Being a Part of Radical Change…

a conversation with Joan Acker

Photo by Chris Mihulka

A leader of the original group that established a center to study women at the UO, Joan Acker continues to serve as a member of the executive committee of CSWS.

Q: You grew up in Indiana—where?

Indianapolis. I went to Shortridge High School, then to DePauw University in Greencastle for one year and couldn't stand it so I dropped out. The war started and it was much more interesting to work. I worked in a radio station; I was the person who chose the music for the disc jockeys. I had several hundred dollars to spend. What I did was go to the record stores and buy records. That was the end of my career in that regard. Then I moved to New York. I really did not like Indiana; I found it racist, although I did not know much about racism yet. It was kind of uninteresting. I was involved in many school things but wanted more adventure in my life. Fortunately my mother moved to New York City. I went along a year later and joined her and went to Hunter College.

My parents were divorced when I was ten years old. My mother was an unusual woman for those days. I loved my parents, and they were both good parents. My tendency is to scoff a bit about how hard divorce is on kids. It might have been harder on my sister than it was on me. It seemed to me that life went on; I was pretty much involved in my own life by the time that I was ten.

Q: What were your predilections at that age?

My father had no sons, and so he treated [my sister and me] as though we were sons and taught us to do all kinds of things. We did shooting of guns and shooting of bows and arrows and sailing boats. I had my own boat when I was ten or eleven and used to race with my father. We mostly sailed up at Lake Tippecanoe in northern Indiana; we went up there every summer. And I was a very good student; but that was not my whole life, being a student. I was active in high school affairs, one of the editors of the newspaper, and things like that. I didn't have a clue about what I wanted to do except probably be a journalist.

Q: Did you follow up on that?

No, not really. At Hunter I was an editor of the literary magazine. I was also practical, and I realized that it would be very hard to be a foreign correspondent, which was what I wanted to do, and also get married and have children, which was also what I wanted to do, so I became a social worker instead.

Q: And did you get married and have children?

Yes, I had three children. One's in Port Angeles, Washington, one's in Sonoma, California, and one is in Brooklyn, New York. My youngest son has a Ph.D. in biology. Now he works for the National Park Service and is the plant biology person at Olympic Peninsula Park. My other two kids are artists.

Q: You didn't become a journalist, but you did find a reason to write?

I didn't really start to write until long after I had that ambition, but I went back to school, got a master's at the University of Chicago; and then I worked as a social worker for something like thirteen years before I went back. I worked in Chicago initially, and then I worked in New York City, and then we moved to San Francisco and I worked there. I guess my dissertation was the first substantial thing I ever wrote, which I wrote in 1966–67.

Q: What did your husband do?

He was a psychologist at Stanford Medical School, and then he worked here at the UO in the College of Education in counseling.

Q: You got your Ph.D. at the UO?

Yes. I came here partly to get my Ph.D. I had decided that I was going to leave social work and go into sociology when we were living down in California. Actually, we were living in Silicon Valley, and it was a wasteland of housing tracts at the time and I couldn't stand it. So I inquired at Stanford about applying to go into the sociology department as a graduate student. The head of the department told me there was no point in me even filling out an application because I was too old and I was a woman. This was in the 1950s.

Q: Too old and a woman... how old were you at that time?

I must have been about twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty—something like that. I was too old. Then very soon after that my husband got offered a job up here, and I applied to the department up here, and they were very different from Stanford, they were very welcoming. They were glad to have me come as a student. Not that I never experienced any prejudice against women, or categorizations of any kind, I did experience that. But they were perfectly willing to have me come in, and some of the professors were very helpful.

Photo by Jack Liu, circa 1993

Former CSWS directors include (left to right): the late Miriam Johnson, Cheris Kamarae, Sandra Morgen, and Joan Acker.

Q: Were many women graduate students in sociology at that time?

There was a fair cohort; I can't remember how many. I was the only one who finished, and I was only the second woman who ever got a Ph.D. in the department.

I finished my degree in 1967. I had already been teaching in the department. They offered me a job because I could teach things that nobody else could, and I grabbed it because I was married and had children. However, in 1968–69 I spent the year in England, and then I came back. I had decided to leave sociology, and I took a job in a big community agency in Dallas, Texas, for a year, so I was in and out of Eugene. I took a leave from Oregon so I could come back. One year of working with psychiatrists and psychologists sent me up the wall and I came back. It was a mental health agency and I was kind of an administrator.

Q: Did your husband go to Texas with you?

No, I was already divorced; after I got my degree I got a divorce. I felt very alienated in the soc department. When I first came there were some faculty members—they were all men, of course—who were very supportive, and some who weren't. One professor said in class one day that he didn't think the department should take any women as graduate students because they would just get married and have children. It was outrageous. And there were a lot of political fights in the department. The reigning men were pretty conservative, but that changed over the sixties. A lot of the reigning men left and we got a lot of younger, more progressive men, and they were very good, and some of them remain my friends now.

I felt alienated because of the discipline of sociology. I was not totally involved. I began to understand why when the women's movement started. We started to analyze the situation of women in academia, and the situation in sociology as in most other disciplines was that women were invisible, absent. So the analyses and the theories of sociology were written as though women didn't exist. So the whole thing was not relevant to me in some ways. I couldn't see spending the rest of my life doing something I wasn't committed to.

But the eruption of the women's movement and this tremendously

exciting intellectual ferment that was going on gave me the opportunity to do things that I could not have done before. I started developing classes, and I had a very free hand. This was around 1970–71. Finally, I was calling the shots for what I was going to teach. I would make up my own ideas about it, and I had a lot of students who wanted to take classes. So I became very interested in the whole thing.

Q: What were some of the classes you were teaching then?

I taught Women and Work; Women in Society, which I think was an introductory course; I did Feminist Theory; Women in the Welfare State. I always taught welfare state courses, but I modified courses over the years as we began to understand more about welfare programs and gender. Those are the central courses that I developed.

Q: I see an activist thread running through your life—scholar, teacher, writer, activist.

Yeah, I started my activism in college—Hunter College in the 1940s. I was definitely on the left. I think we mostly did stuff in relationship to workers. I remember going to group meetings and going to dances held by these organizations. This was in the era of friendship with the Russians. I remember a big party where we invited a whole bunch of Russians who were students at Columbia, and it was very great fun.

Then I was involved in civil rights activities in New York—that was after college, after I was married—and other kinds of activities supporting unions and things like that. Oh, in graduate school, in the '40s, too, we had a big campaign to organize the students in the school of social service administration into a union, and I was the president of that chapter of the union . . . united office and professional workers in Chicago in the '40s—must have been around 1947–48—we had a big campaign against the Taft-Hartley Act, which took back a lot of the labor rights won by the Wagner Act. So we did that. And it must have been the early '50s when the Korean War came along, I was in the antiwar movement. I went to demonstrations. I remember one that was terrifying, where the police on their horses came galloping into the group forcing us back, things like that. I remember when the Rosenbergs were killed, and a big demonstration that evening while they were being executed. So I was somewhat active all along in different kinds of things. I remember standing on the streets in New York with a petition, the Stockholm Peace Petition, which must have been in '49 or '50—an international petition for peace. It was a total flop, nobody would sign the petition. I remember campaigning for Henry Wallace for president; it was pretty much the same thing. I was involved in lots of stuff.

Q: Were you a socialist?

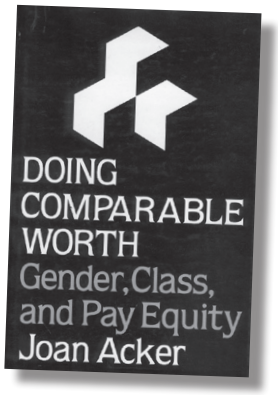
Definitely.

Q: Socialist and sociology professor and social worker.

(Laughing) Everything social, right.

Q: As you began teaching women's studies courses on campus, were you part of what became the Women's Studies Certificate Program?

Probably . . . and then we started CSWS, which was then called the Center for the Sociological Study of Women, and that was because there was no other department than sociology on the whole campus that would have anything to do with it. We wanted to establish a cross-disciplinary campuswide center, and all department heads were queried and everyone turned it down except for Dick Hill in sociology.



It was 1972–73…right in there. We had already started the center in a rudimentary form, we had a room on the sixth floor of PLC, which we appropriated with the help of the administrative assistant in political science, who was wonderful and we had about three or four thousand dollars a year for a part-time graduate assistant to work in the center.

Q: Were you the director?

Yes, it was really a cooperative thing—mostly me and Joyce Mitchell, who was in political science. And a couple of people from education: Jean Leppaluoto and maybe some other people. And not long after that it was Marilyn Farwell, who was in English. We got a little more status in the soc department as the Center for the Sociological Study of Women, and a little more money from the graduate school.

I'm up to 1975, a propitious year when women's studies was founded, and that was the year that Ed Kemp in the library identified Jane Grant as somebody whose papers would be interesting. By that time I had started to publish some on feminist theoretical questions in sociology journals, so I would say my writing emerged with my dissertation, and then my first article was in the *American Journal of Sociology*.

Q: What was the topic of your dissertation?

My dissertation was the study of the welfare department here in Eugene, and the connections between the department itself and the business community. It wasn't a bad study,

New Book on Welfare Reform

Stretched Thin: Poor Families, Welfare Workers, and Welfare Reform by Sandra Morgen, Joan Acker, and Jill Weigt will be published in December 2009 by Cornell University Press. The book, based on a three-year, multimethod study of welfare restructuring in Oregon, gives an "on the ground" account of doing welfare reform from the perspectives of clients, agency workers, and administrators. The authors assess the outcomes and suggest new policies to deal with poverty and economic crisis. The study was partially funded by CSWS and housed at CSWS.

actually. I never published anything out of it, but there was one finding—that people in the business community have little awareness of people who are getting public assistance except single mothers. Single mothers were already being seen as deadbeats by people in the community; that was partly because they had more contact with the community than others. Back in those days the welfare department gave assistance to disabled workers, impoverished elderly, etc. The AFDC existed, but it was only one small program of the whole thing. But the single mothers already stood out.

Q: You kept on writing about the welfare state?

Well, I kept on teaching about it. But the welfare state did not remain my main interest somehow. I had been interested in the welfare state since I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago way back in the early '40s, or the mid-'40s, really, so I was concentrating more on other things. I'm still writing about it, but I didn't have the same "ah-ha" experience as I had about questions about women and work and organizations and so forth.

Q: So your "ah-ha" experience has been women's rights, essentially?

Well, women's rights, and I think the theme question I still have is: "Why is it that there are still so many problems?" We have made great advances, but if you look at the very big picture, the wage gap between women and men is still substantial; in spite of working class men's wages falling; there is still a very high level of sex segregation of jobs; the organization of work has never changed to accommodate the realities of being a human being in our society, and that means work organizations have not fundamentally changed. All this stuff about being family-friendly is crap, I mean not all of it, it's better to have some rights than none at all; but the fundamental organization of capitalism makes it extremely difficult to develop a gender-equal and family-friendly structure of daily life, at least the organization of our kind of capitalism in the United States. It's to some degree different in countries like Sweden and Norway, the Scandinavian countries in particular.

Every European country has a paid parental leave. It's amazing how nineteenth century the U.S. still is. So I've been very interested in why it has taken so long in the U.S., and other places, too, for fundamental change to occur, and a lot of my research on organizations had some relevance to that kind of a question.

Q: What kinds of organizations?

Work organizations, like the UO, Intel. I did a study of banks in Sweden; I was on the Pay Equity Commission in Oregon and was involved in that effort to change the wage structure of Oregon public employment.

Q: Which had quite an effect.

It had an effect on certain low-wage workers; it doesn't mean that there are no pay inequities in the system. Yes, pay-equity projects did have an effect, and I think that's one of the reasons that they got killed. To achieve real pay equity in this country, including in the private sector, would cost huge amounts of money to employers. So that was our vision at the beginning. We were not just thinking of changing the state of Oregon, but the whole employment sector, private and public, in the U.S.

Q: So there was federal legislation and it didn't see the light of day?

The pay-equity activities in the '80s were kind of a last gasp of a real ambitious effort to change. There were a lot of court cases that essentially destroyed it. There's a very interesting book by two sociologists, Bridges and Nelson, that recounts all the court cases that undermined the pay-equity efforts.

Q: And then there is your book . . .

There's my book, and there are quite a few other books on it.

Q: But you were really one of the movers and shakers?

Well, it was a big social movement in the '80s, and I was part of that. I had a good role, a role that I appreciated. I wasn't the leader or anything in it, seems to me. I guess by that time I had sort of given up trying to be a leader of that kind. I was more of a doer of things. And then a chronicler of it.

That's part of doing social movement. A lot of us were involved in it. Margaret Hallock was absolutely essential in the state of Oregon, getting things done here.

Q: Was she on the UO faculty?

At that time she was the economist for the SEIU, and she was the chairperson of the Pay Equity Commission, really the inside operator. That was before she was in the labor department of the state.

Q: What is your vision of where CSWS could go?

A great deal depends on what the

general context turns out to be. Does the society now turn toward some very creative kind of rethinking on how to restructure things? What would be a good way forward? And perhaps this is something that the center could find a way to contribute to, in terms of encouraging research, holding conversations about it.

The economic problems for women are so overwhelming now, particularly single mothers, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, which is what replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children, has just disappeared from the public agenda. There's no safety net anymore for women who want to leave an abusive husband, for example, and who have no work experience, or no experience that's recent enough. In this job market it's desperate. And, of course, often when women get jobs, the jobs they get are such low pay they can't live on them anyway.

We could think about stimulating research on how women are actually coping with the economic downturn. We know it's hard. But are there any groups out there attempting to take action or to support each other? Maybe there are new forms of organization happening. I'd like to see us brainstorming on what issues are affecting women in the Northwest now, other than issues we're already dealing with, which are primarily the immigration issues, and what kind of research would help to understand the processes better and perhaps understand better what can be done to solve some of these problems.

Obviously, I'm much more interested in the practical side than culture, and I certainly understand that culture and consciousness are integral parts of what's happening in the material world, but I don't want us to get out of balance in our concerns. There have been all kinds of problems with the budget cuts, but we have more money than many places.

What's happening here at the UO and undoubtedly in other places, too: although women have made tremendous gains, if I compare what the University of Oregon looked like in 1970 with now—in 1970 we had 5 percent of the full professors who were women—we've made extraordinary gains. Research on gender and women is legitimate now, it's even establishment almost, which undermines it in a way, but okay. At the same time, there is a lot of subtle sexism going on, and that has made it more difficult to deal with than the very overt kinds of discriminations against women; it's hard to study; it's hard to get hold of, and yet a lot of women know that it is happening. And that might be another area that we could think seriously about. The RIG study [Social Sciences Feminist Network, a CSWS research interest group] of faculty members and how they use their time will get at that to some degree, but there's also the question of the fleeting interactions in which put-downs are implicit, or other things. If you talk to people from out around the country, you'll see great variation between departments and how much this goes on, but it's still going on.

Disturbing things indicate that the underlying sets of male assumptions about the superiority of masculinity are probably still there among great numbers of men, and that means that other kinds of inequalities could grow again very easily depending on the circumstances. And so that's a very hard thing to study, but I think it would be well worth our while.

There's a very strange thing that gender equity has become almost invisible at the University of Oregon. Now, I have not investigated it in the last two years, but when I tried to find out what was the proportion of men and women faculty members on this campus by rank, I had a hell of a time finding that out, to say nothing of getting a list of departments in terms of distribution and anything about wage differences.

It's all been sort of relegated to an office, I think it's still called affirmative action, which was over in the personnel department someplace when I was looking at it. And when I talked to the person in charge of data over there, she had to go and compute things to answer any of my questions. Now those data ought to be up on the webpage of the university rather than hidden over in the files of the department someplace. Same problem we had way back in the early '70s when we were studying the status of women at the University of Oregon; we had to create the data ourselves out of the printer output of faculty data, which was in the library at that time—all of it data that was in the system but not available. There was much more data available on race and ethnicity than on gender. That's pretty important. I was actually shocked. And I hope you put that in. I have not checked the webpage at the university in the last year, at least, but I doubt that it's changed.

"I look forward to the next ten years in the hope that CSWS will contribute to solutions to the still tremendous problems facing women, and that the center will be a part of radical change at the University of Oregon, not just a respectable member of the establishment."—Joan Acker (*CSWS Ten Years, 1983–1993*).

Q: What are some of the biggest issues facing women?

One issue is the extreme objectification of female bodies that afflicts young women and young men alike. That's another thing we could look at, actually, among students. What kind of an impact is that having?

As far as my discipline goes, one of the main things that has not been achieved is that we have not made the kind of breakthrough within sociology that we envisioned back then. A tremendous amount of sociology is still being written that could be considering questions about gender and doesn't. So gender has kind of become a new subdiscipline. ■

—Alice Evans interviewed Joan Acker in April.