



In remembrance of Professor Joan Acker: A legendary figure in the field of Gender, Work and Organization.

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In remembrance of Professor Joan Acker: A legendary figure in the field of Gender, Work and Organization.

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When we heard of Joan's death in June 2016, we were all saddened to lose such an important academic sociologist who was dedicated to challenging the social and gender inequalities of our society. There have been few figures in our field that have acquired such an iconic status, not least because she constantly challenged what is so often taken for granted and unquestioned. Not only was she active in the political and civil rights movements of the 1960s and in 1973 'founder and CEO of the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon', she was also 'a member of the Oregon State task force on comparable worth, through which she raised the pay of low-wage women's jobs in the state system' (Love, 2006: 4) and recognized as a feminist who changed America (ibid).

I cannot claim to have known Joan well although was lucky enough to meet with her from time to time and have the occasional personal conversation. As co editor-in-chief of the newly formed journal *Gender, Work and Organization* (GWO) in the early 1994, I was honoured, if a little surprised, when Joan accepted an invitation to travel from Oregon in the US to provide a keynote address at our first international conference in Manchester UK (a task that she repeated a few years later when the conference had moved to Keele University, UK) and we published both of these keynotes some time after the conferences. In writing this piece I was struck how closely her academic and political output epitomized the title of GWO. It is not then surprising that her work has been cited in GWO articles over 260 times, more than any other author by quite a margin. Joan served on our associate editorial board from those early days and was a tremendous advocate for the journal in the US and across the world and we obviously owe her a great deal more than this memorial electronic issue can provide. However this is the least we could do to acknowledge her tremendous support for the cause underlying this now internationally recognized journal, approaching its 25th year of publication.

In my last conversation with Joan just before her presentation at the 2008 Academy of Management Conference in Los Angeles, she gave me some personal background as to why she had always had a burning interest in gender as also class inequality – the latter because she was from a comparatively 'poor' background and here we found some mutual resonances. I had also come to gender studies via a general theoretical and empirical interest in social inequality. We also shared something else in common not only at the beginning but also at the end of our careers since both of us were late entrant students at university and we continued working long after official retirement. Partly because my own paper at this conference was entitled 'Body Matters: Breaking Gender Binaries in Social and Organizational Research'¹, I

¹ Many years and numerous drafts later, this was published (Knights, 2016).

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3 couldn't help noticing how physically small Joan was and by this time quite frail as
4 she had just recovered from ill health and yet when she took the stage, she stood
5 like a giant and delivered a scholarly argument of intellectual and embodied
6 enormity that few in the packed audience would readily forget.
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9 In this brief essay acknowledging the tremendous contribution Joan has made to our
10 field, I want to focus on two aspects of her work – her recognition that discourses
11 and practices of masculinity are crucial to understanding social inequality and her
12 belief that gender inequality cannot be studied independently of class and race
13 analysis. While recognising that issues of masculinity and class also cannot readily be
14 treated as distinct topics, I begin with the way in which she was as much committed
15 to class analysis as gender theory largely because, from personal conversation, I
16 know this to have been one of her central preoccupations. But also this focus has
17 remained a struggle given that, by contrast with Europe, the US believe in the
18 American Dream and its faith in equal opportunity and this renders class a taboo
19 topic. After discussing this broader contribution to inequality, I turn to her
20 contribution to the topic of masculinity about which I have also been concerned to
21 write.
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24 25 *Social class and gender inequality* 26

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28 In Joan's last single authored book *Class questions: feminist answers* (Acker, 2006a)
29 and in her final book (Acker et al., 2010), social class was clearly as much of a
30 concern as gender. And in one of her final journal papers, she extended this to also
31 include race,
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33 'class inequality, inflected through gendered and racialized beliefs and
34 practices, is the normal and natural bedrock of organizing, and white men are
35 the normal and natural top leaders' (Acker, 2006).
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38 Joan did not survive quite long enough to witness the election of Donald Trump but I
39 can only imagine that she would have been as shocked as anyone at how this was
40 not just a step backwards for 'progressive' views but also like falling into a cesspit in
41 which we are doomed to be sucked into a vortex of unimaginable horror. However,
42 Joan would not have allowed such pessimism to undermine her lifelong project for
43 radical transformations in social and gender inequality. She would have diverted the
44 fall and been heading for the street marches to protest about the outrageous
45 attempts by Trump to construct reality in his own sexist and racist, distorted image
46 and challenging his dismissal of any opposition as fake news.
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50 Ironically Trump perpetuates his vulgar and offensive masculine politics in support of
51 an increasingly marginalized lower middle and working class that Joan spent much of
52 her life defending. She would have empathized with their growing anger and disdain
53 for an elite liberal democratic establishment that has for years neglected their
54 concerns yet presumed they could be relied on for electoral support. I am sure Joan
55 would have embraced the new historical literature in tracing the sources of
56 American inequality and disdain for the white underclass back to England that in the
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3 18th century shipped off its vagrants, its 'early indentured servants, the poor who the
4 British wanted to dump into British colonial America' (Isenberg, 2017: Loc 27). The
5 history of social inequality is very closely associated with poor whites that have been
6 variously described as 'white trash, clay-eaters, waste people², rednecks' (ibid.) and
7 have their roots 'in the British class system' (Loc. 75). It is not surprising that this
8 seriously deprived class of the white underprivileged would seek scapegoats in the
9 liberal political establishment for their worsening condition. Nor is it strange to find
10 them attracted to a political outsider who has declared a verbal onslaught and daily
11 violation of the respectable conventions of elite middle class protocol and who
12 communicates to them through the social media site of twitter. What is perhaps less
13 comprehensible is how easily they abandon one set of liberal elites for a multi-
14 millionaire from an even more privileged background than many in the liberal
15 establishment. Seemingly, the reason is that despite their own experience of the
16 myth of the American Dream of equal opportunity, wealth is still admired as if it had
17 nothing to do with class but was simply the outcome of human ingenuity, talent, and
18 'hard' work. This image of the deservedly super rich Donald Trump results in
19 subjects disregarding or endorsing his apparent ableism, nationalism, racism and
20 sexism despite their potential to become its victims.
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26 I feel sure that Joan would have rallied against such a bigoted and reactionary
27 Presidential view, as she never was fazed by the status of her interlocutor. As Don
28 Van Houten, a former sociology colleague and friend of nearly 50 years said "She
29 could be a feisty person, willing to take on anyone, if the issue was important,"
30 (University of Oregon, 2016). She demonstrated this in one of her many
31 contributions to the literature when critiquing the US mainstream, and in particular
32 even some active feminists and critical researchers, for assuming gender neutrality in
33 class relations (Acker, 1980; 1980), organizations (Acker, 1990) or society and social
34 institutions in general (Acker, 1992a; 1998). The mainstream believes equal
35 opportunity norms and legislation have removed gender disadvantage whereas
36 some critics, following a strict Marxian position, understands class exclusively in
37 economic terms and therefore indifferent to cultural issues of gender. In both cases,
38 there is little need to pay much, if any, attention to gender inequality but throughout
39 her career Joan had a clear and overriding interest in integrating theories of social
40 class and gender but more broadly all theories of social inequality including class,
41 gender and race.
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46 One of Joan's early bugbears was the 'analytic separation of sex stratification and
47 social stratification' that has the unintended effect of precluding women from social
48 'stratification thinking' (Acker, 1980: 26). For this reason, drawing on the concept of
49 intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; 1995), she argued that different inequalities so
50 interpenetrate such that 'theory and research on inequality, dominance, and
51 oppression must pay attention to the intersections of, at least, race/ethnicity,
52 gender, and class' (Acker, 2006: 442). This, she argued, can be achieved through
53 studying organizations as "inequality regimes" that involve different inequality
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57 ² In England, those who failed to develop the land they occupied were 'called waste
58 people' (Isenberg, 2017: Loc. 75).
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3 practices and processes or 'systematic disparities' ... 'in power and control over
4 goals, resources, and outcomes' (443).
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8 In an early article reviewing the literature on women and inequality, she raised the
9 question as to whether women's disadvantage and subordination is explained by
10 existing theories of social stratification and also asked if attention to women can
11 extend our knowledge of class. She summarized the approaches to the subject
12 matter as taking one of three different forms: '(1) that sex and class stratification are
13 different phenomena and that sex inequality should not be examined at all or should
14 be analyzed separately; (2) that women can be integrated into existing theories
15 without substantial change in those theories; and (3) that reconceptualization is
16 necessary if we are to understand sex inequality' (Acker, 1980: 25). In the first and
17 second approaches, sexual inequality is at best marginalized and at worst completely
18 invisible and this is made possible because 'class, which we take to be sex neutral, is
19 actually a concept built on understandings of the socioeconomic world as lived by
20 men' (ibid. 26).
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23 In this same article, however, Joan expressed puzzlement that a questionnaire
24 survey on status had found that 'housewife' was rated higher than 70% of other
25 female occupations. Since there is no income attached to the role, she argued, it
26 shouldn't 'be rated at all' (ibid. 28). She concluded that it must relate to some sense
27 of our society assigning some kind of honour to the role and 'that women, as
28 women, are given a middling sort of respect in our society (29). Although she was
29 not satisfied with the idea of two separate systems of inequality – class and gender,
30 this was the most common approach of the time. One variant was to perceive
31 interdependence between the two systems as in the theory of patriarchal capitalism
32 (Eisenstein, 1979) where patriarchy offers political control to complement and
33 reinforce the economic and class inequality in which benefits accrue to men and
34 capitalism alike. Although she does not criticise its functionalism where the
35 underlying causes of an activity are explained in terms of their consequences, she
36 questions whether the patriarchal capitalism thesis 'avoids the problems of the two-
37 systems analyses in that the analysis of class under capitalism can be left relatively
38 undisturbed, with patriarchy invoked when we want to talk about the "special"
39 situation of women' (Acker, 1980: 32).
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44 Perhaps because of her own comparatively high status as a professor, especially at a
45 time when there were even fewer women climbing the academic hierarchy than
46 today, she did not reflect on the way that masculine norms and practices could help
47 understand better than systems analysis what she found to be the puzzling status
48 rankings of house work. First, of course, there is the tendency for women
49 disproportionately to work in low status occupations often doing work more menial
50 than housework. This is partly a result of women taking breaks in their employment
51 when they become mothers, their often greater identification with motherhood than
52 formal employment but perhaps equally important the extent to which norms of
53 masculinity still prevailed to sustain a breadwinner status for men by 'keeping'
54 women in the home. As we shall see below, in later analyses (Acker, 2006), she
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3 identifies how masculinities are crucial to understanding not only class and status
4 but also gender and racial inequality.
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6 7 *Masculinity and Inequality*

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9 One of the problems that Joan recognized was how sociology had tended to treat
10 gender as a peripheral specialism rather than a fundamental principle of social
11 analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, she was instrumental in transforming the
12 discipline to acknowledge that 'gender is the patterning of difference and
13 domination through distinctions between women and men that is integral to many
14 societal processes' (Acker, 1992a: 565). She also was conscious of how studies of
15 organization and work had neglected the topic of gender at least until the
16 development of the journal *Gender, Work and Organization*. Part of the problem was
17 that in practice, organizations and their management was the preserve of men and
18 mainstream theorists did little to problematize this but instead left gender hidden
19 behind, rather than integral to, the exercise of power. Gender can seem to disappear
20 in 'the impersonal, objectifying practices of organizing, managing and controlling
21 large organizations' (Acker, 1992: 256).
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25 On the other hand, feminists could not easily infiltrate this masculine fortress
26 although some authors did observe that: "While organizations were being defined as
27 sex-neutral machines, masculine principles were dominating their authority
28 structures" (Kanter, 1977: 22 quoted in Acker, 1990: 143). However, by implicitly
29 positing 'gender as standing outside of structure', Kanter 'fails to follow up her own
30 observations about masculinity and organization' (ibid.). Also while Ferguson (1984)
31 sees bureaucracy as an exemplification of oppressive male power constructed
32 through rationality and abstract rules and procedures, she perpetuates the
33 masculine-feminine binary by drawing on 'a stereotype of femininity as oppressed,
34 weak, and passive' to describe both male and female employees and clients of the
35 bureaucracy (Acker, 1990: 144). This conflation of divergent men and women that
36 are rendered feminized victims of the bureaucracy also 'obscures the specificity of
37 women's experiences and connections between masculinity and power' (ibid).
38 Through both empirical and theoretical work (1992; 1992b; 2006; 2006b), Joan
39 sought to avoid these problems by identifying the gendered, and in particular,
40 masculine aspects of class, race, organization and hierarchy as a way of helping to
41 'explain the persistence of male dominance and female disadvantage, in spite of
42 years of attempts to implement gender equity policies (1998: 197).
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48 Although not a part of Joan's extensive reviews of the literature, she clearly shared
49 the view expressed by Moira Gatens (1996) who argued that 'Man is the model and
50 it is his body that is taken for the human body; his reason which is taken for Reason;
51 his morality that is formulated into a system of ethics' (24). But this gendered aspect
52 of class is obscured because work and 'job hierarchies, common concepts in
53 organizational thinking, assume a disembodied and universal worker' ... and ... 'this
54 worker is actually a man; men's bodies, sexuality, and relationships to procreation
55 and paid work are subsumed in the image of the worker' (Acker, 1990: 139). While
56 never claiming to be philosophic, even her very early work was demonstrating
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familiarity with, and criticism of, the dualism between masculinity and femininity and how it worked to the advantage of men and the disadvantage of women in work organizations.

'This order preserves traditional power relations between women and men and confirms the symbolic association of masculinity with leadership and femininity with supportiveness' (Acker, 1988: 482).

Apart from acknowledging the multiplicity rather than unitary nature of the discourses and practices to which these notions refer (Connell, 1990), it is not entirely clear that theorizing this binary between masculinity and femininity has advanced much beyond Joan's contribution here. Moreover, studies of leadership to which she alludes have only recently begun to deconstruct such binaries (Collinson, 2014). While Joan did not theorize identity, she did believe that certain 'organizational processes and pressures' such as masculinity were instrumental to the development of 'aspects of gender identity' and that it was of crucial importance to generate a 'systematic theory of gender and organizations' (Acker, 1990: 140).

Conclusion

Generally her own and others empirical research demonstrate minimal success and many failures in projects designed to generate greater equality in organizations. This is not least because of institutionalized class interest that creates and sustains economic and political advantage and attachments to privileged male gendered, and white racialized, identities (Acker, 2006). Nonetheless, optimism leads her to conclude that the increasing 'visibility of inequality', and its diminishing legitimacy, may mean that we are witnessing the beginning of 'energetic attacks on inequality regimes' (ibid. 460). Whether the election of Trump will dissipate or only further encourage this energy is anyone's guess but it is likely to suffer some erosion as a result of Joan's passing away.

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41 [sociology-professor-joan-acker](https://around.uoregon.edu/content/memorial-set-revolutionary-uo-sociology-professor-joan-acker) consulted 3.8.17.