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An Interview with Ellen Messer-Davidow

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This is an edited version of a series of conversations I had with Ellen Messer-Davidow from December 1998 to February 1999.

HJ: Both in your work and to me you've talked a lot about the importance of cross-sector coalition-building in making social change. Specifically, you started talking about how the TAs unionizing with UAW is a step towards that kind of coalition-building. Could you say a little bit more about that?

EMD: It's a smart move. First of all, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. The people who know how to do union organizing are the people who are doing it. That doesn't mean they're right about everything. They don't know the peculiarities of the academic system, so that what works at a Ford plant doesn't necessarily work at Stanford. Secondly, they have resources that graduate students don't have. Not just informational and strategic knowledge but financial resources, contacts, that kind of thing.

It's a smart move too, because the whole business of unions strikes terror into the hearts of trustees and administrators. Company administrators -- company men. As an example, I'd mention the recent faculty unionization drive at the University of Minnesota. Our board of regents (it's like a board of trustees at another university) had members who had come from the corporate world and thought that they understood academe. They thought that academe was sloppy and needed to be streamlined and brought around to good business practices. And so, in addition to generally imposing what I call an Arthur Anderson management discourse, so that faculty activities and departmental functioning are evaluated by productivity, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness criteria, they also decided that tenure was a bad thing and were going to modify the tenure code.

HJ: What was the upshot of that?

EMD: The faculty mounted a huge unionization effort. The earlier unionization effort at Minnesota, somewhere around '80 or '82, had failed. It was inspired by faculty in the College of Liberal Arts, particularly the humanities and some of the social sciences, but it made really no inroads into the professional schools and the science and tech areas. Well, this time we came within about 40 votes of unionizing. The regents were scared to death, and the governor and many of the legislators, were concerned. What happened was the regents backed down. Several of them either resigned or were asked to leave. New regents were appointed. The faculty governance body then entered into the process of revising the tenure code, and the changes were kept to a minimum. The principal change was the addition of post-tenure review of faculty performance, which . . .

The reason university trustees and administrators fear unionization is not that it changes this or that

decision (about faculty salary increases or workloads) but that it changes the decision-making structure. It formally adds new parties to the decision making and changes the process to conflict that can escalate from negotiation through protests to strikes.

HJ: Coming back to this issue of the academic job crisis facing graduate students, you have suggested the importance of coming up with an analysis and an action plan as a way of getting a handle on this situation -- which, you have insisted, needs to be seen as part of the larger picture of economic restructuring. Specifically what do you have in mind when you say "analysis" and "action plan"?

EMD: What I'm referring to is how would a group that wanted to make change, like the GSC, proceed. First, a group needs good analyses of the larger picture. Nationally, what's been going on with higher ed? Is there a proliferation of institutions, and what type? The full research universities, the universities that have some graduate programs? We know the two-year colleges have burgeoned. Have student populations increased overall? Where have the student populations flowed? Where have faculty populations flowed? You've got to think about populations as flow. Where have the resources flowed, both federal and state? Let's leave aside for the moment private institutions, since that's a different picture.

One of the things we know about public institutions--between the early 1970's and now--is that these institutions used to get the majority of their revenues (maybe 80% or 70%) from tuition and state funding. The much smaller proportion came from federal sources, grants and contracts, foundations, endowments, income-producing activities. As a proportion of the revenue pie, state funding plummeted during this period. Then of course with the Reagan revolution, the federal faucets were being shut down. I'm not talking about in absolute dollars or inflation-adjusted dollars. I'm talking about the proportions of the whole revenue pie for public institutions. In the meantime public institutions scrambled to rev up their revenues from other sources: grants and contracts (federal and private), corporate partnerships, endowment drives. Today, they're launching billion-dollar endowment drives, which had never been done before Minnesota astonished everyone by raising \$200 million in the mid-1980's. Today, they're making sponsorship deals with Pepsi and McDonalds, like basketball teams or shopping malls. Today, they're forming partnerships with corporations to launch hi-tech profit-making ventures.

So, once you get the revenue picture, you have to say to yourselves, OK, what about the expense side of the ledger? Is it really true that we can't afford humanities professors, sociology professors? Where did the costs go up in the institutions? And the answer will be different for different types of institutions--which is why we need case studies. What happened at the University of Minnesota, which has had its down times but is now on an upturn? What happened at a comparable university that's falling apart? What happened at one that's a booming enterprise? Or take another type of institution and do that kind of comparison.

Then you've got to ask yourself, OK, the ones that were successful, how did they solve their problems? And the answers are going to be many. They were good at lobbying their legislatures, they were good at endowment drives, they were good at cost-saving measures, they were good at anticipating problems before they became crises. Most universities with medical centers -- a college of medicine, a university hospital, maybe a college of nursing or dentistry--didn't anticipate the financial crisis that would hit them. A university medical center has a much higher overhead than an ordinary full-service hospital: it pays for research and teaching, it maintains a huge physical plant, it provides big toys for diagnosis, it does expensive things that keep it from being a break-even venture. Most universities coped with the problem by taking money out of the cash cows--the undergraduate or liberal arts colleges--to staunch the fiscal bleeding at the medical center. They didn't figure out until too late that it would get worse -- that their patients and dollars would flow into HMOs as the healthcare industry reorganized. So, you see, the answers are very complex.

HJ: So, what do you do with this information?

EMD: Well, once you get a grip on the dynamics causing the problems, then you can develop an action plan. And the action plan is going to differ for different institutions. Everyone needs to be better at dealing with their legislatures and getting that state funding, because every state in the country to one degree or another has now shifted its resources. Assuming they were funding the higher education sector pretty well (some Southern states weren't), those resources have been shifted to: the elderly sector because we have an aging population; the criminal sector because we are building prisons and incarcerating people, especially people of color; and the social service sector, if the state had a heart and decided to pick up on funding the social programs that were cut by Reagan.

The demands of those other constituencies are not illegitimate. I think we need to be doing things for elderly populations, many of whom have been kicked off their health care programs because their health-care managers find the elderly not cost-effective. I think we need to be doing things to improve primary and secondary education, to help deinstitutionalized people who need institutional homes or group homes or assisted-living services.. So if you can identify some common sources for problems in several sectors -- education, health care, aging, social services--that's where you can build a really interesting cross-sector coalition in your state and make your legislators realize that there are some common precipitants.

HJ: How do you articulate those common precipitants?

EMD: Let me turn your question around. If a university were concerned about the shift in state funding away from itself and into other sectors, what could it do, using its expertise in research, teaching, and service, to insert itself constructively into those other sectors? Consider three big areas of the state budget: workfare-welfare programs, services for aging populations, and the so-called criminal justice system. Many universities are already doing the obvious: research on the populations and programs in these areas. Some provide community education and service--courses in prisons, agricultural or forestry services elsewhere in the state. But universities basically expect people to show up on campus and register for the disciplinary programs they offer. What about designing programs for their needs and taking the programs to them? Workfare-welfare programs usually limit single moms to two years of higher education and don't alleviate the very circumstances--heavy domestic responsibilities, low income, lack of decent childcare and transportation--that prevent them from pursuing education. What if a university did research on the state workfare-welfare program and proposed a pilot project the state would help fund: a hybrid program, based at a neighborhood community center, that was geared to giving these moms what they needed, everything from intellectual education and elective job skills to on-site childcare, etc.? I could mention similar ideas for the elderly, or at-risk teens, or But you get the idea. Most states would consider universities more attractive ventures to fund if they were helping to serve citizen populations and solve societal problems.

Let me turn it around again. I hear a lot of legislators talking about university faculty this way: "What are they doing? They teach a few courses, chat with students, grade some papers. Maybe that's a 20-hour week, and the rest of the time they lie around reading and pondering bit questions." Most of the people I know at research universities and liberal-arts colleges are putting anywhere from 50 to 100 hours a week. I do academic work 7 days a week and fit my life chores around the margins; that schedule leaves me hardly any down time. So why is it that legislators and other publics think we lead a leisurely life? Because they don't see the work we do. Virtually all of it doesn't get done in their arenas and doesn't have much application in those arenas.

HJ: And it seems like the academic work week has gotten much longer in the last twenty years. Is that a good impression, do you think?

EMD: It depends on the institution. But let's talk about the research university, the all-purpose university, and the elite liberal-arts college. Although teaching loads decreased over the past 25 years, research expectations rose. The two or three articles that used to suffice for tenure became a book, six or eight articles, and conference papers. That level of productivity, plus professional service that maintains your national profile, is now expected to be ongoing after tenure.

Small colleges and universities have always emphasized teaching and student contact. When I interviewed at Kenyon College in 1985, they had a rule that faculty had to live within 5 miles or 8 miles of campus. Mind you, Kenyon is in the tiny town of Gambier, two hours east of Columbus (Ohio), out in the cornfields. You couldn't live in Columbus because they wanted you to be available to the students, not only during office hours but all the time. In the past five years, research universities have been emphasizing teaching and student contact because they have been criticized for not being concerned with undergraduate education and for being so big that students can't find anybody.

HJ: This is shifting gears, but I wanted to hear you talk a little bit more about something you've written about, and that's the idea of using academic knowledge instrumentally for social change. What specifically do mean by this? Aside from producing work which is accessible to outsiders and having to do with the real world, what does or could this look like?

EMD: In our cluster of disciplines--literary, cultural, and feminist studies--humanities scholars claim to be studying the cultural, the social, the economic, the political. We have theories about social formations, subject formations, and discursive formations. And then we apply them in studies of globalization or group oppressions, performativity at the theme park and commodification at the shopping mall, the aesthetics of body piercing and the metaphysics of substantive sex. What do we do, most of us, when we produce this work? Do we do empirical research? Do we observe, do we interview, do we look at the statistical compilations and surveys others have done? Maybe we do visit the mall. But how do we study it? We read it as if it were a text. And once we interpret that text through the lenses of this or that theory, we make all sorts of unfounded assertions about its effects: it maintains this regime and oppresses that group, it constitutes this divided subject or subverts that discourse. Blah, blah, blah. How do we know what it does without also studying its effects? There isn't a social scientist in the world--and I'm talking about the ones who use the new critical discourses, not the ones who cling to positivist-empiricism--who would consider such assertions to be grounded in evidence.

I don't want you to think I'm anti-theory. I've been reading it for years and doing it for years. In every family of theory I've found formulations to use, to question, to reject. What I'm anti- is empirical work that's uninformed by theory and critical analysis, and theory or critical analysis that's uninformed by empirical work.

HJ: How do you approach the issue of doing more than simply "producing readings"?

EMD: First you have to acquaint yourself with the theories, methods, and literatures in disciplines that focused on producing text- or discourse-based interpretations. Then when you have a project in mind, you have to oscillate back and forth: between theories (or models) and empirical data, between this group of data and that group, between this theory and that. No question that while you do this, you're interpreting. But interpretation is one of your means, not your objective. If your objective were to produce an ingenious interpretation of what something means, what is that ingenious interpretation going to do in the real world--besides entertain your academic colleagues? Will it even manage to get to the world outside the academy?

So if you want to do a new kind of humanities research that might have some real-world effect, you have

to say to yourself, what is it in the real world that's bothering me? You should choose an identifiable thing, not a huge abstraction, or if you want to tackle a huge abstraction you should select three concrete examples of it as "case studies." When you begin your research, ask yourself: If I want this project to have some impact in the world outside the academy, how do I design my research? How do I format and write up the results?

The product might not be a book, because maybe your target audiences don't read books. Or there might be several versions of it--a book, op-eds, a magazine article, executive summaries, briefings. How do you circulate it? If you just send it to *PMLA*, *Social Text*, or *Feminist Studies*, who is it going to reach? Let's say you do reach people in the policy world, the social movement world, the community action world. They're going to say, that's great, but what are the possible solutions? And what do we have to do to facilitate and implement those solutions?

Most of our work is critical and oppositional, and I think that's good. But it also needs to be constructive; it needs to present viable solutions and action plans for getting to them.

Let me give you two concrete examples of what not to do and what to do. The book I've just finished, *Disciplining Feminism*, is how *not* to do it. Here I undertook this huge project to figure out how social change has worked in practice, and what conditions it. So I look at specific cases, a specific historical moment: academic feminism, the right wing, at very specific projects within this. And I'll get an academic audience, and some people not in academe will read it. Since it's a cross-disciplinary study of specific episodes of change--mainly academic feminism, but also the civil rights, New Left, and conservative movements--it will have a broad academic audience.

But it won't have much effect in the political and in the policy arena. Because nobody there is going to read a book that's 400 pages without the footnotes.

So that's an example of how not to do it. My next book is going to be an example of how to do it. I'm studying how policy initiatives are produced with respect to discrimination and equal opportunity in higher education. That's going to come out in different formats: everything from a book to articles, insider briefings to executive summaries. And that's probably how to do it, but I'm not counting chickens before they're hatched.

HJ: I've been so interested in reading those historical accounts in *Disciplining Feminism*. You quoted the DA minutes of one of those years, and I went back to the 1969 Delegate Assembly minutes and read Florence Howe's report [on behalf of the Commission on the Status of Women]. It was very moving for me to read it. She spoke boldly and plainly about women and women in the academy and the Association. Partly it was moving because, despite all of the progress women have made in the profession, I think we are still doing the bulk of underpaid teaching. And it was also moving because she could have been speaking to a nineteenth-century audience when she said, "Our responsibility, as members of the Commission and as members of the educational establishment, is to undertake seriously the education of women." Could you speak a little to the paradox of a situation in which, at a time when women's studies has been institutionalized--however much it is under attack, it *is* institutionalized--for a decade, the bulk of academic women are still toiling, I think, in the lower half of the economic ladder?

EMD: When was Florence speaking, around '71?

HJ: It was '69.

EMD: You see, we had gone through a period earlier in the century when women were virtually excluded

from the academy, with the exception of women's colleges and teachers' colleges. If you look at the statistics, you'll see that women went from a minuscule number of the total student population to very, very slowly and incrementally drifting upwards--but less so in terms of graduate and professional education unless they were female fields like education. During the war, women surged into various public arenas. And then the minute the war was over, they were re-domesticated. If you read Elaine May's book *Homeward Bound: the Domestication of the Cold War*, you'll see how women were returned to the home. But what happened next was the postwar expansion of higher education: first the vets, then baby boomers and returning women.

So by the time Florence was speaking, young women and returning women had started pouring into the academy. What we called "returning women" were those who had finished high school and maybe a few years of college, had married and were raising children, and now wanted to get that college degree. Universities were not exactly receptive; they allowed some returning women to enter degree programs but channeled many more into a second-rate program called "continuing education." When Florence spoke about educating women, it was a major priority for academic feminists for these reasons as well as the rampant sexism in universities and disciplines.

If I were going to speak about feminist educating today, I would emphasize three things. First, we should be providing a feminist education for men as well as women, because, as we found out since Florence spoke in 1969, men can do feminist work and women need them as comrades. Second we should be educating the relatively privileged folks about the histories and circumstances of the less privileged and oppressed ones. And third we have to recommit ourselves to that old struggle of trying to open the pipelines to higher education, employment opportunities, and citizen participation for groups that have historically been shut out or only allowed to trickle in. With an organized conservative movement on a jihad to illegalize affirmative action, dismantle social programs, and further redistribute the wealth to elites, we don't have time to quibble about whether people are more disadvantaged by race, sex, sexuality, ethnicity, or whatever. We need to come up with proactive plans for distributive justice--rights and responsibilities, material and social goods.

HJ: You're saying we need to bring not just women but all kinds of people into higher education.

EMD: And then there's the whole other question of how can we bring higher education outside of academe, into the community, to workfare/welfare moms, as I mentioned earlier. The model workfare/welfare program was launched in Wisconsin by governor Tommy Thompson and is called W2. In the early 1990s, he spoke about it at events sponsored by the Heritage foundation; from there it spread through the Heritage network of conservative think tanks, governors, and legislators and is being instituted in several states. Under this type of program, the women get some state benefits on the condition that they work several hours a week. The program may provide some job training and may have a roster of businesses that will employ women, usually in minimum-wage, no-benefits jobs. Feminist research shows that the Wisconsin W2 program has pernicious problems: it doesn't address the crunch on families when the moms juggle work and home with inadequate transportation and childcare; it reduces family payments when the mom has to stay home from work to tend sick children; and 80% of the jobs that the moms get disappear within a year through no fault of their own. The worst part is that conservatives touted these programs as the antidote for single mothers' dependency on the dole, yet the programs either prohibit women from attending college or limit their attendance to two years--thereby ensuring that when their time in the program expires they'll be stuck in an impoverished existence. Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone has raised this issue in Congress and the media.

You really have to ask yourself about the consequences. What proportion of these workfare/welfare "graduates" will be able to make a living wage and provide their families with decent housing, food, and healthcare? What proportion of the nation's children--probably 20% now--will grow up in poverty? And if

they survive it, how will they function as productive citizens in the 21st century? Why do conservatives want a 21st century in which a quarter or a half of the US population are have-nots?

HJ: Well, what is your impression? You've done all the field work, you've sat in the back of the rooms of the Heritage Foundation and everybody else. Why?

EMD: Well, I think they just want to rule the nation. This is my conclusion in the last two chapters of my book. They want a ruling elite and the elite is them. They want an electoral majority that will hand it to them. They want a huge class of have-nots. They want a middle class of worker bees. . . . And they want to be the oligarchy that runs things. We know what that kind of stratification and polarization leads to. It leads to the destabilization of society. It leads to violence. It leads to insurrection.

HJ: I find that I've asked you a rather narrow question and you've broadened it out for me. And now I have another narrow question, but it's one that I think *Workplace* readers want to hear about. How did you come to found the GSC?

EMD: I had to reflect on that when I was writing the book but I'd lost a lot of the details. I couldn't recapture the founding of the GSC as well as I could recapture other moments from that period. In 1974 I was appointed to the MLA Commission on the Status of Women. I was the first graduate student appointee, then a few months later Barbara Smith, also a graduate student, came on. Barbara was the first African-American woman to serve on the Women's Commission, and the next year Gloria Hull joined us. During my first year, as I wrote in the introduction to my book, I was totally lost. I didn't understand the labyrinth of the MLA and its procedures. I understood universities insofar as I understood the University of Cincinnati and other universities because I was working as Administrative Assistant to Warren Bennis (then-president of the University of Cincinnati). But I didn't understand the profession and its politics, and I felt like I was wading through molasses at the MLA. I just didn't get it at first.

But the women on the Commission were very smart and very strategic, so I began to understand associational politics. For my second year project, they had arranged for me to represent graduate students on the MLA job committee, which was chaired by a professor who was sympathetic to the grad student concerns and supportive when I made declamations at committee meetings. But in those days I was impatient with the official way to make academic change--you know, form a committee and write a report. I preferred what is called power politics or strategic politics. You organize a constituency, compel folks to realize its legitimacy, maneuver your way into negotiations, make demands, apply pressure through protest or other means, get some of what you want and try to institutionalize it. So at some point I said to the Commission and maybe the committee chair, we need a graduate student caucus. And the Commission said fine, do it. So that was my next project.

We had our first GSC session at the 1976 MLA convention. People who attended wrote their names, addresses, and phone numbers on sheets of notebook paper. After that, I remember asking people to chair task areas, like membership due and conference programming, and work on recruitment at their institutions and in their cities. I also had this idea that the GSC should have co-chairs serving two year terms, the older one initiating the younger one each year. Eventually we set up contact persons, or chairs, in three or four regions. The organizational ideas came from my work in the women's movement--that we should rotate the GSC's various leadership positions in a way that allowed for organizational continuity and should build the organization by developing a network-like infrastructure.

HJ: So the GSC grew out of the Women's Commission.

EMD: Yes, and I can tell you one of the reasons why the phrase "graduate student" was a neon sign even

before I was on that committee. In a 1973 issue of the MLA newsletter, the Women's Commission announced that it was looking for new members and asked anyone who was interested to send a CV to Elaine Rubin, who was then co-chair. The procedure was that the Commission would go through all of the--applications is too formal a word--and come up with names. Let's say there were two slots opening up that year--it was a nine-member body. The Commission would prioritize several names and send them to the Executive Council which would then select two appointee. Elaine Rubin, whom I didn't know, called me to do a phone interview. I told her that I had attended Industrial Areas Foundation (it was founded by Saul Alinsky, the dean of community organizing), institutes to train women as organizers, had helped organize women at the University of Cincinnati, and was co-chairing the Coalition of Campus Women. She probably told the Commission I was somebody who had activist experience. So my name was one of those forwarded to the executive Council which told the Commission that it wouldn't appoint a grad student. At that time, I think, the Executive Council was reluctant to appoint anyone with low status--assistant professors, instructors, people with tenuous institutional affiliations. They wanted established people. And in those days few women were full professors, let alone any type of professor at a prestigious university.

When Elaine phoned to tell me the Commission had forwarded my name and the Executive Council had turned them down, I told her what Marquita McLean (then the affirmative action director at the University of Cincinnati) used to tell campus women and minorities. She was an old hand at organizing strategies. Marquita always said: Well, you've got your work cut out for you. When they knock you down, you've got to go back and educate them and create the conditions whereby they have to make the right decision. So, I said that to Elaine Rubin..

The Commission went back [to the Executive Council] again. I don't know what they did on the grad student issue, but I was appointed to the seat that Kate Stimpson vacated to launch *Signs*, and Barbara Smith was appointed soon afterwards.

HJ: In your opinion, how can GSC make the best use of its activist position within MLA?

EMD: First, if it were up to me (which it isn't), I'd ask the MLA to defray the cost of a weekend conference for 50 to 100 GSC leaders. It would feature three groups of people: (1) the folks who can help the GSC develop an analysis by profiling the problems with the higher education system I've mentioned--revenue flows to universities and colleges, reallocations within them, employment patterns and details (both overall and in the modern languages), trends of graduate training in our disciplines, policy initiatives, and so on; (2) the folks who can present, say, two institutions as case studies; and (3) the folks who can help the GSC develop an action plan.

Next, I'd work within the GSC (using its venues, such as *Workplace*, MLA sessions, and other meetings), but collaborating with other organizations where fitting (like the NAGPS), to firm up the analysis and action plan. Then I'd launch some national initiatives and local projects.

The process isn't as unwieldy as you might think because several useful initiatives that are already launched or simmering could be linked for strategic effect. I'm thinking of the graduate-student unionizing and TA work strikes that are starting to mushroom around the country, of the idea of taking teaching staff issues to the accrediting associations now that *Facing Change* clearing a pathway to their door (*Facing Change: Building the Faculty of the Future* is a report just issued by several higher-education associations and state university systems that recommends, among other things, equitable compensation, benefits, and working conditions for part-time and nontenure-track faculty), and of states where the conservative decimation of public higher education is just begging for voter education and mobilization. Imagine the effect if all of these initiatives and more were targeted to New York state.

HJ: Thanks, Ellen, for being so generous with your time.

EMD: You're welcome.

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