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FEMINIST HISTORY

JILL MATTHEWS

The impetus behind the new feminist history was initially much the same as that behind nineteenth century bourgeois feminist philanthropy—rescuing our lost sisters. And the purpose was much the same: they called it moral, we called it political. ‘Women have been absent from history—that absence matters—therefore women must be restored to history.’ Of course, if you draw out the analogous syllogism (women have been lost to god—that loss matters morally—therefore women must be restored to god) and relate the two, you get another version of history as god. And in its present stage, it is exactly that equation that feminist history is revealing and deposing. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

The new feminist history emerged almost 20 years ago as an arm of the Women’s Liberation Movement, or second wave feminism, and it continues to serve that political process. Its intellectual siblings were people’s history and the new social history, with both of which it still shares many preoccupations, techniques for discovering and decoding sources, and strategies of interpretation.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the new women historians, many of them trained in traditional academic history departments, became conscious of the absence of women as historical subjects and actors, and went looking for them. Quite quickly they found a few, grazing quietly beside what is now happily known as the male stream. But they didn’t much like the look of them. Initially, these elderly histories of women were put aside and disregarded, not so much for being antiquarian, as for being mere compensation or contribution histories—the terms are Gerda Lerner’s, one of the most prominent of the early feminist historians.¹ Included among compensation and contribution history were the discussions of women in standard biographical, political, social, labour and ideological histories. What was wrong with these histories was that they treated women according to masculine standards of significance; they mostly described what men of the past told women to do, what men of the past thought women ought to be.

Thus, biographies were of women worthies,² exemplars of masculine standards of true womanhood, or exceptional women who were almost as good as men. The political histories showed women acting like men, organising like men to obtain what men considered important—so, most importantly, the feminist campaigns for female suffrage. Alternatively, they showed women acting alongside men—contributing to some more universal social or political movement: male suffrage, or recruiting drives, or the eight hour day for male unionists. That is, women ‘were also there’.³ The labour histories picked up on women only when they were in the same place doing the same sort of work as men, when their militancy was of the same sort as men’s, or indeed, more usually, when they staunchly presented themselves as the wives of the working class. The social histories—both old and new—managed generally to lose women altogether within families, inheritance customs, racial or national groups, communities, peasantries, households, childhood, slavery and so on, except for those moments when women popped up as problems, as deviants—

1. Gerda Lerner, ‘Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges’, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, Nos 1/2, Fall 1975, 5-14.
2. Natalie Zemon Davis, ‘“Women’s History” in Transition: the European Case’, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, Nos 3/4, Spring-Summer 1976, 83.
3. Lerner, as Note 1, 6.

particularly as prostitutes. Finally, there were ideological or representational histories: the views of women published by doctors and prelates, the images of women in paintings and newspapers, the ideals of womanhood in etiquette manuals and novels, the common-sense beliefs about woman's nature and her true sphere. Here again was the history of men disguising itself in women's skirts. Such expressions of attitudes, values and beliefs constituted merely the history of what men thought about women.

All these forms of contribution history were criticised by feminist historians for using traditional conceptual frameworks, for slotting women into the empty spaces of male-defined historical scholarship, and for thus keeping women marginal to the standard canon of masculinist writing. The feminist challenge was not just to add women to that standard canon, to plug up the gaps in existing genres, or to add women's history to the growing list of genres or subgroups of historical writing. Rather, it was to do over the whole enterprise, to recast the discipline of history so that women's lives and experiences were as integral to it as men's. This was the exhortation to feminist history.

As usual, such abstract exhortation was stirring, but working out how to do it was quite another matter. From the wide range of feminist historiographical or methodological writing over the last ten years, about seven basic assumptions seem to have emerged—steps on the way to making the exhortation concrete. These can be briefly listed:

1. gender relations, that is interactions and power balances between and among women and men, constitute one of the central dynamics of all societies;
2. the sexual organisation of society (the sexual division of labour, the distinctions between public and private realms, the relations between procreation and desire, the natures of families) is integral to every conception of social structure and social change;
3. women's situation or status is a social matter and not a natural phenomenon and is therefore capable of being historically analysed;
4. the mere fact of being a woman, at any time in any place, means having a particular kind of social and hence historical experience;
5. women are diverse among themselves and any history of 'Woman' is a fantasy;
6. concepts derived from men's experience of society cannot simply be transposed in the attempt to understand women's historical experiences;
7. it is no longer, or not yet, possible to assume that women's history is the same as men's history.

Beyond these assumptions or presuppositions there is great diversity. There is no unified corpus of knowledge, there is no single coherent theory. As there are numerous feminisms so there are many feminist approaches to history. Indeed, to quote Gerda Lerner again: 'In order to write a new history worthy of the name we will have to recognize that no single methodology and conceptual framework can fit the complexities of the historical experience of all women.'⁴ How then is feminist history to be defined? How is it to be distinguished from other historical enterprises, especially that of women's history, which is often considered a mere synonym? To put it simply: women's history is that which seeks to add women to the traditional concerns of historical investigation and writing; feminist history is that which seeks to change the very nature of traditional history by incorporating gender into all historical analysis and understanding. And the purpose of that change is political: to challenge the practices of the historical discipline that have belittled and oppressed women, and to create practices that allow women an autonomy and space for self-definition.

4. Lerner, as Note 1, 13.

Now, with criteria like that, it's difficult to distinguish women's from feminist history, but let me try to show the differences by reference to the offerings at the recent Feminist History Conference, held in London in July 1985.⁵ This provides a useful focus for two reasons. Firstly, it was self-consciously a general feminist history conference rather than a specialist one (as was, for example, the 'Crucibles of Feminism: Women in the Nineteenth Century' Conference in Adelaide, March 1985) or a non-specific women's history one (such as the 'Women' sub-section at various Australian Historical Association Conferences or indeed, such as the major US event, the biennial Berkshire Conference on the History of Women). Secondly, the conference was informal and non-institutional, accepting all offers of papers without vetting, thereby allowing a full presentation of the range of work calling itself feminist history and full participation by the range of women calling themselves feminist historians.

other point. There is an alternative, and quite valid, definition of feminist history which states that it is whatever history is written by a woman who claims the political appellation of feminist. I am not addressing this definition, and in no way wish to imply that any of the women presenting papers at the Conference were not feminists. I wish only to address their papers as texts.

The Conference was organised by the Feminist History Group, a London based feminist collective which draws its membership from the wide range of women traditionally involved in the History Workshop and people's history movements: academic historians, tertiary students and post-graduates, adult and workers' education students, visiting North Americans and Europeans, feminist activists, community workers, women who'd been there, and women who are just interested. Over three days, 80 papers were delivered to over 400 participants, 19 topics were discussed in 41 sessions.

From the range of topics and titles, there was no clue as to whether the specific contents would be feminist in this textual sense. Organising topics included sexuality, feminism and socialism, women in the Middle Ages, lesbians, working women, peace, colonialism, religion, language, anarchism, historiography, teaching methods, children, oral history projects, and the histories of various regional, national or other groups—African, Asian, Jewish, Welsh . . . All the papers dealt explicitly with women as historical subjects and agents.

A number of papers were quite straightforward women's history as rescue or compensation. A biographical paper on 'Cicely Hamilton 1872-1952' with its 'attempt to show what we all have in common and . . . to rescue some very interesting women from oblivion' was a classic example.⁶ Similarly, a paper on 'Women in the Seventeenth Century Book Trade'⁷ established women's absence from the standard biographical dictionaries and trade and social histories, 'the ways in which they had been hidden', and restored them to public view. A paper on 'Women's Psychological Disorders in Seventeenth Century England'⁸ added women to medical history, relating the past symptoms of green disease to modern diagnoses of anorexia. And, as a final example, the aims of 'Women and Mau Mau in Kenya 1952'⁹ were firstly to examine the roles and images of women in the Mau Mau war of liberation, and secondly to examine the effect of Mau Mau on the modern Kenyan woman.

All these types of paper fell within the compensation or contribution categories of women's history. Hamilton and the book trade women had been

5. Feminist History Conference, London, July 1985. Unfortunately, only abstracts of the papers are available.

6. Liz Whitelaw.

7. Maureen Bell.

8. Anne Lawrence.

9. Tabitua Kanogo.

missing, were deemed worthy of rescue and were found, added to the list of exemplars of lives and works. The medical history counts as women's history not because it was about women's diseases as defined by men—in which case I think it would classify strictly as men's or traditional history. But it added 'real' women into the investigation, looking at women's self disclosures and interior questionings expressed in their spiritual autobiographies and diaries. (I must admit that this paper was a very tricky one to classify.) The Mau Mau paper, on the other hand, was considerably easier, an example of women contributing, 'also there' in a major political movement, the history of which had previously ignored women.

On the surface, another paper¹⁰ slipped easily into this same category of women's history as contribution, in this case, contribution to the male-defined political process. This paper dealt with the Langham Place Group, 1857-67, the earliest self-conscious feminist group in England. These women acted, in the public realm, in ways recognisably similar to men, in pursuit of aims recognisably political. They published a journal, established a 'ladies' institute', an employment exchange and an emigration society, and campaigned for higher education and suffrage for women—all perfectly orthodox activities within the grasp of political history, even if concerning women. But a complication arises in this paper. And that is the question of self-consciousness in the historian, a recognition of her own subjectivity in the field of her investigation and through that, an awareness of the complexities of the issue of gender. Thus, the author writes:

Despite the importance of the Langham Place Group, they are given but passing mention in the history of the period. This paper will examine "image making" in women's history, "writing out" of evidence that may detract from the credibility or respectability of the women's movement at this time. I will also examine the relationship between feminist women and their male supporters—a relationship that is not seen as problematic, indicating perhaps, an absence of any analysis based on a concept of "patriarchy"? The paper bears on the question of the nature of feminist history, and that of why some women become feminists. In this context I will also look at class divisions, which seemed to run deeper than those of gender.

In other words, here the very categories of analysis, not just the empirical details, are put into question. The taken-for-granted meaning of 'the political', the simple understanding of historical change as a genderless dynamic, the certainties of 'masculine=universal' political history, all are challenged.

What seems clear from this example is that it is not the subject matter but how it is handled which determines feminist history, whereas subject matter is central to women's history. Feminist history, in fact, need not focus on women as such, although in general it has done so. What is central to feminist history is the recognition of gender relations as a major power dynamic within history.

The papers that I am categorising as women's history are not, however, to be disparaged. They can be vitally important for their empirical findings. It's hard to analyse gender relations if you can't find any women. Women's history is important in rescuing certain types of women, certain types of behaviour, viz, those which are similar to men's but have been 'overlooked'. They add to or supplement traditional history. They can be roughly identified as the 'women and, or women in' school. Now, as I've shown, the distinction between women's and feminist history cannot be drawn on subject matter, but only on approach. From the Conference papers, it seemed to me that there were a large number that were quite clearly feminist, although looking rather like the 'women and/in' group. What made the difference was a questioning

10. Pauline Tear, 'A Rallying Point to Help Women—The Langham Place Group 1857-67'.

of the very categories of their historical object—the meaning of ‘women’ and of whatever they were related to. That is, they challenged essentialist or stereotyped notions of the nature of women and looked rather at the specific circumstances, the social forces affecting the conditions and patterns of their lives. These were papers dealing with the construction of specific definitions of femininity, they were establishing the conditions of possibility of certain behaviours within the power dynamics of specific gender relations. For example, the paper ‘Prostitution, Rape and the Control of Public Space in London of the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries’¹¹ showed the ways in which some of the specific attributes of ‘the respectable woman’ and ‘the domestic sphere’ were built up through police strategies of control of public streets and through the varieties of response to that control by different classes of women. Three other papers showed how other attributes of femininity were constituted in other periods. These papers all dealt in some way with ‘woman’s nature’: ‘Towards a Definition of Female Deviancy in early Victorian England’,¹² ‘Genius and Woman in Late Eighteenth Century Britain’,¹³ and ‘Defining Women’s “Nature” in England c.1700’.¹⁴ Each of these papers dealt not only with the prescriptive literature claiming to describe the essential norm of woman. That would simply be an exercise in the history of what men thought about women. Beyond such ‘thoughts’, however, each paper sought to show the changing patterns and organisation of power and resistance that constituted the specific and changing definitions and self-definitions of women. For example, the abstract to the paper on woman’s nature around 1700 states:

The arguments conveyed, eg., in contemporary editions of *Aristotle’s Masterpiece* and a range of medical texts on women’s sexuality, marriage and childbearing and childcare appear to me to have been intended to forge a new, more exclusively domestic and conjugal, allegedly more “natural” gender identity for women. The didactic purpose of many of these tracts can be inferred from their catechismal form. The evidence for continued public resistance to this process of definition by many women writers and by men writing in defence of women (Mandeville especially) suggests that the task may have proved both more formidable and less successful than had been anticipated. The nature of the struggle, moreover, and the language employed suggest its links with ongoing debates not only about woman’s presumed intellectual and moral incompetence and physical frailty but also her alleged unsuitability for public life.

Two other papers showed the shifting boundaries between masculinity and femininity through analysis of language. ‘Marital Sex and Feminism 1880s-1914’¹⁵ examined an ‘attempt both to develop a feminist language of sexuality and morality and to take on the oppressiveness of male sexual practices’. It showed how the double standard placed progressive women in double binds, in contradictions that reduced them to silence, and how cutting through those contradictions shifted the burden of silence to a different group, viz, spinsters, and through them, to the emerging category ‘lesbians’. The paper, ‘The Language of the “Public” from the Eighteenth Century to the Present’¹⁶ was an examination of the changing uses of the keyword ‘public’, the attempts of working people and other women to include themselves in the concept of the public, and the social impact on women of the maintenance of any division between public and private. This shifting boundary has circumscribed women’s

11. Anna Clark.

12. Tessa Kelly.

13. Christine Battersby.

14. Estelle Cohen.

15. Lucy Bland.

16. Eileen Yeo.

accepted place insofar as the 'private' has come increasingly to be synonymous with 'the feminine'—and such circumscription has carried over into the practices of traditional history and its proper sphere of investigation.

I won't go on here simply adding examples to the list of papers exemplifying feminist history. I'd like instead to summarise what seem to me to be the effective challenges to traditional history thrown up by this work, and its distinction from women's history.

Women's history adds women to the standard categories of historical analysis, and deals with them in those terms.

Feminist history adds gender as a problematic relationship into all other historical categories.

At the simplest level this means that when a feminist historian adds women to work, she doesn't just come up with pit-brow lasses or even domestic servants. Rather, the whole meaning of 'work' and its definitions within the gender division of labour are thrown into question. When she adds women to politics she doesn't just come up with women's contribution to the Mau Mau or to Chartism or the Langham Place Group. Rather, the whole meaning of 'politics' and its definitions within the public-private dichotomy are thrown into question. Leisure, class, skill, honour, family, resistance, security, race—all these terms mean different things to women and to men, and historians need to ask different questions to uncover their gender specific meanings. A new and crucial question for all historians now is, whose? Whose family? Whose definition of resistance or class or leisure? Once such difference is recognized, then the categories of historical explanation are thrown into question: time and change, identity and agency, cause and evidence. Who is doing the explaining, from what standpoint, with documentation of whose version of reality—and how were they all constituted? The categories of explanation are further pushed out of kilter when feminist historians challenge the very constitution of the historical subject. Feminism denies any essential female nature, denies the essential nature of everyone and every category. When 'essence' or 'nature' is revealed as politically constructed and hence historically changing, then the 'subject' of history becomes a dialectic of quite extraordinary proportions. In Jeffrey Weeks' phrase, we are propelled 'into a whirlwind of deconstruction'¹⁷ in which there is no fixity. Even if we take the anti-humanist approach, and identify the historical subject as social structure or group, the introduction of gender similarly throws the analysis into uncertainty. Gender isn't just a category that can be dealt with and put aside. Gender is central to all other social relations: race, class, the unconscious. Gender introduces difference and heterogeneity into all other categories. It is not true, as the title of a book of black women's writing proclaims, that all the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave.¹⁸ Neither is the working class a strictly masculine phenomenon, nor is sexuality something only men engage in.

The final category that feminist history's introduction of gender makes problematic is that of boundaries. Within history as traditionally conceived, a boundary between public and private is central. But feminist history shows that boundary to be so permeable as to be fantasy. Further, the sub-genres of history—political, economic, cultural, social, even diplomatic—have clearly defined and bounded territories only when they deal with masculine activity. The introduction of women and of gender relations throws them all into each other's arms, even into the arms of other disciplines.

17. Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents. Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, 6.

18. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith (eds) *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave. Black Women's Studies*, New York: The Feminist Press, 1982.

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As I have said, the practices of feminist history are multifarious and are sure to remain so. Good theoretical intentions are often exceedingly difficult to translate into coherent research programmes, let alone polished monographs. Moreover, how is one to teach it? Obviously, for both research and teaching, the assumptions, principles and distinctions I have discussed need to be borne in mind. It should no longer be possible for masculine events, perceptions and experiences to be treated as gender-free universals, for women simply to be ignored and gender relations deemed insignificant. But feminist history always involves more than adherence to a set of rules concerning gender and women. Feminist history is a political stance, a demand on behalf of women for 'freedom from oppressive restrictions imposed by sex; self-determination; autonomy'¹⁹ It is here, of course, that the possibility of male feminist historians becomes a question. Without answering that question, it seems to me that male historians who support both the theoretical and political revolutionary projects of feminist history should be warmly welcomed.

In conclusion, if there is a traditional history, and if it proclaims the ideals of certainty, objectivity, and universality, then it is under severe threat of not simply challenge but supersession. Against certainty, feminist history proclaims the relativity of continuous social construction; against objectivity, it proclaims disciplined gendered subjectivity; and against universality it insistently asks, whose universe?

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19. Gerda Lerner, 'Politics and Culture in Women's History', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring 1980, 50.