

How to Survive as Feminist and Gender Researchers in the Neoliberal University?

Lena Weber

Pereira, Maria do Mar. 2017. *Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship. An Ethnography of Academia*. London: Routledge.

What does it mean to conduct feminist research and to teach in the 'entrepreneurial university'? What strategies do feminist researchers and teachers develop to achieve the epistemic status of 'proper' science? Under what conditions is feminist knowledge production generated and distributed? *Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship* (2017), by feminist researcher Maria do Mar Pereira, offers a rich ethnography of the working conditions and knowledge production of feminist academics and about feminist research. She draws on an impressive collection of data from fieldwork in Portugal that is supplemented with participant observations in the UK, US, and Sweden. The author conducted interviews with 36 feminist researchers in 2008/2009 and again, with twelve of them, in 2015/2016. In addition, she documented corridor talks, classroom lessons, and conference chats.

The book contains seven chapters that focus on the academic boundary work of feminists and their strategies to produce knowledge that can be considered 'proper' science. The starting point is that academic communities, whose research is acknowledged as 'proper' science, are doing everything to appear different from gender and feminist research because those research areas are considered 'improper', 'not objective', or 'political'. Pereira's goal is to analyse the strategies that feminist researchers establish to counter these allegations of producing 'improper' or 'not objective' science and how they develop strategies to attain a stable epistemic status in contemporary so-called 'performative' universities. The author shows how these strategies of scientific boundary work are entangled with the institutionalisation process of feminist and gender research in the Portuguese 'performative university'.

As a gender and feminist scholar based in Germany, I am convinced that the outline of the book is highly topical (cf. Hark, Villa 2015). In Germany, public criticism of gender and feminist research has increased only recently, especially among journalists and some segments of civil society. Thus, the situation Pereira describes for Portugal holds true for Germany, too. It seems to be true that, as soon as gender studies are integrated into bachelor's and master's programmes in higher education and gender research becomes more and more institutionalised, the public voices against gender research grow louder. At the same time, established scientists in other research fields



question the 'objective' and 'proper science' status of gender and feminist research. This process can be interpreted as a battle for financial resources and it shows that gender and feminist research always have to reflect and explain their legitimacy to society. The book highlights the highly relevant issue about how feminist and gender research is constructed in academia, what problems it faces, and how the construction of epistemic status as well as its counteractions can be reflected. For those who are interested in the boundary work of researchers defining 'proper' academic knowledge and distancing themselves from 'improper' knowledge, this book is strongly recommended.

The chapters of the book build on each other, but every chapter also stands on its own. To show the line of argument, I will give a short overview of each chapter. The introduction provides a well-written overview of the central terms, definitions, and ideas. In Chapter 1, Pereira describes the precarious epistemic status of Women's, Gender and Feminist Studies (WGFS) in the science system worldwide. She shows that, in most countries, WGFS is not regarded as 'proper' science. Instead, the picture of WGFS in public and mainstream science is 'too political' and 'too subjective'. In the second chapter, Pereira outlines her research approach on 'epistemic status', linking different strands of theoretical perspectives, namely Michael Foucault's approach of epistemic genealogy, with Science and Technology Studies (Thomas Gieryn) and feminist epistemology (Lorraine Code). In Chapter 3 Pereira ties together the changes currently taking place in the scientific landscapes, which she indicates are a transformation towards 'performative knowledge production', and the precarious institutionalisation of WGFS in the Portuguese higher education system. Chapter 4 is dedicated to Pereira's empirical finding that, whereas *gender* research has almost passed through the gates of academic recognition, *feminist* research is split up and often dismissed by other scholars. Pereira shows that scholars' differentiation between gender and feminist research is a part of their boundary work. Her interpretation of this strategy is that 'splitting provides a supposedly legitimate epistemological rationale for taking into account the WGFS insights which broadly fit mainstream frameworks, while simultaneously rejecting as epistemological unsound of the WGFS critiques of those frameworks' (p. 114). In Chapter 5, she uses the concept of epistemic maps, which describe boundaries and spaces, and the distance between or proximity of the different research strands. The author depicts how the scholars she interviewed locate feminist research in comparison to 'proper' and 'mainstream' science, which results in five more or less distinctive maps with varying relationships between 'proper', 'mainstream', and feminist science. In Chapter 6, Pereira explains the ambivalent role of the Portuguese science system in a global context. She states that the epistemic status of science is unequally distributed in the world and that the origin of 'proper' science is perceived to be located in Western societies. Furthermore, she notes the existing

hegemony of English language in science. Even Women's Studies is dominated by an Anglo-American discourse. In contrast, Portugal is often viewed publicly as the 'tail of Europe': a modern state with various deficits in modernisation (p. 151). As Pereira shows, even Portuguese scholars describe their science system as 'delayed'. Thus, she argues for further opening up, modernisation, progress and, at the same time, for increasing the value of feminist research, which was institutionalised sooner in the English-speaking 'modern' world. In the last chapter Pereira reviews some of her first research results and interpretations of earlier interviews in contrast to her recent ones, stating that the practices of knowledge production in the performative university have exhausted and frustrated many scholars.

With reference to the changing conditions for academic work in the 'neoliberal' or 'entrepreneurial' university, Chapter 3 and Chapter 7 are particularly interesting. Below, I will focus on Pereira's analysis of the 'economic shift' in academia and its consequences for scholars in their everyday lives.

Chapter 3 reflects on the relationship between the neoliberal transformation of academia and the institutionalisation process of WGFS in Portugal. The most interesting finding in this chapter is that 'at the end of the noughties, there [has been] arguably more openness to gender equality discourse within and outside academia' than before (p. 76). WGFS has become more and more recognised as proper knowledge, through the large (and fast-growing) amount of literature on the subject that meets the requirements of the performative university. However, this recognition, as Pereira describes it, is a conditional one: 'WGFS is recognised as proper knowledge *if* it leads to publications' (p. 79). Thus, as soon as its publication output declines, the epistemic status of WGFS is questioned.

Instead of talking about the 'entrepreneurial' or 'neoliberal' university like the majority of the contemporary research literature, Pereira chooses to speak of the 'performative university'. For her, the performative university is based on two pillars: first, a new form of knowledge production that aims at high(er) levels of productivity; and second, the development of new auditing and surveillance structures of academic performance, especially for the 'production' of publications. Nevertheless, what are the conceptual advantages compared to the terms and concepts that already exist remains an open question. In my view, the notion of the performative university focuses on only one aspect of the academic transformation, whereas the reasons for the transformation are overlooked. Thus, some of Pereira's empirical findings could be better explained by using a broader approach, such as examining them in reference to the neoliberal or entrepreneurial university, which would be a more complex approach.

As Pereira shows, this transformation is a two-sided one: on the one hand, academia is opening up to new disciplines and broader student access, and on the other hand, the working conditions for academics are deteriorating. The number of professorships has



decreased, and more and more researchers are employed on the basis of a temporary contract. The new neoliberal 'spirit' in politics calls for more transparent, objective, and measurable output criteria to legitimate academic work. Study programmes have to attract enough students to be profitable for the university, and scholars are required to produce continuously innovative knowledge measured by publication quotas, to acquire third-party funding for their projects, and to make contributions to societal welfare through commercial innovations. However, using the concept of 'performativity', Pereira is not able to link these economic pressures in academia to her findings, which extend, also, to the everyday practices of WGFS scholars.

Pereira's idea of the economic transformation as being two-sided gets more or less lost at the end of the book, where the negative impacts of the neoliberal shift overshadow the analysis of the situation as a whole. This can be seen in the last chapter, where Pereira again picks up the thread about the performative university in order to make more critical comments. She highlights the major difference between the interviews from 2008/2009, when the neoliberal shift entered the universities and gender research become institutionalised, and the interviews from 2015/2016, when the reforms had already been implemented for some years. Pereira points out that, to survive in the science system, the strategy of many of the feminist researchers interviewed has been to follow the performative university's imperative of productivity. However, there are physical, mental, and social limits to this: in the interviews from 2015/2016, almost all the scholars stated that they are physically and mentally exhausted and lack enough time to read and to discuss findings and other important but not always visible productive parts of academic work. In Pereira's view, it is the governance of the performative university that is responsible for the increased workload in administration.

While this interpretation of the results might be valid – in fact, the new governance of science overburdens scholars with tasks and duties – some questions remain unanswered. For example, it is not known whether these effects only apply to WGFS scholars (because only those have been interviewed) or whether 'exhaustion' is a general problem experienced by scholars at a certain stage in their academic career: At the beginning of a career, scholars have a great deal of enthusiasm and spirit and research issues they want to investigate. After working for some years in academia, the energy of the first years can fade. In this chapter, a discussion of existing literature on these very findings would have been illuminating.

Each chapter provides interesting insights into the epistemic status practices of WGFS, boundary work strategies, and their implications. The empirical findings and their interpretation are presented well, but more systematic information about the data collection, the interviewees, and the fieldwork would have been useful for readers. Pereira provides readers with ostensive insights into the mechanisms and strategies of scholars tackling, on a local level, global shifts in scientific governance.

For her research objective of investigating the epistemic status and boundary work of academic communities, the concept of the performative university is instructive, but it results in some blind spots in her interpretation of her empirical findings. The strengths of the book lie in the empirically grounded critique of current science politics regarding gender and feminist research, and in the reflections on the strategies used to establish and sustain 'proper' epistemic status. The findings of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 in particular are very well presented and illustrated using impressive examples. Pereira does not shy away from remarking critically on the effects of the performative university and their entanglements with the institutionalisation of WGFS. Furthermore, she offers some recommendations for changing and shaping science. According to her, a key idea is to think through which projects we like doing, and to 'regularly say no' (p. 215) to other projects that we cannot do owing to limited time or physical resources. However, we should not forget that there are, to date, successful political bodies that support women in science and gender research, especially in the EU, and that collective strategies are important for solving problems. What is more, in order to strengthen WGFS, in my opinion it is more helpful to highlight the valuable contributions made by feminist research (p. 210) than it is to discredit other strands of research.

And now, I am going to 'spend the rest of [my] day being unashamedly and deliciously non-productive' (p. 218), just as recommended.

References

Hark, S., Villa, P.-I. (eds.). 2015. *Anti-Genderismus. Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

The Principle of Slow (Food), Applied to the Corporate University

Annette von Alemann

Berg, Maggie, Seeber, Barbara K. 2016. *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press.

Many books have been published on the corporate university, and a lot of researchers have studied and commented on recent developments in academia. Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, two Canadian professors of English language and literature at