

Student: (Jennifer Yum):
ULRICH, BRAY, SCOTT

In *The Midwife's Tale*, Laurel Ulrich uses the writings of Martha Ballard as the central source in her study of New England in the late 1700s. Interestingly, she does not build her analysis around town records or government documents but a personal diary that was not intended for public view. For Ulrich, it is this very dullness, "the exhaustive, repetitious dailiness" of the diary that makes her work novel (9). She argues that it is the historian's task not only to examine, but reconstruct history. By reading into the broader context of the diary, she uses the everyday accounts of a New England midwife to cast light on larger themes in the 18th century history. Similarly, while reading *The Age of Hometown*, I was reminded of Braudel and Thompson in Ulrich's reference to historical events as "points where the silence is broken by something that is in the regular flow of common life. The obvious task of the historian is to connect electricity and thunder"(25).

Ulrich openly admits that Martha Ballard did not play a role in town politics. She does not look for evidence that would prove the hitherto downplayed role of female influence in local male politics. Still, from the sources she has available, she argues that women in Hallowell still had a "community life. The base of that community life was a gender division of labor that gave them responsibility for particular tasks, products, and forms of trade" (76). For example, Martha frequently discusses medicine and textiles in her entries. Ulrich in fact notes that "they were two strands of a broad and largely invisible local economy managed by women" (84). Joan Scott would commend Ulrich's reasoning. In one of her more positive assessments of the "her-story" approach Scott notes that historians who see "personal, subjective experience" as no less important than "public and political activities" "establish not only the legitimacy of narratives about women but the general importance of gender difference in the conceptualization and organization of social life" (Scott, 20).

Ulrich also suggests that the diary, not conventional documents, may be the only option to understand women's lives during Martha's time period. Women did not exist in the town records. Yet contrasting this neglect with Martha's accounts, where women too were active as healers, mothers and workers, Ulrich makes the reader think about "the patriarchal organization of society as well as the perishable and invisible nature of their [women's] work" (100). By reading this section, I realized the usefulness of looking at personal, unofficial accounts in understanding concepts that were poorly documented. The Foster rape case is an excellent example of where court documents consist merely of the "formal indictment, an expense account, and a verdict" (115). Luckily for the historian, Martha's account is a valid surviving testimony; it is the crucial piece of evidence for knowing what really may have happened.

In *The Age of Hometown*, Ulrich reiterates what has become a reoccurring theme of this course: "the causes of a nation's greatness had never been recorded, perhaps never could be, certainly not in the deeds of famous men" (15). As a social historian, she hints at a potential weakness of her field. Social historians risk "substituting one form of exclusion for another, freezing people into a collective anonymity that denies either agency or the capacity to change" (20). Joan Scott says something similar

in her critique of gender: “social history made room for the study of women by particularizing and pluralizing the subjects of historical narratives—no single universal figure could possibly represent the diversity of humankind” (22). What I found to be Scott’s most effective critique of feminist history, however, was that of the “causal” approach: “it theorizes about the nature of phenomena or realities, seeking an understanding of how and why these take the form they do” (31).

Does Francesca Bray fall into this category? Is her analysis teleological? Unlike Ulrich, Bray covers a wide span of time—nearly 800 years. In our reading, she examines how, in China, “the shift in perceptions of gender roles even among ordinary people was intimately bound up with women’s loss of status as active subjects” (263). She establishes that during the Song, nearly all textiles were simple weaves made by rural women. There were several turning points, however. First was the demand for a more complex weaves (207); second the cotton boom. Interestingly, Bray employs climactic and geographical factors in order to explain the interregional division of labor that soon developed between North and South (Annales?) Another was commercialization and the role merchants who created an oppressive “putting out system” by the late Ming. Most important is that Bray takes gender as seriously as class in her study. In doing so, she leaves the reader with a new historical interpretation of Chinese women’s status throughout history. In the end, Bray challenges the May Fourth Thesis quite effectively. By the end of the Qing, women had lost their “natural place” as weavers. Their initially reproductive roles were perceived as productive. Focusing her analysis on “representations,” she proves how over the long duree, women no longer played a participatory role in the household; rather, they were reduced to “separation and dependence” (263).