

Margaret Lowe Benston 1937-1991

“To Understand the World

by Marian Lowe



L'article combine une biographie de Margaret Benston avec une analyse des exigences nécessaires à la création des connaissances qui susciteront l'évolution sociale. Il comprend une discussion du rôle de la bourse féministe à l'université et les prémisses sur lesquelles elle se fonde en se référant à la vie et au travail de Maggie.

We are feminists because we believe not only that the evidence shows the oppression of women, but, further, that such oppression is wrong. We also believe that society should be changed to end all forms of oppression. Our scholarship is done in that context, but also in the belief that the closer one gets to the truth the better the cause of women will be served. At the core of the feminist critique of the various disciplines is the attempt to fashion intellectual tools that are freer from the distortions of present male scholarship and that allow us to seek the truth while we recognize our commitment. (Margaret Benston)

This is a meditation on Margaret Benston's life and work in, I hope, something of her style. Just as her work tied together theory and the reality of people's lives, in writing about my sister I want to combine biography and some theoretical musings.

Remembering Maggie's life and work is important, not just to acknowledge the contributions she made and to pay tribute to a dedicated life, but because the way in which she lived and worked can help remind us of some of the requirements for creating knowledge useful for bringing about social change. One of the most important of these requirements, as her later work stresses, may be the need for feminist scholars to work in the community as well as in the university. In addition, her life helps to remind us of the importance of the feminist commitment to egalitarian social structures. She believed that individuals contribute best in the context of co-operative work. This was not just an abstract concept to her. Maggie made important individual contributions to feminist scholarship while working in a co-operative framework and refusing to be a star.

Maggie grew up in a working class family in a small logging town in the state of Washington. She studied

in Order to Change It”

chemistry and philosophy as an undergraduate during the late 1950s, collected a Ph.D. in theoretical chemistry at the University of Washington and Berkeley and then did post-doctoral work at the University of Wisconsin during the mid 1960s. Social class, geographical location, historical period, and professional field all restricted her to a mostly apolitical attitude during this time (which did have in the background a strong distrust of wealth and privilege). In addition, these factors meant that, unlike many others of the period, she did not rebel against her background by becoming a hippie, but by becoming middle class and a scientist/scholar.

Her interest in politics and the possibility of social change first appeared when she arrived at Simon Fraser University in 1966 to take up a position in the Chemistry Department. When she got to Simon Fraser, it was in political ferment and she became caught up in the intellectual excitement of socialism and feminism. She used to credit the dancing of the 60s and its freedom of movement with allowing her to hear what the radicals were saying. Freedom of the body helped to free the mind. Marxism as a framework made sense, something that for the first time offered the possibility that social forces could be understood and then changed. It was a revelation, and her life and her work began to be informed by political ideas.

Her commitment to feminism and to social change made it increasingly difficult to continue her career as a theoretical chemist. She wanted her feminist scholarship to be primary in her life and, for a number of reasons, feminism and chemistry were not (and are not now) compatible with each other.¹ Eventually she moved half way out of chemistry with a half-time appointment in computing science. Some years after that, she left the chemistry department completely and went half time to women's studies, with the other half of her appointment remaining in computer science. She used to joke that she was now in two fields in which she had no credentials at all—as was fitting since one of her chief aims was to empower people by allowing them direct access to knowledge, without dependence on experts.

Like many other feminists, Maggie's vision went beyond women's lives. She believed that women's oppression could not be ended if others remained oppressed. The world Maggie wanted was a world where no one was exploited, a just, peaceful world where people helped shape the conditions of their own lives—and where everyone sang. This led to her theoretical work on the connection between socialism and feminism. She also

believed strongly that an egalitarian, feminist, materially sustainable society was not possible without changing science and the way technology was developed and used. Both her training as a scientist and her political convictions, therefore, led her to concentrate on science and technology in her feminist research. Most of all, as she said, she wanted to understand the world in order to change it.

Her first political writing was “The Political Economy of Women's Liberation,” a paper that helped change many people's lives, including mine. I became aware of its impact during the early 1970s in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when I saw that the article had helped to shape the thinking of many of my radical friends (who were always impressed that I was Margaret Benston's sister). Furthermore, the article was translated into a number of languages and had an international impact. We learned from visiting Italian socialists that a part of the women's movement in Italy called themselves Benstonists (Benstonistas, of course), and when she and I and a friend travelled in Chile in 1973 while the Allende government was still in office, a stream of people, mostly Chilean feminists, came to meet with her. The impact of her article showed me that an individual could make a difference in changing the world, which became an important factor in *my* choosing to do feminist scholarship rather than scientific research.

With all of this attention, Maggie could have shaped her work in such a way as to become a star of the women's movement, as many others did during that period. Instead, she chose work that explored ways to empower others. In a world that defines success narrowly and makes us either into leaders or followers, she tried to be neither. She was not egalitarian in the abstract, but to the core of her being and it showed up in all aspects of her life.

As a result of her choice to do feminist research, and a particular kind of feminist research at that, she spent almost 24 years as an assistant professor at Simon Fraser University. Her promotion to associate professor came shortly before her death. She received little encouragement or acknowledgement of the importance of her research from most of her academic colleagues, and at times it did not even come from colleagues in Women's Studies. Her unconventional academic career cost her a great deal, and limited the work she was able to accomplish. Her problems illustrate the difficult time that feminist scholars have in the university.

Feminist scholarship has never fit easily into the university.

Feminist scholars have as an explicit goal the search for the origins of women's oppression in order to find effective strategies for change. The obviously political nature of our scholarship inevitably clashes with the supposedly objective nature of the university's scholarly mission. All feminist scholars pay a price for choosing to work outside the academic mainstream and that price becomes higher the more someone's work is related to social change, or to matters directly affecting the community outside the university.

Various words are used for acceptable academic scholarship: objective, non-political, neutral, unbiased. The conventional view that it is possible to find absolute truth that is independent of observer or society comes from the ideal in the physical sciences. The questions posed by researchers or scholars are supposedly determined only by the current development of theory and the available data base, while the answers are fixed by reality, independent of the observer. Objectivity and value-neutrality are virtually synonymous.² However, one of the major themes of feminist scholarship has been that knowledge is never value-free, including that produced in the universities. Universities are social institutions and as such they serve political and economic interests. The knowledge that has been produced within them reflects this, even though academics are generally convinced that their work is neutral and value-free.

The conventional view of objectivity is not simply a misperception that has occurred by chance. The rhetoric of value-free objectivity serves to obscure the very real social and political biases of knowledge produced within universities. This knowledge is systematically more useful to the privileged than to the majority of people. It especially benefits businesses, the military, and government. However, if knowledge is seen as value-free, then the question of who that knowledge serves can never arise. In fact, the emphasis on objective scholarship acts to limit inquiry to topics which do not threaten the social order, since work that suggests ways of changing the class structure or the gender or racial biases of our societies is seen as non-objective and unsound.

The myth of value-free objectivity also influences who gets to produce knowledge. In order to guarantee that knowl-

edge is unbiased, it is to be produced by a practitioner with no axe to grind, a neutral expert. A look at the history of the various disciplines makes it clear that the professions and professional associations were set up so as to take control of knowledge, primarily by enforcing standards of objectivity and by certifying who gets to practice. The expert is in charge of acquiring knowledge for the common good. It is irrelevant that this person is privileged, affluent, usually is white, male and has little or no connection with non-academic life. As part of the control of knowledge, radicals tied to social movements have been consistently and overtly excluded.³

Trying to use the university for feminist scholarship has been, and will remain, a very tricky task. Women's Studies programs have found a place because academic scholarship does allow a certain amount of diversity and because they of-

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fer something to the university. Women's Studies programs survive for a number of reasons, but their revolutionary potential is not one of them. To some extent, feminists have tried to pass as conventional scholars just to get a foothold in the university, as the name Women's Studies instead of Feminist Studies shows, and they will always feel pressure to choose research that is acceptable by conventional standards. The most obvious forms this pressure takes are external, institutional ones: the spectre of not getting tenure or promotion or funding. However, pressure can also come from within Women's Studies, from colleagues who would like the research done in Women's Studies programs to be accepted as academic scholarship.

It is important to be clear about the

context in which feminists are operating in the university, not only to avoid co-optation, but also to find ways to use the resources of the university to create new knowledge for our feminist project. At best, we can hope for an uneasy perch for feminist studies in universities—but I want to argue that there should always be tension. The degree of acceptance of Women's Studies scholarship that we now see may, in fact, be a bad sign. The disappearance of tension indicates the loss of feminist research, not the acceptance of it by the university. Resisting the co-opting tendencies in the university is difficult. Academic research is so fundamentally biased that feminists must have some connection with non-academic work if their work is to remain political. The kind of bridge to the community that was an integral part of Maggie's research may be crucial if the feminist goals of Women's Studies are not to be lost.

Given the support for the status quo that is built into the core of academic knowledge, why have Maggie and other feminists stayed in universities?⁴ When a famous American bank robber was asked why he robbed banks he replied, "Because that's where the money is." Feminists stay in universities for the same sort of reason. Universities are where knowledge is, in the sense that it is primarily in universities that knowledge is certified and gains credibility. Truth is not established through a neutral, objective, impartial search that follows scientific principles. In reality, certification of knowledge is done by those with power. Feminists attempting to break the stranglehold of the powerful and privileged have tried to use university resources not only to create feminist knowledge, but also to have it acknowledged as legitimate. For very fundamental reasons, this is difficult to do.

The difficulties arise primarily from the charge that if people allow political values or input from the community to enter into their research, as feminists do, it becomes fundamentally flawed.⁵ Any taint of political commitment is seen by mainstream academics as fatal to objectivity. However, the basic tenet of feminist scholarship, that no knowledge is value-free, is closer to reality. Our common sense tells us that, contrary to the conventional view, truth is neither abstract nor absolute. Deciding what you want to know and then

trying to answer the question that you have posed are both, in general, affected by values.⁶ A person asking a question about the world is a social being, operating within a social context. We necessarily make choices about what we want to know and those choices are clearly affected by *who* wants to know and *why* they want to know it. All kinds of constraints exist on determining what is worthy of investigation but ultimately, those in power in a discipline or in society make the choice.⁷ Again, our common sense tells us that if we want to know who a particular investigation serves, we need to know who has determined the original question.

Some feminists now assert that values override all and that social reality itself is socially constructed, so that objective social reality does not exist in the same way as objects of study of physics. Maggie was among those who differed from this point of view. The questions that a researcher or questioner asks and the constraints on the kinds of answers that will be accepted as valid are indeed determined by a particular social point of view. However, within those constraints, “better” and “worse” do exist and to that extent one can speak of objectivity or good or bad scholarship. If we do not believe this, the aims of feminist scholarship as an agent of change simply do not make sense. What we observe is constrained by how a question is formulated, but also by the nature of underlying reality. Fetal monitoring affects babies, access to abortion or job discrimination based on race or gender affects people’s lives, and technology is developed to give increased control and supervision of workers, rather than allow more autonomy.

What we observe is also constrained by why we are asking a question. A question is always posed with some end in mind and some expectation of what the answer will be or we could not pose the question in the first place. Groups with different points of view will have different aims in seeking knowledge, leading to different criteria for what constitutes a successful answer to a question. Inevitably, they will need to know different things in order to meet these criteria. Observations will be open to different interpretations depending on the aim of the person making the observations. Things that are important to

one person may simply not be a part of the picture for another. Knowledge is shaped by one’s reason for acquiring it. It is specific to those who create it. It most definitely has social and political context.

When trying to assess how “objective” a particular result is, it is critical that we take into account who the observer is, what they want to know, and why they want to know it. For example, two different people might ask about the best method for controlling crop pests. However, depending on who you are, “best” may mean very different things. Does it mean which method is cheapest for a given number of pests killed, which method is safest for farmworkers, or which method is least likely to contaminate food? This is an obvious example. In most investigations, the different constraints are not so clear, such as in discussions of innate sex differences, but they are always there.

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This does not mean that no such concept as truth exists, but that the standards of what is better or worse must be defined. In practice, objectivity is a cultural creation of those with power within a given field. They decide what is important and decide what answers are credible. The criteria for what constitutes “better” answers need to be changed when questions outside the mainstream are asked. We do, however, still need standards, since values always tend to influence our observations. If we want to get as close as possible to the particular truth we are after, we need to try to minimize the effect of values.⁸

Who asks the questions is critical in the creation of knowledge. The first stage of feminism was primarily about raising new questions and enlarging the boundaries of

what is recognized as legitimate knowledge. Much of this feminist questioning arose outside the university—or at least outside people’s disciplines. During this questioning stage, the questions were often better than the answers, since standards of objectivity for the new research were not yet developed. The current stage of feminist research is one in which many of the questions raised during the first stage have gained at least some legitimacy and where scholarship has improved in answering the questions.

Once feminist scholarship moved inside the university, however, it became more distant from its political roots. As a result, many Women’s Studies programs have settled into academic respectability and feminist pressure to expand the limits of acceptable scholarship has often decreased or disappeared. Work growing out of political involvement or directly addressing women’s needs has become more difficult to sustain. Overall, the process of challenging accepted power structures and trying to change what counts as knowledge has become harder with increasing respectability. Maintaining political involvement has become more difficult, as well, since the feminist movement outside the university is no longer an innovative force. The feminist movement is currently in an era of reactive activism, simply trying to stop women’s earlier gains from being nibbled away.

Maggie was one of those who kept both stages of feminist work alive. She still believed in the possibility of creating a feminist world and her intellectual commitment was to find the truth needed to do it. She believed that we could have scholarly work that was objective and committed at the same time. She recognized that we cannot ask the same sorts of questions or use the same methods as the existing disciplines if we expect to change the status quo. If we want knowledge that is relevant to lives of non-academic women, they have to be involved in its construction. In order to create knowledge for social change, then people whose lives are supposed to be changed need to be part of the process.

To me, Maggie’s most important contribution was her emphasis on finding concrete ways to break down the hierarchical structure of knowledge and the technology created by it. Specifically,

Maggie recognized the need to change our relationship to technology and to experts. Like others, Maggie speculated on what a feminist science might be like. She focused as much on the process of creating scientific knowledge as she did on the content and put forward three main possibilities: "science for the people," "science with the people," and "science by the people." She believed that the last two models were the goals we should work toward, and in her own research she tried to do so. She did not want to be a university professor providing expert technical advice. She wanted to become part of the process of people defining and answering new questions for themselves.

In one research project, Maggie and her collaborators began to develop a feminist alternative in an applied technological area. Technologies, like more abstract manifestations of knowledge, reflect the power relations in society. One of the basic values embodied in workplace technologies in industrial society has always been that of control over the workforce. Maggie brought feminist concerns to the study of the ways in which technology is shaped by those in control. She wanted to examine how alternative values produce different technologies. In the research project, she and the others were designing ways to involve users in the design and development of a computer network through the development of nonhierarchical relationships and through the design and development of distinct technologies.

She always wanted to produce knowledge that would be useful in creating a better society. Maggie, along with other progressives, had a number of different aims: a commitment to social change rather than social stability, redistributing wealth, creating egalitarian social relations, integrating public and private life, doing away with expertise as it currently exists, protecting the environment. These aims do not totally define a new world, however. We cannot have a complete vision of a world we have never known. We can, at best, have a partial vision of the world we want to create. To try to picture possibilities, Maggie turned to utopian literature as a tool both in her teaching and in her thinking, but she also tried to live in ways that were consistent with her vision. She understood that our thinking is based in our own standpoint and tried to keep her standpoint consistent with her principles and ends. Her life was not completely tied up in the university. Most of her friends were not academics and they were not all middle class.

She paid a price for being an unrepentant feminist scholar. She did not receive the professional recognition or promotions that her talents could have brought her. All of us, no matter how committed and strong, are

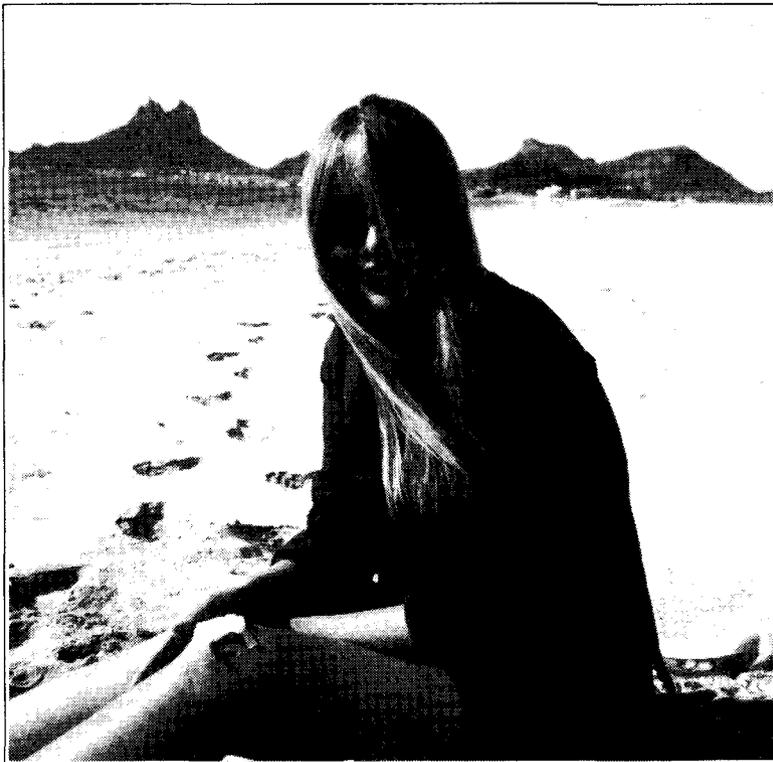
vulnerable to lack of recognition and to the pressures of being a deviant voice. It takes enormous self-confidence and, probably most important, support from somewhere, in order to keep on going. Maggie did have strong support from feminist friends and colleagues both inside and outside university, and without it, she would not have been able to do as much as she did. After a lengthy transition period, Maggie was learning how to operate as a feminist academic. She had created a life for herself that provided the basis for doing the kind of work she believed was needed.

For those of us seeking a more egalitarian, co-operative society, many fundamental tools and techniques simply do not exist. Maggie devoted her life to helping to create some of the tools we need. She wanted to live in a world without inequality and oppression and both in her work and in her life she tried to live by her principles. Maggie died the way she had lived, surrounded by friends. During the last two weeks of her life, after she entered the hospital and it became clear it was the end, she was never alone. Friends, singly and together, sat with her day and night—and sometimes sang to her.

Marian Lowe, Margaret Benston's identical twin sister, is presently an independent scholar living in Seattle. She is working on the interactions of science and gender and examining the social and environmental consequences of these. She was for many years a member of the Chemistry Department and of the Women's Studies faculty at Boston University.

¹The issue of trying to create a feminist science has been discussed at some length in feminist literature. However, this concept usually does not address the physical sciences, with good reason. The physical sciences are farthest from feminist theory and practice and will be the hardest to fit into a model that stresses egalitarian production of knowledge and the role of values in objectivity.

²Like many of the sweeping statements I am making, this is only the broad view. As far as gender bias goes, some advances have been made, not only in demonstrating male bias in a number of disciplines, but even in having it acknowledged to some extent by those with power in the disciplines. Also, we find that post-modernism is very fashionable in the humanities, where everything is seen as valued. However, the humanities have always been outside the limits of objective, scientifically acquired knowledge claimed in the sciences and social sciences. These exceptions do not really affect the stranglehold that the idea of



value-free neutrality has on academia.

³All of this is an overview of the *bias* in academic scholarship and does not treat important details. If the situation were simply this, we would not expect Women's Studies programs to be allowed at all. Thought in universities is, of course, not monolithic and biases are not necessarily conscious on the part of professionals themselves. Universities operate within an ideology of liberalism, with some room for diverse opinions. This, however, does not change the systematic bias toward the maintenance of the status quo in the mainstream disciplines.

⁴Some feminist scholars have not stayed in academia. Those that have not, however, have generally used the other structures that provide credibility, such as publishing.

⁵Some toleration of ties between organized labour and the university exist, but in a top-down way that usually does not contribute to any progressive tendencies in the unions.

⁶Physics and mathematics may be possible exceptions to this statement. In these fields, the constraints on both the questions that can be asked and on the possible results are so great that they appear to unfold in a deterministic way, unaffected of social factors. These constraints are due to the narrowly defined systems under investigation, the dependence on the existing theoretical framework, the already known facts and the state of experimental development.

⁷A complete look at the mechanisms for controlling the directions of research calls for a long discussion. Funding is clearly an important component.

⁸Note that one implication of this discussion is that a real world does exist out there that we can try to learn about. However, even within the limited questions we necessarily ask, we can never be absolutely sure that we have found the truth.

References

Author's Note: Much of Margaret Benston's work is relevant to this discussion. See the bibliography in this journal.

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HELEN POTREBENKO

A Song for Maggie

Goodbye old friend
Longtime friend
Now beyond time
Goodbye friend
Longtime friend
Now beyond, now beyond time

Never again to pick up the guitar
Never again to sing like an angel
Sing out on the picket line
Sing, sing, sing to soothe a friend
Now beyond, now beyond comfort

Never again going for a walk
It was a good road you travelled
Every step of the way
Now it's a long, long, it's a long road without you
Now beyond, now beyond distance

No more talk
No more papers
Ideas are for living
Students to other classes now

Never again to come over for dinner
No longer needed
The earth is now your home
Returned to the earth, returned to the air
Returned to the wind and the sea

Goodbye friend
Never helped you live
Couldn't help you die
Now beyond pain
Never again will I bring you daffodils
Now beyond, now beyond season

Helen Potrebenco was a longtime friend of Maggie Benston's. This poem was written for her memorial service and was set to music by Phil Vernon.