
RESPONSE AND REVIEW

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As Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) practitioners within the public sector, we share Hester Eisenstein's concern with the attacks on EEO and Affirmative Action (AA) from the right. These attacks, although shallow and semantic, are nevertheless influential and widely reported.

It is of equal concern that these attacks have not been well answered. Although the charges of the right have been refuted, the defence of EEO/AA programs has lost credibility because most of the defenders are seen as having vested interests in the EEO/AA system. The wider left, and especially feminists outside the EEO field, have either remained silent, or have launched their own criticisms, largely based around a belief that the state cannot be used to change radically the situation of women and other oppressed groups.

The dearth of wider theoretical discussion among the left and feminist groups around these issues is worrying. In failing to analyse seriously the implications of EEO/AA programs, especially within the public sector, we believe that the left and feminist groups have ignored the potential of such programs to effect real and significant changes in areas such as the sexual division of power in the workplace, the re-evaluation of work done by women and men, and the working conditions of women.

Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle asked in 1984 "... under what circumstances could EEO threaten patriarchal relations in the workplace?" This question has gone largely unexplored. In this contribution we seek to investigate issues which are central to the preceding papers; the concept of the "femocrat", and the power of the bureaucracy to defuse the challenge posed by EEO reforms. In particular, we would like to look critically at some of the current responses to these issues from left and feminist circles, and sketch out the sorts of responses which might be needed if Game and Pringle's question is to be addressed. In our comments we go beyond regarding EEO as restricted only to women in the public sector: for EEP programs also operate in relation to other disadvantaged and oppressed groups, including Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, and migrants.

The concept of "femocrat" is as negatively-loaded in left debate as is that of "feminist" in the right's discussions. It

generally conjures up notions of women who have forsaken their feminist and/or left allegiances to capitalise on EEO/AA programs, and to take up well-padded seats within the bureaucracy. It roughly parallels the opprobrium directed against senior Aboriginal public servants who, by accepting positions within the bureaucracy, are seen to have abandoned the values of their community. The discussions of how feminists become femocrats often begins and ends debate on EEO; if women involved in EEO end up compromised by their positions in the hierarchy, how can their work ever challenge the status quo? EEO programs are often dismissed out of hand in this way, depriving us of closer understanding of their wider operation or impact. Not only does this line of argument misunderstand the relationship between the feminists who moved easily into the system in the initial phase of EEO activities, and the present operation of EEO, but it serves as a blanket which smothers inquiry.

Hester Eisenstein suggests that, rather than focussing on the type of woman empowered by EEO programs (feminist or not, "good" or "bad" feminist, etc.), our analysis should look at whether women are being empowered at all, and the processes through which they can be empowered. For example, in failing to distinguish its targets clearly, the "femocrat" discussion has been unable to take account of women who have actually discovered feminism in the working environment itself, sometimes with the assistance of an EEO program or co-ordinator. It is interesting to note that the condemnation of "femocrats" is often based on their perceived class position. The WEL women who moved early into the system were perceived as middle class; did this make their co-option easier? What, then, are the implications if women from "working class" backgrounds seek to enter and move through the bureaucracy?

There are other aspects of the attack on "femocrats" which are disturbing. The term is often used without definition, to cover all women who have achieved any power within the bureaucracy, so compounding the resistance they already face from their own managers. It may be ideologically acceptable to be a "victim", to occupy a low status, low-paid position at the bottom of the heap, but look out if you venture outside those jobs! Discussions about "femocracy" also often overlook the positive role played by some of these women in supporting the empowerment of women and other oppressed groups, either within or as clients of, the bureaucracy. The question of how women, feminists in particular, are seen to be co-opted in moving through the system is, however, an important one. Sue Wills considers the process by which this can occur, emphasising the difficulties faced by feminists working for reform within the bureaucracy. These difficulties cannot be denied, nor would we seek to deny the conflicts which can occur and the compromises which are often made. However, to assert that feminists can no longer be "good" feminists (a problematic concept!) if they also identify with their employing agency is similar to arguing that trade unionists cannot be effective if they are also "good" employees. To be influential within an organisation, to be in a position to locate its weaknesses and use its internal contradictions to criticise and to promote change, requires moving away from merely acting as "infiltrators" of the system.

An important element in determining how effective women can be in challenging organisational structures is the degree of support they get both within but, more importantly, from outside the organisation itself. Support from, for example, women's networks within the organisation can be helpful, especially for women in relatively powerless positions. But trade unions, feminist structures within unions and feminist organisations can be more powerful sources of support.

That socialist and feminist theory does not yet fully comprehend the implications of EEO activity in large public sector organisations is evidenced by the emphasis in present debate on the notion that the state can readily accommodate EEO initiatives and, in fact, can actually use EEO programs to reinforce bureaucratic power while allowing little real change. This fails to recognise that external social change, and pressures for internal reform place the bureaucracy at the moment in a state of turmoil. Strategies of change can be effective in such a situation.

Sue Wills' account of the job evaluation review in her organisation offers an example. Without moving into the debate as to whether the participative work arrangements within the unit described are essentially "women's values", it is clear there is at least an issue of a challenge to organisational values here.

Sue Wills proposes two alternatives: to move into an organisationally-endorsed work pattern; or to press for recognition in the organisation of arrangements which these women have established. Decisions on strategies such as these are made by EEO practitioners every day. Collectively, the strategies adopted could have the potential for real structural change, and the re-evaluation of the position of thousands of women in lower paid jobs. Further, the strategies could make an impact on people in even more powerless situations, for example, outworkers in the textile industry, or Aboriginal people in marginal and subsidised employment.

Pat Ranald stresses that issues at the heart of EEO/AA implementation are industrial issues. This underlines a further, and clear, danger of patriarchal state organisations setting the agenda for EEO activity. Union involvement in the implementation of EEO offers a broader overview of its implications and provides negotiating power which can respond to that of management. It is important to remember though that unions often become involved in EEO because women who have moved into the bureaucracy to press for change, perceive that such structural change will also have to be pressed through industrial channels. Like others, these women recognise that activity will have to take place at both levels, and be co-ordinated.

The labour movement is, then, operating to offer the support to EEO practitioners which is not available from theoreticians. What sorts of theoretical analysis and input, though, are we seeking?

Anne Game and Rosemary Pringle have offered crucial insights into occupation segregation on a gender basis. And, as Hester notes, the works of Clare Burton and Claire Williams have investigated the male response to the movement of women into areas of traditional male occupation. A compelling example is Hester's articulation of the operation of "masculinity protection". This clarifies the common experience among EEO practitioners that the response of many men to the "intrusion" of women into their workplace goes well beyond an anxiety at an expanded field of competition within their career streams, or hesitation at having to adapt to new working patterns and behaviour. The extent and intensity of the resistance can only be properly explained by perceptions such as these.

Hester extends this analysis elsewhere to suggest that the threat of EEO is more fundamental; that the presence of women in the workplace is an assault on the male categories of the public and private domains — categories which are also central to analysis of capitalism.

We have drawn a number of conclusions from our readings of the preceding three papers. First, we noted that individual EEO practitioners are already promoting activity which goes beyond the "shopping list" of specific objectives which is all EEO monitoring agencies typically expect of EEO implementation, to pose a real challenge to the existing structure of the bureaucracy. Secondly, we noted that they are doing this within the public sector and the labour movement in the absence of support from theoretical analysis from the left or feminism. Indeed, at times they operate in the face of criticism from these circles which we believe to be based on cloudy notions of the potential that EEO/AA programs have for structural change.

Finally, we believe that activists such as the authors of these three papers throw up a challenge to the left to "deglobalise" its analysis of the bureaucracy, and to look inside it to the operation of internal power relations. There is a challenge also to feminist theory to expand its investigation of power, and male resistance, to take account of the particular situations of women in large state organisations. It is a challenge to develop the theoretical basis and strategies which will allow EEO/AA programs to be effective as part of the wider program of change.

