



a feminist's work is never done

For more than 35 years, Joan Acker's work has been at the cutting edge of feminist scholarship, providing incisive analyses of gender and social stratification, comparable worth, workplace organizations, welfare reform, and capitalism. In 1973, in the pages of the *American Journal of Sociology*, she took scholars of social stratification to task for "intellectual sexism." Her most recent book, *Stretched Thin*, investigates the consequences of neoliberal restructuring for welfare workers, administrators, and recipients. A past recipient of the American Sociological Association's Jesse Bernard Award, Acker is professor emerita at the University of Oregon. Jennifer L. Pierce, Professor of American Studies at the University of Minnesota, talked with her in January.

JENNIFER L. PIERCE: In your 2006 book, *Class Questions, Feminist Answers*, you take up concerns that have long been central to your scholarship: gender and social class in workplace organizations. Can you talk about what influenced you to write that book?

JOAN ACKER: My early theoretical training, as an undergraduate at Hunter College in the 1940s, was in Marxism. However, my earliest feminist influence, beginning in 1972, came through the work of Dorothy Smith, and later, that of political scientist Carole Pateman. They were very important to me in developing an understanding of the basic flaws in most sociological theory, particularly, the ways in which our main theoretical works wrote out, conceptually, half of human activity. My overall theorizing has changed over time, greatly expanded, and become more complex through work

on intersectionality—that is, approaches that analyze the intersections of gender, class, and race. Here I am thinking of the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Elizabeth Higginbotham, Bonnie Thornton Dill, and Lyn Weber. This work greatly influenced my thinking in *Class Questions*.

JP: Most of your influences are feminist theorists. Can you say more about that?

JA: I resist saying I am a Weberian, a Marxist, or even a Smithian... [laughs] Dorothy Smith would hate that... It implies a lack of thought. It's a barrier to real thinking to say that I am a Marxist and that tells you everything that I think. I have never accepted any one system of thought. All systems of thought close out other ways of thinking. I had training in Marxism as an undergraduate in the years before McCarthy. Then in graduate school in the early 1960s, I ran into structural functionalism. We couldn't even mention C. Wright Mills or Marx in graduate school. Soon after I got my degree in 1968, feminist theory was beginning to develop. But, I actually first read *The Second Sex* in 1956. I knew it was there and it was a mediating factor in the kind of social theory I taught. I have never had reverence—if this is irreverence—for any of the social theorists who had their moment in the spotlight as great thinkers.

Still I always liked being a sociologist. We ask interesting and important questions. We don't always have the best answers, but the attempt to find answers is stimulating and interesting. So, I would never begin asking a question within a theoretical frame. Instead, I would ask: why is this happening? And, is it really happening? And, how can I find out? Interviews? Statistics? My approach to



Chris Mihulka

Joan Acker at home in Eugene, Oregon.

building theory and using theory is to start from what is "problematic in everyday life"—which happens to be a good title of a book by Dorothy Smith.

JP: Your most recent book, *Stretched Thin: Poor Families, Welfare Work, and Welfare Reform*, written with Sandra Morgen and Jill Weigt, examines the relations between social workers and welfare recipients in the transition from welfare to workfare. One of the central arguments in the book is about how neoliberal reforms, such as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, have created devastating consequences for poor women. Could you say more about what you think neoliberalism is, and what is wrong with it?

JA: For me, neoliberalism is the stripped down version of the basic idea of capitalism we have today. In other words everyone, including women, are expected to survive on their own. To survive, they have to get out and earn a living. Individual enterprise and determination are deemed essential. The feminist critique is that neoliberalism turns women into the

"abstract worker," removing the context and specificity of women's material reality as mothers of children, caretakers of the elderly, and other family members. Neoliberalism, as an ideology, does not take into account these kinds of responsibilities; it is still assumed that women will do these things. Of course, this ideology also assumes the myth of the male breadwinner, that is, that there is a man in the family earning a sufficient income to support everyone—kids, spouses, the elderly, etc.—with women at home caring for everyone else. Only a minority of families in the United States today can actually meet that ideal. In most families, both parents work because they have to support their families. And, there are a huge number of single parent families. They are the ones who are most vulnerable to neoliberal policies.

JP: What kind of policy recommendations do you and your co-authors make in *Stretched Thin*?

JA: The social policies we recommended are extraordinarily important, achievable, but also highly unlikely to take place in our current political climate. Still, I believe that we could have policies in place like those in Scandinavian countries. These would include things such as universal medical care, and cracking down on the exorbitant pricing of drug companies. Eliminating insurance companies. Creating living wages and universal child care allowances—every other Western nation has universal child care! Reducing the cost of higher education.

I would like to see Temporary Assistance for Needy Families reformed. We also need a better safety net and emergency help. We need an income support program that is open to anybody who needs it with fairly elastic eligibility rules. People get into tough situations and can't meet federal regulations for assistance if they own a house, but have no money coming in. So, they don't qualify. We should have programs that meet the needs of all. What we need is total reform and a "social safety net"

economy to insure that no one suffers. I am sure the good ol' neoliberals will say "lots of luck" with that.

JP: Still, with the Great Recession, there have been challenges to neoliberal policies. Here, I am thinking of the people involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement. What do you think we can do?

JA: We need to defeat Republicans at the polls and get politically active. I have done canvassing in neighborhoods and will do it for the next election too. We need to think about what is good for society. Though some sociologists don't think you can do good research with politics, I disagree. Political action is going to be extraordinarily important in this next presidential election, but it's going to be much harder this time. It's not Obama so much as it is Congress. Can we defeat the Tea Partiers?

JP: In the 1980s, Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne first published an article entitled the "Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology." Is the "feminist revolution" still missing today? And, where do you see your own work moving in the future?

JA: It's a different problem for feminist scholars in sociology today than it used to be. Feminist sociology is a strong discipline today and it is accepted as such with some standing in the profession. What I find disturbing is that our original goal was to reform sociology—theoretically and empirically—with gender as an integral part of the discipline. That hasn't happened. Still, I'm obsessed with the notion of building a sociology that is fully integrates gender. In some ways I try to do that in *Class Questions*.

Using the concepts of gendered institutions, gendered processes, and gendered organizations is one approach. This involves taking sociological concepts and reinterpreting them through a "gender lens." I continue to be interested in questions about gender and class. Mainstream economics does not show how dependent our economy is on the *unpaid* work of women.

Conventional economists still act as if the economy is organized solely by capitalism, finance, and production. I think it is important to retrieve earlier feminist scholarship on women and unpaid household labor to challenge these mainstream economic models. Much of social policy is informed by these models and assumptions. And, it has had a devastating impact on the poor. Now is a good time to challenge this kind of thinking. There is now a huge body of research theorizing "caring labor," but it seems to constitute a subfield that "general theory" ignores.

Another area that I have been very interested in is football as an economic and symbolic group of activities that perpetuate gender inequalities, as well as a kind of masculinity that is dangerous. Actually, I have an informal campaign to eliminate football. So far, I have not been able to recruit more than two or three people [laughs!] But, seriously, for kids, football creates serious problems. Think about all the research on concussions for kids. At the collegiate level, there is major money for universities that focus on football rather than academics. At the University of Oregon, one of our alumni, Phil Knight, the co-founder of Nike Corporation, gives millions to the University, mostly for athletics and football, and buildings related to football. His excessive influence became most visible when students organized and joined with the campaign against products produced through slave labor.

But, the greatest issue about football, and the reason that I want it to be abolished, is that it glorifies and legitimates a certain form of male violence. Vast crowds spend considerable money to watch young men injure each other. Yes, they also throw and catch balls and run for the goal, but those activities do not mitigate the main message that violence in pursuit of winning is okay. This is also how capitalism operates, as well as the U.S. military, which is always ready to send its troops wherever. As for the future, I would like to see research on the role of masculinity in generating the global crisis.

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