

Oct. 1. Women's History; Gender and Textiles

Discussion #8 : Women's History, Gendered History, and Joan Scott

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The introduction of women's experience into historical study has developed in three phases. The first effort was to recover the lives of the neglected, to replace stories of great powerful men with a focus on women. In this phase of women's history, "herstory" was parallel to social history in general. The recovery of sources, writing of biographies, studies of specific groups of women, all are very valuable. The danger is of separating off women's history into a separate category, easily ignored by the male-dominated profession, or of artificially splitting spheres of family and home from action in public life. Mere "affirmative action" history is no help, too, if it only celebrates heroes, and is not critical about its subjects.

Phase two, examining political movements related to women's issues, overcomes part of these limitations. In much of the world, especially outside Europe, the first voices arguing for women's liberation were mainly male (China, Russia), because they were the dominant literate elite. The suffragist movement in England and the U.S. gets a lot of attention, but in periods of political opening elsewhere, similar demands appeared (Sharon Sievers on Meiji democratic women's movements; Chris Gilmartin and Kay Johnson on women in 20th century Chinese political movements). Politics reintroduces human agency into the discussion. Too much focus on exploitation (real as it is), so characteristic of phase one work, turns women only into passive victims of male oppression. It also only reinforces a liberal progressive ideology which Americans fall into so easily: "things were terrible in the past, but we're beyond all that".

Phase three changes the subject from "women" as a group to "gender" as a historical category. The argument is that both men and women in their intimate and public relations are shaped by the socially constructed concept of gender, independently of biological givens. Using gender as the analytical tool opens up all of traditional historical study to re-examination. It means a new focus on the language of historical texts. It also introduces heavy doses of theory, especially literary criticism and post-structuralism, into the seat-of-the-pants historian's working style.

Each stage produces a different form of historical work: mostly biographical in the first, political in the second, and heavily theoretical and discourse-oriented in the third.

Women's historians grew progressively more ambitious, moving from the recovery of individual lives to challenging structures of the entire historical profession. Scott argues that only a broad theoretical attack can transform how men and women think about the past. But the cost of more theory is alienation from the public, which prefers to see people rather than discourses.

Scott argues that concepts from Derrida and Foucault can be applied creatively to reinvigorate historical work. Her main point is that gender distinctions are treated as naturally given binary polarities. Derrida undermines the idea of natural polarities, leading to a stress on difference, the dependence of each pole on the other, and a strategy of reading that aims to "deconstruct" conventional assumptions. But Derrida (insofar as I understand him) is actually much more radical than Scott would like. His aim is to

undermine not just male-female distinctions, but all distinctions, including that between "signifier" (words in documents) and "signified" (the "real world" of living human beings). He wants to make all texts problematic, and asks us to spend the rest of our time just producing more texts. Doesn't this destroy the basic goal of an historian, who naively assumes that she is trying to reconstruct the past lived experience of human beings? In effect, phase three of this project turns around and destroys the aims of phase one: the women "subjects" reintroduced into history are now driven out of it again.

Foucault is, perhaps, less radical. He historicizes the invention of the human subject by dating it to the radical shift in discourse around the late eighteenth century. Still, he, too, is hostile to conventional history: his discourses are static, "deep structures" of polarities defining their fields. Only abrupt disjunctures mark fundamental shifts; the abrupt disjunctures themselves are unexplained. Classic intellectual history, that looks for influences, continuities, and evolving dialogues between thinkers, is rejected. What is left here for the thinking human agent? Oddly enough, Foucault (who vehemently denies that he is a structuralist) seems to share a lot with Levi-Strauss in hostility to the diachronic (linear narratives presuming that a single individual or collective agent persists through time).

Scott wants this project to be "political", too. She has a deep commitment to ending the oppression of women. How will this new theory help such a project? Only if "political" has a very special meaning. The standard meaning, of ordinary people taking action to change what they see as unjust social and economic conditions, defines the collective action tradition of research from which Scott came. Her first book, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux*, was done as a student of Charles Tilly, and she is grateful to E.P. Thompson's inspiration. It shows in a well-documented, straightforward fashion how French glassworkers in one town developed into socialist activists. The writing style is plain and clear. So is her second work, co-authored with Louise Tilly, on *Women, Work, and Family*. (She partly repudiates this work in her third book: p. 84, p.41) The third book is full of jargon, not at all easy to follow, though admittedly much easier to read than Foucault and Derrida themselves. But how can this style inform any "politics" that non-academics will understand? Isn't there the danger of creating a cult of radical intellectuals who write and talk only to each other? Won't this lead just to further isolation of Women's Studies from the mainstream? Or can the genuine insights of this theoretical movement be translated into real historical work that will have a broader appeal? In other words, "where's the beef"? Most historians are not in principle hostile to theory, I think, but they are pragmatic about it. I want to see an abstract model used for analysis of a specific situation before I can judge its validity. Mao Zedong, well-known pragmatist philosopher, used to say (about Marxist dogmatists): "theory is like an arrow. These people just want to stroke the arrow and say 'nice arrow'. The purpose of an arrow, however, is to hit the target".

Women's Studies (like STS?), as yet, is a topic, but not a discipline. It has many approaches, a large number of new insights, but no controlling criteria of what counts as high quality, no consensus of which directions are most promising. A lot of important work has been produced in phases one and two. Phase three has yet to produce convincing historical work (whatever the contributions so far to psychology or literary criticism). The attractiveness of Carol Gilligan, the misreadings of originally faulty data, only indicate how limited is the influence of historical standards in the field at large. Let's

not make too great claims for history, however. As a discipline, it faces the danger of collapse from fragmentation, overspecialization, being captured by fads, losing its core principles. But there are some inherited standards and some idea of what the "classics" are. Will this heavy theoretical dose make us lose touch with the core of the discipline? Joan Scott is about the only person who could convince me that reading Derrida is worthwhile. She has to be taken seriously, but also with a heavy dose of anxiety. Laurel Ulrich approaches women's experience from, apparently, a very different angle. There is no explicit theory here; apparently "just the facts" recording of the experience of one woman's life as seen through her diary. But the book is very carefully constructed. Ulrich brings in a great deal of social history beyond Martha Ballard's own experience by extending her reach to the men in the town, medical history, religious and political affairs, etc. Even though only faint echoes of the larger world reach the diary, Ulrich demonstrates that every life is part of a bigger society. Did she need any theory to do this? Would she satisfy Scott's injunction to go beyond "herstory" and challenge patriarchal assumptions? Which is the more satisfying work of history, or can the two coexist?

Select Bibliography of Books on Women and Gendered History

China

Honig, Emily, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919-49*
Honig, Emily, and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s*
Johnson Kay, *Women, the family and Peasant Revolution in China*
Wolf, Margery, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China*
Yue, Daiyun, *To The Storm: The Odyssey of a Revolutionary Chinese Woman*
Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, Tyrene White, eds., *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State* (Harvard 1994)

Japan

Bernstein, Gail Lee, *Haruko's World: A Japanese Farm Woman and her Community*
Dalby, Liza, *Geisha*
Hane, Mikiso, *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan* (chapter on factory girls)
Ishimoto, Shidzue, *Facing Two Ways: The Story of My Life*
McClellan, Edwin, *Woman in the Crested Kimono: The Life of Shibue Io and her Family*
Sievers, Sharon L., *Flowers in Salt: The Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan*
Smith, Robert J., and Ella Wiswell, *The Women of Suye Mura*
Tsurumi, Patricia, *Japanese Factory Girls*

Europe and United States

Cowan, Ruth Schwartz, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology*

Demos, John, *Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and the Life Course in American History*

Deutsch, Sarah, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an American Frontier*

Kammen, Michael, *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the U.S.* (article by Carl Degler on "The Family")

Keyssar, Alexander, "Widowhood in 18c. Massachusetts: A problem in the history of the family"

Stone, Lawrence, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (see review by Alan Macfarlane in *History and Theory*, 18 (1979), 103-26.

Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* [1987]

Teaching Guides and Bibliographic Surveys

Gerda Lerner, *Teaching Women's History*, (AHA pamphlet, 1981)

Organization of American Historians, *Restoring Women to History: Teaching Packets for integrating women's history into courses on Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East*, (OAH, 1988)