

Entrevista a Charlotte Brunson (Reino Unido, 1952)
Interview with Charlotte Brunson (United Kingdom, 1952)

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Q: Talking about Charlotte Brunson is talking about the Birmingham School. You have mentioned before that when you enrolled in Birmingham School, when you started studying at Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 70s, it was a really specific historical moment. And you have mentioned when educated young women began to look beyond the wedding ring. How was that? I mean, how was being a female researcher in a very historical moment for women and in a space that, from an academic point of view, how was that experience as a woman?

A: Well, I think what is relevant really comes before going to Birmingham because of the politics of the 1960s. So, I grew up in London during the 1960s and it was a radical political time. I had already been involved in the Women's Liberation Movement before I went to Birmingham. So, I had been involved in the Women's Liberation Movement in the early 1970s, and in some ways when I got to Birmingham, I was quite surprised that... some of the politics in Birmingham seemed old-fashioned for me, but there was a group of female scholars and together we tried to work out something about what it was to ask feminist questions in that context. So, it was fun. It was exciting.

You were at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies from 1975 until 1978. I understand that you got your Ph.D. after that, right?

Yeah, I got my Ph.D. not until 1995/1996. I didn't really... Although Stuart Hall was my supervisor, I've written about this extensively. Although Stuart Hall was my supervisor, it was regarded as quite individualistic to do your own Ph.D. The activity at Cultural Studies was very outward facing in some ways. It was seen as more important to publish, to write things, not really academic things, but that was seen as more important than doing your own individual work.

So, I started my Ph.D. Although I worked... I did research all the time there; I only wrote a Ph.D. after I worked in the United States. When I worked in the United States, I saw that, because they have a much more systematic institutional demand, you have to have a Ph.D. to get an academic job in the States. Which, in Britain, nobody who taught film and television... lots of people didn't have a Ph.D., Stuart didn't have a Ph.D. Many people have done research... and a lot of people didn't have a Ph.D. So, then I saw that I had to do one, really, particularly if I wanted to go to the States again to work. Then I started in about 1990 and I've written about that in the publications... the book I did from it, *The Feminist*. And so, what I did... it was partly why I was interested in your project, what I did was try and reflect back on what it was we had been doing in that early period. Because that period was already over. So, it was retrospective. It was a retrospective piece. I wrote it while I was teaching full time.

Coming back to the Birmingham years, you have said that Stuart Hall was very supportive of his students, and that students were taken super seriously. And there is also another author, Rachel Powell, if my records are right, she wrote the first working

paper “Possibilities for Local Radio”, and she said that men were the ones that defined the agenda at the CCCS. What was your experience in that sense? Do you feel the same way?

Yes, yeah, yeah. I think... yes. And also, because institutional power partly comes with research money. And so there had been significant research people who did work on subcultures, Paul Willis, Tony Jefferson, there had been one project on subcultures which was funded, a bit funded. And the interest... There was a lot of interest in young working-class men and their significant work around male subcultures. But they had also done... I mean, I don't know if you're interviewing Rosalind Brunt. I mean they did do work; they did a long, long project which is lost, which I've spent some time trying to find... they did a long, long project in the early 1970s... a project on a story from a women's magazine called “A cure for marriage”. And that was everybody, Stuart... you know everybody was involved and trying to work at how... the sort of method. So, it was defined... it was definitely, yeah, it was definitely a male space like most of the academy. But... yeah.

Along your career, have you faced gender issues? And, in case the answer is yes, what type of gender issues have you faced?

Well, in my early days as a full-time teacher I was given... when you had to go to photocopiers, you know, you had to get down to a particular photocopier there was just one in the building. You would wait in line. And I was given the photocopying by a male professor because he assumed that I was there to do his photocopying, not that I was waiting to have my own done. So that is quite typical. And there was also... it was quite typical for there to be a certain amount of sort of sexual harassment, I would say, that was also quite typical. It was, I think, very normalized. But I think the main issue was that my research topics in a broader academy were not taken very seriously. So, I would say that the major... that both working first on soap opera and then working on television, I think television wasn't taken seriously, particularly if you weren't working on television news. So serious television was either television news or current affairs, so the representation of the real world, or it was within a continuation of the study of theater, and it was a single place. But, to work on popular television, which I did, that wasn't serious, that wasn't taken seriously.

Did you fight for other colleagues to take these topics seriously?

No, I was in a very... I was in an extremely privileged position; it wasn't a difficulty within my department. But, on the other hand, of course I have never taught... I've taught film all my life, which has accorded more respect. I mean, not much more, but more. So, I have always taught film, and no... my own department... with people like Richard Dyer and Victor Perkins... no, that was a supportive environment, and it was very, very small. So no, I've been extremely lucky.

Charlotte, what you have just said... being confused with a secretary or not taken seriously, or even the sexual harassment, have been some of the topics that have been appearing in the interviews that I have done up to this moment. I kind of was expecting some of those, maybe not so much the sexual harassment, which... I mean, according to other of the participants that I have already interviewed, it was pretty normalized, as you have just said. I don't know if you have noticed, in that sense, kind of an evolution, a change, from when you started, in the 70s, until nowadays.

Well, certainly, in my first job, which was in Sheffield, in the Art School, which was a wonderful, wonderful job, wonderful place, I can remember... We used to go for drinks in the

park at lunch time on Thursdays, which was kind of the end of the working week, and I can remember it was quite acceptable for male members of staff to comment on the looks of the female students. You know, I can remember very vividly one man saying: "Oh, I love the summer, because they were such little tops". And that was, you know, you thought it was creepy, but there wasn't a place where you could respond, I can remember being told, when I went to teaching, you know, teacher training sessions, I can remember being told that a good explanation was like a perfect bikini. Because it attracted you, you know? And so yes, I think things have... I mean, really, honestly, the odds within the British academy, departments like Film, English... you know, not bad. I mean, when I was an undergraduate, it was common for members of staff to sleep with... to have affairs with students. But I don't... that never happened, to my knowledge, in the department I've worked in. So yes, I would say there is more consciousness of that, I'm not sure... I think it's gotten better. Yeah.

You have written about... I mean, you published, at the end of the 70s, about this idea of subordination, of how women have been subordinated in different aspects. Have you ever felt subordinated as a researcher, as an academic?

I feel that I've... I have felt humiliated and... yes, I have felt, I mean, you know, because I'm old now, but yes, I've felt humiliated and I've felt not taken seriously and I certainly had the experience of saying or publishing things which don't seem audible when I say them but if a man says them can be heard. Yeah, definitely.

And there's also, I think, a peculiar shame in being included in things when you suspect you've been included because they know that they need a woman. So, I think that's... I think it can always be an uncertainty about the terms in which you're present.

Did you have female mentors or strong female influences? Do you think it is important for a female researcher to have female role models?

It was interesting. I saw that on your draft of your questions, and I talked to some people I knew from Birmingham, some women that I knew from Birmingham, about that... so, in relation to mentors, well, I had... I mean, there was nobody when we were at Birmingham, there was nobody. I mean there were really no women at all. There were some women a little bit older than me whom I knew in the wider world in relation to film, right? Annette Kuhn, Pam Cook, yeah? So, I knew some people who were a little bit older and they were significant figures. But really nobody was in the position to be a mentor because people didn't have... you know, people didn't have jobs, and also, I didn't know that what I was going to end up doing was... being an academic. So, no. Although, when I was an undergraduate there was a... I had one teacher who was a significant influence but I don't think she was a mentor really.

I think it makes a difference, I do think it makes a difference who you see occupying positions of authority, yeah, I do think that makes a difference, and who you see doing things. But I have never thought about the issue of being a role model, ever, that has never occurred to me and I have talked to Janice Winship who I was at Birmingham with, who I know from those days, about that and she agreed that that was not a concept, and I think I've always tried to be principles in my behavior in teaching but I think, in a way, to imagine yourself as a role model you would perhaps have to feel more established than we did or have done. You know, to have a clearer sense, so, no.

Let me... I suppose the other thing I would say about role models is that I think identity is very complicated, and I think, in a way, in my teaching I've almost tried to do something that is rather the opposite of the idea that's implied with the role model. Because I feel that it's

very important not to put students in a position where they become defined by an identity, so that they have to speak, and they have to contribute as a certain kind of person. That they have to be representative in some way in the group and I feel very critical of the way in which some of the politics that I have been involved in has contributed, I think, to trapping people in identities. You know, if you say, I'm speaking as a woman, or something like that, I think that's not helpful. I think, particularly, in the academy, you have to try and imagine what it would be like to speak from a place that is not yours. So, it's not a very interesting concept to me, role model. I don't think it's a very productive one. But I do think it's important which people you see doing which things. Does that work, does that help?

That's very clear. Have you felt more scrutinized? When you were researching, I don't know, at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, or in the 80s, or when you were getting your Ph.D. in the 90s, did you feel more scrutinized or did you feel like you had less opportunities than your male colleagues?

Well, I've written about the politics of organizing as women in the CCCS. We all... I mean it was extremely unusual, to be honest, for anyone to finish a Ph.D., you know, lots and lots of people didn't. It was more unusual to finish... I didn't feel more scrutinized, I had no scrutiny when I wrote the Ph.D. because I wasn't doing that in an institutional context.

No, I don't think I've felt more scrutinized, I think the expectations were different, and I think it's arguable that... or one of the things I've paid some attention to in my teaching is that I think that female students very often want to get things right, they want to be good girls. And I think I wanted to be a good girl, intellectually, and I think that's very damaging, I think that it's intellectually inhibiting. So, I think that the way in which femininity, I mean "not all kinds of femininity are the same, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah", but I think it's common for femininity to involve a responsiveness to others, paying attention to what is wanted, finding out what would be the thing to do. And that can impede intellectual work to the extent that it makes it more difficult to think what you think. You're better at seeing what it might be good to think. Does that make sense?

Yeah, it does. That idea that the expectations are different... Do you feel that your female students may have more pressure because of these different expectations?

No, but I think it's much more contradictory for women because I think, still, to be a clever girl is deviant. So, there's a kind of paradox for female students that... I mean, I think that has changed and I do think that's changing, I do think that young women are able to be more, perhaps, I hope, are able to be, perhaps, more clever. But I think that the penalties for being a clever girl are very intense, they certainly were when I was growing up. I don't know, do you think that's true?

I think that my experience is that we really have to perform, right? Like that role of being a little bit less clever, or a little bit less... right? There's still something there, there's still something related to the voice, there's still something related to getting credibility, there is something there. But I do not feel that I have to perform, I mean, I am... I feel that I can be who I am, but it is more difficult for me to have authority, for example. To have a voice.

Yeah, yeah. I think that's true. Yes, yeah.

Do you think that women from your generation have had a voice, in the sense of being able to talk and being heard?

Well, yes and no, really. I mean, I think, in some ways, because second wave feminism developed in a context of, in the West, relatively economic stability, and the movement I perceive is a movement from outside institutions to a situation where many women actually got academic employment and that was a tremendous privilege, really, in comparison to generations now. And I think yes, I think there has been some voice but I think that the particular gains of a sector of highly educated white women, a particular generation... they can be integrated, it doesn't really change things. And I think Angela McRobbie's work has shown that there's a certain figure of the girl who can be integrated but that there's I think, arguably, a whitening gap between those privileged women and other women and I think that the arrangements during the COVID crisis have revealed how thin some of the fabric of changes have been, with women having to do, so many women, actually, doing very difficult work but also all the caring and the housework and things like that. So, I think yes, we did have a voice, but maybe it's very historically specific. And a very particular privileged sector. So, I feel like my story, in a way, your questions seem like questions whether I've felt discriminated against... whether it was more difficult... things like that. Well, I think to an extent, yes, certainly there are things that were normal to me that are unimaginable to young women today. But, overall, I think my story is a story of privilege, not a story of discrimination. Although those things were all there.

Thanks for your honesty. What has been the most rewarding thing in your career?

I've had some good Ph.D. students, you know, I had really, really good Ph.D. students who've gone on... you know, to do some good things. And the women that I worked with at Cultural Studies, I think, with whom we had to work so much. I'm friendly with many of them still. So, I think that forging of an identity or a set of concerns, that's interesting. But yeah, generally I think that I've experienced what could be seen as quite an easy life... yeah, I work in a privileged context, but I think, generally, I've carried it hard, I've found it hard but, in fact, I don't think objectively it is very hard. So, I don't think "oh, I've got this", no, I don't think that at all.

You kind of felt like the path was already made for you to research and for you to progress in academia. What other aspects do you feel like we still need to change?

Well, I think that... I don't know, I have a lot of hope, actually, for young women, I think the young women are... they have different expectations so it's quite exciting, really. I think they can... and they have the ability to show somebody like me that things that I just assumed were normal shouldn't have been like that, you know?

I don't know, I think perhaps there are two dangers, well there may be three. I think being a good girl is a catastrophe, yeah? I think that's... and it's quite difficult to see where you aim to change that. But I think in a way all academics, we're good children. They work hard and... but it's kind of... Start from there, and that's difficult, and I think it's quite difficult to know how you might change that. I think that getting stuck in what I have called, sometimes, the "girl zone" is also, strategically, a mistake for women. On the one hand I think it is very, very important that scholars have worked on genres, on types of media, on pleasures of media that are associated with women, and I've said "no, these aren't trivial, these are serious, let's pay attention". So, these are terribly important, I think it's very important that we say that fashion can be as significant as, I don't know, car chases. I think that is very important. But I think if female scholars, if feminist scholars, stay in the girl zone, and are only in this little world where everybody is kind of nice and we all just talk about the things that girls like and all of this, I think that would be a catastrophe because it means the real world is sort of out there, somewhere else, and all the feminist scholars are in the girl zone. So, when the journal *Feminist Media Studies* was set up and they asked me to be on the editorial board, I was... I

felt ambivalent.

Why?

Well, because I thought that I wanted to support them but I wasn't sure that it was a good idea to have a journal where feminist scholarship... and it was quite late in the day, Feminist Media Studies, and it was quite different to the early women in... you know the early... I wasn't sure that it was a good idea, and I'm still not sure that it is a good idea politically to have a journal where all the feminists do their research and then you have the other journals like *Media, Culture & Society*, or something like that, or *Communications*, where the real work is. The other work. I think there are real politics about that.

And I think the other thing is that it's... I don't know, I don't know that if you want changes in the place of women in the academy, I'm not sure that the academy is where you start. I think maybe, I think perhaps a more significant... the only way is childcare. I think it's possible, I noticed increasingly that all... in my university, a very substantial number of senior jobs are done by women. They do a huge burden of the administrative work running the committees and things like that. You could say that those women have got more power, but it seems to me the case that they often... it just means that the male scholars are getting on with their research and not having to take any kind of responsibility. You have female heads of department, you know, so the women are kind of running the show and the men are going off writing books being brilliant. So, I think it's always a question of particular demand in particular contexts, I don't think there is a single recipe and I also think it's really important to remember how sacred the academy... how, in some ways, I know it's very, very difficult for younger scholars but, in some ways, the academy is still very, very privileged. I'm not sure that that's where things should be directed. But evidently there are tremendously significant things happening in relation to generation in the academy. I think, possibly, that's more significant in gender, at present. Younger scholars are working part-time, you know, they will never get tenure, and they are sort of being spat out, really. I think, moving into a different phase... I don't know, that's not very clear, but does that give you some sense of what I'm...

Yeah, very clear the three aspects that you have highlighted. My final question... What is the contribution that you are most proud of?

No, I don't think... no, I don't. I mean, I feel privileged to have worked with some of the people I've worked with, but... I, no, I don't have those feelings.

Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you think it's important or that you would like to talk about?

I think, perhaps just to say that... I think feminism and thinking about feminist work, if I look back on my career and think about it, I've had quite a, sort of, passionate and contradictory relationship to it, which I can think about almost in how I arranged my bookshelf. Because I've had the luxury of an office where I can keep some books and I've also had a study at home where I can keep some books. And, for many years, my feminist books were at home where I could refer to them, work on them. Then, at a certain period, I thought I'm never going to write anything more about this so I moved my feminist books, not all of them, but a good half of them, to my office, you know? Where I sort of could still have them, but I didn't have them. And I also made a choice, very consciously, at the end of the last century where lots of things were happening. You know, everybody was talking about the end of television, I made the choice to stop doing research on television and also, really, to stop writing about feminist material. I just wanted instead to write about other things, in my case cities, to try to

write as a feminist, but not about, as it were, women's things, or women.

And then, occasionally, something happens and it just takes me back, you know, I was watching a television program the other day, and I realized it was about the third television program in which I had seen a female senior... you know, an official, a police officer and... so, this is a drama, and she's shown sleeping in her office. And I just thought: "Well, why do women, why do serious women have to sleep in their office... in drama?" So, I'm just gonna write a little article, which is called "Why do women need to sleep in their office?", so it comes back, you know, you never leave it, but it's not what I've chosen to focus on recently. In a way it freed me, gave me a place to speak from, but also, I have wanted to leave it behind, really. And I sometimes advice Ph.D. students not to work on, say, *Sex and the City*, but rather to work on... you know, which, you write about *Sex and the City*, then, professionally, that has very serious... that has consequences, for the rest of your life. And I can say that, because I wrote about soap operas, so I know what that means. So... yeah, go on.

What are other topics that you think, despite soap opera, or *Sex and the City*, or whatever... other topics that you think it's necessary that we investigate, that we research from a feminist perspective? Other topics that are not traditionally...

Well, I've been trying to think about the city. And I think there are lots of... very interesting stuff about space, really. But I've been trying to think about the city and I wrote... I did a book which was about the city and I had one review from a feminist scholar: "So what this is all about... you know, there aren't enough women, in this book, you know, it's not enough about women". And so, it's been very interesting for me because I thought, well, yes, but that's because there aren't very many women making the kind of work I was talking about. It's quite an interesting intellectual question, really.