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Reponse to Sabine Hark

Having spent my academic career as a feminist researcher and teacher working for inter- and transdisciplinary spaces for Women's/Gender/Feminist Studies (WGFS)¹, I welcome Sabine Hark's plea for disciplinary autonomy and interdisciplinary connectedness wholeheartedly. I agree very much with the quote from Diane Elam with which she concludes her article:

In order to survive and grow, Women's Studies needs to be viewed by the institution as a financially and intellectually autonomous discipline that continues to explore its interdisciplinary commitments.(Elam 2002 quoted in Hark p. 23)

What I would like to do in this comment to Sabine Hark's article, is to suggest ways to push further the discussion of WGFS as a field of studies which should act as a discipline in institutional contexts, but which at the same time should keep up a total interdisciplinary openness. As I once wrote, such a position is currently "a monstrous oxymoron, but perhaps the mainstream of tomorrow..." (Lykke 2004: 100).

1. A positioning.

In the interdisciplinary WGFS milieu, where I am employed as professor of Gender Studies (Linköping University, Sweden) we define the oxymoronic position, referred to above, as one which makes WGFS into a postdisciplinary discipline. Institutionally, we define what we do as thematic WGFS, where the term "thematic" has a very precise institutional meaning. Thematic research is at my university officially defined as an alternative to disciplinary research, and it is organized accordingly. To be defined as a "theme" means to have status as a department with its own interdisciplinary team of professors, post-doctoral researchers and

¹ As an acknowledgement of the diversity of naming practices, which have been part of the institutionalisation processes of feminist research, I shall refer to the area as Women's/Gender/Feminist Studies (WGFS). The space does not allow me to go into a debate about the distinctions.

PhD students, its own PhD-awarding interdisciplinary doctoral programme, its own budget and administration etc. Besides a thematic department for Gender Studies, my university also runs parallel units for “themes” such as ethnicity, children, water, technology and social change etc. It is very enriching for WGFS to be organized as this type of unit for thematic, inter- and transdisciplinary research and at the same time form part of an environment, where there are many units of this kind, each with its own thematic focus. This opens a lot of possibilities for cross-cutting collaboration.

To do WGFS in such an environment makes it possible to act and elaborate the field as a postdisciplinary discipline or what Hark (quoting Allen and Kitch 1998) calls an “interdiscipline” (Hark p. 17), i.e. a discipline in the sense that we have our own unit with its own staff, the right to award PhD degrees in thematic Gender Studies etc., and a post- or interdiscipline in the sense that we make it a point to keep up a total transdisciplinary openness.

2. The “future” has already begun!

Besides a positioning, this brief introduction to my university and my postdisciplinary working environment should serve as an example which is meant to point beyond Hark’s statement that the hailing of interdisciplinarity since the 1960s have been more of a lip service game than a real change of structures. I would like to strike a more optimistic tone as regards the current state of the art than Sabine Hark does. But, in so doing, I want to give my warm support to Sabine Hark’s vision of WGFS, reconfigured as interdiscipline or postdiscipline in the above defined sense.

When Sabine Hark talks about “a paradoxical juxtaposition of rhetorical modernization and structural perseverance” (p.4), I do, on the one hand, agree, when looking at the overall picture. Traditional, border policing ways of doing disciplinarity is still going strong in many universities and national as well as international funding agencies, and, I agree very much that this has repercussions for the unfolding of inter- and transdisciplinary dimensions of WGFS.

But to leave the argument here, is, on the other hand, to make a too sweeping and homogenizing statement. Hence, I do not agree, when Sabine Hark right away concludes that

“it seems indeed the case that in Women’s Studies interdisciplinarity is as much a seriously underthought critical, pedagogical and institutional concept as everywhere else in the academic universe” (Hark p. 13). From this kind of overall characteristic of the state of the art, it becomes difficult to grasp local, national and regional differences as regards the transnational unfolding of the field of WGFS. Moreover, such a generalizing conclusion distracts the attention from the ways in which Academia today, including the spaces where WGFS has been able to gain institutional ground, performs as a very messy environment, where clear-cut dichotomies such as disciplinary/interdisciplinary do not apply neither structurally nor rhetorically. Moreover, I miss the point that, in some settings, the postdisciplinary “future” has already begun, which Hark and several of the Anglo-American feminist researchers, on which she primarily builds her argument, hope for. In Sweden, for example, a growing number of established interdisciplinary Gender Studies PhD programmes have had the institutional-material and discursive possibility to transcend the stalemate, in which a lot of Anglo-American Women’s Studies programmes seem to have ended up, according to the introduction to one of Sabine Hark’s sources, the volume Women’s Studies on its own (Wiegman 2002) - ie. a stalemate, where

interdisciplinarity becomes an effect of disciplinary accumulation, not a strategy of instruction at either the undergraduate or doctoral level. (Wiegman 2002: 5)

3. To go beyond US-outlooks

Sabine Hark’s way of pointing out dilemmas and contradictions as far as the history of interdisciplinarity in general and within the field of WGFS in particular is concerned, is important and well argued. But her strong focus on US examples (Pryse 2000; Zimmermann 2002, Allen & Kitch 1998, Stanford Friedman 1998, Wiegman 2002 etc.) gives her analysis a problematic twist. It means that the specific organisational and structural foundations of US Women’s Studies and the ways in which they, perhaps primarily in the 1970s and 1980s, have furthered, but also restrained transversal and discipline-transgressive feminist knowledge production tend to become universalized. The strong focus on US examples means that Sabine Hark’s analysis cannot transcend their dilemmas.

A lot can, definitely, be learnt from the US-specific dilemmas, but I think that Sabine Hark discusses them in a too generalizing way. She gets “captured” by them in a sense, which Susan Stanford Friedman (one of Hark’s sources), in fact, articulates very well. In an article, debating whether or not to establish PhD degrees in WGFS at the University of Wisconsin Madison (Stanford Friedman 1998), whose first part is quoted extensively by Sabine Hark, Stanford Friedman undertakes a very interesting move in the last part of the article. In an attempt to push herself into innovative epistemological grounds, she argues against the first part of her own article and its scepticism vis-à-vis PhD degrees in WGFS, and in so doing, she articulates the worry that her way of thinking about the whole issue, as presented in the first part of her article, is too “captured” in the US situation:

I worry about being captured in the discourse of the present in the United States through a failure of imagination , an inability to think more broadly about future possibilities. (Stanford Friedman 1998: 319)

I agree with Allen & Kitch (also quoted extensively by Hark) that what is much needed, is “a fieldwide analysis of the structural, institutional, epistemological, and political factors” that play a role in generation of “a full interdisciplinary women’s studies research mission” (Allen and Kitch 1998: 275), and I think Sabine Hark’s article is an important contribution to such an analysis. But I shall add that transnational perspectives has to be systematically included and thought through. National and institutional differences and diversities, issues of travelling theories, methodologies and models, translations from one context to another etc. have to be taken thoroughly into account. This is one of the lessons, I have learnt from my yearlong commitment to the unfolding European WGFS.

4. How to reach alternative accounts?

As Sabine Hark’s article has brought me to reflect on transatlantic differences, I shall end my comment by suggesting that the diversity of strategies, which European WGFS have developed in order to overcome sometimes seemingly insurmountable barriers vis-à-vis going interdisciplinary, together with European level initiatives to compare notes on this diversity in the 1990s and 2000s, have created a basis for perhaps more diverse and boundary

transgressing reflections on interdisciplinarity than the ones, currently emerging out of US Women's Studies.

To exemplify, let me mention a couple of current large scale European WGFS organisations such as the EU-funded thematic network Athena, comprising over 100 European WGFS programmes/groups/units, or the Nordic Research School in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies, a PhD training consortium of over 40 WGFS programmes/groups/units from the Northern regions of Europe. What is being performed within these major institutionalized WGFS frameworks is, I think, more well-developed discursive-material deconstructions of the disciplinary/interdisciplinary dichotomy than the ones, which have been allowed for in the US examples, discussed by Hark. This is not to say that the mentioned European contexts are without problems. Far from it. My point is that the diversity in terms of building and reflecting on new transgressive and boundary-crossing WGFS curricula, performed within these organisational frameworks, seems to shift the perspectives of the fieldwide analyses away from the dichotomous either/or of being/not being disciplined by the disciplines or having/not having an identity as a (successor)discipline to a more diverse stance.

Since we all - Sabine Hark, her main US sources, myself and a lot of my feminist colleagues, engaged in Athena and other European projects - seem to agree on the necessity of alternative accounts of what it means for WGFS to perform as an inter- or postdiscipline, I think much more space to compare notes is needed. So I welcome the initiative taken by the editors of this journal to give space for such debates.

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