

IRW/IWL Seminar 1998-1999
Modes of Knowledge and Action

Barbara J. Balliet

Women's Studies

“City Sketches: Women Illustrators in Public”

No abstract

Karen Balcom

History

“Networks and Strategies in an International Public Sphere: Female Social Welfare Professionals in Canada and the United States and the Case of the ‘Traffic in Babies,’ 1930-1960”

Throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, leading child welfare officials in Canada and the United States (an almost exclusively female group) struggled with the implications of a rising demand in both countries for adoptable infants. They worried that the intense desire on the part of adoptive parents for children, coupled with relatively undeveloped child welfare systems in some states and provinces, would lead to exploitative adoption placements. A rising trade in infants across the international border—a literal “traffic in babies” in which dollars as well as children changed hands—confirmed these fears and set an agenda for the reform of adoption laws and practices on both sides of the border. To be effective, such reforms had to be coordinated across state, provincial, and national lines. In the absence of formal mechanisms to trace children back and forth across borders, the personal relationships between key women in leadership positions at the Canadian Welfare Council and the US Children's Bureau served as a critical resource in the construction of new, largely informal, mechanisms for the sharing of information and the development of now cooperative policies in Canadian provinces and American states. The strength of these relationships, built up in years of personal friendship, professional interaction, and, perhaps, common feminist commitment, showed in the ability of these women to devise and enact effective strategies and common approaches. The limits of this approach were evident, however, in their inability to secure formal agreements that would more effectively police the traffic in babies. This project examines the interaction of these leading female reformers as an example of women's activism in an international public sphere.

Karen Barad

Women's Studies

“Getting Real: Power, Practice, and Agency”

No abstract

Sheila Cominsky

Sociology, Anthropology, Criminal Justice, and Women's Studies, Rutgers-Camden

“The World of Maria”

This project examines change and continuity in midwifery knowledge and practice through a comparison of a mother and daughter, both of whom are “traditional” midwives on a Guatemalan plantation. The daughter apprenticed with her mother, who is now in her 80s, and also received a government midwifery license after attending an official training course. She now attends most

of the deliveries in the plantation and nearby areas. In what ways have mother and daughter adapted, accommodated, or maintained their ritual, social, and obstetrical roles and their knowledge in light of the pressures from the dominant biomedical system? Has the daughter's acquired knowledge of biomedical obstetrics been accompanied by a loss of her mother's knowledge or has it empowered her? How does she utilize or combine her knowledge in her practice? I trace the impact of medicalization and commoditization on the midwives' authoritative knowledge and practices over a period of 22 years of periodic fieldwork and address the influence of the changing policies that, while aimed at improving deliveries through the training and control of the midwives may also have significant implications for women's health and their access to health care.

Cynthia R. Daniels

Political Science

“Gender, Citizenship, and State Power”

Feminist scholars have long struggled with the questions of relationship of state power to gender inequality. Transformations in the global political economy—which have produced profound challenges to welfare state policies worldwide—have added new levels of complexity to these questions in the 1990s. This project analyzes major developments in US gender-related public policies which have been in part produced (and justified) by such shifting global relations. To what extent do such shifts affirm women's claims to self-sovereignty and citizenship? To what extent do they undermine these? While focused specifically on US policy, this project explores broader theoretical questions regarding the relation of the individual to the nation-state and the need to rethink the terms of liberal citizenship as prerequisite for gender equality.

Judith Gerson

Sociology and Women's Studies

“In Between States: German Jewish Refugees, 1933-1945”

The purpose of this project is to interrogate a wide range of identity claims German Jews made at various points in their journeys to escape Nazi rule and resettle in the States. The concept of identity claims provides an empirical tool to specify how a group of people understood the widest range of their identities and represented that knowledge to themselves and various others. Ultimately, when complete, I anticipate that these identity narratives will reveal a more appropriately complex and inclusive understanding of public spheres and public cultures.

Sherry Gorelick

Sociology

“Feminists and the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict”

Although the peace and women's movements have often been rent asunder by conflicts between Jews and others over the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, women's organizations have also been in the forefront of forging and constituency for Israel/Palestinian peace long before the Madrid International Conference and the secret Oslo negotiations between the PLO and Israel were even on the agenda. What has made it possible for women to play this role, and what have been the major impediments? What has structured what they “know” and how they put that knowledge

into action? Using oral histories with activists in the Jewish feminist movement for Israeli/Palestinian peace, and participant observation at a variety of organizational meetings and historic conferences of both Israeli/Palestinian and diaspora Jewish peace movements, I try to illuminate the links between experience (both macroscopic/historical and microscopic/interactional), identity, knowledge, ideology, and action.

Radha Hedge

School of Communication, Information & Library Studies

“Talk, Text, Illusions: Dilemmas of Representation and the Production of Transnational Feminist Knowledge”

Globalization has introduced new issues and challenges to feminist research practices. The question of who is saying what and for whom resonate powerfully for feminist scholars who are concerned with transnational issues that bridge communities/national boundaries. What does it mean to do feminist research at this global moment? Some complex epistemological choices guide the specific processes negotiating talk/silence in the field and translating it into the language of academia. How real or illusory is the knowledge that is produced? In the project, I revisit my own transnational presence as an ethnographer in a small south Indian town where I talked to women who had committed female infanticide. How does one present stories of oppression without spectacularizing misery or reproducing the archetypal third-world image of misery and doom? There are ethical, political, and aesthetic choices one has to make in the process of representation. Methodological taken-for-granted will be examined and the role of communication will be scrutinized. My intention is to examine epistemic biases and their implications in defining agency and constraint in women’s lives.

Beth Hutchison

IRW and Women’s Studies

“Asserting and Enacting Lesbian and Gay identities”

No abstract

Alice Kessler-Harris

History and Women’s Studies

“Gender and the Construction of Social Policy in the United States from 1920 to 1970”

No abstract

Laura Y. Liu

Geography

“Citizenship and Chinese Immigrant Women: Community Groups, the INS, and Transnational Capital”

My project seeks to interrogate issues of gender and the public sphere by looking at constructions of citizenship status through the case of undocumented Chinese immigrant women workers in the US. The project adopts an “intersectional” approach to the immigrant subject—one that takes race, class, and gender to be mutually constituted as well as mutually constitutive—in order to understand the relationships between geographical and institutional scales of the community, the nation, and global movements of capital and labor. Examining who

produces knowledge for and about these women reveals that the public sphere and its “counterpublics” are never neutrally or adequately “public.” Through an analysis of changes in immigration law and policy, I show the ways that the policing of immigration by the INS serves nation-building, while trade agreements and the labor of undocumented immigrant women workers serves global capital. Mediating between the two are community groups working around and often toward citizenship rights to insert the undocumented woman worker into the public sphere. Reading the immigrant subject as always racialized, classed, and gendered allows us to better understand community responses to changes in immigration law. Examining strategies of community organizing and action through the immigrant subject disrupts the notion that the subject is ever “neutral” and exposes the white, male, hetero-normativity behind the citizen subject.

Jo Ann Pinto

Accounting & Information Systems, Rutgers-Newark
“Towards Gender Equality in Accounting”

Current studies indicate that approximately 50% of all new entrants into the accounting profession are female. At the same time, however, only 5% of the partners in public accounting firms are women and the ranks of senior financial officers in both large and small organizations are thinly populated by female professionals.

Women have been entering the field of public accounting in large numbers for two decades; however, partnership opportunities, which usually are made around the twelfth year of employment, are rarely extended to female professionals. Prior studies, which, ironically, have been conducted by male researchers, suggest that women frequently fall off the partnership track due to conflicts with childbearing activities. While the explanation may be partially true, anecdotal evidence points to the fact that female CPAs are routinely assigned to less prestigious clients within the firm’s client mix, which leads to women occupying a second-class status within the firm’s organizational structure.

The implications of gender bias in public accounting reach far beyond the firms in which this occurs. Accounting information is utilized to make decisions about the allocation of real economic resources in our society. This extends to organizations of all stripes, including not-for-profit, governmental, and educational entities. To the extent that women are systematically excluded from the highest echelons of the production and dissemination of this information, economic equality between the sexes remains an elusive goal.

Liss Platt

Visual Arts, Mason Gross School of the Arts
“Is Your Baby Gay?”

The research I am undertaking will enhance the critical apparatus that I will be using to make a thirty-minute videotape titled *Is Your Baby Gay?* The videotape will be an experimental narrative which critically examines the tendency of current scientific discourse and popular media to promote biologically based explanations for homosexuality. This project provided an opportunity to engage with the socio-political issues at stake in such a deterministic view of

human sexuality and encompasses the following questions: Will establishing a biological “difference” help lesbians and gays attain civil rights (and how might the history of civil rights and women’s movements make this more legible)? Why is the belief that “gays are born that way” so appealing to such a broad spectrum of the public from gay activists to conservatives to the scientific community? How does science construct certain subject positions for women, lesbians, and gay men? What is the relationship of homophobia to scientific inquiry (is anyone looking for a “straight” gene?)?

Rupal Oza

Geography

“Contentious Bodies: Gender, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in India”

Television in India is a relatively new phenomenon that has an assertive existence since the introduction of foreign satellite channels in 1991. The explosion of the visual domain in conjunction with economic reform policies of liberalization has given rise to anxieties of a modernizing state. With particular reference to the construction of the female icon, my research attempts to unravel the particularities of modernity in India, suggest how and why the anxiety with modernity is debated through the female icon, and articulate how globalization is manifest from the perspective of the “third world.” Three interrelated questions frame my investigation: 1) What are the public knowledges of globalization that television in India creates? 2) What kinds of anxieties with identity, gender, and nation do these knowledges generate? 3) How do the state, civil society, and domestic and multinational capital counter, react, and adjust to these anxieties?

Joanna Regulska

Geography and Center for Russian, Central, & East European Studies

“The New ‘Other’ European Woman”

No abstract

Kirsten S. Wever

Labor Studies & Employment Relations

“Women as Change Agents in the World of Work: An International Comparative Perspective”

The field of comparative industrial relations continues to “black box” women, using familiar theories and databases that assume a male-as-default model. Women’s agency in the public sphere, especially the world of paid employment, is consistently ignored or assumed away. However, this field is in principle the best starting point for understanding women and work, offering an interdisciplinary understanding of employment relations built around key sociological, political, and economic variables. Breaking out of the mainstream research model, my project places women and work in comparative international perspective, combining qualitative with quantitative analysis. I start with a comparison of macro-level data from twenty advanced capitalist economies on women’s incomes and earning, occupational and sectoral segregation, labor force participation, and other labor market outcome variables. The research probes the key variables (historical, institutional, economic, and cultural) that influence a counter-intuitive pattern of cross-national labor market outcomes in the Untied Stats, a typical “liberal case,” the typically “conservative” case of Germany, and social democratic Finland. I will couch these cases in an international context to develop a typology of countries, counter to

mainstream typologies, based on women's access to and experience in the world of paid work across countries. Thus I will bring women "in" to mainstream thinking, explaining the broad range of similar outcomes and dissimilar outcomes in similar counties, as revealed by international data.