

Editorial

Special Issue

Thriving on the Edge of Cuts: Inspirations and Innovations in Gender Studies

**Alexa Athelstan, Cassandra McLuckie, Liz
Mills, Angelica Pesarini, Mercedes Pöll**

With a Special Contribution on the Political Context of the Editorial
by **Stefanie C. Boulila**

Resolutely Thriving in a Bleak British Political and Economic Climate: Towards a Political Con- text for the Thriving on the Edge of Cuts Conference and Edition

In June 2011, a group of postgraduate students from the Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies and the Department of English at the University of Leeds held a one-day conference entitled *Thriving on the Edge of Cuts: Inspirations and Innovations in Gender Studies*. This conference was organised in direct response to the British Government's recent budget cuts. With this conference, we sought to play our part in opposing the UK Government's withdrawal of public responsibility to the British education system through its dramatic cuts to higher education funding initiated in

December 2010. As postgraduate students from various socio-cultural and economic backgrounds, we were directly affected by the decision to further privatise higher education and wanted to contribute to the national student protests that had emerged by resisting these changes. In solidarity with all students who have been demonstrating, occupying university premises, and lobbying against the cuts, we are outraged by the government's decision to jeopardise the futures of a whole generation, along with the futures of academic and administrative staff employed in the educational sector.

As researchers who are academically and politically concerned with social inequalities, we are deeply troubled about the effects

the budget cuts will have on the accessibility of higher education for people facing social and economic disadvantages. This is especially problematic when the rise of fees is accompanied by the abolition of programmes supporting students from low-income households, such as the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and AimHigher. The pressure of the envisaged debts and the lack of funding will have a disproportionate effect on young adults who are already facing discrimination and poverty based on classed, raced, aged, gendered and other inequalities. A quick glance at the findings of National Statistics (2004) shows that social and economic background plays a significant role as to whether somebody participates in higher education or not. This, coupled with the fact that a university degree significantly affects the level of income at a later stage, makes university education an important realm for balancing out social inequalities. To complicate access to degree programmes will therefore directly impact social mobility.

The government's decision to force young people into employment at the peak of a recession is a further absurdity. Recent statistics have shown that there has been a drop in the employment rates of young adults aged 16 to 24 since the start of the recession in 2008 (Office for National Statistics, 2011). As an effect of increasing youth un-

employment, many young people were pushed into full-time education. Therefore, to make higher education unaffordable at a time where employment opportunities are scarce will leave even more young adults with nothing.

Alongside these grave issues, the reform that caused us to frame this conference around Gender Studies in particular was the government's decision to fully abolish all funding for the teaching of social science and humanities subjects. In the name of '[s]ecuring a sustainable future for higher education' (Browne, 2010, 1), the coalition gave clearance to what one might describe as an academic exodus. Although this reform caused less public outrage than other policies that have recently been brought in, its aftermath will be disastrous for the much needed diversity in the academic sector. In justifying these spending cuts, the report states that when it comes to funding, priority is given to courses that create what are regarded as "wider benefits" for society. According to the Browne Review (2010, 25 & 47), such subjects are medicine, science, engineering and 'strategically important language courses'. The hypocrisy of this statement can easily be unpicked. Although the Browne Report (2010, 17) recognises that in the OECD (Organisation for Economic and Co-Operation Development) comparison, the UK has one of the most unequal societies when it comes to social (in)justice,

it nevertheless declares precisely those disciplines as unimportant which directly research the causes and remedies of these inequalities. Instead, its list of fundable subjects seems like a secret path to secure investment for defence, the pharmaceutical sector, as well as the automotive and the building industries. The composition of the panel responsible for the Browne Review is also telling. With links to institutions and companies such as BP, the Royal Academy of Engineering, DaimlerChrysler, Goldman Sachs, McKinsey, Standard Chartered (Curtis, 2009) and Rolls/Royce (Aston University, 2011), it is obvious that this choice of academic “priority” has more to do with specific lobbying, rather than concern with broader social benefits.

A significant achievement of Gender Studies is that it has taught us that there is no objectivity beyond partiality, and that as critical thinkers we should be wary of spurious claims towards objectivity. Thus, whilst the Browne Review claims to “objectively” evaluate the condition of higher education in the UK, in actuality, it disguises the widespread political interests of the few powerful players involved in decision-making. The same businesses that are bound to the causes of the economic crisis are now turning the recession to their advantage. As students of a discipline that has grown out of a political struggle for equality, we condemn the defini-

tion that this small circle of elite social, political and economic players have of what is beneficial for society as a whole, especially when it is their capitalist ideology that continues to broaden the gap between the richest and the poorest in both this country and abroad. The coalition government’s spending cuts disproportionately target poor and disadvantaged people. Research that contests the government’s definition of which knowledge matters for a fair and prospering society is therefore desperately needed. As students and researchers in Gender Studies, we aim towards shaping a society in which all individuals can live their lives free from discrimination, especially if that discrimination is carried out by a supposedly democratic government.

The state’s decision to withdraw funding from the teaching of humanities and social science subjects has furthermore gone in line with cutting equality services and equality expert commissions. This will provide racism, homophobia, misogyny and other inequalities with new breeding grounds. Additionally, the government relies on its citizens to deliver free labour on behalf of a state that contracts private companies to make profit delivering public goods at lower quality. Such policies unmask the “Big Society” as a cruel society for those who are lacking resources. It is our duty as researchers to defend the achievements made inside and outside of academia and to strive

further on our journey of tackling social injustice. It is vital to increase diversity amongst ourselves and to extend our portfolio of researched issues. We need to make our knowledge accessible to people outside of academia and enter dialogues with individuals directly affected by the government's financial irresponsibility. Our knowledge is crucial in empowering ourselves and others in the battle against inequalities.

Taking these factors into account, in a time where the achievements made from previous struggles have come under scrutiny, we thus invited students and researchers to share their findings in gender and sexuality related topics – firstly, in the context of the *Thriving on the Edge of Cuts* conference that was held in June 2011 at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies of the University of Leeds; and secondly, in the context of this special edition of the *Graduate Journal for Social Science*.

The Thriving Conference

Within this context of increasing impediments to higher education, especially for younger and early career academics, it is notable that the driving force behind organising *Thriving on the Edge of Cuts* was a dedicated committee of post-graduate students at both MA and PhD level. We came together holding a variety of academic interests grounded in our strong concerns for gender issues. Recognising the

importance of highlighting the vitality of discourse, the sharing of ideas and the significance of strong visibility of an endangered academic species like Gender Studies, the conference was envisioned, organised and executed jointly and with determined enthusiasm. We thus worked with what, in retrospect, can be described as a Rosi-Braidotti-inspired philosophy, which believes that the creation of sustainable futures and the 'transformative edge' of feminist activist politics and knowledge production lies in our capacity for enacting 'the transformation of the negative into a life affirming alternative,' of transforming a time of crisis into a potential time for thriving on the edge of an intense wave of social and political change, in ways that 'not only empower the marginal but also change the structures of the social order,' even if only on a micropolitical level (Braidotti in Bui-kema, 2009, p.258).

The development of the conference and this subsequent publication created the opportunity for us, as students, to take part in a practical and proactive learning experience. With the guiding support of staff from the Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Leeds, the organisation of this conference became simultaneously an exercise in skill building and in the deployment of existing knowledge resources. Adopting a working structure that focused on collaboration and dynamic leader-

ship - because realistically speaking no organisation can truly claim to be without some sort of explicit or oblique hierarchical system - organising committee members were able to focus on tasks complementing their own interests, as well as tasks that presented new challenges.

However, this learning endeavour of building practical organisational and academic skills did not stop merely at the organising committee. With a Call for Papers that explicitly encouraged abstract submissions by researchers at very early stages - or even the start - of their careers, the conference provided a platform for exchange and cooperation on a broader collegial level as well. Tying in with Say Burgin's and Dr. Julia Horncastle's contributions to this special edition, a supportive academic environment was fostered through voluntary inclusivity rather than an enforced hierarchy. Moreover, an ethics of care and an awareness of the socio-political positionality of the project proved to be another clear benefit of the event.

In an austere climate that prohibits easy access to higher education, this collaborative approach to the generation and discussion of cutting-edge research was therefore also meant to highlight the important contribution that student researchers, at various stages of their engagement with the academic world, are capable of making to the wider interdisciplinary scholarly

community. By playing an active role through participation in all aspects of the conference, younger or less experienced researchers were able to demonstrate that they are much more than merely passive consumers of educational provisions. Indeed, their exciting contributions spoke for themselves and highlighted their crucial role in furthering research. Contrary to the government's neoliberal justifications of the funding cuts, the conference posed a vibrant platform speaking to members of an activist-academic community of practice across the board and, in parallel, let concerns and suggestions be voiced instead of silenced.

Such voices were heard from a range of sources, leading to an interdisciplinary experience of both cuts-orientated research and projects which showcased ideas and criticisms crucial to understanding sexed, gendered and sexualised social realities. Over 50 international presenters and attendants from within the UK and across Europe, spanning fields such as Sociology and Social Policy, Psychology, Religious Studies, Geography, Anthropology, Media Studies and Translation, put their own spin on dealing with the matters at hand. The topical focuses of the individual panels touched on issues high up on the political agenda, proving the tangible relevance of Gender Studies research for contemporary communities. Themes around social

privilege, (non-)normativity, border crossing, marginalisation, contemporary feminism or citizenship generated a lively response not only on an academic level, but for their applicability and thought-provocation in working through policy developments in the UK and abroad. One such piece of research was presented in the keynote lecture by Dr. Kath Browne from the University of Brighton, whose work on transgender equalities in the context of political changes provided the culmination of a day of exciting, sobering and challenging discussions.

In recognition of the range of impact of the conference, we were able to obtain funding from the University of Leeds Faculty of Education, Social Sciences and Law, as well as the Faculty of Arts. Moreover, in order to further disseminate the contributions, the *Graduate Journal of Social Science* (GJSS) supported our endeavours, being a perfect fit for the overarching aims of the conference through its clear focus on providing a critical discursive space for postgraduate and early career researchers. The result of the support gained from the GJSS is this October 2011 special edition, for which submission was encouraged throughout the event. Additionally, a training session on writing for publication was hosted by GJSS representative Rob Kulpa (Birkbeck College, University of London) and Ruth Garbutt (Staff and Departmental Development Unit, University of

Leeds) as a way of helping presenters prepare for the potential transformation of their conference papers into the journal articles that form this edition.

The *Thriving* Edition

From conceptualisation to collaboration, to the finished special edition that you are currently reading, the *Thriving* conference became the inspiration for the *Thriving* edition, which directly follows on from the June 2011 *Interdisciplinarity and the "New" University* edition of the GJSS. The edition is broadly split into two sections. The first four papers by Say Burgin, Julia Horncastle, Sarah Harper, and Kath Browne and Leela Bakshi deal directly with the cuts. The later five papers by Liam Hilton, Daniela Cherubini, Carin Tunåker, Flávia Kremer and Roland Weißegger demonstrate the rich variety of perspectives and concerns informing the field of interdisciplinary Gender Studies today. Thus, this edition mirrors the *Thriving on the Edge of Cuts* conference, both in terms of its double foci on debating the impacts of the cuts and in showcasing innovative research currently being conducted by postgraduate students and early career academics. Furthermore, we feel the edition benefits from its mixed demographic, and our active striving to provide a space for Masters, PhD, early career academics and, importantly, also enthusiastic Bachelor students, to engage in contem-

porary debates.

Beginning this edition with a discussion of two examples of radical educational alternatives, one historical and one contemporary, Say Burgin's *Coarse Offerings: Lessons from the Cambridge Women's School for Today's Radical Education Alternatives* takes up the paradigm of higher education alternatives that developed in times of social and political change. Burgin draws on the examples of the Really Open University (ROU), which was recently founded in the UK, and the Cambridge Women's School (CWS), which ran in Boston from 1972 to 1992, to offer fresh ways of thinking through 'the multi-dimensional nature of educational justice.' By situating both these projects in their particular political contexts of feminist social activism, she encourages a view that distances education from economic commodification and quantifiable knowledge. Instead, the schools in question focus on teaching and learning as a collaborative, openly political and non-hierarchical acts, designed to bring together people of various backgrounds, to analyse, understand and challenge patriarchal, racist and imperialist impositions of traditional education systems. In particular, Burgin's efforts centre on the idea of learning and benefiting from the past. Through her paper, Burgin argues that the way the CWS handled issues of inclusivity with regards to their student population,

which consisted mainly of highly educated middle or upper class white women, highlights how a grounded and intersectionally informed commitment against discrimination is required for the manifestation of a sustained sense of diversity in both mainstream higher education and alternative radical educational projects, that endeavor to stand for social and educational justice, like the ROU.

A similar focus on the effects of the cuts to higher education is taken by Dr. Julia Horncastle in her paper *Taking Care in Academia: The Critical Thinker, Ethics and Cuts*. She deals with topics of inclusivity and transformation from a perspective that is grounded in personal experience and that results in a bold and unguarded look at austerity and higher education politics. In light of her own situation of "being cut" as an academic from an Australian institution, she presents an analysis of anti-liberal politics as a transnational phenomenon by introducing a discussion on care ethics within academia. She emphasises notions of collegial and institutional support especially in a culture in which higher education is being managed within frameworks of 'corporatisation' and 'market ideologies.' In relating care practices to economic and interpersonal power relations, Horncastle takes up Judith Butler's concept of "grievable life" and loss. Gender Studies (and other, smaller, specialised areas) are fre-

quently discussed as being at risk and struggling for a sustainable survival, since they are often marked out as existing in academic ghettos. Horncastle challenges such rhetoric strategies by analysing media accounts and questioning the idea of impact “value” applied to Gender and Women’s Studies, as academic fields and generators of social change.

Kath Browne and Leela Bakshi’s strategies of investigating trans people’s lives show a corresponding ethics of care and continual support through critically examining the everyday effects of social policy. In *Don’t Look Back in Anger: Possibilities and Problems of Trans Equalities*, they argue for a cautious and measured approach when attempting to understand the political changes we are experiencing in the UK today. The authors examine legislative changes, preceding the current government, aimed at extending the rights of LGBT people, suggesting that academic work needs to be able to account for complexity and that critical work must be both situated and critical *for* something. Concentrating on Brighton, Browne and Bakshi consider the impact changes in legislation have had on the lives of trans people, drawing out the specificities in experience that highlight the importance of working not just in conversation with a national context, but also through maintaining nuanced engagements with culture and sociality that encourage

reflexive and particularised understandings of the world. Refusing a-spatial and a-temporal accounts of the world, the authors ultimately call for working towards a ‘critique with a purpose,’ which understands the value of critical work as always being partially framed through envisioning hope and possibilities for the future.

In Sarah Harper’s *Spiritualised Sexuality Discourse: Impacts on Value Judgements*, such a purposive style of critique, as advocated by Browne and Bakshi, here focuses on sex work and the sex trade industry from a perspective that veers from more common discursive paths of sexuality. Her argument illustrates neatly the formative power of (political) rhetoric on the construction of identities. Harper posits that popular academic standpoints mainly deal with sex as an act or site of power enforcement. Subsequently, “spiritualised” discourses on sexuality have emerged, embracing a holistic view of sexual experience as a positive force for liberation that displays a healthy mentality. Concurrently, Harper draws from research such as Levy’s (2006) critical stance on sex work as subjugation hidden under the guise of liberation. Harper’s original focus lies in women’s subjectivities which contradict this spiritual holism. Specifically, she casts light on individuals who view sex work as income-generating labour and who subsequently understand their bodies as a means of achiev-

ing a financially compensated end. Harper argues that a separation of emotionality, spirituality and sexuality must not necessarily form a pathology in such cases, but may merely be a gainfully employed technique for generating income. Moreover, she assesses the potential impact of such discourses not only on feminist theory and academia, but also on the reality of policy making.

With Burgin, Horncastle, Browne and Bakshi, and Harper focussing on social and political discourses as determining of everyday lives, Liam Hilton highlights more broadly the precariousness that results from marginalisation and othering. Taking a broader look at justice and urging for a politics of location, his provocative essay *Peripher realities: Porous Bodies; Porous Borders. The "Crisis" of the Transient in a Borderland of Lost Ghosts* critically hones in on contemporary and ancient understandings of the concept of "the human", thus revealing conceptualisations of humanity to be intensely labile, yet still often forcefully determined. Hilton works to demonstrate the crucial relationship between the state and the human, or rather; the power of the state to fix what might count as human, while also exploring opportunities or possibilities for resistance. Hilton concludes by arguing for the importance of critical thought, specifically in Gender Studies, to provide resistance to these powerful normativities and to highlight the possibilities for conceptual-

ising "humanity" differently.

Linking such conceptualisations of humanity more directly to laws of citizenship and questions of belonging, Daniela Cherubini's paper *Intersectionality and the Study of Lived Citizenship: A Case Study on Migrant Women's Experiences in Andalusia* seeks to investigate the transformation of citizenship in the context of international migration in feminist studies. The author thus provides a solid feminist theoretical framework, supported by the results of her research on migrant women's perceptions of citizenship in the South of Spain to illustrate her argument. Intersectionality and lived citizenship are the two key concepts chosen by Cherubini to investigate the gendered, racialised, and classed dynamics behind the idea of "citizenship" and how different immigration profiles lead to unequal opportunities in terms of family relationships and intimacy in the everyday life. Through the voices of her interviewees, Cherubini shows how immigration laws can undermine women's self determination, especially in the case of irregular workers and those women employed in global chains of care. Her paper thus brilliantly highlights the heterogeneity of the migration process and women's different experiences of lived citizenship in a context marked by the power of immigration policies.

While Cherubini's migrant women struggle for agency in their borderland positions as Others in Andalusia, Carin Tunåker presents a very different conception of female subjectivities. Her article *The Matrifocal Household: Santería Religious Practice and Gender Relations Explored* provides an interesting ethnographic analysis that highlights instances of female empowerment in matrifocal households in Cuba, where both men and women have active roles, and gender relations are understood under different sociocultural frames of reference. Unlike canonical descriptions which follow the dichotomy of public and private in their depiction of matrifocality as a uniquely female space, Tunåker emphasises the importance of women in the workings of Cuban life, given their centrality in domestic relations and their importance within the household, which is defined by the author as 'the most active hub of social, economic, political, and spiritual life.'

Also drawing from ethnographic paradigms, Flávia Kremer's *Interrupting Research: Ethnography of a Research Encounter with the Bororo People in Central Brazil* turns up striking issues of social consciousness. Incidentally, she describes her research as a "failure", before taking the opportunity to investigate further. During a short fieldwork experience in Brazil among the Bororo people, Kremer was denied her request to conduct an interview with one of the

community members. This is the starting point of a fascinating paper that astutely analyses the research process and seeks to deconstruct the terms of the dichotomy between the researcher and the researched. Drawing on her interlocutor's words, Kremer provides a sophisticated analysis of research practices, emphasising the imperative of taking into account the political implications of the research we conduct. Through her deployment of a gender, globalisation and development focused analytical lens, Kremer challenges those imbalanced power dynamics and implicit assumptions of knowledge production present in the research process. Through the refusal of her interlocutor to be interviewed, Kremer invites us to question the hierarchies that organise the perspectives of "global" researchers and their "local" participants, within politicised networks of knowledge production.

Seeing as Kremer's research "failure" was caused by and subsequently accommodated through linguistic means, Roland Weißegger provides further insight into the importance of linguistic cues for navigating social worlds. *Queering Translations: Transcultural Communication and the Site of the "You"* takes a critical look at the intersection of translation practice and the construction of identities. On the premise that interlingual and intercultural communication does not equal an apolitical, uncomplicated

transfer of meaning from one dimension into another, Weißegger argues for a more aware and situated understanding of the translational process. In line with deconstructive theories of translation as text production, Weißegger uses feminist and queer approaches to further reconceptualise translation as a constructive and interpretative processing of realities. By adopting a novel system of gender-neutral pronouns ('oq') and suffixes, Weißegger illustrates *oqs* main arguments that anyone involved in communication and information processing may take up a subversive form of agency by not conforming to hegemonic discourses of identity. Using examples from one original and one translated book on gay lifestyles, Weißegger furthermore demonstrates how translation can work to expose the constructedness of social realities within differently contextualised frameworks. Thus, this edition ends with Weißegger's linguistically innovative and provocative contribution.

Final Words and Thanks

In terms of organising the conference, we would like to thank the Faculties of ESSL and ARTS at the University of Leeds for their invaluable support by contributing £1000 in funding to the organisation of *Thriving on the Edge of Cuts*. We are grateful to the current and former CIGS Directors, Dr. Sally Hines and Professor Ruth Holliday, and CIGS Co-ordinator, Matthew Wilkin-

son, for providing us with their guidance and practical support when we needed it, as well as the space and freedom to imagine and execute the conference effectively and in(ter)dependently. We would also like to thank GJSS web editor, Rob Kulpa, and Ruth Garbutt from the Staff and Departmental Development Unit at the University of Leeds for contributing their skills and expertise in leading a workshop on writing and publishing for academic journals on the day of the conference.

With regards to the edition itself, we are grateful to GJSS Chief Editors, Melissa Fernandez and Gwendolyn Beetham, for offering the December 2011 special edition to us and providing helpful guidance throughout the process. Special thanks also go to the rest of the GJSS team for working with us in producing this edition within such a tight time schedule. Finally, we are immensely grateful to the authors themselves for contributing the inspirational and innovative papers that form the very bedrock of this edition. They are demonstrating not only the highly engaged and relevant research that young and early-career scholars are currently producing in an austere climate, but also that despite everything, minority subjects like interdisciplinary Gender Studies will hopefully continue to thrive even on the edge of a social, political and economic crisis.

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