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Working-Apart-Together: Reflections on a decade of feminist collaboration 2005–2015

At the end of ten years as Professor II in Sociology at the Centre for Gender Research, as I say “farewell” and formally end my employment by the University of Oslo, I offer here some reflections on my time “*working-apart-together*” with colleagues in the Centre.

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In Norwegian you have long had a term, *særbo*, for the increasingly prevalent form of intimacy that in English is rather clumsily described by the neologism «living-apart-together» (LAT). Whether LATs by choice or constraint, many people who are in non-cohabiting relationships, particularly those who live at considerable distance from their partners, explain that they value the special quality that their relationship has by virtue of not being sullied by the daily messiness of domesticity. They do not have to argue about the washing-up, or negotiate matters of money and personal space as they would have to if they lived with their partner. Their time with their loved one is limited, and more precious and pleasurable because of this, the intensity heightened and every moment seemingly more memorable and meaningful because of the difference from the everyday “back home”.

Working-apart-together similarly has many advantages. Coming to the Centre has always been a break from the mundane for me, time away from the stresses and strains of my *day job*. My visits have been occasions to think with other feminist researchers, to explore ideas, to debate and discuss, as a researcher and teacher, but also as someone who is herself still, always, learning. For I have learnt an enormous amount through coming to the Centre and working with its inhabitants over the years, above all through reflecting on the difference that I have encountered in the space of the Centre, and on my affective responses to it.

Coming and going as an insider-outsider

As I have come and gone every few months, year-in, year-out for over a decade¹, I have grown to love what I have seen and been part of at the Centre. I gradually came to realise that a calmness would descend over me soon after I arrived, as I breathed in the freshness of the context and the freedom from my everyday working life, whilst I simultaneously relaxed into a certain level of familiarity with the place and with the

¹In fact, I first came to a meeting of the Nordic Council of Ministers-funded Women’s Movements and Internationalization research group, invited by Beatrice Halsaa, back in 1999, and I visited the Centre several times to talk and teach before I was appointed Professor II in 2005.



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low-key warmth of the extended dialogues and collaborations that developed over time with many colleagues at the Centre – about intimacy, sexuality and queer theory, about feminist activism, women’s movements and citizenship, about subjectivity, psychoanalysis and the psychosocial.

I must confess that I have always tried to be on my best behaviour when visiting the Centre, as LAT partners aim to be – at least for the first few hours or days of a visit. And I have perhaps seen the best of the Centre. I think we may not have entirely revealed our “true selves” to each other. I have not been part to the Centre’s internal debates or power struggles (although perhaps Norwegian consensual social democracy, or distaste for agonism, mean that these are smoothed over, resolved or squashed, before they take hold?). I have not had to worry about the Centre’s finances or staffing strategy. I have not had to get involved in planning teaching, or developing research plans. I have not had to take sides, or argue with people, or enjoin battle to change things. I have been more than a guest, but less than a full member of this establishment, and this insider-outsider position has been a privileged and pleasant position to occupy. ♦

Early impressions and lasting learning

Back in the early days of my attachment, I found it amusing that the Centre was housed above a petrol station and garage,

and that the feminists shared their lunch table with the men in blue overalls. There seemed something utterly Norwegian about women’s studies – as it still mainly was then – literally sitting on top of, and then coming down to eat with, the men who worked at the consumer end of the oil industry (although my eco-feminist roots meant that I worried about the toxicity of the petrochemical fumes, and the long-term consequences of fossil fuel dependency). Now that the Centre is located high up on Gaustadalléen, I have enjoyed gazing out across the city to the water, especially on bright sunny days when the skies are blue, and when the hills are covered in snow.

And I have loved, and learnt from, the temporal structures and domestic communality of the Centre, which are so different from British university departments. I have absorbed the importance of the ritual of the weekly “house meeting”, at which members of the Centre report on their ongoing work to the assembled group, promoting a supportive and collegial context for research, and acting against the individualizing tendencies of academic life. I have been impressed that every day *real food* is consumed together, around a big table rather than alone at one’s desk – food that is brought to work in greaseproof paper, or prepared on site, with tasty condiments and fresh salad leaves that live in the ample fridge. I have experienced tactile pleasure in the smooth, matte china of the Centre’s grey mugs, and I have supped from the constant supply of good, strong black coffee and unusually fragrant tea, which tastes like tea nowhere in England. I was amazed to discover that the Centre has a dishwasher (and hence no dirty mugs growing mould in the sink), and a proper kitchen, of cooler design than many homes in Britain.

I have marvelled at the ergonomic chairs that caress my back, and the fact that the furniture is in funky colours, and is updated regularly. And I have admired the architecture, lighting and furnishings of the University library, which looks to me like a Nordic design hotel, with its black leather sofas and armchairs and blond wood tables. In all of this, I have witnessed a deep-rooted institutional understanding of the value of creating a community of scholars and support staff who work together within an atmosphere and physical environment that are comfortable and containing. And I have learnt from this that it is possible to build a sense that the people who inhabit a university matter and that their well-being is vital to the university’s work. These have been subtle and vital lessons for me to take back home, to my day job, as a head of department and research leader.

More broadly, perhaps the most significant thing that I have

learnt during my Professor II post is to appreciate not just the Norwegian welfare state – for universities are, I believe, part of the welfare state – but the power of welfare regimes more generally. Whether social democratic, liberal, neo-liberal or conservative, the social organisation of welfare fundamentally shapes our lives and subjectivities, for better and for worse. Now, I am aware that my attachment to the University of Oslo has worked a certain seductive magic on me, acting as “soft power” for the Norwegian nation, drawing me into an engagement with Norwegian culture and values from outside. I have, for instance, recognised that my walks to and from the University involve passing far fewer homeless, poor and mentally distressed people than I am used to seeing on the streets of London. I have noted that the blankets left on chairs outside cafes to warm the knees of coffee-drinkers do not seem to get stolen because, I presume, there is no perceived need to steal them, as there might be amidst the economic inequity and benefit cuts of contemporary austerity-Britain.

But, and this is an important conjunction, because I have also been engaged in prolonged research collaborations and conversations with colleagues here, as part of *FEMCIT*, *The Queer Turn* and *Being Together*, and because I have focused on and explored with colleagues the citizenship experiences of members of minoritized and racialized groups – people from Pakistani and Sami minorities, the uncoupled, the sexually marginalized, and those living outside the conventional family – I have also learnt not to place Norway on a feminist pedestal, as sometimes has been the tendency of Anglophone gender researchers. I have come to understand some of the particular, nationally specific issues that exist around questions of difference, diversity, multiculturalism and familialism within the universalising cultural politics of Norwegian social democracy. Developing this critical, comparative engagement with the politics of welfare and citizenship has been a lasting legacy of my involvement with the Centre, and one that will continue to inform my research for many years to come.

Not goodbye, only farewell?

For the difference that my ten years at the Centre have made to my research and thinking, for the new insights and framings, the challenging, collegial conversations, and the transnational friendships, I am very grateful to the Centre, its Directors and members, and to the University of Oslo. Like many people these days whose relationships come to an end, I hope to stay in regular contact with my ex-WAT partner, and to see our connection live on in a reconfigured form. ♦