

VIEWPOINT

## *Sweatshops and the Corporatization of the University*

RACHEL SILVEY, *University of Colorado*

In the spring of 2000, student activists mobilized an anti-sweatshop campaign at the university where I teach. They joined student activists at campuses across the USA and Canada who, since 1997, have been protesting the sweatshop conditions under which much athletic wear bearing university logos is produced (Featherstone, 2000). Their activism has placed them in direct conflict with the university's corporate partnerships and therefore also in conflict with the priorities of many campus administrators whose jobs require them to protect corporate contracts (Mandle, 2000). In this context, my research on Indonesian factory working women took on a heightened sense of urgency. As I found myself talking across the heated worlds of campus activists, university administrators, and Indonesian factory workers, I had to negotiate fiercely competing agendas. Not least among these was the internal tension I felt between my commitment to workers' rights and the unspoken pressure on me to censor my opposition to sweated labor. In what follows, I examine this internal tension, and pay particular attention to the ways in which the corporatism of the university contributed to it. In addition, I discuss some of the ways that recent critiques of this corporatism can strengthen critical feminist approaches to understanding the sweatshop issue, as well as other similar global economic issues.

Geographers have argued recently that the relationships between corporations and universities, while not new, have grown substantially cozier (Mitchell, 1999, 2000; Castree & Sparke, 2000). They point out that the increasing financial dependence of universities on corporations affects the quality of higher education, the priorities of research institutions, and the personal and professional lives of faculty and graduate students. Here, I add to their discussion with an analysis of the effects of corporatization on my sense of freedom of speech. I am especially interested in using this reflexive analysis to identify alliances that can be built among students, faculty, and staff at the university, as well as with factory workers here and abroad. As Katharyne Mitchell (2000, p. 1713; italics in original) has argued, '[I]t is public recognition of the *sameness* of the transformations and experiences, as well as some of their differences across space, that will allow us as a wider community to resist many of the negative ramifications of structural changes [both] in the academy' and beyond. In this commentary, I highlight the common pressures affecting the differently positioned groups involved in the campus sweatshop debates.

I situate this discussion within the broader debates in contemporary feminist studies. There is pronounced anxiety among some feminist scholars about how to reconstruct the

critical edge that defined early academic feminism as an explicitly oppositional political project (Martin, 1997). There are, according to Susan Okin (1999), too many kinds of difference muddying the feminist waters. Further, now that women's studies have won some institutional space in the academy, it is less clear how to direct feminist challenges (Brown, 1997) [1]. This state of affairs causes much less concern among other feminists, who argue that academic feminism has far *more* of a critical edge than it once did (Kobayashi & Peake, 1996; Alvarez, 2000). For these scholars, the real strengths of feminism in the twenty-first century lie in the deepening integration into feminist theory of anti-racist and transnational perspectives [2]. Building on their work, I discuss the ways that these strengths within feminist studies can be made even more powerful when they are tied to self-reflexive critiques of positionalities within the corporatizing university.

Feminist activists and intellectuals must continue to think critically about what kinds of reflexivity best contribute to the achievement of specific political goals. Authorial self-disclosure does little to help understand the ways that power relations operate. Indeed, confessional writing often obscures more than it illuminates. Yet, positionality still matters. Within the corporatizing university, and within the context of debates about sweatshop labor, I am interested here in examining *how* positionality matters, for whom, and to what ends.

### **Debating a University Code of Conduct**

The first dilemma that sheds light on the issues in question arose when I was talking across the worlds of student activists and university administrators. The challenge here was to try to talk across the opposing worlds of transnational feminist labor activists, whose values I share, and those of professional academia in which I had a stake. In response to student protests in the spring of 2000, the university convened a committee composed of faculty, administrators, and student representatives charged with investigating the implications of a code of conduct for producers of university logo-bearing garments. University administrators asked me to serve on the committee, while student activists who knew of my research counted on me to provide expert testimony in support of their claims. Specifically, students argued that in Indonesia, the predominantly female Nike factory workforce suffered low wages, poor working conditions, and a range of physical and verbal abuses on the job. Knowing that most of the students' claims were accurate, and recognizing the importance of their agenda, it was important that I support them. But it was also clear that the Athletic Department's multimillion dollar contract with Nike was in danger of cancellation if the administration signed the code promoted by the student activists.

The controversial nature of the issue, and the high stakes that were involved, made it difficult to know how best to frame the issue. While legally my employment at the university was not in danger, I was nonetheless concerned that my alliance with the students might be viewed in a negative light by the administration, and that this could have negative repercussions in the future. The students had built and camped in a 'shanty town' on campus for much of the semester, and had employed some aggressive tactics to get the attention of university officials. The administration for its part had tried to appease the students by holding numerous meetings about the issue, but had refused to concede to any of the students' demands, and had studiously protected the university's contract with Nike. It was clear that any faculty analysis that fell in favor of the students' agenda would be at odds with the administration's priorities. My political commitments

to factory workers' rights, it felt to me, were in direct conflict with my sense of job security.

What would it have meant to have been productively self-reflexive in this situation? The dilemma highlighted my embeddedness in the university economy, and thereby my inevitable, even if partial, complicity with corporate interests, some of which are directly linked to the exploitative transnational labor practices that the students and I oppose. But auto-critique that ends with recognition of one's complicity can be counter-productive, particularly if it leads only to debilitating guilt. On the other hand, it can be potentially progressive to tie the insights that stem from such individual reflexivity to a broader analysis. Specifically, thinking about the corporate roots of the subtle pressure to keep dissent private can reveal the common pressures affecting *both* university faculty and factory workers.

To be sure, the lived situations of faculty members and factory workers are not materially comparable in any respect, and the *effects* of global neo-liberal trends differ dramatically for the two groups. But the *pressures* that we face come from the same source; indeed, in the case of the sweatshop debate, they come from the very same corporation. While Nike pressures factory workers in Indonesia to keep quiet by relying on the state's use of force to quash organizing efforts, it also pressures university workers into ideological submission through threatening to withdraw contract funds [3]. Nike's labor practices in Indonesia depend on the acquiescence of intellectuals, politicians, and reporters for the mass media, all of whom are increasingly reliant on corporate dollars. It is not a coincidence that I felt I was risking some penalty by speaking out against the terms of the university contract with Nike [4].

Corporatizing the university is instrumental to the persistence of sweatshops; both factory labor and faculty labor face discipline—albeit in very different forms—from transnational corporations. A broadly feminist approach to labor relations must not be limited to concern about the rights of factory workers overseas. Labor relations also involve faculty, and we can develop transnational feminist praxis by examining our roles, not just as knowledge producers and educators, but also as potential voices that challenge the unethical aspects of corporate expansionism taking place both outside the academy and within it. By resisting the silencing preferred by the corporatizing university, feminist scholars and activists can build stronger alliances with factory workers internationally.

### **Student Activists; debating sweatshops**

The second arena within which the themes in question were illustrated was in interactions with the anti-sweatshop student activists. Here, the challenge has been to talk across the worlds of student activists, second wave feminist theorists, and the broad scholarly and activist critique of global neo-liberalism (Mander & Goldsmith, 1996). I support the student activists' goals of establishing a living wage for overseas factory workers and developing a code of conduct for the university's subcontractors. Early on in their campaign, however, I was troubled by the tendency of some students to locate oppression overseas, and to view themselves as the saviors of poor, Asian factory women. In this situation, the lack of critical self-reflection on the part of the students undermined their capacity for anti-racist feminist action. They were reproducing national and racial hierarchies in the context of their pro-labor, pro-woman activism.

A number of faculty members on campus were concerned that the student activists had not developed a critical perspective on the ways that they allowed their own privileges to limit their understanding. Several of us worked with students to try to get

them to broaden their vision, specifically to see the connections between the colonial character of their gaze on the factory workers in South-east Asia, and the perpetuation of their own racist and sexist perspectives at home. In our courses, colleagues and I guided students to think about the *relational* nature of racialized gender oppressions across national borders (Mohanty, 1997). In particular, I asked students to think about the ways that positioning themselves as the saviors of the 'poor, exploited, brown women' served both to 'other' the factory workers and to obscure the ways that students are complicit in perpetuating parallel oppressions in their own local economies (Mohanty, 1991). Critical pedagogy thus played a key role in reaching across worlds (see hooks, 1994). These discussions with students, though not without their challenges (see Nast & Pulido, 2000), helped the activists to build on the insights of women of color feminists, and to see the linkages between sweatshop labor overseas and the racialized and gendered oppressions at work in the USA (Collins, 1991; Zinn & Dill, 1996).

Student activists at other universities who have taken seriously the challenge to develop more inclusive transnational agendas have grown to see the connections between local and global issues. Several student movements have developed living wage campaigns that have organized on behalf of the rights of university janitors and service workers, many of whom are women and recent immigrants (Robbins & Ross, 1996; Lizarraga, 1998). The growth of these movements is an example of the positive political potential that can stem from critical reflexivity and a broadly based feminist agenda. The students who have employed their self-reflection to understand the international linkages between 'sweatshops' and the low wages paid to campus service workers are developing a politically meaningful, broadly inclusive feminist praxis.

My hope is that undergraduate students will take their reflexivity yet a step further, and begin to see that the pressures affecting low-wage workers in the USA and abroad are also influencing their own educational world (see Roberts [2000] and Freeman [2000] for particularly rich discussions of these issues). The corporatization of the university, driven by the same neo-liberal logic that rationalizes sweated labor, affects campus life in numerous ways. For instance, students often complain that faculty are harried and unavailable, and that too many courses are taught by non-tenure-track instructors. Faculty members' heightened stress is in part a function of the rising expectations brought about in the corporatizing university (Mitchell, 2000). The flexibilization of university employment has also been a distinctly gendered process, as the growing percentage of insecure, less prestigious positions have gone disproportionately to women (Falconer Al-Hindi, 2000; Winkler, 2000). Further, corporate pressure on the university service sector leads to lower wages and fewer benefits for the university's cleaning, secretarial, and cafeteria staffs, many of whom are women, recent immigrants, and people of color (Harvard Living Wage Campaign, 2001). If students can develop a critical perspective on the racial and gender politics of downsizing and flexibilization in the campus economy, they can begin to see linkages between the forces shaping their own situations, the working worlds of university employees and overseas factory workers, and even the availability of faculty.

This case illustrates that the important question is not whether self-reflexivity itself is necessarily politically disabling. Clearly, it need not be. Rather, the critical issue is how and under what circumstances the questioning of one's own standpoint can strengthen a basis from which to challenge multiple, intersecting oppressions (Young, 1990). The work of these students builds on transnational feminist insights in that they view gender inequities both internationally and domestically as interwoven with race- and class-based oppressions. Their work can go further yet by analyzing the ways that they themselves

are affected by the university's corporate logic, and by linking their analysis of their own situation to the situations of others. Developing a framework that highlights the common threads influencing the worlds of both students and low-wage workers, and yet maintains vigilant awareness of the painful differences between these worlds, can further strengthen the student movement's sharp critical edge.

## Conclusion

It is this critical edge, and the willingness to take the risks involved in challenging existing social systems, that has defined feminist scholarship and activism from its earliest period (Tong, 1989). Fortunately, that which is understood as feminist has grown more inclusive since the late 1960s, largely as a result of more than three decades of sustained feminist scholarship by women of color. As the gendered perspective has come to be understood as plural and as inextricably bound up with other differences, feminist transformations of research and activism need also to take place. In this article, I have charted two examples of the ways that reflexivity can be used to strengthen and broaden feminist praxis. I have focused on the effects of the corporatization of the university to examine the ways that the worlds of students, faculty, and workers are in fact linked under one regime. In speaking of the disciplinary pressures we face as faculty and of the losses endured by students as a result of university corporatism, we can extend our understanding of the forces linking us to factory workers. Never forgetting that the spaces we occupy are acutely differentiated, both within and between the worlds of the academy and the factory, feminist analysis can nonetheless point to the common context within which differences are forged and maintained.

This shift in attention to a more broadly based political agenda does raise the question of what now distinguishes work as particularly feminist, a question that perhaps deserves some attention (Brown, 1997). But the question—a form of reflexivity itself—will be especially fruitful if taken up with a larger purpose in mind. As with self-reflexivity in general, questioning the boundaries of the field of feminism is most worthwhile if it is geared towards fulfilling the political goals driving the question in the first place. Productive reflexivity moves beyond disabling guilt and the individualization of social problems, and towards making linkages that contribute to building stronger alliances across difference. It does not stop with the self. As Henry Louis Gates Jr (1994, p. 17) puts it, 'The challenge is to move from a politics of identity to a politics of identification.' For both faculty and students, this means recognizing the common threads linking us to workers. And, as Margery Wolf (1996, p. 221) argues, perhaps this approach will enable scholars and activists 'to move on past this critical period with a lighter load of guilt and a stronger commitment to changing the ways we work—both in the field and with each other.' Using reflexivity in these ways to build more inclusive praxis will not water feminism down. To the contrary, this is a way for feminists to get our teeth back.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dylan Clark, Diana Fischetti, Gerry Pratt, and Lynn Staeheli for comments on an earlier draft of this article, and to Lisa Sun-Hee Park for her leadership at the meetings of The Movement Group. Thanks also to the reviewers and the journal editor for their comments, and especially to Lynn Staeheli and Richa Nagar for organizing the Viewpoints section.

## NOTES

- [1] The fears include the concern that feminist politics have been domesticated through institutionalization, and worse, that some nominally feminist academic work, particularly that of post-structural theorists, has taken the teeth out of feminist research and practice (Nussbaum, 1999).
- [2] These scholars are no more enthusiastic than is Martha Nussbaum (1999) about high theory or cultural studies approaches. The similarities in the perspectives of Nussbaum and these feminists, however, end there.
- [3] Lest there be any concern that this is an overstatement, note that the University of Oregon's Athletic Department lost a 30 million dollar contract with Nike because the administration signed a code of conduct that took monitoring rights away from the Fair Labor Association, the monitoring group favored by the Nike, and joined the Workers' Rights Consortium, the group favored by the students (Greenhouse, 2000).
- [4] For the record, I did testify to the university administration on behalf of the student activists and workers' rights. I later learned that an administrator referred to my presentation as 'brave,' a characterization that confirmed my sense that there was something to fear, albeit something vague and unspoken, in the situation. Interestingly, labor organizers in Indonesia are regularly referred to as 'brave' (*berani*), too, though in their case, because they are in fact risking their lives for their values, the term is entirely appropriate.

## REFERENCES

- ALVAREZ, SONIA (2000) Translating the global: effects of transnational organizing on local feminist discourses and practices in Latin America, *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, 1, pp. 29–67.
- BROWN, WENDY (1997) The impossibility of women's studies, *differences: a journal of feminist cultural studies*, 9, pp. 79–101.
- CASTREE, NOEL & SPARKE, MATTHEW (2000) Introduction: professional geography and the corporatization of the university: experiences, evaluations, and engagements, *Antipode*, 32, pp. 222–229.
- COLLINS, PATRICIA HILL (1991) *Black Feminist Thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (New York, Routledge).
- FALCONER AL-HINDI, KAREN (2000) Introductory remarks: structure, agency, and women geographers in academia at the end of the long twentieth century, *Professional Geographer*, 52, pp. 697–702.
- FEATHERSTONE, LINDA (2000) The student movement comes of age, *The Nation*, May 15, 271, pp. 23–28.
- FREEMAN, AMY (2000) The spaces of graduate student labor: the times for a new union, *Antipode*, 32, pp. 245–259.
- GATES JR., HENRY LOUIS (1994) A liberalism of heart and spine, *New York Times*, March 27, p. 4.
- GREENHOUSE, STEVEN (2000) Nike's chief cancels a gift over monitor of sweatshops, *New York Times*, April 25, p. 416.
- HARVARD LIVING WAGE CAMPAIGN (2001) website: <http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~pslm/livingwage/portal.html>; accessed November 18, 2001.
- HOOKS, BELL (1994) *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom* (New York, Routledge).
- KOBAYASHI, AUDREY & PEAKE, LINDA (1996) Unnatural discourse; 'race' and gender in geography, *Gender, Place and Culture*, 1, pp. 225–243.
- LIZARRAGA, DANIEL (1998) Organizing for a living wage. Unpublished MA thesis, Department of Public Affairs, University of Texas, Austin.
- MANDER, JERRY & GOLDSMITH, EDWARD (Eds) (1996) *The Case against the Global Economy: and for a turn toward the local* (San Francisco, CA, Sierra Club Books).
- MANDLE, JAY (2000) The student anti-sweatshop movement: limits and potential, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 570, pp. 92–104.
- MARTIN, BIDDLE (1997) Success and its failures, *differences: a journal of feminist cultural studies*, 9, pp. 102–131.
- MITCHELL, KATHARYNE (1999) Scholarship means dollarship; or money in the bank is the best tenure, *Environment and Planning A*, 31, pp. 381–388.
- MITCHELL, KATHARYNE (2000) The value of academic labor: what the market has wrought, *Environment and Planning A*, 32, pp. 1713–1718.
- MOHANTY, CHANDRA TALPADE (1991) Under Western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourse, in: C. T. MOHANTY, A. RUSSO, & L. TORRES (Eds) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, pp. 51–80 (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press).
- MOHANTY, CHANDRA TALPADE (1997) Women workers and capitalist scripts, in: M. J. ALEXANDER & C. T. MOHANTY (Eds) *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, pp. 3–29 (London, Routledge).
- NAST, HEIDI & PULIDO, LAURA (2000) Resisting corporate multiculturalism: mapping faculty initiatives and institutional-student harassment in the classroom, *Professional Geographer*, 52, pp. 722–736.

- NUSSBAUM, MARTHA (1999) The professor of parody, *New Republic*, 220, pp. 37–45.
- OKIN, SUSAN (1999) *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).
- ROBBINS, BRUCE & ROSS, ANDREW (Eds) (1996) The Yale strike dossier, *Social Text*, 14, pp. 1–131.
- ROBERTS, SUSAN (2000) Realizing critical geographies of the university, *Antipode*, 32, pp. 230–244.
- TONG, ROSEMARY (1989) *Feminist Thought: a comprehensive introduction* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press).
- WINKLER, JULIE (2000) Faculty reappointment, tenure, and promotion: barriers for women, *Professional Geographer*, 52, pp. 737–750.
- WOLF, MARGERY (1996) Afterword: musings from an old gray wolf, in: D. WOLF (Ed.) *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, pp. 215–221 (Boulder, CO, Westview Press).
- YOUNG, IRIS MARION (1990) *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).
- ZINN, MAXINE BACA & DILL, BONNIE THORNTON (1996) Theorizing difference from multiracial feminism, *Feminist Studies*, 22, pp. 321–331.