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Hemmings, Clare

Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hemmings, C. (2008). Tuning Problems? *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 15(2), 117-127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506808090398>

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# Open Forum

## Tuning Problems?

### Notes on Women's and Gender Studies and the Bologna Process

Clare Hemmings

LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

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#### INTRODUCTION

My article 'Ready for Bologna? The Impact of the Declaration on Women's and Gender Studies in the UK', was published in *European Journal of Women's Studies* in 2006, and with it an editorial by Mary Evans engaging with many of the points I raised there (Evans, 2006; Hemmings, 2006a). My article sought to highlight many of the challenges UK higher education faces in implementing the Bologna Declaration, and some of the reasons UK women's and gender studies might want to take seriously the opportunities (as well as potential pitfalls) the major European-wide shifts in higher education afford. The article was overall on the positive side, emphasizing reasons feminist scholars in the UK might find changes wrought by Bologna interesting, perhaps even rewarding. These were mainly to do with the increased opportunities for national and international funding and mobility that the restructuring promises for the field, and the importance of an international curriculum and perspective (not always the case in the UK, where many have never heard of Bologna, nor have any intention of altering their existing curricula).

Mary's response was much less optimistic, raising important questions about the increased bureaucratization of the field, and of UK higher education in general, where we are already struggling under the weight of endless audits and reviews, and reviews of audits and audits of reviews. For Mary,

additional tailoring of women's and gender studies to fit bureaucratic requirements (international or otherwise) can only be an added burden. Further, Mary rightly highlights the problems of 'tuning' (akin to 'benchmarking' in a UK context), in terms of its homogenizing and universalizing tendencies, and the danger of women's and gender studies losing any radicalism it may currently have. What are we being asked to become 'attuned to', who is included or excluded in the process of tuning our curricula, what do we stand to lose as well as gain from such disciplining of the field?

These are all important questions, and the debate between Mary and myself continues in the women's and gender studies tradition of debating the politics of institutionalization of feminist thought and practice. All of us who participate in the field know that we are never far from the following familiar questions: To what extent should we encourage institutionalization of feminist thinking (Crowley, 1999; Evans, 1982; Hemmings, 2006b)? How might we retain a critical position on the margins (or at the centre), while ensuring the knowledge produced within women's and gender studies is taken seriously (Griffin and Braidotti, 2002; Looser and Kaplan, 1997)? Do we have a shared project within women's and gender studies, and if so, what is lost in any emphasis on commonalities over differences (and vice versa) (Brown, 1997; Wiegman, 2003; Zalewski, 2003)? Should interdisciplinary autonomy of the field be striven for, and/or should we work within disciplinary contexts to ensure the ongoing health of the field (Hark, 2007; Liinason and Holm, 2006; Lykke, 2004)? What should we call this contested endeavour (Butler, 1994; Evans, 1991; Threadgold, 2000)? From my own perspective, these questions generate rather than divide the field of women's and gender studies, and continuing to ask them is one way of ensuring we also continue to focus on our capacity to transform the field we hold dear. My argument here is that debates about Bologna, and the value of European tuning within that process, extend these questions in both new and old ways.

One of the interesting new aspects of the European tuning debate, it seems to me, is the way in which it necessarily foregrounds both international differences and similarities within the field, and situates these as institutional as well as theoretical questions (Braidotti, 2002; Griffin and Hanmer, 2001). Thus to talk about who or what might be included or excluded in Bologna tuning efforts immediately raises the question of English-language hegemony, as well as specific institutional concerns such as translation, employment rights and tenure (Vasterling et al., 2006). But it also points to institutional histories of academic feminist cooperation within which the UK is often marginal or absent, and to exchanges between, for example, Sweden and the Netherlands, or Italy and Croatia, which are more established in both political and institutional senses. Debates about institutionalization of academic feminism have always raised such questions, but Bologna forces these to the front of debate, since they can only be resolved by institutional as well as intellectual means.<sup>1</sup>

In the rest of this piece, I return to the questions raised in mine and Mary's articles, fleshing out some of their concerns more fully, and tentatively suggesting ways forward for women's and gender studies in its negotiation with European institutionalization of the field. I focus my reflections on the question of 'tuning', to enable some precision in what can otherwise be rather general debates, and to reflect the development of my thinking about the issue through participation in a workshop on Bologna tuning held in Budapest last year.<sup>2</sup> Both there and in what follows, I write from my location as a women's and gender studies scholar and advocate, based in the UK, and interested in thinking about that location in terms of its international resonance and relevance. My hope is that these reflections will contribute to ongoing discussion about the current and future relationship between intellectual and institutional practice in European women's and gender studies.

## PART I: EUROPEAN HARMONIES

Let me begin with what I see as some of the positive aspects of European tuning for women's and gender studies. In the first instance, we might want to interrogate just how different tuning might be from what most of us already do in our curriculum development, teaching methods and assessment more generally. In a UK context, certainly, women's and gender studies academics already meet many of the institutional requirements for tuning. As with the controversial three-cycle system (bachelor's, master's, doctorate), a UK context is rather well adapted to the tuning process in light of its ongoing external monitoring of degrees and national quality assurance bureaucracies (whatever we think of these politically or intellectually). In addition, while UK women's and gender studies does not have nationally agreed undergraduate benchmarks for the field, the Feminist and Women's Studies Association (UK and Ireland) (FWSA) developed benchmarks for women's and gender studies early this decade.<sup>3</sup> These included assumptions of inter- or multidisciplinary, core theory and methodology training, inclusion of key concepts and so on, but were also very flexible in recognition of disagreement about even these arguably core issues within the field. While the benchmarks were not adopted at the national level, since unfortunately the development of these coincided with increasing lack of support for undergraduate provision for the field, the benchmarks are available, and have been used locally in the development of new programmes. These have been considered useful in making the institutional case for women's and gender studies as a distinct field, and have not (to my knowledge) been experienced as over-determining what is included in the curriculum or learning outcomes. Other European colleagues have similar tales of formal and informal

cooperation, where curriculum development and aims, objectives and assessment practices in established courses and programmes provide useful ammunition in the face of institutional ignorance of women's and gender studies. In this respect, the practices we already endorse informally might be usefully extended as part of European tuning, particularly where colleagues internationally need support in convincing sceptics that this is indeed a valid, internationally recognized field of study.

This extension of existing practices is important from a UK women's and gender studies perspective in a different way too. While tuning might be useful for the establishment of new programmes, constituting 'evidence' that the field is internationally established, it might also provide support for existing programmes facing closure. As many readers will be aware, degree-awarding undergraduate women's and gender studies provision in the UK has been steadily diminishing over the last decade, although individual courses and pathways continue to thrive in many cases (Davis et al., 2006). While often extremely healthy, UK graduate women's and gender studies still needs to consolidate its position, nationally and internationally, if it too is not to be 'phased out', in the face of pervasive ideological conviction that the time of the field is past. European tuning offers UK feminist scholars, institutes and departments the opportunity to refer to a broader 'community of practice' in making the case for their own relevance and capacity for growth.<sup>4</sup> In pragmatic terms, European 'benchmarks' or the existence of a tuning template, might thus allow the field visibility and credibility in institutional fights for survival.<sup>5</sup> European colleagues have similarly expressed the need for international visibility (with attendant documents and templates) to support established institutional sites that will, we know, continue to be vulnerable to economic and cultural shifts in higher education.

Outside our own immediate institutional contexts, too, there are reasons that tuning might be thought of positively. To focus on my own location again, national funding bodies tend not to recognize women's and gender studies as a distinct field in the UK, meaning that research proposals grounded in interdisciplinary feminist scholarship are often assessed by disciplinary experts unfamiliar with the particular context addressed (Griffin and Hanmer, 2001). This directly disadvantages feminist scholars, who often have to choose between putting in funding applications that reflect their real interests, and putting in ones that have a more narrow disciplinary focus, and/or do not mention gender (let alone feminism) in order to maximize their chances of successful bids. UK higher education is increasingly foregrounding the importance of external funding as core to rather than one possible part of an academic career; indeed, many contracts now include expectations of generating external revenue. European tuning might well provide a lifeline for UK feminist academics in this context, both because existing networks already allow

for joint funding applications, and because many European funding sources already have women's and/or gender studies as a designated field. From a broader international perspective, we should also bear in mind that joint applications to European funds are of paramount importance to many European partners in arguing for research leave, career development and baseline recognition; it can make the difference between a paid and an unpaid job in some locations. In this respect, it seems of paramount importance that any tuning efforts we do make – for example, within the context of the Athena network – are matched by active promotion of field recognition in funding categories where this does not already exist. This recognition will be key to maximizing the ability of women's and gender studies scholars to engage tuning strategically rather than reactively.

From a further practical perspective, the mobility afforded by tuning will surely be of benefit to students across Europe, particularly in contexts where infrastructures do not exist for full degree programmes, or where a particular issue is not taught. In a context of uneven institutionalization of the field across Europe, this allows for a more expansive vision of our curriculum, which can thus take in more than the courses we happen to offer in a given institutional context. This mobility exists already through Erasmus exchanges of course, but there remains some difficulty in translating across systems, even where courses are accredited through ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System), which in the UK they predominantly are not. In addition, twinning of different programmes within or across regions might provide a useful rationale for establishing one or two courses without the need to make the (sometimes impossible) argument for the establishment of a women's or gender studies programme per se. From a UK perspective, such flexibility might, for example, allow gender and women's studies master's programmes to offer their usually year-long master's programmes as part of broader two-year cycles in association with European partners, thus reducing the need for reframing master's programmes as a whole within the Bologna process (which many UK institutions are resistant to and in the current climate unlikely to resource). There may be considerable career advantages for women's and gender studies students to this kind of tuning approach. Not only might they have advantages of mobility in terms of disciplinary or interdisciplinary specialization, they might also be better able than purely nationally educated students to respond to an international academic or professional market.

Overall, then, the preceding arguments are reasons why I consider participation in European tuning to be potentially useful for women's and gender studies at both a macro and micro level. Facilitation of staff and student mobility, course 'sharing' and the invocation of a European 'community of practice' offer positive benefits for the field from a range of

positions within it. Working from the UK context I am most familiar with, tuning requires thinking about the advantages of developing a truly international women's and gender studies curriculum. But it is this possibility that also sounds an important note of caution. Any moves to develop European benchmarks must also be accompanied by a clear integration of global issues and awareness, either in terms of marginalized states within its geographical imaginary, or in terms of the central role migration to and from 'Europe' has played in its history and current form (Anim-Addo and Scafe, 2007). A focus on student and staff mobility in this context needs to make central issues of migration and racial/class differentiations from the start, rather than as an afterthought, looking carefully at who the presumed subjects of this enhanced European mobility are. This is key to Bologna tuning within women's and gender studies, if we are not to reproduce the same exclusions that have typified the field more generally, and I discuss this further in the following section.<sup>6</sup>

## EUROPEAN DISSONANCE

This caution about blithely celebrating 'inclusion' echoes some of the concerns Mary raised in her editorial response to my own more enthusiastic article, and points to more general problems of the relationship of women's and gender studies to academic institutionalization. Thus, while we might usefully map possibilities offered by European tuning, focusing on questions of strategy and coopting of bureaucratic agendas for our own aims, this can easily backfire. There are ample examples of the ways in which marginal approaches within academic life, particularly those with the most success, such as interdisciplinarity, can be adopted as edicts by institutions who come to appreciate their economic as well as political usefulness. Indeed, it seems clear that any decision about 'strategy' can only be a starting point, rather than a presumed self-evident tool available to women's and gender studies scholars.

From Mary's piece, and from discussion with colleagues, the most common concern about tuning the curriculum and institutional developments across European women's and gender studies was that it would be likely to homogenize the disparate and diverse aims and objectives that characterize endeavours within the field. Universalization here is understood to result in reproduction rather than amelioration of the field's existing exclusions, strengthening the divide between academic and activist or professional interventions, for example. As Mary makes clear, the key question here concerns the politics of the field. Women's and gender studies has a history as not only an academic field of enquiry like any other, but as a different kind of endeavour (Braithwaite et al., 2004; Messer-Davidow, 2002). Providing benchmarks, no matter how broadly defined or open to interpretation, may

fix the meanings of the field internationally and contribute to its institutional domestication locally. This argument derives from the position that debate and contestation form the basis of this vibrant field, and thus any attempt to set its boundaries, whether temporarily or strategically, represents a conservative, exclusionary move. Even the most enthusiastic supporters of tuning acknowledge that tuning efforts will need to foreground an approach of ethical flexibility and pay serious attention to how this can be ensured rather than merely gestured towards.

The question of the politics of women's and gender studies as a field also raises the issue of disciplinization implied by benchmarks. First, for many, women's and gender studies has been a *de facto* interdisciplinary enterprise (Lykke, 2004; Pryse, 2000). Benchmarking and tuning might thus represent the fashioning of a canon of texts and methods for the field, heralding its emergence as a discipline in its own right (and this is closely related to anxieties about homogenization indicated earlier, of course). In a European context this is particularly important, given that women's and gender studies as a field is not always recognized as an autonomous field, and so finds its institutional place within, for example, American studies, sociology, linguistics or philosophy. There is a distinct danger that tuning may prioritize those national or regional contexts with greater autonomous institutionalization of women's and gender studies to date, over and above these more common contexts. Indeed, it is an imagined interdisciplinary women's and gender studies (as the basis of disciplinization) that is likely to be prioritized in any tuning exercise, over and above the texts and approaches of specific fields, particularly those already marginal within women's and gender studies, such as the natural sciences. In this sense, tuning risks reinforcing models of the field that prioritize certain material and geographical, as well as intellectual, histories over others.

In a related vein, European tuning efforts raise the question of expertise, not only in the sense of who the presumed European subject of any 'tuning template' might be, but also in terms of who will write these benchmarks or develop an account of our common practices and desired outcomes. Who will be consulted, and whose opinions will be seen to count? Will the creation of tuning templates represent a top-down ordering of positions within the field or seek to challenge the same? Moreover, if some women's and gender studies contexts were to adopt tuning methodology and others were not, would this create a hierarchy of training where 'experts' were only assumed to emerge from those institutional contexts signed up to tuning? The question of experts could be seen in a different light, though, too, as a way of ensuring that 'gender studies' not be coopted by those with no training in the field, or with perspectives antithetical to the political history of the field, e.g. through the use of gender discourse for nationalist agendas, or by theorists invested in reproducing rather than challenging the status of social gender differences as natural. In this respect, particular care needs to



be taken to ensure that a tuning template allows for and encourages *critical* training in gender studies for those entering 'gender professions' such as mainstreaming and development, particularly in light of their growing influence in CEE countries, for example (Duhaček, 2006; Kašić, 2004).<sup>8</sup> This is particularly important if the 'international' nature of the field remains central to arguments about its continued relevance and growth, as indicated in the first part of this article.

But if we try to 'tune' women's and gender studies in strategic fashion to include these developments, do we also risk instrumentalizing our own agenda in line with the expectations of industry and government? This anxiety relates closely to the question of quality assurance, here understood as the flip side of the more positively expressed 'community of practice'. Thus while we might want to ensure, as suggested, that gender expertise is not taken out of the field's control, we might also want to take care not to do governments' work for them. In most European countries, there is already considerable pressure to focus our teaching and research in areas that increase student employability, with, as Mary cautions, little regard to politics outside the politics of the market (Evans, 2006). A competition-driven EU endorsement of tuning positions women's and gender studies in a deeply ambivalent manner, given the weight 'gender equality' currently carries in a global frame. Quality assurance in this context would not only be a problem of bureaucratization and constraint, in other words, but a mechanism through which it could be ensured that the 'right' kind of women's and gender studies is being taught (Ware, 2006). It might thus be important to resist the over-association of gender equality with western 'democratization' in a European context, both in relation to the question of geographical, racial, ethnic and religious power relations that we might want our 'tuned' project to contest (Scott, 2007), and in terms of retaining the disciplinary diversity of the field.

In terms of the dangers both of universalization and furthering of international agendas in which gender remains central, it seems fundamental for women's and gender studies to insist, where/if adopting European tuning, on debates and contests as central rather than tangential to the field. In any benchmarking exercise the tendency is to present outcomes of debates rather than the debates themselves, and this would give the false impression that debates about racism, homophobia and classism, to mention only three key sites of contest germane to the field, have somehow been resolved. Central to any political negotiation of Bologna tuning must be an acknowledgement of the whiteness, heterosexism and financial or cultural privilege endemic to the field in Europe, and the ways in which that marks what women's and gender studies is – intellectually and institutionally. There is a very real danger that tuning will force us to produce an imagined rather than real representation of the field, in ways that reproduce the exclusions a tuning template purports to have transcended.

## CONCLUSION

This piece has allowed me to reflect further on some of the broader questions raised already in *EJWS* about the question of European tuning for women's and gender studies. Whether positively or negatively viewed, tuning raises important questions about power relations that characterize the field and our various locations within it; in this respect, the tuning debate is extremely useful in its own right. Moving beyond the 'either/or' positions initially adopted by Mary and myself, the tuning debate suggests a more strategic focus on exclusion and community; but the precise nature of these strategies remains obscure at this stage. A desire to be strategic, or to take on tuning while remaining politically engaged and conscious of bureaucracy's exclusionary effects, is not necessarily coextensive with accountability for those exclusions, or real attention to strategic method over the long term. For me, one thing remains clear: that any appropriation of tuning has to start from what the field has failed to do – historically and contemporarily – as much as from what it has achieved; and from the different locations – institutional and political – that we inhabit.

## NOTES

1. See also work that highlights the significance of institutional debates for a more located and politically strategic feminist epistemology (Pereira, 2008; Wiegman, 1999/2000).
2. The workshop was coordinated by Berteke Waaldijk and myself, as part of the annual Athena meeting (European Thematic Network in Women's Studies). The workshop was attended by approximately 30 people from a range of European sites. My thanks go to the other participants in the workshop, and especially to Berteke, for providing such an open space for debate.
3. See [www.fwsa.org.uk/](http://www.fwsa.org.uk/) for more information about the Association.
4. See recent article in the UK *Times Higher Education Supplement* on the purported disappearance of women's and gender studies as a distinct field. Unpublished letters in response to this argument drew on the development of the international importance of the field as part of the case for the growth rather than diminution of the field (Oxford, 2008).
5. And indeed, this has proven to be the case at the Gender Institute, LSE, where I work; it is the *international* development of the field that finally convinced institutional bureaucrats to support (albeit in minimal terms) a field they otherwise failed to see the national relevance of. This represents a pragmatic negotiation of institutional thirst for international fees, of course, but a minor success nevertheless.
6. The interculturality subgroup of Travelling Concepts in Athena is beginning this difficult work of collaborative teaching across linguistic and institutional differences. The group, led by Mina Karavanta (University of Athens) starts from the assumption that any European gender studies project must foreground interculturality in order to challenge dominant power relations in the field. The group draws on earlier work exploring modes of communication across the complexities of differences European scholars inhabit (Covi et al., 2006).

7. Discussion on the issue of gender mainstreaming as part of democratization, and the role of gender studies scholars internationally in critically engaging with this process, was sustained over several days at the conference 'Gender, Empire and the Politics of Central and Eastern Europe', 17–18 May 2007, held in Budapest, and co-organized by Allaine Cerwonka (CEU) and Robyn Wiegman (Duke University). Copies of some of the papers given can be found at [www.duke.edu/womstud/Budapest.html](http://www.duke.edu/womstud/Budapest.html)

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Clare Hemmings is senior lecturer in gender studies at the LSE. She teaches within interdisciplinary feminist and sexuality studies. Address: Gender Institute, LSE, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. [email: c.hemmings@lse.ac.uk]

