

Student B:

Individually, I found both readings fascinating and provocative. I was impressed by Ulrich's ability to reconstruct large, previously unknown sources of a historical time and place using fragments from a diary. Ulrich exposes two aspects of early New England life that remain unseen in more official, usually male-authored sources: the "largely invisible" local economic structure of all types of goods and services, and the life of women in general. Though women constitute half of the history of the period, Ulrich only succeeds in reconstructing their lives by interpreting a terse diary, a feat which reminded me of Braudel's evocation of the lives of the Mediterranean poor through occasional official references and deduction from economic statistics.

I found that Bray's use of cross-cultural evidence, whether in the form of economic facts, social trends, or bias in historical writing, added great strength to her arguments. Methodologically, *Technology and Gender* fluently uses *Annales*-style analysis (indeed, one of the articles which appears in modified form in the book was first published in *Annales*) to great effect. Structures, conjunctures, and events such as the silk market (or the natural resources that enabled it), late imperial economic trends, and the end of the Song dynasty are all treated extensively and are all used together to construct convincing arguments. Individual events and people are deemphasized, except to give examples of general trends. I somehow found Bray's use of events and people as anecdotes far more effective than Genovese's, but I'm not sure why this is.

I found both authors' use of gender as a historical category to be the most interesting and salient aspect of the week's reading. Gender was used in both analyses as a social force, analogous to economic trends, value systems, religions, etc. This was made especially clear because both readings considered a time period around a major event (the American Revolution and the end of the Song dynasty), when many social forces interacted to produce 'history' which Bray and Ulrich then analyze, laying emphasis on the role of gender and its interaction with other forces. As an example of this, Ulrich notes how a "collective [female] consciousness" was formed around the time of the revolution, as politics came to the fore in New England society as an important and exclusively male activity. Gender was the category that structured those who did and did not participate in politics. Bray beautifully illustrates how gender and cultural and economic factors combine in the role of dowries in the rise of female subjugation through the Ming and Qing dynasties. Dowries were not primarily a symbol of female subjugation in the Song dynasty and before largely because women played a primary economic role in families through textile manufacturing and helped provide their dowries, either in kind or in profit. When cotton began to sweep China in trade and fashion, women in individual households shifted towards more menial textile jobs for lower profits and could no longer contribute towards their dowries in the same way, which helped the dowry become an important symbol of gender inequality. Also, when Bray notes that textile production went from being women's work to being men's work (in aspects which required skilled labor) to undergoing "feminization" during the Industrial Revolution, one sees

gender as a neutral category describing which group of people performs a certain social role. Lastly, both readings demonstrated how gender often (usually?) functions as a social force or division, without the implications of superiority or subjugation that the very word "gender" evokes today. Though this seems like an obvious point, I found it important because contemporary America is obsessed with the latter idea of gender. As Bray notes, both (prototypical) feminists and the ideas they fight see gender as a fundamentally non-neutral power relation. I wonder if subjugation seems to be attached to gender today because of the maternal and sexual roles assigned to females in today's culture, not purely because of their status as females.

Ballard's New England and late imperial China, along with Thompson's England, struck me as strangely similar in their social divisions which developed alongside commercialization, industrialization, and modernization. As weaving becomes less local and medicine becomes a professional domain in Ballard's New England (though these developments are mostly referred to as future events), midwives begin to lose their status as valid social healers and weaving is no longer restricted to homes, leading to fewer opportunities and greater subjugation of women. Bray describes how emergent "petty capitalist" behavior and industrialization led to exploitation of workers who would previously have manufactured textiles at home, and helped strip women of their status as productive workers on equal footing with men. And in Thompson's account, the loss of an idyllic local economy in which weaving is done in individual homes is a direct result of industrialization. Though Bray cautions that trends such as industrialization => greater gender divisions must be examined in the context of all social changes, the similarity between the three situations (and further ones cited by Bray) is striking. If this is the kind of trend examined by Marx, I can see why he thought that capitalism was fundamentally divisive and exploitative. I'd be interested to know if there are any glaring exceptions to the generalization that modernization and industrialization result in the same kinds of divisiveness, poverty, and misery. If not, woe to industrializing countries today.

Both works reminded me of the extreme subjectivity of recorded history, whether primary or secondary. The world evoked by Ulrich is almost entirely absent from the writings of period males, probably simply because they did not consider women and the local economy worthy of historical note, and chose to focus on other people and structures instead. And Bray reminds us that our biases constantly inform historical writing and our interpretation of sources, citing the shared Western and (modern) Chinese preoccupation with the powerless and caged late imperial Chinese woman as a stereotype shaping the interpretation of historical evidence. In this light, doing Annales-style history seems dangerous because it relies so heavily on interpretations that will be necessarily formed by a historian's concept of what is important and interesting. And though we attempt to keep valid records and address all important contemporary questions in our own journals and newspapers, our records may turn out to be fundamentally deficient to a historian of the future.

On a similar note, both readings gave me a sense of the tremendous need for 'women's history', both as history using gender and as history using

sources written by and dealing with women. Womens' history is (I think) both of these kinds of history, which have been largely neglected before the second half of the twentieth century. Somewhat naively, I hadn't realized the extent to which half of humanity is largely hidden from historical view, in terms of what's been recorded, who the authors of historical documents have been, and what questions have been addressed in the study of history. The extent to which Bray and Ulrich are able to examine mostly unexplored fields of knowledge is telling, as is their necessary reliance on scattered and fragmentary evidence. I suppose I had previously known that women are grossly neglected in historical studies, but not that they are often almost invisible in the records that make up history itself and in the priorities of historians of the past.