communication that has hitherto been made impossible by academic structures.

Clearly this is both a powerful and a passionate book, but, as I pointed out earlier, one with a number of weaknesses. First, it makes very large claims. For Leeb, symbolic class violence is so ingrained and pervasive throughout society that even left-wing thinkers such as Marx, Weber and Bourdieu reinforce it in their theories. I am sure they do, but in order to prove her point Leeb relies unnecessarily on rather simplistic readings of 'malestream' theorists – almost inflicting a reverse symbolic violence on their texts. For example, in relation to Bourdieu's work, while I agree that the working class has become synonymous with a lack of cultural capital, I disagree that this was either Bourdieu's intention or his fault. As his writings encourage, it is beholden on academics to employ his concepts such as cultural capital in empirical contexts so that they allow for an explication of working-class cultural capital.

After a first half in which Leeb critiques malestream theory, the second half of the book gives voice to working-class female academics. The main theme running through this part of the book is working-class abjection. Here there is much of interest and Leeb writes with passion and conviction, but there are also sweeping assertions. For example, on p. 123 we are told that academics 'have nothing in common except their shared belief that the working classes are somehow less intelligent than themselves'. While they may well believe in their intellectual superiority, there are many other things they share in common – privilege, norms and culture for a start! However, despite the large claims, Leeb raises many pertinent if provocative issues.

At times it is difficult to disentangle gender and class. In the example of Olga, who despite having 16 publications fails to get a promotion that goes to a younger man with only one publication, there is some slippage from classism to sexism and back again.

I also found the issue of resistance challenging. As Leeb herself points out, you can glimpse the women's resistance in their very presence in elite academic institutions.

But for much of the book the resistance trail goes disappointingly cold. In fact, there appears to be far more shame than resistance and at times these women seem to be totally endorsing a middle-class value system that inscribes them and where they've come from as inferior.

Leeb writes about 'the problematic knowledge' academia is producing about the working classes. Yet, at points in many of her working-class female academics' narratives, working-class culture is similarly portrayed as very negative and the working-class mother is held accountable for providing insufficient support. This is no fault of the author, but does exemplify the impasse academic work on working-class cultures still finds itself in. Forty years after *Education and the Working Class* (Jackson and Marsden, 1966), working-class culture is either romanticized or pathologized with very little balanced representation of its many strengths and weaknesses. Leeb's struggle to find this balance has produced a brave book with fine intentions and lots of interesting ideas. Despite its flaws, it is a thought-provoking book examining an area that merits more empirical investigation.

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Sheila Jeffreys: *Unpacking Queer Politics: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective*. London: Polity, 2003, vii + 189pp. £15.99, $29.95, ISBN 0–7456–2838–9 (pbk).
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Sheila Jeffreys' books create an impact because she says things we do not want to hear. For some of us, getting on with our ordinary suburban lives, her descriptions of what other people are getting up to are so alien, so horrific, we would rather not know about them. For others, personally excited by and invested in those same practices, Jeffreys' views are equally difficult to accept. She dares to criticize the things we love! She must be anti-sex, anti-gay, anti-fun! Jeffreys has indeed been called all of these things, and more; but, through all the fashions of sexual liberation, she has remained true to her radical lesbian feminism. Jeffreys is clear that society's investment in gender difference is the root cause of women's oppression; and that only when gender ceases to matter – when the social categories of male and female cease to be the organizing principles of our world – can male domination and female subordination cease.

In this book, Jeffreys takes on queer theory. Anyone expecting a dispassionate account of its principles will be disappointed: anything more different from the standard textbook approach would be hard to imagine. This is a *critique*. She begins by demonstrating the links and similarities between gay and feminist liberatory movements. Both grew out of a distrust of marriage and 'family', a keenness to challenge gender roles, a dedication to the pursuit of equality. But when many lesbians, outraged by the 'casual misogyny' (p. 16) of gay male culture, abandoned gay liberation for *women's* liberation, many of these radical critiques were lost. Instead, the central goal of gay liberation became the freedom to pursue one's sexual desires and practices, whatever form they took.

This is epitomized by the gay male call for the social recognition of public sex. Though in some ways an understandable consequence of decades of denial of *any* right to sexual activity, public or private, this 'quintessentially male demand' (p. 56) is depicted by Jeffreys as immature and anti-social. 'It is hard to imagine lesbians, or