

Women's History

What one wants, I thought—and why does not some brilliant student at Newnham or Girton supply it?—is a mass of information; at what age did she marry; how many children had she as a rule; what was her house like; had she a room to herself; did she do the cooking; would she be likely to have a servant? All these facts lie somewhere, presumably, in parish registers and account books; the life of the average Elizabethan woman must be scattered about somewhere, could one collect it and make a book of it. It would be ambitious beyond my daring, I thought, looking about the shelves for books that were not there, to suggest to the students of those famous colleges that they should rewrite history, though I own that it often seems a little queer as it is, unreal, lop-sided; but why should they not add a supplement to history? calling it, of course, by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety?

VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A Room of One's Own*

During the last decade, Virginia Woolf's call for a history of women—written more than fifty years ago—has been answered.¹ Inspired directly or indirectly by the political agenda of the women's movement, historians have not only documented the lives of average women in various historical periods but they have charted as well changes in the economic, educational, and political positions of women of various classes in city and country and in nation-states. Bookshelves are being filled with biographies of forgotten women, chronicles of feminist movements, and the collected letters of female authors; the book titles treat subjects as disparate as suf-

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age and birth control. Journals have appeared that are devoted exclusively to women's studies and to the even more specialized area of women's history.² And, at least in the United States, there are major conferences devoted entirely to the presentation of scholarly papers on the history of women.³ All of this adds up to what is justifiably termed "the new knowledge about women."

The production of this knowledge is marked by remarkable diversity in topic, method, and interpretation, so much so that it is impossible to reduce the field to a single interpretive or theoretical stance. Not only is a vast array of topics studied, but in addition, on the one hand, many case studies, and, on the other hand, large interpretive overviews, which neither address one another nor a similar set of questions. Moreover, women's history does not have a long-standing and definable historiographic tradition within which interpretations can be debated and revised. Instead, the subject of women has been either grafted on to other traditions or studied in isolation from them. While some histories of women's work, for example, address contemporary feminist questions about the relationship between wage-earning and status, others frame their studies within the context of debates among Marxists and between Marxists and modernization theorists about the impact of industrial capitalism.⁴ Reproduction covers a vast terrain in which fertility and contraception are variously studied. Sometimes they are treated within the confines of historical demography as aspects of the "demographic transition." Alternatively they are viewed within the context of discussions about controlling political analyses by Malthusian political economists and socialist labor leaders, or within the very different framework of evaluations of the impact of nineteenth-century "ideology of domesticity" on the power of women in their families. Yet another approach stresses feminist debates about sexuality and the history of women's demands for the right to control their own bodies. Additionally, some Marxist-feminists have redefined reproduction as the functional equivalent of production in an effort to incorporate women into the corpus of Marxist theory.⁵ In the area of politics, investigations have sought to demonstrate simply that women were to be found "in public," or to illustrate the historical incompatibility between feminist claims, on the one hand, and the structure and ideology of organized trade unions and political parties, on the other hand (the "failure" of socialism, for example, to accommodate feminism). Another quite different approach to politics examines the inferior organization of women's political movements as a way of documenting the existence of a distinctively female culture.⁶

More than in many other areas of historical inquiry, women's his-

tory is characterized by extraordinary tensions: between practical politics and academic scholarship; between received disciplinary standards and interdisciplinary influences; between history's atheoretical stance and feminism's need for theory. Feminist historians feel these tensions in many ways, perhaps most acutely as they try to identify the presumed audiences for their work. The disparate nature of these audiences can lead to uneven and confusing arguments in individual books and essays and it makes impossible the usual kind of synthetic essay on the state of the field.⁷

What is possible, instead, is an attempt to tease out from this vast accumulation of writings some insight into the problems historians face as they produce new knowledge about women. For whatever the topical range and variety, there is a common dimension to the enterprise of these scholars of different schools. It is to make women a focus of inquiry, a subject of the story, an agent of the narrative—whether that narrative is a chronicle of political events (the French Revolution, the Swing riots, World War I or II) and political movements (Chartism, utopian socialism, feminism, women's suffrage), or a more analytically cast account of the workings or unfoldings of large-scale processes of social change (industrialization, capitalism, modernization, urbanization, the building of nation-states). The titles of some of the books that launched the women's history movement in the early 1970s explicitly conveyed their authors' intentions: those who had been "Hidden from History" were "Becoming Visible."⁸ Although recent book titles announce many new themes, the mission of their authors remains to construct women as historical subjects. That effort goes far beyond the naïve search for the heroic ancestors of the contemporary women's movement to a reevaluation of established standards of historical significance. It culminates in the set of questions raised so tellingly by Woolf: can a focus on women "add a supplement to history" without also "rewriting history"? Beyond that, what does the feminist rewriting of history entail?

These questions have established the framework for debate and discussion among historians of women during the past fifteen years. Although there are clear lines of difference discernible, they are better understood as matters of strategy than as fundamental divides. Each has particular strengths and limits, each addresses the difficulty of writing women into history in a somewhat different way. The cumulative effect of these strategies has been the creation of a new field of knowledge marked not only by tensions and contradictions but also by an increasingly complex understanding of what the project of "rewriting history" entails.

Not only has that understanding emerged from debates internal to

the field of women's history; it has also been shaped in relation to the discipline of history itself. As feminists have documented the lives of women in the past, provided information that challenged received interpretations of particular periods or events, and analyzed the specific conditions of women's subordination, they have encountered the powerful resistance of history—as a disciplined body of knowledge and as a professional institution. Meeting this resistance has been an occasion variously for anger, retreat, and the formulation of new strategies. It has also provoked analyses of the deeply gendered nature of history itself. The entire process has generated a search for terms of criticism, conceptual reorientations, and theory that are the preconditions for feminist rewritings of history.

Much of the search has revolved around the issue of woman as a subject, that is as an active agent of history. How could women achieve the status of subjects in a field that subsumed or ignored them? Would making women visible suffice to rectify past neglect? How could women be added to a history presented as a universal human story exemplified by the lives of men? Since the specificity or particularity of women already made them unfit representatives of humankind, how could attention to women undercut, rather than reinforce, that notion? The history of women's history during the last decade and a half illustrates the difficulty of finding easy answers to these questions.

In this essay I will examine that history as a way of exploring the philosophical and political problems encountered by the producers of the new knowledge about women. I will draw most heavily on North American scholarship that focuses on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because I am most familiar with it, and because in the United States there has been the fullest elaboration of theoretical debates about women's history.⁹

One approach—the first chronologically—to the problem of constituting women as historical subjects was to gather information about them and write (what some feminists dubbed) “her-story.” As the play on the word “history” implied, the point was to give value to an experience that had been ignored (hence devalued) and to insist on female agency in the making of history. Men were but one group of actors; whether their experiences were similar or different, women had to be taken explicitly into account by historians.

“Her-story” has had many different uses. Some historians gather evidence about women to demonstrate their essential likeness as historical subjects to men. Whether they uncover women participating in major political events or write about women's political action on

their own behalf, these historians attempt to fit a new subject—women—into received historical categories, interpreting their actions in terms recognizable to political and social historians. One example of this approach looks at a women's political movement from the perspective of its rank-and-file members rather than its leaders. In the best traditions of the social histories of labor (which were inspired by the work of E. P. Thompson), Jill Liddington and Jill Norris offer a sensitive and illuminating account of working-class women's participation in the English suffrage campaign. Their material, drawn largely from Manchester records and from oral histories they collected, documents the involvement of working-class women in the struggle to win the vote (previous histories described it as almost entirely a middle-class movement) and links demands by these women for suffrage to their work and family lives and to the activities of trade union and Labor Party organizers. The predominance and wisdom of the Pankhurst wing of the movement is called into question for its elitism and its insistence on female separatism (a position rejected by the majority of suffragettes).¹⁰ A book on the history of the French women's suffrage movement by Steven Hause offers another illustration. The author interprets the weakness and small size of the movement (in comparison with its English and American counterparts) as the product of the ideologies and institutions of French Catholicism, the legacy of Roman law, the conservatism of French society, and the peculiar political history of French republicanism, especially the Radical Party during the Third Republic.¹¹

Another strategy associated with “her-story” takes evidence about women and uses it to challenge received interpretations of progress and regress. In this regard an impressive mass of evidence has been compiled to show that the Renaissance was not a renaissance for women,¹² that technology did not lead to women's liberation either in the workplace or at home,¹³ that the “Age of Democratic Revolutions” excluded women from political participation,¹⁴ that the “afflictive nuclear family” constrained women's emotional and personal development,¹⁵ and that the rise of medical science deprived women of autonomy and a sense of feminine community.¹⁶

A different sort of investigation, still within the “her-story” position, departs from the framework of conventional history and offers a new narrative, different periodization, and different causes. It seeks to illuminate the structures of ordinary women's lives as well as those of notable women, and to discover the nature of the feminist or female consciousness that motivated their behavior. Patriarchy and class are usually assumed to be the contexts within which nineteenth- and twentieth-century women defined their experience, and moments of

cross-class collaboration among women directly addressed to women's oppression are stressed. The central aspect of this approach is the exclusive focus on female agency, on the causal role played by women in their history, and on the qualities of women's experience that sharply distinguish it from men's experience. Evidence consists of women's expressions, ideas, and actions. Explanation and interpretation are framed within the terms of the female sphere: by examinations of personal experience, familial and domestic structures, collective (female) reinterpretations of social definitions of women's role, and networks of female friendship that provided emotional as well as physical sustenance.

The exploration of women's culture has led to the brilliant insights of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg about the "female world of love and ritual" in nineteenth-century America,¹⁷ to an insistence on the positive aspects of the domestic ideology of the same period,¹⁸ to a dialectical reading of the relationship between middle-class women's political action and the ideas of womanhood that confined them to domestic realms,¹⁹ and to an analysis of the "reproductive ideology" that constructed the world of the bourgeoisie of northern France in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁰ It has also led Carl Degler to argue that American women themselves created the ideology of their separate sphere in order to enhance their autonomy and status. In his rendering of the story, women created a world neither within nor in opposition to oppressive structures or ideas that others imposed, but to further a set of group interests, defined and articulated from within the group itself.²¹

The "her-story" approach has had important effects on historical scholarship. By piling up the evidence about women in the past it refutes the claims of those who insist that women had no history, no significant place in stories of the past. It goes further, by altering some of the standards of historical significance, asserting that "personal, subjective experience" matters as much as "public and political activities," indeed that the former influence the latter.²² And it demonstrates that sex and gender need to be conceptualized in historical terms, at least if some of the motives for women's actions are to be understood. It establishes not only the legitimacy of narratives about women but the general importance of gender difference in the conceptualization and organization of social life. At the same time, however, it runs several risks. First, it sometimes conflates two separate operations: the valuation of women's experience (considering it worthy of study) and the positive assessment of everything women said or did.²³ Second, it tends to isolate women as a special and separate topic of history, whether different questions are asked, different

categories of analysis offered, or only different documents examined. For those interested there is now a growing and important history of women to supplement and enrich conventional histories, but it can too easily be consigned to the "separate sphere" that has long been associated exclusively with the female sex.

"Her-story" developed in tandem with social history; indeed, it often took its lead from the methods and conceptions developed by social historians. Social history offered important support for women's history in several ways. First, it provided methodologies in quantification, in the use of details from everyday life, and in interdisciplinary borrowings from sociology, demography, and ethnography. Second, it conceptualized as historical phenomena family relationships, fertility, and sexuality. Third, social history challenged the narrative line of political history ("white men make history") by taking as its subject large-scale social processes as they were realized in many dimensions of human experience. This led to the fourth influence, the legitimization of a focus on groups customarily excluded from political history. Social history's story is ultimately about processes or systems (such as capitalism or modernization, depending on the theoretical stance of the historian), but it is told through the lives of particular groups of people who are the ostensible, though not always the actual, subjects of the narrative. Since human relationships of all kinds constitute society, one can study a variety of groups and topics to assess the impact of processes of change and it is relatively easy to extend the list from workers, peasants, slaves, elites, and diverse occupational or social groups to include women. Thus, for example, studies of women's work were undertaken, much as studies of workers had been, to assess capitalism's impact or to understand its operations.

These studies have led to a proliferation of that "mass of information" Virginia Woolf asked for. They have documented the extraordinary range of jobs women held and drawn patterns of female labor force participation according to age, marital status, and household income—belying the notion that one could generalize categorically about women and work. The studies have shown that women formed labor unions and went on strike, albeit at different rates from men; they have examined wage-scales and charted changes in employment opportunities, suggesting the greater importance of demand than supply in structuring female job markets.²⁴

There is as well a rich interpretive debate. Some historians insist that wage-earning enhanced women's status; others that women were

exploited as a cheap labor supply and that, as a result, men perceived women as a threat to the value of their own labor. While some historians point out that family divisions of labor attributed economic value to a wife's domestic role, others have argued that family conflict centered on control of wages. Those who maintain that sex-segregation undermined women's job control and hence their ability to organize and strike are challenged by those who suggest that when women command sufficient resources they engage in collective action identical to men. All of this indicates a need not only to look at women but to analyze their situation in relation to men, to introduce into general studies of labor history questions about family organization and sex-segregated labor markets.²⁵

At the same time that it has enabled documentation of topics like the history of women's work, social history has also raised problems for feminist historians. On the one hand, 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. On the other hand, it reduced human agency to a function of economic forces and made gender one of its many by-products. Women are just one of the groups mobilizing resources, being modernized or exploited, contending for power, or being excluded from a polity. Feminist questions about the distinctiveness of women and the centrality of social relations between the sexes tend to be displaced by or subsumed within economist and behaviorist models.

Both "her-story" and social history establish women as historical subjects; indeed, they are often overlapping or intersecting approaches in the work of historians of women. They differ, however, in their ultimate implications because each is associated with a somewhat different analytic perspective. Social history assumes that gender difference can be explained within its existing frame of (economic) explanation; gender is not an issue requiring study in itself. As a result, social history's treatment of women tends to be too integrationalist. "Her-story," in contrast, assumes that gender explains the different histories of women and men, but it does not theorize about how gender operates historically. For that reason, its stories seem to be uniquely about women and can be read in too separatist a manner.

Attempts to conceptualize gender are, of course, also part of the history of women's history, and they have run through the discussions and debates from the beginning. The late Joan Kelly set as the goal

for women's history the making of sex "as fundamental to our analysis of the social order as other classifications such as class and race."²⁶ For Natalie Zemon Davis the aim was "to understand the significance of the sexes, of gender groups in the historical past."²⁷ This could be accomplished by examining social definitions of gender as they were expressed by men and women, constructed in and affected by economic and political institutions, expressive of a range of relationships that included not only sex but also class and power. The results, it was argued, would throw new light not only on women's experience but on social and political practice as well.

For historians, studying gender has been largely a matter of method so far. It consists of comparing women's situation implicitly or explicitly to men's by focusing on law, prescriptive literature, iconographic representation, institutional structure, and political participation. Temma Kaplan's *Anarchists of Andalusia*, for example, examined the different appeals of that political movement to men and women and the different but complementary ways in which male and female peasants and workers were organized to revolutionary struggle. Her parallel treatment of men and women within anarchism shows how aspects of gender relationships in Andalusian society were used to articulate this particular political movement's attack on capitalism and the state.²⁸ Tim Mason developed important insights about the "reconciliatory function of the family" in Nazi Germany as a result of an inquiry into the position of women and policies toward women. The factual material he gathered about women, who he says were largely "non-actors" in the politics of the period, "provided an exceptionally fruitful new vantage point from which the behaviour of the actors could be—indeed, had to be—reinterpreted."²⁹ Taking Foucault's suggestion (in the *History of Sexuality*) that sexuality was not repressed, but at the center of modern discourses, Judith Warkovitz delved into Josephine Butler's campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts in late Victorian England. She placed her account of this successful woman's movement, aimed at combating the double standard of sexual morality, in the context of economic, social, religious, and political divisions in English society.³⁰ The study establishes the centrality for members of parliament as well as for leading professional figures, male and female, of debates about sexual conduct. These debates were carried on "in public," and resulted in institutional and legal change. Sexual conduct was, therefore, an explicit political issue for at least several decades. The articulation of the meanings of sexual differences was also crucial at certain moments in the French Revolution, when citizenship and political participation were being defined. Darlene Levy and Harriet Applewhite

have studied the proclamations that outlawed women's clubs in 1793 in the name of protecting femininity and domesticity. And Lynn Hunt has called attention to the way the Jacobins used masculinity to represent the sovereign people.³¹

These studies share a common preoccupation with politics and more specifically with governments as the realm in which power relationships are formally negotiated. As such, they indicate the importance of connecting the study of gender with the study of politics. Since political structures and political ideas shape and set the boundaries of public discourse and of all aspects of life, even those excluded from participation in politics are defined by them. "Non-actors," to use Mason's term, are acting according to rules established in political realms; the private sphere is a public creation; those absent from official accounts partook nonetheless in the making of history; those who are silent speak eloquently about the meanings of power and the uses of political authority.

This emphasis brings women's history directly to political historians, those most committed to writing narratives with male subjects at their center. It also begins to develop a way of thinking historically about gender, for it draws attention to the ways in which changes happen in laws, policies, and symbolic representations. Furthermore, it implies a social rather than a biological or characterological explanation for the different behaviors and the unequal conditions of women and men. At the same time, however, it seems to undercut the feminist project by neglecting female agency and by implicitly diminishing the historical importance of personal and social life—family, sexuality, sociability—the very areas in which women have been visible participants.

The contradictions encountered by these various approaches to women's history have not prevented the production of new knowledge. That is evident in the multiplication of women's history jobs and courses and in the thriving journals and book market on which publishers have so readily capitalized. The contradictions have been productive in other ways as well. They have generated a search for resolution, an effort to formulate theories, and have set off reflection on the process of writing history itself. When put into dialogue with one another, these different approaches can move the entire discussion forward. But they can only do so, it seems to me, if the key terms of analysis are examined and redefined. These terms are three: woman as subject, gender, and politics.

Although there is a growing literature (informed especially by psychoanalysis) on the question of the "subject" that ought to be brought to bear on any discussion of women in history, I want to take up only a small point here. That has to do with the issue—made so apparent by the experience of "her-story"—of the particularity of women in relation to the universality of men. The abstract rights-bearing individual who came into being as the focus of liberal political debate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries somehow became embodied in male form and it is his-story that historians have largely told. Feminists' scholarship has repeatedly come up against the difficulty of including women in this universal representation since, as their work reveals, it is a contrast with feminine particularity that secures the universality of the masculine representation.

It seems clear that to conceive of women as historical actors, equal in status to men, requires a notion of the particularity and specificity of all human subjects. Historians cannot use a single, universal representative for the diverse populations of any society or culture without granting differential importance to one group over another.³² Particularity, however, raises questions about collective identities and about whether all groups can ever share the same experience. How do individuals become members of social groups? How are group identities defined and formed? What influences people to act as members of groups? Are processes of group identification common or variable? How do those marked by multiple differences (black women, or women workers, middle-class lesbians, or black lesbian workers) determine the salience of one or another of these identities? Can these differences, which together constitute the meanings of individual and collective identities, be conceived of historically? How could we realize in the writing of history Teresa de Lauretis's suggestion that differences among women are better understood as "differences within women?"³³

If the group or category "women" is to be investigated, then gender—the multiple and contradictory meanings attributed to sexual difference—is an important analytic tool.³⁴ The term "gender" suggests that relations between the sexes are a primary aspect of social organization (rather than following from, say, economic or demographic pressures); that the terms of male and female identities are in large part culturally determined (not produced by individuals or collectivities entirely on their own); and that differences between the sexes constitute and are constituted by hierarchical social structures.

The turn to political history by those interested in writing about gender has introduced notions of contest, conflict, and power into

the process of the cultural determination of the terms of sexual difference. But by studying power as it is exercised by and in relation to formal governmental authorities, historians unnecessarily eliminate whole realms of experience from consideration. This would not happen if a broader notion of "politics" were employed, one that took all unequal relationships as somehow "political" because involving unequal distributions of power, and asked how they were established, refused, or maintained. Here Foucault's discussion of power relations in Volume I of *The History of Sexuality* seems worth quoting at length:

The question that we must address, then, is not: Given a specific state structure, how and why is it that power needs to establish a knowledge of sex? Neither is the question: What over-all domination was served by the concern, evidenced since the eighteenth century, to produce true discourses on sex? Nor is it: What law presided over both the regularity of sexual behavior and the conformity of what was said about it? It is rather: In a specific type of discourse on sex, in a specific form of extortion of truth, appearing historically and in specific places (around the child's body, apropos of women's sex, in connection with practices restricting births and so on), what were the most immediate, the most local power relations at work? How did they make possible these kinds of discourses, and conversely, how were these discourses used to support power relations? . . . In general terms: rather than referring all the infinitesimal violences that are exerted on sex, all the anxious gazes that are directed at it, and all the hiding places whose discovery is made into an impossible task, to the unique form of a great Power, we must immerse the expanding production of discourses on sex in the field of multiple and mobile power relations.³⁵

This approach would end such seeming dichotomies as state and family, public and private, work and sexuality. And it would pose questions about the interconnections among realms of life and social organization now treated quite separately from one another. With this notion of politics, one could offer a critique of history that characterized it not simply as an incomplete record of the past but as a participant in the production of knowledge that legitimized the exclusion or subordination of women.

Gender and "politics" are thus antithetical neither to one another nor to recovery of the female subject. Broadly defined they dissolve distinctions between public and private and avoid arguments about the separate and distinctive qualities of women's character and ex-

perience. They challenge the accuracy of fixed binary distinctions between men and women in the past and present, and expose the very political nature of a history written in those terms. Simply to assert, however, that gender is a political issue is not enough. The realization of the radical potential of women's history comes in the writing of histories that focus on women's experiences *and* analyze the ways in which politics construct gender and gender constructs politics. Feminist history then becomes not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organization of most societies. With this approach women's history critically confronts the politics of existing histories and inevitably begins the rewriting of history.