WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY
INTERVIEWS

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An Interview with Ellen Mortensen

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Ellen's Office at the Center for Women's and Gender Studies, University of Bergen

Ellen Mortensen: My name is Ellen Mortensen. I am a Professor at the Department of Literature and Director of the *Center for Women's and Gender Research* at the University of Bergen.

Carlos Motta: What is your research about?

EM: I have been working on the borderlines between literature and philosophy. I have done theoretical work on feminist and gender theory, and some queer theory too. My major work has been on the French-Belgian philosopher Luce Irigaray and her thinking on sexual difference. I work on all kinds of literature, primarily French, Anglo-American, and Scandinavian.

CM: Could you give me an overview of queer studies in Norway and its relation to the feminist movement?

EM: That is difficult to do because queer studies in Norway are very limited. There are a few people, especially in literature, that work with queer theory, but I wouldn't say there is such a thing as queer studies in Norway. There are some researchers that work with queer theory, but most of the studies done on homosexuality, lesbianism, etc., are done within fairly traditional theoretical parameters, especially in the social sciences. They have not embraced queer theory in the same way that, for instance, certain people in literature have. There is more skepticism against it. They feel that some of the categories that many of the social movements have championed, such as the category of woman, or the category of gay or lesbian are being deconstructed in queer studies and the fluidity of the categories is more problematic in a more narrow political sense. There is skepticism especially in many of the social sciences against implementing queer theory, because the field of study becomes somewhat unpredictable. There is also quite a widespread skepticism within the gay and lesbian movement towards queer studies and queer theory, because they feel that it undermines the foundation of their political work. It is easier if you have a solid category of gay or lesbian, and then you ask for implementation of social reforms on the basis of these categories. In fact, I would say that queer

studies and queer theory are primarily within small segments, or within academia, and not that much in the political field in Norway.

CM: It seems like queer studies becomes a threat to the government structure and to political activism. But, when do queer studies arrive in Norway? You say that the field is limited, but I suppose it still has some foundational origins.

EM: I would say it arrived in Norway with the publications of Teresa de Lauretis' seminal essays on queer studies. Also upon the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990, things started to happen in academia here. I would say that even though Judith Butler has been read, and has made a very important impact on the way feminist and queer theories are being implemented in Norway, there is still widespread skepticism. There are few of us who use her; I have published critiques of Butler in some of my books. I think that she has been incredibly important in many ways.

In mainstream culture the arrival of queer theory was especially through mass media, television, Internet, etc., outlets that spread the possibilities of sexual practices. I think the spreading of it all in culture has made more of a difference, in fact, than the actual theories produced. Even through series such as the *L Word* or *Queer as Folk,* and all these television programs that enter into the living room of each home. I think they actually have more of an impact than the actual political work being done, but that is my thesis.

CM: Would you also say that of the gay and lesbian and feminist movements in Norway? It seems like there is a lot of work that has been actually accomplished here. In terms of legislation, there is what one could call equal citizenship. How did that work develop and what was its theoretical and practical foundation?

EM: The theoretical foundation for the political work done within both of those movements is not queer theory but identity politics. Something that is peculiar to the Scandinavian countries is that there is quite a short distance between certain academics, especially in the social sciences, and the policy makers. For instance, within academic feminism, they were instrumental forwarding many of these equal rights law proposals when it comes to gender. Likewise within the gay and lesbian community that is still fueled by what I would call identity politics and the clear-cut categories of gay and straight. They have been able to make successful political impact precisely because of this strategy. They have made these legislation proposals on the basis that, for instance, gay and lesbians are a minority group that should have equal rights. It has not been made on the basis of queer theory, because that muddles the terrain.

CM: Is it because the figure of the queer is not an "equal" figure in a kind of moral, ethical and social paradigm?

EM: Yes. There is something lascivious about queers in popular culture. People would say that a person that is queer is not morally or ethically sound in a sense. They are not responsible in the same way that a political lesbian or a political gay man would be. The figure of the queer is fundamentally provocative to the policy makers and perhaps to the population at large; it is much more an anarchistic kind of a figure in relation to responsible political work.

CM: It is a politicized figure...

EM: It is not that politicized in Norway. It is more on the lifestyle terrain. Queerness is not so much a political figure here, as in certain cellules of queer activism in the United States.

CM: Is there a theoretical or a public discussion, or both, about this difference?

EM: It is mostly an academic discussion. As I said before, the gay and lesbian movement has been highly critical of the term *queer.* They don't like it; they don't embrace it. And queerness is not highly influential politically. It might have more influence on lifestyles and everyday practices in young people.

CM: How would you explain the rapid historical succession of LGBT legislation in Norway? Is it related to some kind of theoretical framework at all, in terms of gay rights or even women's rights?

EM: Yes. I think the feminist and gay and lesbian politics in Norway have been a success because they have not questioned the theoretical framework. They have made their political claims on the basis of very clear-cut identities, and they have been able to make an argument on the basis of a plight to equality. The feminist movement has said there is such a thing as the category of women, and there are anti-discriminatory laws that should be passed to protect women's rights in terms of work, pregnancy, healthcare, etc. They have been successful in doing that by working within a very traditional framework of feminist theory, and the same goes for gays and lesbians. It is on the basis of the identity of both gays and lesbians and making a plight as a minority asking equal rights, that they have been successful. They are broadening now. There is a new law that is going to be passed, a sort of generalized anti-discriminatory law, where sexual orientation, gender, age, physical impairment, ethnic groups, religion, are all within one same pool, and it is the same for all. What started being a gender issue has become more generalized. It now includes all of the other identity categories.

CM: Do you think that these politics have become part of the establishment?

EM: Yes. They have become part of what we call “State Feminism” or “State Equality.” The Norwegian State is ideologically bound to notions of equality.

CM: It seems like the process of achieving equality of rights has been quite successful here. Have some conflicts arisen from the implementation of these equality laws? What is the challenge in that regard to the gay and lesbian community, after there is equality before the law in Norway?

EM: There has been sort of a “hierarchy of oppression.” I think that most social movements have seen that. In Norway, it started off with gender, but as we have become more of a multicultural society, the questions of race and ethnicity have become more acute. The gay and lesbian movement has also been included in this general drive towards equality of rights.

Of course there have been conflicts. There was, for instance, a gay male academic who contested the gender equality laws in Norway. They tried to use affirmative action in hiring women academics. He sued the Norwegian government in front of the EU Commission, and won. The Norwegian government cannot use preferential treatment to arrive at these equality rights. There has been a certain rivalry between different identity groups as to what is more

important. And this proposal for a new law is a consequence of that. Gender is now on the same level of all the other issues: age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, etc.

CM: Will that lead to the oppression of some specific identities that do not fit amongst those established categories?

EM: Some people say that it has become absurd; that there are so many identity categories now, that next time there will be anti-discriminatory laws for blue eyes or something. On the other hand, if you are going to have laws to protect against discrimination, I think it makes sense to include these different identities. However, there might be an implosion at the end of it all.

CM: Do you find that there is in fact full equality of rights and citizenship when it comes to every day life in schools, the work place, the home, etc? Is it as paradisiacal as it sounds from a legal perspective?

EM: No, it isn't. I think you have to acknowledge that we have had an anti-discriminatory law for homosexuality in Norway since 1971, I think. These laws have been in place for a long time, but no cases have been won. You could say that the importance of these laws is more on the level of the symbolic value of these categories. The law says you should respect these people that belong to these categories, and as such they are important. But when it comes to actually giving them protection under the law, I am a lot more skeptical. I think it urges the population at large not to discriminate against these people, since they have rights. In this sense, it does its work, but that doesn't mean there aren't people who are not homophobic, racist or anti-Muslim in this country. People with physical impairments and people of other ethnic origins have a hard time getting a job in Norway. But I think these laws can get the message across that it is not okay to discriminate against others, and I think that helps.

CM: What is the state of the feminist and the gay and lesbian movements today? Are they working in a parallel way, or are they in confrontation to one another?

EM: It is very hard to talk about the feminist movement today in Norway as a mass movement. It was in the 70s, but today the feminist movement as such is a disseminated kind of organization. The gay and lesbian movement is a parallel group; but even though most feminists tend to be pro-gay, they don't necessarily have harmonized politics. They are two definite movements working side by side, but there is not a mass movement in either area. There are cellules of activism: You have the green feminists, the anti-porn feminists, etc. Certain feminist groups within some of the immigrant population are even vocally anti-gay. It is a much more multifaceted picture. The feminist movement in the 70s and 80s was not particularly pro-gay, and they had to branch out into their own movement.

CM: You mean lesbians within the feminist movement?

EM: Yes. I was an activist in the 70s, and we had to create our own group of lesbian feminists because most of the feminist politics being embraced were very family oriented and we were fundamentally critical of that model. That is why they didn't want to embrace us too openly.

CM: Was it "lesbianizing" feminism too much?

EM: Exactly. They wanted to divorce themselves from that. You still see that in certain areas. Women who call themselves feminists are afraid of being called man-hating lesbians. People like me, who have been part of the lesbian movement from the 70s, are sort of the horror image

of the feminists. I don't particularly see myself as man hating. In fact, in the movement we worked closely with gay men.

CM: That must have been a politically strategic decision in order to advance what they wanted to achieve?

EM: It was difficult, because we were not totally embraced by the feminists who were family oriented, and we were not particularly embraced by some of the gays who were not feminists. There was a lot of friction going on, a lot of positioning. Now the gay and lesbian movement is more cohesive. In the 70s there were much harsher confrontations between the different groups.

CM: In the 70s there wasn't such an emphasis on family values and respectability and other of these moral/ethical notions, but it seems like Norway today, or at least the gay and lesbian movement, is fundamentally based on these ideas of family unity. Is there a conflict there?

EM: It is interesting how the question of gay marriage has been such a central issue in the gay and lesbian community. There is a certain miming of the heterosexual family going on in the gay community. On a certain level, it is true that they should have equal rights; on the other hand, it might be a problem, since we are being defined by the heterosexual norms. This is perhaps more true in Scandinavian countries than in some others, where gays tend not to be willing to embrace the overall norm of family values and where gayness, or queerness, is antiestablishment in a certain sense; it is a critique of the heterosexist society.

CM: And at the level of academia and activism, is that critique taking place?

EM: Some of us have voiced critiques of the tendency within the gay community to go “straight.” Not to choose straight partners, but to lead straight lives. Whereas if you take people like Judith Halberstam, who talks for another form of temporality and another form of understanding of location, you see that there are certain ways in which the gay and lesbian community has a history of greater freedom when it comes to sexual practices and to individual life paths that are not necessarily conforming to general values in society; respectable and bourgeois values of conduct. You have people like Leo Bersani, who wants to be a *homo*. He doesn't want to become a housebroken general citizen, but one that embraces his own liberty as a life project.

CM: It seems to me that this radicalization could only re-happen, or those ideas could only be re-embraced in a country like Norway, where the law is already in place. In the United States right now there is so much inequality and the conversation is so polarized, that even Judith Butler has said that she is really not interested in marriage; but until it is achieved, she has to keep her mouth shut. Could that happen here?

EM: It is a paradox. On one hand, you could say it is radical that you have equal marriage; even though that might change, you never know. To have equality between gays and lesbians and the rest of the straight population is good in many ways, especially for kids growing up in these

kinds of families. On the other hand, some claim that that will put some kind of pressure on the gay community to become too responsible, too controlled within these parameters. But I still think that you could find pockets of gay life that are outrageous and "out-there." Nonetheless, these are not the kind of practices that are being forwarded by the gay and lesbian movement.

There is a dilemma: Should we all fall in line or should we embrace other kinds of lifestyles that are not as palatable for the community at large? I think that you could find both here; but for the most part, I would say we are very disciplined, very responsible, and very proper.

CM: In broad terms, where does sexual difference lie in Norway today?

EM: Sexual difference?

CM: Yes.

EM: Between the genders?

CM: Yes, and also between different sexual orientations.

EM: I think there are parts of the gay community that are very frivolous when it comes to sexuality, still after AIDS.

CM: What do you mean by frivolous?

EM: In their sexual conduct; having multiple partners, having a more liberal view on sexual practices, and I think that you could find much more of a difference according to gender than to sexual orientation. I think most lesbians behave like most heterosexual women; that is, they tend more towards monogamy, towards having longer relationships. Although this is changing. Women are being more frivolous as well, both heterosexual and lesbians. I think that is a general rule. I always say that in Norway the people who have the most sex are gay men. The ones who have the least are the lesbians, because it takes two women, and I think men are more sexually active in Norway today than women are. There are exceptions, of course. There are heterosexual women who are "out-there," and there are also a few lesbians who are "out-there." I think gay men have a much more practical way of organizing their lives. They tend to stay in longer relationships, but they have sexual partners on the side. That is almost impossible in the lesbian community, where you go from serial monogamy to…

CM: From serial monogamy to serial monogamy? (*Laughter*)

EM: From one partner to the next, and I think that heterosexuals also have some of the same problems. They tend to go for longer relationships, yet both partners stray. It used to be the men, but now women do too. In Norway, especially in the cities, there is a 50% divorce rate.

CM: Regardless of gender?

EM: No, I don't know the statistics on gay marriage. But when it comes to heterosexual couples, about 50% of all couples divorce within 5 years.

CM: I am interested in two categories that perhaps could be still more problematic here: The category of the transsexual and the intersexual. What is your opinion on this?

EM: I have to be opinionated about it. I have not done any research on these issues, but transsexualism in Norway is still very controversial. The whole question of gender bending in

any kind of way is problematic for society at large. We have a hard time dealing with it. Even though transsexuals are part of the media at times and they certainly have their own movement, they are still looked upon as very marginal. The whole question of gender regimes in Norway is very traditional, very set, and that is a problem.

CM: You mean it is more of a problem at the level of the street?

EM: Yes. I think it is a problem at the level of the street, and it is a problem at the level of politics. Transgender people have a hard time fitting into the identity politics of the gay and lesbian movement. Even though they are quasi included, they fall between the cracks, and I think there is a lot of prejudice in the community at large against any kind of gender bending.

CM: From a political science perspective, how do you see the relationship between the sexual movements with the development of the welfare State?

EM: The welfare State has been an arena where you could front these proposals, and there is a general acceptance of the principle of equality between classes, cultures, sexes, etc. That has been important, but I think that the feminist movement was a lot more important of a precedent for the sexual movement. The general climate created in the country by the feminist movement made it possible for gays and lesbians to follow in its wake, even though there were some conflicts between them. A certain joining of those forces has made it possible in Norway to get this kind of legislation passed.

CM: Do you think that those movements are responsible for shaping a political identity in regard also to the welfare State?

EM: Yes, and I think the welfare State has changed with feminism and the sexual revolution in the 70s.

CM: So they are not one, they are parallel…

EM: It is perhaps more intricate than that. They are intertwined. The welfare State made it possible for certain proposals to be passed, and there was a general openness towards social reforms that made it possible. In Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Prime Minister, was very instrumental in opening up the notion of equal rights for women, and there were quite a few laws that were passed at the time. I think the gay and lesbian community mimed the strategy established for many of the social policies that were made in the name of feminism, when they proposed their own laws for sexual rights.

CM: What is the challenge today?

EM: There are many challenges today. One of them is that most people who live queer lives are not engaged in any social movements. The projects have become individualized, and that is a challenge. If the Right, the Christian Right and the movement that is trying to reverse the marriage law, gain momentum, it might be hard for the gay community, lesbians and queer people to mobilize in response to that or to counter that. Even though there are homophobic attitudes, in general most people live fairly happy lives; but they don't know that it can change and I think that is a challenge here.

CM: And it can change from the political opposition?

EM: It could get worse. A movement could gain momentum to reverse the rights that have been obtained.

CM: So at this point they should not be taken for granted?

EM: No. I think that is a challenge for gay, lesbian and queer people in Norway.

CM: With the rise of the right wing?

EM: Yes, they are very active, and they are in the Church. A part of the far Right and the Christians have united in their fight against homosexuality and gay rights. And I think we should not underestimate their power.

CM: A Swedish researcher I talked to told me that, in fact, the greatest challenge to the Swedish model right now is the issue of immigration. It has changed the way that they, the Swedish, see themselves in regard to these issues. Some things have started to change in the perception of homosexuals as a minority as well. Is that something that could resonate here?

EM: Yes. It seems, for instance, that the rights of immigrant and people of other ethnic minorities are gaining center stage, and in certain ways rightly so. But there are also very strong anti-gay attitudes within those groups. A lot of gays and lesbians on the left would be very supportive of the plight of the immigrants, but that would not be reciprocal. There is a conflict here, where religion, ethnicity, class and all kinds of things play a role.

CM: There are always hierarchies of discrimination, I suppose.

EM: Hierarchies of oppression.

CM: That is very strong in the States with the election of Obama. Most of the gay community voted for Obama, but there was this backlash from the African American community against gay marriage in California.

EM: Yes. And the same thing is happening here. The people that search to better the conditions of immigrants and ethnic groups that are experiencing discrimination, would not support us when push comes to shove. In fact, many of these groups would support the far Right and the Christians in reversing the marriage law. It is a quite complicated field, and we should not take anything for granted.

CM: The battle has not been won in this sense.

EM: Absolutely not. But on the other hand, I grew up in the 70s as a young lesbian coming out, and that was a totally different climate. I have a 19-year-old son. He is gay and he has a different world to work in, and I choose to call that progress.

CM: And was your coming out a political project in a way, as opposed to his issue?

EM: Absolutely, it was a political project.

CM: So that is indicative of the times.

EM: Yes, but I think there is a lot more personal freedom today than I could enjoy back then, which is good, and let's hope that it will carry on.