

Re-Thinking Resistance: On Welch and Foucault

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After reading Sharon Welch's *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* in order to respond to Michael Gunzenhauser's essay, I was so taken with her work that I immediately read, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity*, which examines the role of communities in both fostering liberation and sustaining oppression, and *Sweet Dreams in America*, which utilizes her ethic of risk in secular multicultural education. Beyond the scarcely disputable need for active engagement and mutual critique in ethnographic research that Gunzenhauser suggests, Welch's *oeuvre* also merits educators' philosophical reflection on several fronts that he has not mentioned. Therefore, to afford some opportunity for philosophical dialogue today, I will focus specifically on Welch's conception of resistance.

Welch envisions a postmodern approach to theorizing and sustaining activism in the face of entrenched social injustice. Although I concur with much of Gunzenhauser's summary of Welch's *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, I must respectfully dispute his view that Welch embraces a modest social transformation, exchanging, as he says, the hope of victory for the hope of "better conditions for later possible victories." I do not see that she ever capitulates on the goal of societal transformation. In fact, Welch disputes the equation of maturity with resignation or acceptance of the improbability of fundamental social change.¹ Her ethic of risk offers an alternative to an ethic of control, that is, the notion of complete control over events and quick, predictable responses that motivate both national fixation on absolute security and Euro-American passion for domination of difference (*FE*, 23-35). Welch's ethic of risk never sacrifices justice, dignity, and freedom necessary for social transformation, but is mindful of the limits of human thought, the intransigence of systems of domination, and the need for specific and local interventions (*FE*, 23-35).

Youthful activists in the liberation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s believed that revolution born of righteous rage would melt away the issues of social injustice. Activist educators believed that challenging the canon of literature and traditional pedagogies would usher in social change. After four decades of activism and deconstruction, theory and research, Welch worries that anger has atrophied into despair and cynicism, particularly among the middle class, who are already beneficiaries of partial change. She also appreciates that even the best-intentioned acts undertaken to redress wrongs have resulted in a mixed bag of consequences. Not only can one never be sure of all the unintended effects of actions undertaken with the best of intentions, people simply do not agree on what changes are "positive" (*FE*, 34-39).

Welch reckons, therefore, that global transformations and quick fixes are highly unlikely. The educational implication is that educators should celebrate partial victories even while recognizing the need for continued courage, persistence, and

defiance. Without sacrificing emancipatory goals, educators must recognize human limits, the damages that result from arrogant disregard of those limits, and the potential for producing both harm and good (*FE*, 14-15).

I believe that Welch makes a significant contribution to educational discourse on resistance. I was surprised, however, that as frequently as Welch utilized Michel Foucault's work, she did not turn to his discussion of resistance. Had she done so, she would have found much compatibility between his ethical inquiries and her own. For example, even though Foucault severely criticized revolutionary theory, he stubbornly maintained his belief in notions of "liberty" and "human dignity" central to the humanist project.² He claimed that his project was to "show people that they are much freer than they feel," and that all of his analyses "are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence."³ Feminist philosophers Lorraine Code and Jana Sawicki, among others, have cited these statements as evidence of his commitment to emancipatory politics.⁴

Foucault explored Greek and Roman constructions of the self to demonstrate cultural specificity and to find a gap for alternative aesthetic recreations of self.⁵ Similarly, Welch drew upon African American womanist literature to show that the cultural despair and cynicism affecting middle class America is not universal. Both authors challenge the continued acceptance of oppression. Both projects educate people about the disruptive effects of defiance, local action, and critique. Both serve as reminders that ordinary people can practice freedom. Further, Welch is, as Foucault was, keenly aware of the intransigence of oppressive systems because of the intense webs of power relations in which all persons and institutions are part.⁶ This recognition influenced Foucault's skepticism about the inevitability of linear progress and revolutionary solutions aimed at global transformation. Yet, Foucault suggested that freedom must continually be pursued, not as an end state to be attained, but an action to be practiced.⁷ He said "my position leads not to apathy, but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism."⁸ Foucault explained that the ethico-political choice that one must make every day is to determine which "danger" most needs our attention.⁹ For educators, this hyper- and pessimistic activism requires new tactics as problems shift. It also means expecting even successful solutions to be both incomplete and temporary. Hence, "hyper- and pessimistic activism" accepts lifelong resistance.

These notions closely parallel Welch's ethic of risk. One does not give up on transformation, but recognizes the multiple and unpredictable costs, including potential harms that can occur, in the work for justice. For Welch, however, those costs do not include the loss of self. Rather, she says that the ultimate loss of self would be choosing *not* to resist injustice (*FE*, 165). To stop raging against oppression is to die.

Despite Welch's compatibility with Foucault, she offers educators a more practical perspective. I will limit my comments to two points. First, even though feminists have utilized Foucault's work, Sawicki suggests that his rhetoric is masculinist, his perspective is androcentric, and his vision is pessimistic.¹⁰ Further, feminists have denounced his call for discontinuity and his nihilistic tendencies.

Renouncing continuity is problematic for groups of people for whom oppression has been continuous and who historically have been coerced into discontinuity.¹¹ Further, Foucault's heroes of discontinuity are drawn from the likes of the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille. I concur with Janice Raymond, Dale Spender, and Andrea Dworkin, who have denounced Foucault's "philosophizing" when it covers multitudes of transgressions: cruelty, degradation, rape, torture, murder, and child abuse. Celebrating these men for their defiance and discontinuity risks repeating a history with which many women and minorities are already far too familiar. Educators will find that Welch's ethic of risk reads against the grain of hegemonic thought without nihilism or discontinuity (*FE*, 149).¹²

A second crucial difference between the two authors focuses on the relationships necessary for ethical living. Foucault's ethical inquiry explores a "technology of the self," that is, the kind of relationship one ought to have with oneself. Persuaded of the extent to which the self has been formed through discourse, Foucauldian ethical inquiry attempts to free individuals through aesthetic re-creation.¹³ In Welch's ethic of solidarity and difference, however, one cannot be moral alone (*FE*, 127). Rather, her theology maintains that ethical living must reside in the beloved community. She suggests that it is not necessary to posit "god" as the substance or ground of divinity. Members of the beloved community relate to one another in compassion, love, and solidarity, celebrating difference, finding healing and resilience in the power of relatedness. Relational power *is* divine. The beloved community is based, therefore, not on shared morals, faiths, or cultural norms, but on raging against all that destroys the dignity and complexity of life. Shared stories of conflict, oppression, and exclusion educate community members about both their oppression and their complicity in oppressing (*FE*, 154-55, 162, 165-68). Welch's thought offers hope for educators as critical activists. Her vision for education, like her vision for life, is based on risk, celebration, solidarity, and difference—all necessary for sustaining struggles for justice—and worthy of educators' further philosophical inquiry on another occasion.

1. Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 70. This book will be cited as *FE* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. See Nancy Fraser, "Michel Foucault: A 'Young Conservative,'" in *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, ed. Susan J. Hekman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

3. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, eds., *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 10-11.

4. Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 296 and Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 11.

5. Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 341-52.

6. Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

7. Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, 246.

8. *Ibid.*, 343.

9. Ibid., 343-44.

10. Jana Sawicki, "Feminism, Foucault, and 'Subjects' of Power and Freedom," in Hekman, *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, 159-61.

11. Janice G. Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 44.

12. Raymond, *A Passion for Friends*, 44-47.

13. Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 351-55.