

Françoise PICQ
ANEF (Association nationale
des études féministes)
France

Lund
August 2003

Why not a French speaking network in Athena ?

The problem I would like to raise is about the French participation in this conference. How many French scholars are we today, here in Lund ? In Bologna for the fourth European Conference of feminist research, we were six. Four of us were from Toulouse. Only three French universities are partners in Athena.

Does that mean that gender studies hardly exists in France ? You have heard from Milka that it is not exactly the case, even if we regret what we see as a growing gap in the development of gender studies.

Last September, in Toulouse, several hundred of women and several men met for the Third French speaking Conference of Feminist Research « La recherche féministe francophone : Ruptures, résistances et utopies ».

So the first problem seems to be that of the language. Many French speaking gender scholars don't feel comfortable to participate in a English speaking Conference.

The second problem may be that of the cost. Most French scholars are not able to raise funds for the journey and conference fee, because most of the universities or research centres do not consider that they have to pay for a gender studies Conference.

And that is the third problem, that of the institutionalisation : Women's / Gender / Feminist Studies are not yet considered as a legitimate academic topic in France.

The "Institutionalisation of Women / Gender / Feminist Studies" is one of the main theme discussed in French Feminist Studies since early Eighties.

Last year, in Toulouse, Harriet Silius chaired a round table on this question, where I gave a paper. This round table is to be published in September by the ANEF.

And there was a workshop for several sessions on the same subject, where Milka and her colleagues were able to present the first findings of the National survey about Gender Studies in French universities. This survey, as Milka has already indicated was commissioned by the Ministries of National Education and Research. It was the first time that the Ministry of National Education had taken any notice of Gender Studies, the first time that universities Presidents were asked to answer questions about gender courses in their universities. And you must realise how important it is to legitimate Gender Studies in the universities.

Our National Association for Feminist Studies (ANEF), which has existed for nearly twenty five years, and which, during that time has tried to network feminist scholars and to develop feminist studies within the academia, was chosen by the ministries to analyse the survey. For that purpose, ANEF set up a team with senior researchers, Michèle Ferrand, Annik Houel Nicky Le Feuvre and myself, and junior researchers : Muriel Andriocci, Jules

Falquet, Emmanuelle Latour, and Milka Metso. The report is now nearly finished, but not yet published. Anyway, Milka in her paper, presented the main questions and results.

During the workshop in Toulouse, we began to compare the situation in France and in other French speaking countries, such as Switzerland and Québec. And we were encouraged to initiate a French speaking network within Athena II : we could build a joint curriculum, publish teaching material and translations to and from English... This offer was very tempting, but we could not finalise it in time for Athena II.

We thought that Lund could be an opportunity to carry on the exchange and to begin the French speaking network. It is the proposition that I presented, in the name of ANEF, to the organisers of this Conference, enlarging it to Latin speaking scholars.

"The aim of this workshop will be to understand the special difficulties of feminist studies in these countries and to begin the networking of a project in Athena".

My proposition was accepted, but it seems not to work, actually.

What is the problem ? Of course several French speaking countries do not participate in Athena, Quebec, Senegal etc. are not in Europe and Switzerland is not a member of the European Union. I had hoped to meet scholars from Belgium, I hoped that other scholars, for instance, from Spain could be interested in such a workshop. But I must realise that it is not the case.

So I have given up on organising a French-speaking session at this conference, but not at some point in the future

I hope that it will be possible one day. I hope that European networking in Gender Studies will not be an obligatory English speaking networking.

What are the main obstacles to a large development of Gender Studies in French universities?

The results of the National Survey show that Gender studies still suffer from the "lack of recognition" within French academia and that they are underdeveloped in comparison to other European Union member states.

Today we have only two senior lectureships and three full professorships in women's or gender studies in France, compared to more than a hundred in Germany, nearly forty in the Netherlands, ten in Finland etc.

Previous studies, made by the ANEF, in nineteen ninety one for the Ministry of National Education, in nineteen ninety five before Beijing Conference, and for WISE and for SIGMA have always come to the same conclusions. There is a long lasting gap between France and others European countries as far as the development of Women's Studies is concerned.

How can we understand this French exception? The same was noticeable some years ago for the representation of women in the Parliament, and you know that the only way to help women access political office was to modify the Constitution and to vote a law for parity.

In her summary for the report EWSI, Harriet Silius¹, pointed out that Women's Studies followed the same process of institutionalisation in every country : they are bottom-up initiatives, I quote : *"It started in all so-called Western countries in the ninety-seventies as part of the new women's movement. Production of knowledge in the movement soon led to feminist*

research and later to teaching". The institutionalisation process is homogenous, she notices, with four phases : activist phase, establishment stage, professionalisation phase, and autonomy.

The outcomes differ from one country to the other, she adds, depending on several factors such as consensus among feminists, strategical choices, university structures, government support.

This are the tree points that I shall discuss : the attitude of the feminist movement toward institutionalisation, the lack of support from the government, the disciplinary structure of universities, and I shall add some personal reflections.

First : the feminists fault.

Hariett Silius incriminates "*The informal, collective and non-hierarchical values of the movement (that) led to fears of "recuperation" from any kind of institutional structure*". It is true that the French feminist movement in the seventies, was especially radical. MLF (Mouvement de Libération des femmes -Women's liberation Movement) was born from the May 68 movement, and it bloomed in the leftist culture of contest. It refused to help bourgeois and patriarchal society to "improve", but wanted to "change life", and Women's struggle was the vanguard of that revolution.

Those characteristics of the MLF come from the French national culture with its tradition of confrontation, with its taste for intellectual controversies and its unfitnes to compromise. This is the delight and drama of the so-called "French exception" (Picq, 1997ⁱⁱ). Utopia has helped to find a way out and radicalism has been efficient to open unexpected possibilities. But after a time, being "outside" was no longer a strength, and the fear of reformism became an obstacle .

But feminist studies are not just a prolongation of the women's movement. They can develop only through breaking from that anti-institutional framework. The choice of institutionalisation was made since the first National Conference in Toulouse, in nineteen eighty two. It continued with the foundation and activities of ANEF (Picq, 2003ⁱⁱⁱ). It is true that until today, the ideological debate has not completely stopped, but it cannot be denied that most of the feminist scholars have long ago accepted institutionalisation and its costs.

Second : the lack of support from the government and public institutions.

During the past thirty years, feminist scholars have been able to rely on the government (or part of it), sometimes, but it never lasted for long.

In nineteen eighty two, the first National Conference in Toulouse was supported by the Ministry of Research and the Ministry of Woman's Rights. The National centre for scientific research (CNRS) initiated two thematic research programmes. And there was a spectacular increase in research on women's issues during that time. Sixty eight research projects were selected and financed. French feminist research could be proud within the Women's studies field. But gender studies teaching remained far behind, in spite of the creation of three senior lectureships, with the mention "feminist studies". What we thought to be the beginning of support from the institutions, revealed to be an end. We needed a long lobbying campaign to obtain, seven years later, the creation of two more senior lectureship,. The ministry claimed that demand for support for Women's Studies had to come from the universities themselves, since they were "autonomous" institutions.

Around the year two thousand, some progress took place. Was it because of a new government ? Was it primarily thanks to the head of Higher Education Directory ? Was it thanks to European good practice recommendations? The socialist government looked more willing than its predecessors to do something about the slow pace of change in French Women's Studies. Three full professors were nominated (one each year in 2000, 2001, 2002). An "Action Plan for equal opportunity in Education" was signed between several Ministries,

that drew attention to the need for systematic research on women in all areas of the society. It is in that context that the National Survey about gender studies courses was commissioned. The "State feminists" who are in charge of that plan brought together numerous feminist scholars from numerous universities, to co-ordinate actions for Equal opportunities in the universities and at the national level. Universities were encouraged to sign conventions with European funding and promote any action toward equal opportunity. Twelve universities did sign such conventions and began to carry out a plan of action. Here we are now, with a new government, hoping that the support will not stop after the two or three years of the Conventions.

Both parties are responsible for the insufficient collaboration between feminists academics and Institutions. Both were suspicious of each other, and wanted the final say on policy orientations. Neither the feminist scholars, nor the State feminists, were able to change the bad relationship between social movements and the State that is usual in France : the State is accountable, for better or for worse, and it often found guilty of what happens or not.

The third point that I shall take from Harriet Silius is about the disciplinary structure of universities. Women's Studies, in France like everywhere, are fundamentally interdisciplinary. That doesn't fit with the general organisation of the universities. You have to belong to an academic discipline, otherwise you have no room in the French universities. Feminist scholars never asked for the autonomy of Women's studies, because in the French universities, that would have meant a ghetto, without any scientific recognition. To be just a little considered as scholar, you must first be recognised in your discipline. Women's Studies could eventually be an addition. The reverse side is that Women's studies are never explicitly recognised. And that "the minimal conditions for the transmission of feminist knowledge to future generations have been difficult to obtain and even harder to maintain over time" (Le Feuvre & Andriocci, 2002: 266^{lv}).

"Women's Studies as an institutionalised academic field is still marginalised in France. It is considered to be "ideological and non-scientific". (Silius, 2002, 487). Harriet Silius is right. The three points that she mentioned play their part in the underdevelopment of women's studies in France : the attitude of the feminist movement toward institutionalisation, the lack of support from the government, the disciplinary structure of universities. But there is something more, something that is difficult to explain but that you can feel, in the history and the culture of France. *"Feminist teaching and research have negative connotations throughout the French scientific community (as they do outside of academic circles)"* (Le Feuvre and Andriocci, 2002). French culture strongly stays "gender blind", arguing in favour of "universalism" Universalism has been the credo of France since the Revolution. When France declared that women and men were equal (one and a half century after proclaiming that all men where equal), it is presumed that they have become equal. To argue that they are not actually equal, is considered as an attack on the republican social contract. Statistical evidence of gender differences is difficult to obtain, since the republican social contract forbids social groups of communities to be "differentiated" in any way ! . In much the same way, feminism has a bad name, because it questions the gender social contract which is supposed to be based on a harmonious relationship between the sexes. And feminist criticism is difficult to admit when it questions neutral and universal science.

Universalism is a value that even feminists cherish and are not ready to abandon, but it is obviously more difficult to promote gender studies in that context.

In that national situation, European requirements are an absolute necessity for gender studies, as they are for Equal opportunities or Gender mainstreaming in France.

The main question today in the universities is what we call C3ES (Construction de l'Espace Européen de l'Enseignement Supérieur - Building of the European Area for Higher

Education). In that perspective, it is important to seize all opportunities for the development of gender studies in France. (changes in the disciplinary structures of universities, student mobility, interdisciplinarity).

Most of all, Women's Studies has at least one strength : networking, which is far more developed than in other fields of knowledge.

That is why I am so disappointed not to have a French speaking workshop, and a French speaking network in Athena, but also why I am so keen to build one.

ⁱ Harriet Silius, Chapter 10 : "Women's employment, equal opportunities and Women's Studies in nine European countries -a summary", Women's employment, Women's Studies, and Equal Opportunities 1945-2001, Reports from nine European Countries, E, Gabriele Griffin (Ed.) *Women's Employment, Women's Studies, and Equal Opportunities 1945-2001. Reports from nine European countries*, Hull (UK), EWSI.

ⁱⁱ Françoise Picq, "Le MLF, exception française ou modèle ? " in Y.Cohen et F.Thébaud, *Féminismes et identités nationales*, Coll. Les chemins de la recherche, Programme en sciences humaines, Rhône-Alpes 1997.

ⁱⁱⁱ Françoise Picq, "Toulouse vingt ans après", in *Institutionalisation*, supplément au bulletin de l'ANEF, 2003.

^{iv} Le Feuvre, Nicky and Andriocci Muriel (2002) "France", in Gabriele Griffin (Ed.) *Women's Employment, Women's Studies, and Equal Opportunities 1945-2001. Reports from nine European countries*, Hull (UK), EWSI : 231-291