Gender Equality in the Age of Academic Capitalism:

Discursive intersections and university restructuring

Myra Marx Ferree, Alice H. Cook Professor of Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison,
1180 Observatory Drive, Madison WI 53706 USA, Phone 608-263-5204, Fax (608)265-5389

mferree@ssc.wisc.edu.

Kathrin Zippel, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Northeastern
University, local affiliate at the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Harvard University,
201 Renaissance Park, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, Phone (617) 373-3852, Fax (617)
373-2686, k.zippel@neu.edu.

Myra Marx Ferree is the Alice H. Cook Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin, where she is also a member of the Gender and Women’s Studies Department. She is the author of Varieties of Feminism: German Gender Politics In Global Perspective (Stanford University Press, 2012). Other recent books include: Gender: Ideas, Interactions and Institutions (co-authored with Lisa Wade, Norton 2014), Gender, Violence and Human Security: Feminist Perspectives (co-edited with Aili Tripp and Christina Ewig, NYU Press, 2013), and Global Feminisms: Transnational Women’s Organizing, Activism, and Human Rights (co-edited with Aili Mari Tripp, NYU Press, 2006).

Kathrin Zippel is Associate Professor of Sociology at Northeastern University in Boston and local Affiliate and Co-organizer of Seminar on Social Exclusion and Inclusion at the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University. She is the author of The Politics of Sexual Harassment: A Comparative Study of the United States, the European Union and Germany (Cambridge University Press, 2006) that received the APSA Victoria Schuck Award for the best book on women and politics. Her current work explores gender, mobility and globalization of science. Recent publications include “How Gender Neutral are State Policies on Science and International Mobility of Academics?” in Sociologica (2011).
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Abstract

This paper uses a discursive approach to explore the paradoxes of intersecting gender equality politics with liberal as well as neoliberal reform projects in universities. The ongoing struggles over meaning of higher education provide the context in which the dynamics of academic capitalism and global modernization create challenges and opportunities for gender equality advocates. Focusing on discourses of diversity management and gender mainstreaming, we use the claims they raise about accountability and excellence in universities to highlight how the neoliberal embrace of gender reform neither simply coopts feminist concerns nor provides an answer to all challenges feminists have raised.
Feminists have long targeted universities as crucial sites for creating gender equality.

Gender equality advocates have found unparalleled opportunities in recent years to enter into the governance structures of modern higher education systems, but have also been deeply critical of the premises and overall direction of changes in academic governance (Currie et al. 2002; Luke 2001; Riegraf et al. 2010). “Academic capitalism” or the shift toward managerial authority, accountability to economic productivity standards and quantitative performance auditing, has introduced norms and values that disrupt those of the classic liberal-humanistic university, including its professorial authority relations, “old boy” networks, and internalized disciplinary standards (Slaughter and Leslie 1999).

There is widely acknowledged tension between the classically liberal university as institutionalized and partially reformed by feminists in the 20th century and the neoliberal university emerging transnationally in the 21st century, where the position of feminists is still in flux (Allan 2012; O’Connor 2014). While sharing the term “liberal” and largely reflecting interests of privileged populations, the agendas of neoliberalism (a market fundamentalist commitment to economic development, privatization of social goods, and corporate forms of governance) also conflict with those of classical liberalism (a political commitment to individual development, social pluralism and democratic self-determination).

This paper engages the paradoxes generated as feminist efforts in the higher education field align with or contradict these shifts, arguing that the restructuring of universities along less autonomous, more competitive lines poses both threats and opportunities. On the one
hand, as longstanding critics of how academia reproduces gendered and other forms of
inequalities, many gender equality advocates are seizing the chance for influence in the wave of
transformation hitting universities (de Welde and Stepnick 2015). On the other hand, the new
system’s preferences for discourses of marketability, scientism and quantification and its
technocratic disregard for situated experience does not fit with feminist principles for
education and may open doors only to women who excel in the system’s biased terms (van den
Brink and Benschop 2012). We argue that struggles over the meaning of higher education are
still very much in process, and resist the temptation to evaluate these changes as either a
Pollyanna who only sees the opportunities they could offer or a Cassandra who assumes that all
the battles will be lost.

The perspective we take is discursive: that is, we look at how gender equality and
university restructuring are framed as objectives that imply particular commitments to change
across multiple dimensions of actual organizational work. We extend to universities the critical
consideration paid to feminist engagement in governance in other institutional contexts, such
as international development (Prügl and True 2014), criminal justice (Bumiller 2008), and
trafficking (Bernstein 2010; Halley et al 2006). Such ambivalent feminist self-reflections offer
insight into the intersectional interests brought to institutional change efforts. The
intersectionality we emphasize lies in the tensions among political discourses at the level of
stratification processes (Choo and Ferree 2010).

In the first section, we address higher education as an institution that always has been
shaped organizationally by struggles over its meaning and purposes. We argue that universities
are even now being reshaped not only by neoliberalism but also by the globalizing aspirations
The history of gender and university system reforms

The classically liberal university, currently seen as under threat, is the social formation of higher education as a means of the self-determined pursuit of knowledge and the self-development of the capacities of the individual and “his” society (Wellmon 2015). Originally defined as exclusively male, the ideal of political liberalism, rooted in the aspirations of the bourgeoisie of the 18th and 19th centuries, formed the norms undergirding the organization of universities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in their support for participatory
self-government, freedom of discovery and expression, and professional autonomy. These originally elite values were gradually expanded to broader populations (Ramirez and Boli 1987).

Stretching back into the eighteenth century, and remarkably energized in the twentieth, feminists have invested their energies into expanding educational opportunities for women, and promoting women as researchers, scholars and professors (e.g. Bailyn 2003; Rossi and Calderwood 1973). These struggles have been not only over including gendered bodies but also gendered expertise, critiquing elite men’s claims to abstract and universal knowledge and introducing knowledge about science, gender relations and human experience grounded in alternative standpoints. Twentieth-century feminist claims on institutions of higher education have been successful in increasing the numbers of women students across the disciplines, establishing self-governed departments of gender and women’s studies, and undermining male definitions of importance and expertise in fields as diverse as literature and medicine (e.g. Friedman 1998; Nicolette and Jacobs 2000).

Feminist struggles have also shifted over time as the aims and practices of universities have changed. The social welfare states emerging after World War II redefined the meaning of higher education as stratification system that could produce as well as restrict opportunities for working class people (David 1991; Ramirez and Boli 1987). In the “massified” university that resulted, higher education has been subjected to intensified application of capitalist norms of productivity, economic impact and managerial authority. As these new meanings have become more dominant, and their role in producing economic and social mobility more contested, attention has been directed to on-going changes in university work, and questions raised about
the role that feminist politics plays in regard to both the classically liberal and emerging neoliberal modes of knowledge production (Teelken and Deem 2013).

The current moment is one of intensified institutional transformation in the field of higher education in many national contexts (Deem, 2007; Slaughter and Leslie 1999). Higher education as a cultural and economic field is structured primarily at the national level, where state policy continues to play a significant role: allowing tuition fees to rise in the US and UK, or abolishing tuition fees entirely and providing stipends for students for a fixed number of years, as in Germany. Globalization, however, is a “modernizing” force that works on these national institutional fields in different ways, depending on how each nation fits into the transnational field of knowledge production and transfer (Ramirez and Christensen 2013).

On the one hand, this global field is characterized by the classical liberal principles of the world polity, which foreground the role of diffusion of ideas through mobilized NGOs, technologies of communication, and freedom of research and expression, producing international norms of knowledge and rights (Schofer and Meyer 2005; Ramirez and Tiplic 2014). Both “science” and “women’s equality” are culturally powerful discursive assets in this field, which might be called “the world is flat and getting flatter” (Friedman 2005). The globalizing extension of liberal ideals of human rights, civility and self-governance is a disruptive force in the field of higher education, undermining patriarchal and colonial authority relations in nominally democratic institutions.

World polity theorists such as John Meyer and his students have demonstrated the extension of citizenship rights and political representation to women reflects a global process in which a new “normal” discourse of inclusivity is created (Meyer et al 1997; Ramirez, Soysal and
Laurel Weldon (2002) and others have shown how substantive issues of importance to women, such as state control over interpersonal violence, rely on the national and international spread of gender equality advocacy work to turn “women’s rights” into human rights (Alfredson 2009; Berkovich 1999; Zippel 2006). As in other institutional spheres, the “common sense” of women’s inclusion in higher education is achieved by activists challenging and changing liberal discourse (Wotipka and Ramirez 2008; DeWelde and Stepnick 2015).

On the other hand, neo-liberalism enters this field as a different kind of principle, one in which naked competition and steep hierarchies are treated as forces for good in a deregulated “winner take all” system. Although far removed from the reality in which states cushion market shocks, monopolists exert coercive power, and corporate managers pursue interests that are neither those of owners or workers, the discourse of capitalism as a force for efficient production is also one that powerfully shapes higher education in the current era (Berman 2012). Although neo-liberalism’s market-centered governance has entered university systems, “those who advance a neoliberal agenda do not defend neoliberalism qua neoliberalism ... Neoliberalism is in this respect rather like patriarchy: few openly speak its name” (Evans 2015, 41). Seen by its opponents as the “dominant economic, political and cultural ideology of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century” (Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005), neo-liberalism as a concept is often used vaguely to encompass all forms of economic domination.

In academia, neoliberalism is especially associated with managerial governance and commercialization of knowledge, adapting corporate practices and ideologies to higher education (Deem 2007; Tuchman 2009). “Academic capitalism” as a concept acknowledges the
managerial and cultural aspects of this shift for universities without framing neoliberalism as a totalizing ideology (Slaughter and Leslie 1999). Because academic capitalism as a discursive formation brings both economic and cultural capital into the fields it structures, it emerges internally differentiated and inconsistent rather than a tool for erasing all differences. Political decisions about how to compete and for what to compete remain primarily nationally specific and invariably contested (Sliwa and Johansson 2013; van den Brink and Benschop 2011).

Opponents of academic capitalism today often defend the classically liberal university as it emerged in the early 20th century if it had been a bastion of freedom of research and teaching, inclusive self-governance and peer evaluations based on universalistic and idealized standards of merit (Newfield 2008). They thus ignore the many feminist critiques of the exclusion of women and less privileged men from its precincts and the unacknowledged positionality that infused standards of supposedly value-free science. In the emotionally charged context of contemporary struggles over academic values and discourses it seems easy to forget that hard struggles over the boundaries of political liberalism in the late 20th century were necessary to expand notions of citizenship, equal treatment, self-governance and human rights to parts of the human race – especially but not exclusively female-bodied people – previously excluded in whole or in part from these norms.

Rather than seeing academic capitalism as a bulldozer that flattens out the existing structures of liberal academia leaving nothing but the rubble of new inequality-producing practices, we consider these institutional histories and their legitimating discourses as intersectional with the variety of reforms being proposed. In other words, the intersectionality of claims-making in and about universities generates moments in which equality advocates
have the opportunity to embrace one or another modernizing project that removes specific obstacles to inclusion while leaving others untouched or perhaps even more prominent.

The global movement for gender equality in the past few decades includes extensive feminist mobilization encouraging close scrutiny of male dominated peer decision-making processes and implementing formal or informal quotas and benchmarks for inclusion (European Commission 2013; AAUW 2013). These reform strategies take advantage of the neo-liberal turn toward managerialism and performance monitoring that critics often view as threatening to the value systems of classical liberal universities (Tuchman 2009). Many are situated at the more privileged and professionalized end of a continuum of feminist change strategies, along with the proliferation of state feminisms, gender mainstreaming mandates and the NGOized form of political mobilization in civil society (Alvarez 2009; Outshoorn and Kantola 2007; Thayer 2010).

In political systems, moments of institutional transformation, such as the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the toppling of authoritarian regimes in Latin America, have often offered increased opportunities to movements both for and against gender equality (Gal and Kligman, 2000; Ewig and Ferree 2013). We see the contested transition in institutions of higher education as a similar moment in which a variety of opportunities will emerge for gender equality advocates -- and for their opponents.

**Intersectionality and discourses of reform**

We adopt a “structuralist” view of intersectionality that highlights the connection between local sites of struggle and more general power relations, rather than a “poststructuralist” view of identities and institutions as wholly emergent and negotiable (McCall 2005, Choo and Ferree 2010). Crenshaw’s distinction between “structural” and
“political” intersectionality is helpful in pointing out the importance of political claims-making, rather than institutionalized inequalities or injustices alone as generating intersecting interests (1991). However, her sharp line between structures and political claims seems to understate the importance of the ongoing political struggles that define, construct and embed racism and sexism in specific institutional forms and the discursive work that is essential to their success. For example, both racism and anti-racism are structural arrangements, not attitudes, and they are embedded institutionally in ongoing social relations of inequality. The emergence of “standardized testing” as a measure of merit in US educational systems over the 20th century structured systemic national, class, race and gender interests into this institutional practice, above and beyond specific political claims about test bias or national standards (Colyvas 2012; Sliwa and Johansson 2013). Intersectionality as found in the complexity of interests articulated in specific struggles in institutional sites like standardized testing is grounded in material relations of power organized simultaneously along multiple axes (Walby 2009; Verloo 2013).

Academic capitalism and heteropatriarchy represent institutional principles that are both structurally anchored and contested in concrete social relations. Walby (2009) emphasizes the complexity in these relations; like her, we resist the common equation of class with the economy, gender with the family, and race with the nation as if these were unified institutional sites for constructing specific inequalities. Higher education in capitalist economies is not only about economic inequality but also anchors gendered and racialized standards of exclusion and evaluation within and across national borders (Connell 2013). Our focus on accountability and excellence as currently contested claims in academic discourse widens the definition of what is at stake in changing how universities operate beyond identifying capitalism as a class issue.
While global capitalism makes claims on the university as an institution, so also does the political liberal project of modernity, expressed as faith in science, progress and democracy (Colyvas 2012; Timmermans and Epstein 2010). “Modernizing” the university can be a discourse embraced in the enlightenment project of the liberal university no less than by the newer neoliberal governance project called academic capitalism (Celarent 2009; Garforth and Kerr 2009).

Intersectionality as a characteristic of societal level discursive practice can be seen as an interference pattern between waves, such as when more than one pebble is thrown at once into a pond (Verloo 2013). Even though patriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism make distinctive patterns, their waves inevitably intersect; the individuals being rocked by waves coming from different sources experience their impact jointly and holistically. Intersectional meanings embedded in texts with power – such as anti-discrimination laws, gender mainstreaming mandates, statutes establishing universities, rules establishing funding criteria – are subject to challenge as well as use as specific actors with their particular agendas negotiate new interpretations of citizenship, opportunity, equality, and excellence in the specific sites of individual universities and national higher education systems. The intersections among the liberal project of globalized modernity, the neoliberal project of academic capitalism, and the feminist project of gender equality are experienced as specific types of turbulences at different social locations; collectively academic “reformers” make use of the dynamic force coming from each of them. The specific way these intersections play out in each institution leads to fixing a partial, impermanent local meaning within a wider web of meanings (Ferree 2009).

Although feminists have been aligned over the whole twentieth century with the political liberal project of expanding political citizenship and asserting women’s human rights
(Berkovich 1999), they have also been in the forefront of the constructive critique of political liberalism in practice (O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999). Critics of “governance feminism” are particularly suspicious of the ways that white women from the Global North have used their relative privilege to tie political claims about gender equality to a neocolonial definition of modernity (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2007; Halley 2008). Critics of the overall project of neo-liberalism have challenged the use of women’s education as a rhetoric of development that defines women of the Global South instrumentally (as advancing peace or economic development) and positions them as less able to define, defend or advance their interests than aid agencies or transnational gender advocates in the North (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2007).

For better or for worse, discourses that share claims produce opportunities to coopt and be coopted by other intersecting projects moving in different directions. On the one hand, some critics of the complicity of gender equality movements with governance systems that exacerbate other inequalities go so far as to suggest “taking a break from feminism” and setting aspirations for gender inclusivity aside (Halley, 2008). Their concern is accentuated by recognizing that women are increasingly descriptively represented among political decision-makers, both in electoral and administrative governance (Orloff and Schiff 2014). On the other hand, feminists who have struggled for decades for impact on policies affecting women’s lives are optimistic about the “window of opportunity” for substantive change they see opened by framework of texts endorsing gender equality (Prügl in press). Women’s participation in governance is seen as offering a chance to make rather than criticize policy, and mobilization at
the grassroots is valued as a way to hold policy-makers accountable for giving more than lip service to substantive interests in intersectional gender equality (Daly 2005; Weldon 2002).

Overall, the evidence that women have gained substantial representation in governance over the past decades is thus greeted with ambivalence. Two of the reform discourses about which feminists have been most ambivalent across many specific sites are diversity management and gender/diversity mainstreaming.

**Diversity management and mainstreaming**

In considering the ways that gender equality advocacy in universities intersects academic capitalist discourses, we consider both diversity management premised on the rationale of positive effects on the “bottom line” (the well-known “business case”, Elomäki 2015; Risberg and Søderberg 2008) and gender mainstreaming (Daly 2005) to be highly managerial models of dealing with political demands for inclusion of “diversity.” As discourses legitimating the power of managers over “human capital,” both have affinities with the academic capitalist reform project (Elomäki 2015); in appealing to “objective knowledge” about gender and diversity, both also intersect the politically liberal projects of enlightenment and global modernity (Bustelo, Ferguson and Forrest in press; Wotipka and Ramirez 2008). Nonetheless, the two discourses differ in their relation to race and class as stratification principles and in their relationships with private and public sector structures of accountability.

The “business case for diversity” emerged in managerial discourse in the US in the 1980s, supplanting a social justice rationale for gender and race inclusivity; in the ensuing decades it has become globally familiar (Edelman, Fuller and Mara-Drita 2001; Risberg and Søderberg 2008). It is embraced most fervently in the UK and US, being firmly anchored in
Anglo-American corporations and management schools (Hankivsky and Christofferson 2011; Prügl and True 2014). As a claim that active diversity management is good for businesses’ bottom line, the definition of diversity has expanded beyond race and gender to include religion, nationality, sexuality and even personality “different from the norm” (Woodward 2012).

While US universities express commitment to “diversity” strongly enough to defend it before the Supreme Court (e.g. Grutter v. Bollinger 2003), what this means to them, what problems it is intended to solve and how white women figure into it in the university context remain vague. On the one hand, white women have been the primary beneficiaries of corporate diversity management strategies (Dobbin 2009; Tomaskovic-Devey et al 2006) and can readily think of ways to apply similar managerial tools to further the project of gender equality in universities. On the other hand, race has been the controlling discourse in thinking about gender discriminations and exclusions in the US, so in the US higher education field, the term “inclusive excellence” works outward from the idea of race to encompass gender, disabilities, and other inequalities, challenging a narrowly drawn idea of merit as embodied by white, male elites of the previous century (Williams, Berger and McClendon 2005).

Diversity management is, however, a “traveling concept” that is now widely used within the European Union and globally for science and academia. Woodward (2012) analyzes how diversity management has informed EU policy, associating it with identification of individuals as having “differences” of various kinds and with neoliberal versions of social policy that prioritize economic growth (see also Elomäki 2015). As universities are brought into the “diversity management business” (Hankivsky and Christoffersen 2011), they frame this as a variety of
backgrounds of students and researchers being “good for science,” not just for corporate
decision-making (O’Connor 2014). The concept of diversity management also widened as it
travelled to rest on more than the “business case” of profitability, being instead applied in
Nordic countries as a signal of corporate “social responsibility” (Merilainen et al 2009; Risberg &
Søderberg, 2008).

The second concept, gender mainstreaming, has been discursively endorsed not only by
the UN in 1995 but by the EU in 1997. Since then it has become widely embraced as a discourse
legitimating change in the management practices of states. Gender mainstreaming frames the
problem of inequality as a lack of attention to gender in the routines of policy-making, leading
to outcomes that differentially privilege women and men. Like diversity management,
mainstreaming is a managerial, top-down model of reforming institutional practices to be more
inclusive (Daly 2005). Unlike diversity management, the mainstreaming model begins from
gender as the conceptual core and takes state rather than corporate practices as central.
Although actual mainstreaming policies and projects are frequently critiqued for overly relying
on categorical gender, essentializing gender differences and framing women as deficient, they
legitimate active state-led intervention toward a goal of gender equality (Daly 2005; Kunz, in
press; Walby 2005).

Gender mainstreaming remains such a central strategy for feminists in policy roles
(“femocrats”) in Europe that it also has been expanded to be “more intersectional” by being
redefined – controversially -- as “diversity mainstreaming” (Prügl 2011; Hankivsky and
Christoffersen 2011). In this extended discourse, diversity is defined primarily by means of the
specific list of potential discriminations that the EU directed be prohibited by its member states
The potential feminists see in gender/diversity mainstreaming lies in its proactive engagement in making policy more inclusive of both women and men, responsive to less-normative forms of gender and sexuality, and accountable for producing equality rather than reproducing inequalities (Squires 2005). Rather than reacting to individual level acts of discrimination after the fact, gender/diversity mainstreaming is intended to identify structures and processes that can be changed to generate increases in overall equality of outcomes. Van den Brink and Benschop (2012) call inequality-producing processes in universities a “seven-headed dragon” that has to be slain, but consider the mainstreaming mandate as defining the state’s job to be supporting gender equality, thus arming feminists in the field of higher education with state-approved weapons.

However, the discourses of diversity management/mainstreaming have little to say about creating space for critical intersectional perspectives in teaching and research, since neither of them were constructed for academia as an institutional field where knowledge and power are intentionally related. Rather than content, their emphasis is on personnel. Both state and corporate management models emphasize the efficient creation and use of “human resources” that will allow a national “knowledge economy” to maximize its standing in the world system. Interaction among students from diverse backgrounds, including international students, is considered “useful,” especially for privileged white male students, because these students can learn “cultural competences” that will help them to function better in leadership roles in diverse world (Williams, Berger and McClendon 2005). These human resource justifications for inclusivity demonstrate how the critical edge of reform has been blunted: the “outsider-within” challenge to the hierarchies of knowledge institutionalized in higher
education systems is not one of “adding difference” in perspectives but moving “away from an understanding of feminist knowledge as expertise towards gender as a critical analytics for disruption and contestation” (Kunz, in press). The specifics of how gender equality is connected to these discourses can be seen in they address accountability and excellence.

**Discourses of Accountability and Excellence**

One transformation strongly associated with academic capitalism is the shift of authority away from politicians and ministries of education, as well as from self-governing networks of (primarily male) professors to administrators, and the exercise of this authority through formalized and increasingly quantified metrics of productivity. The empowerment of a new, more permanent (but highly mobile) and more powerful class of university administrators is consistent with the neo-liberal principles of delegating state responsibilities downward and diffusing surveillance and sanctioning authority among competing managers. Framed as freeing universities from the direct supervision and budgetary discipline of the state, academic capitalist reforms place more power in disembodied systems of accountability (“audits”) such as organizational rankings, quantified “assessment exercises” of faculty productivity and standardized tests of student performance, increasingly used to allocate funding. These governance tools work discursively to shape the consciousness and thus behavior of participants (Colyvas 2012; Prügl 2011; Subramaniam, Perrucci and Whitlock 2012).

Insofar as direct state control is weakened, women’s increased representation in formal political office is too little and too late to change universities, and weakening the authority of professors just as women gradually become better represented may be another instance where “women get a ticket to ride when the gravy train has left the station” (Carter and Carter 1981).
However, formalization of evaluation creates chains of accountability upward through growing layers of administration, each empowered bureaucratically by being entrusted with budgets from which incentives can distributed. While self-identified feminists have risen to these new heights of formalized power in some university systems, most administrators are still men. In US elite research universities the employees classified as “managers” are now roughly equal in numbers to the tenure-track faculty, and their average salaries slightly higher (AAUP 2015). ¹

Feminist research on higher education suggests that academic capitalist restructuring has mixed implications for achieving specific forms of inclusivity. National systems vary in how they use demands for productivity to improve or restrict access for students, and individual universities also work strategically to target new “markets” for students and gain “market share” in a context in which women have already gained standing as “good students” and “productive” faculty (Teelken and Deem 2013). The liberal humanist global mandate to modernize overlaps with academic capitalist interests in controlling “human resources” particularly from the global South; together, these principles of stratification of knowledge hold higher education administrators accountable for producing “internationalization” on their campuses as a sign of quality (Allemann-Ghioda 2014; Ramirez and Christensen 2013). Competition over credits and to attract highly mobile “diverse” students to enroll in particular institutions also increases demand for accountability for teaching quality, even if this is often measured in superficial or misleading ways (Allemann-Ghioda 2014; Ramirez and Tiplic 2014).

¹ The most recent AAUP compensation website is http://www.aaup.org/our-work/research/annual-report-economic-status-profession (Comparison of numbers and average salaries calculated among universities selected for very high research intensity, ranks selected for P, AP & aP and staff selected for “managers”).
Discursively, gender equality advocates justify managers’ role in conducting quantified routines of surveillance of research and teaching in terms of becoming less subjective and less enmeshed in the “old boys’ networks” of the liberal university (van den Brink and Benschop 2012). Removing personal biases and inconsistencies of judgment from evaluations offers at least the promise of more transparency and fairness than when professors were granted the autonomy to set standards on a case-by-case basis. Success in institutionalizing auditing as fair, neutral and important has shifted the discourse of “merit” and “meritocracy” so that these terms have lost their originally critical edge, and no longer seem the opposite of “equality” but rather its precondition (Celerant 2009; Ramirez and Tiplic 2014). Thus gender equality advocacy within the university has less to say about the structural inequalities that result when privilege accumulates over time (the so-called Matthew principle; but see Ecklund, Lincoln and Tansey 2012 on the Matilda principle) than about the use of audits to expose illegitimate biases among decision-makers), to identify the presence of “glass ceilings” and “leaky pipelines,” and to promote greater uniformity in how “merit” is measured and rewarded (van den Brink and Benschop 2011; Garforth and Kerr 2009).

By aligning their definitions of merit with those of higher level administrators who control organizational sanctions, gender mainstreaming projects and diversity managers use the corporate-like structures of accountability emerging in academia to reward decision-makers for including more women or otherwise “diverse” individuals in their departments or research projects (O’Connor 2014; Allan 2012). The discursive institutionalization of auditing also accepts the premise that efficient competition requires structures for comparative evaluation, so that excellence can be economically rewarded (O’Connor and O’Hagan 2015). But the quantified
comparisons audit discourse promotes are also part of a globalizing discourse of modernity in which “best practices” are identified and imitated. Gender equality advocates aim to increase “gender sensitive” policy-making by using ranking systems that include measures of how women fare (Garforth and Kerr 2009). The development of global indicators of gender equality has been a field of research in its own right, as knowledge of systematic gender disadvantage is translated into formalized indicators used for policy making (Bose 2014).

Feminist critics particularly draw attention to how the power to define excellence is political (Husu and Cheveigné 2010; Garforth and Kerr 2009; Kahlert 2014). Increased auditing of performance according to quantified standards of productivity can be criticized as missing many valuable aspects of what universities do, and to an increasing degree these quantified metrics are being produced by international corporate publication giants like ISI, Pearson and Thompson-Reuters which are clearly committed to a bottom-line view of what constitutes “valuable knowledge” (Olds 2012). These for-profit ranking systems discursively define the “merit” of universities, disciplines and individual scholars, becoming institutionalized as the “common sense” of academic evaluation on which scholars are encouraged to rely rather than local, contextualized knowledge (Subramaniam, Perrucci and Whitford 2012; Ramirez and Christensen 2014).

The hegemonic narrative of merit measured as citation count (“impact”) is accepted by some gender equality advocates who strive to ensure that women’s work and gender scholarship receives its due credit, but it is also challenged in its own terms by research showing that men still control the definitions of what journals are “important” (Nielsen 2015) and that men’s and women’s citational networks do not overlap as much as the ideal of gender neutral
science would suggest (van der Weijden and Calero-Medina 2014). In fact, the routine construction of academic expertise continues to rely on gendered networks, mobilizes masculinity to claim the organizational power to define values, and evaluates competences in gendered terms.

Since the indicators companies use define the concept they are measuring, these rankings drive restructuring; as organization scholars say, “what you measure is what you get” (Espeland and Sauder 2007). These measures of academic standing and productivity are not only gendered, but linguistically biased and align international higher education systems with definitions of modernity and excellence based in the English-speaking global North (Connell 2014) The exercise of definitional power by elites was evident in Germany, for example, in the external evaluations of formerly East German academics and departments in the process of unification which defined western ties and standards as those of universal “excellence” (Ferree and Young 1993). The same bite of external evaluation was felt two decades later by academics and universities in unified Germany when a federal “Excellence Initiative” offered greatly enhanced funding to those judged to be outstanding “by international standards.” Many German professors and academic administrators were surprised to discover that in the 21st century their inclusion of women and of international researchers fell so notably short of these standards that it occasioned an unusually public censure from their national leadership (the so-called Winnacker letter; Zippel, Ferree and Zimmermann 2014).

In higher education systems, isomorphism, the increase in institutional similarity, is not wholly attributable to academic capitalism and its emphasis on competition and hierarchy, but also reflects global liberal discourses of modernity, innovation, science and progress, and also
the alignment of gender equality advocacy with this project. Inclusion of women and international mobility are “diversity” projects that overlap to generate opportunities -- but also to accumulate advantages for those who are already well positioned by virtue of class, nationality, language, age or sexuality. Auditing has been normalized in gender mainstreaming and diversity management discourses, but also in the vocabulary of modern social justice movements (e.g. to produce an “accurate count” of sexual assaults or racialized acts of policing), thus serving as “statistical consciousness-raising.” The belief in science and numbers as fair and impartial correctives to human judgment is not in itself neo-liberal. Academic capitalism uses these discourses of accountability to promote economic competitiveness, conduct market-based evaluations, and measure “productivity,” while gender equality advocacy turns to the same tools and overlapping discourses to measure “gender empowerment” and “social inclusion.”

In the past few decades, for example, a multitude of national and international reports review the scientific knowledge about gender inequalities in scientific research and academic status with the goal of increasing the numbers of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields, collectively called STEM (Garforth and Kerr 2009; Sliwa and Johansson 2013). Equality in STEM is a special focus on reformers who aim to restructure the university to better fit the needs of the “knowledge economy” and gain competitive advantages for their own countries (Berman 2012). Struggles over gender inclusion in STEM have introduced biennial comparative data collection and comparative presentations at the EU level, using the discursive power of numbers to encourage active support of women scholars (e.g. European Commission 2013).
Faith in scientific evidence, including gender knowledge, also overlaps and intertwines with reliance on managerial tools. For example, the actual goals and concrete objectives of gender mainstreaming are not openly debated but rather “introduced” to organizational members who need to be “trained” to be gender aware as well as held accountable for their success in making the policy more “gender-sensitive.” Although “gender training” is critiqued as too shallow and short-term to effectively transform state institutions, it ratifies the existence of “gender expertise” and gender “experts” as legitimate agents of knowledge production and transfer, usually in top-down relations that privilege abstract theory over contextual practices (Bustelo, Ferguson and Forrester in press). Moreover, there is a notable gap between the diagnosis of gender as a problem of structural inequality and the awareness remedies that mainstreaming offers, which often frame gender as a form of essentialized group difference (Verloo 2006).

Whether or not actively enforced, the legal demands and directives calling for positive action to increase gender equality offer feminists discursive resources. Gender equality advocates have used this tool to promote studies of evaluation biases, and to encourage awareness of these results among administrators in funding agencies, universities, journals and disciplinary associations (van den Brink and Benschop 2011). Importantly, the sharing of information that is essential to create ranking systems is also a mechanism that diffuses feminist strategies across campuses and countries. Globalized systems of accounting for inequalities give activists tools to “name and shame” administrators who have failed to learn from the “best practices” of their competitors.
The discourse of accountability also steadily increases expectations for reporting, multiplying the time spent on testing and paperwork requirements by faculty and administrators, as well as escalating demands for productivity (however measured). Since the overall time demands for both productivity and accountability keep rising in this positive feedback loop, disproportionate disadvantages increasingly face any academics with familial responsibilities or physical limitations on their work time. Gender equality advocates are deeply critical of the impossibility of achieving "work-life" balance under this system (Ecklund, Lincoln and Tansey 2012). To the extent that gender equality is discursively limited to meaning "equal opportunities for women" in a system that structurally demands continual production of competitive inequality, however, the solutions will focus on those offering "special accommodations" to care-givers -- so-called "family-friendliness" (Lipinsky and Sanjeske 2012). As some critics have pointed out, the concept of the "family friendly" organization providing "balance" as a benefit has come to dominate the feminist demand for "gender inclusive" sharing of care as being about labor relations rather than a separate sphere of "the family" (e.g. Jenson 2008).

In sum, gender mainstreaming and diversity management strategies accord with the administratively heavy structure of contemporary universities and make university managers attentive to proactively making measurable progress in including women and other "others." For the most part, these equality strategies rely on procedures implemented from the top-down, presume accountability upward (whether to university administrators or funding agencies), specify that the metrics of success should be quantifiable, and use competition to rise in the rankings as a primary motivator of organizational effort. These strategies widen the
definition of “excellence” to include more “diversity” of gender and nation, but rarely speak critically about the place of universities in a global knowledge order.

Feminist challenges to these competitive principles include contesting both the insatiable demands for productivity raised by organizations discursively committed to winning at all cost and the power-laden construction of academic “excellence” across global hierarchies of knowledge. While gender expertise and gender studies have gained some standing in the field of higher education, their legitimacy is precarious and often tied to their contributions to managerial imperatives for increasing “diversity” (De Welde and Stepnick 2015; Garforth and Kerr 2009). Even when not as reflexively self-critical about the instrumental use of mainstreaming mandates and the business case to increase inclusion in universities as some academic critics like Garforth and Kerr (2009), gender equality advocates push hard to apply the dominant metrics more even-handedly, especially in the STEM fields where the shift from liberal to neoliberal organizational principles has increased the researchers’ perceived value.

Conclusions and implications for research

The transformations that universities are undergoing in the 21st century reflect not only the growing power of neoliberalism but also the continuing global force that liberal discourses of pluralism, inclusivity and modernization exert. The discourses of gender equality activists overlap with classically liberal claims for rights, equal treatment, and scientific enlightenment but also share neoliberalism’s stress on competition as promoting the efficient use of all human resources and reliance on active management of organizations with quantified performance metrics. But feminists have always been critical of the limitations of liberal modernity and now are also critiquing and resisting the claims of academic capitalism. In their practices, however,
gender equality advocates seek to co-opt the power of both reform discourses, by using state-led mainstreaming projects and corporate models of diversity management to apply the tools of technocratic managerialism to the goal of social inclusion, even if not deep transformation of knowledge practices.

On the one hand, belief that the “world is flat and getting flatter” is an encouragement to engage in a political project of gender transformation that operates globally through the tools provided by increasing managerialism, particularly auditing performance, setting up formal structures of accountability for results, and competing for recognition as “the best.” On the other hand, the “winner take all” priorities found in academic capitalism also insure that these tools advance gender equality within the context of insatiable demands for more productivity, more accountability, and more stratification among economies, universities, departments and individual scholars. Academic capitalism is fundamentally academic, in that it is about knowledge, discovery, and excellence; it is also capitalist in its evaluations of what kinds of knowledge are valued, what conditions for discovery created, and what processes are used for identifying and rewarding excellence. The dominance of neo-liberalism as an ideology may be replacing classical liberalism as a political justification for how universities operate, but feminism will remain precariously positioned as a critic of both.

For a Pollyanna, an analyst inclined to be optimistic about all the progress that has been made, transnational successes in making gender mainstreaming a legal mandate and the business case for diversity a corporate norm are applauded as powerful tools for gender equality advocates in universities around the world. Both mainstreaming and diversity management discourses are being adapted to higher education systems in order to challenge
biases in existing systems of evaluating merit, devise new standards for inclusion, audit and rank performance, and name and shame those who fail to embrace “best practices.” The embrace of managerialism shared by these two discourses gives them particular leverage in academic systems, where the growth in the number and authority of academic administrators facilitates top down strategies of reform. Getting closer to the seat of authority in the academic system seems to promise gender equality advocates the opportunity to remake its decision processes, and thus transform “how professors think” (Lamont 2009). While even Pollyanna is not foolish enough to think that this process will be easy, she sees progress as already underway.

For a Cassandra, inclined to see defeat in the offing when feminists confront capitalism of any sort, the current encounters of gender equality advocates with academic governance systems are more of a danger than a victory. As Cassandra sees it, by embracing the managerial imperatives of the present era, both gender mainstreaming and diversity management advocates can hardly hope to do anything more than collaborate with the cruelties of constant evaluation, accelerating demands for productivity and measures of performance that are too far removed from the actual practices of academic work to be valid. Cassandra stresses the failings of the mainstreaming model and the business case in practice: top-down rules engender bottom up evasions, and even producing real appreciation for “difference” falls short of addressing structural inequalities. Cassandra not only expects academic struggles for inclusion to fail, she views the demands for inclusion, diversity and positive action by higher education authorities as a smoke screen concealing the deeper structures of power, which she does not expect to yield to rational argument. Rather than biases to be corrected, she sees obdurate
interests; the distance traveled is less salient than the shape-shifting obstacles emerging ahead of her.

But if Pollyanna is confident of her ability to coopt academic capitalist transformations and Cassandra is equally sure of feminist vulnerability to being coopted, the reality may be more complex and internationally variable. Systems of higher education are differ greatly in the specific forms that restructuring takes, and pragmatic observers suggest that rather than dismiss the partnerships outright, these should be examined for how they “bring together the legacies of neoliberalism and feminism, with different results in different contexts, enabling co-optations as much as new openings” (Kunz, in press).

Fotaki (2013: 1271) argues that universities are unlike either state bureaucracies or private businesses in that they “are important sites where knowledge is defined and reproduced, and it is also here that the contestation of meanings and significations of the symbolic order comprising knowledge systems is manifest.” Academia is an unusually inward-looking, self-reflexive and social powerful site of contestation over the meanings and values of social institutions, and struggles over what matters are played out especially explicitly and extensively in its precincts. Thus it may be most useful for Cassandra and Pollyanna to sit down together and reflect on the different perspectives they bring to gender transformation. This would retrieve gender knowledge from the realm of “expertise” and return it more explicitly to the domain of politics, reducing the effects of technological managerial expectations and reviving feminists’ propensity for disruption and provocation (Kunz, in press).

This is only one small step toward a conceptual framework that would help compare and contrast gender politics in the nationally specific paths of university reforms. Recognizing
that there are multiple discourses being mobilized and paying careful attention to the similarities and differences in the paths universities are taking seems to offer an important way forward in understanding academic capitalism (Ramirez and Christensen 2013). Such attention to the specifics of how liberalism, neoliberalism and feminism become actual reform values and practices will be even more important for understanding what gender equality advocates accomplish, what new forms of intersectional conflict are emerging, and what roles different universities in different parts of the world will play in the new regimes of stratification being formed today in this age of encroaching academic capitalism. What role feminist knowledge and knowledge creators will play is still being contested, but at least it is clear that the higher education institutions of the present and future already are not and doubtless will not be your grandfathers’ universities.

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