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JUDITH OKELY – PIONEERING FEMINIST ACADEMIC

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I first met Judith at an International Gender Studies seminar in Oxford during the mid-2000s. She had just retired from academia and settled in Oxford where she had done her undergraduate studies in the 1960s. I was in somewhat similar circumstances, having recently moved from a research position at the University of Leiden to the familiarity of Oxford where I had done my D.Phil. I was searching for a new academic position and having mentioned that to Judith, she very readily gave me advice. She could see I was a neophyte re. the UK academic job scene having worked primarily abroad.

Judith had extensive exposure to how things worked in UK universities having studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) as an undergraduate in Oxford. Judith's integrity and fierce independence led her to becoming the first female member in the hitherto male preserve of the Oxford Union, while she was an undergrad. She went on to Cambridge to do a post-grad Certificate in Social Anthropology. She obtained her first academic appointment at Durham University teaching Social Anthropology. As a good raconteur she had amusing stories about what a lonely, awkward experience it was to be the only academic female staff member. Thereafter she moved on to teaching at Edinburgh University, Essex University and finally Hull University, where she became a professor.

Judith had a great sense of humour and was an astute observer of the sub-text of sexual innuendo and power plays going on in departmental politics, which made some of the male members of staff uncomfortable. The 'alpha males' were generally not amongst her friends, which may help to explain why she was slow to obtain a professorship.

Judith was an original thinker. Researching Travellers and Gypsies in her home country was highly innovative, stretching the boundaries of anthropological enquiry in terms of eschewing exotic faraway lands. Here was another world in the midst of middle England, just off the M4. Her empathy and professionalism in documenting Traveller and Gypsy life proved

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to be very important in facilitating progressive UK government policies and court cases related to Traveller and Gypsy issues.

Just a couple months before her death, Judith and I went to see the documentary film *Soundtrack to a coup d'Etat* about the CIA overthrow of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo during the 1960s. Malcolm X featured in the film quite prominently among the African-Americans who protested against the death of Lumumba. He had visited Oxford soon after his trip to the Congo. Judith had met him then in her capacity as a member of the Oxford Union hosting his visit. She sat transfixed next to me watching the screen in the darkened cinema theatre, reliving her days as a 1960s rebel. I think she never stopped being a 1960s feminist questing liberation.

Her career and empathy inspired innumerable students and readers of her monographs and academic publications. During her retirement, she carried on mentoring students, sending emails to young students who wrote to her for advice. Her pioneering contribution to British anthropology will live on. I feel very fortunate to have known Judith Okely as a good friend and fellow academic.

Bibliography

Grimonprez, Johan (dir.) 2024. *Soundtrack to a coup d'Etat*. Onomatopée Films and Warboys Films

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