Feminist History and Women's History

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In 1405, Christine de Pizan, an Italian humanist who spent most of her life in France, set out to rebut the misogynistic literature of her time. Crafting what was to become the first major feminist tract in the Western tradition, Christine de Pizan turned, again and again, to the feminist promise of history. In The Book of the City of Ladies, she described a city populated with the great women of the past—Queen Esther, who saved the Jews; the Sabine women who solidified peace between the Romans and their neighbors; Clothilda, who brought Christianity to the Franks; and of course, the Virgin Mary and various other notable female saints. By focusing on the accomplishments of these admirable women, Christine de Pizan used women's history to demonstrate the grievous errors of those who lambasted the female sex as inherently weak and evil. She also turned to these historical women to inspire ordinary women in her own day: "My ladies, see how these men accuse you of so many vices in everything. Make liars of them all by showing forth your virtue, and prove their attacks false by acting well." In the hands of Christine de Pizan, history was a feminist tool for celebrating women's past accomplishments, rebutting the accusations of those who maligned women, and urging women to greater goals.

Some six hundred years later, probably no one would consider The Book of the City of Ladies an ideal example of feminist history; its tone is too polemical, its sources too mythical, its perspective too elitist, and its examples too much in the mode of "women worthies." But Christine de Pizan inaugurated a tradition of feminist history that has long endured. In the centuries since she wrote, some of our greatest feminists have found inspiration in history (think, for example, of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Simone de Beauvoir), and some of our greatest historians have been motivated, at least in part, by feminism (Catherine Macaulay, Eileen Power, and Mary Beard are a few classic examples). In the 1970s, the link between feminism and history was simultaneously broadened and deepened. On the one hand, the feminist media—not only in the "Lost Women" column of Ms. magazine but also in a proliferation of such free-standing publications as Witches, Midwives, and Nurses—exposed the feminist public to the outrageous omissions of history as it was then taught in schools and universities. On the other hand, in the halls of academe itself, feminist scholars began to rewrite the past, so that history not merely included women but also tussled substantively with topics of importance to the feminist agenda. So, for example, Sheila Rowbotham traced the history of socialist women in her 1972 book Women, Resistance and Revolution; a few years later Linda Gordon added a historical voice to the feminist struggle for reproductive rights with her Woman's Body, Woman's Right, and two years after that, Joan Scott and Louise Tilly tackled the complex history of women's work in Women, Work, and Family. These early works were often produced in a heady mixture of activism and writing; thus, for example, Sally Alexander researched the sweated work of nineteenth-century women by day and advocated better conditions for cleaning staff by night. In such a context, as Sara Evans has recently noted, the questions of feminist history were

easy to formulate: “We just started taking the questions from our own activism and applying them to the past.”

Today, women’s history reaps the benefits of the feminist offensive of the late twentieth century, having matured into a field of intense research, writing, and teaching throughout the world. We now have departmental positions in women’s history (in some cases even chaired professorships), undergraduate majors and graduate fields, programs on several continents that offer master’s and/or doctoral degrees (there are some seventy such programs in the United States alone), regular conferences and prizes for articles and books, an international association, and three journals dedicated just to the English-language side of the field. As women’s history has grown, it has also expanded into gender history and helped to give birth to new subfields, especially the history of men and masculinities and the history of sexualities. Although it is in the United States in particular that a flexible university system has most thoroughly accommodated women’s history, all world regions have been touched—both intellectually and institutionally—by the remarkable advance of women’s history. Christine de Pizan’s pioneering plunge into the feminist possibilities of the past has now grown into an institutionalized field of historical teaching and research.

Feminism

Feminism cannot claim sole credit for the phenomenal growth of women’s history in the late twentieth century. In part, feminist historians were able to build on related disciplinary developments that redirected historians away from “great men” and toward ordinary people. In Britain, for example, many feminist historians emerged from traditions of Marxist and socialist history; in France, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and others found some support for their study of women’s past in the traditions of the Annales School; and in the United States, the methods and subjects of what was then called the “new social history” proved amenable to women’s history. The advance of women’s history was also aided by the extraordinary expansion of higher education after World War II; when universities began to accommodate more women as both students and professors, the curriculum changed accordingly. And in part, the growth of women’s history was spurred by complementary advances in the histories of other neglected groups, especially the roughly simultaneous expansion of African American history in the United States. But these factors played supporting rather than initiating roles. As reported by women’s historians from across the globe in 1991, feminist advocacy was the chief impetus for the expansion of the field in the 1970s and thereafter.

This is a proud legacy, but it has been undermined by decades of assaults on feminism, assaults that have grossly misrepresented what feminism and its corollary, feminist history, really are. To my mind, feminism is simply the conviction that women, like men, should be afforded the opportunity to realize fully their humanity.10 Simple as that. Yet, not so simple, for feminism has been slandered, smeared, and saddled with so many canards that many people who today agree that women should be afforded full human rights nevertheless avoid calling themselves “feminists,” much less “feminist historians.” What exactly do feminists believe?

FEMINISM AND "WOMEN"

In our postmodern world, feminism's focus on the category "women" is easily ridiculed as naive and old-fashioned. The notion that there exists a distinct category of "women" lies at the foundation of feminism, but it has now proven to be a cracked foundation. Thanks to Denise Riley, Judith Butler, and the lived critiques of transgender and transsexual people, the old confidence that "women" can be clearly identified by bodily characteristics no longer stands. Thanks to Audre Lorde, Elizabeth Spelman, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and the ongoing critiques of women marginalized in the dominant discourses of feminism, the old confidence that "women" constitute a transcendent sisterhood that somehow bridges such differences as class, race, religion, sexuality, and world region also no longer stands. As Jee Yeun Lee recently put it, "These days, whenever someone says the word 'women' to me, my mind goes blank. What 'women'? What is this 'women' thing you are talking about? Does that mean me? Does that mean my mother, my roommates, the white woman next door, the checkout clerk at the supermarket, my aunts in Korea, half the world's population?" There is, in other words, no stable subject—no coherent thing called "women"—at the heart of either feminism or feminist history.

Yet, as Toril Moi has refreshingly argued, "we do not have to believe that the word 'woman' always carries heavy metaphysical baggage." Feminists continue to talk about "women," and I will do the same throughout this book. My reasons are threefold. First, the epistemological arguments of Riley, Butler, and others might be compelling, but they have limited practical resonance. As Riley herself has noted, it is perfectly feasible to acknowledge that "women" do not really exist "while maintaining a politics 'as if they existed'—since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did." In other words, "women" is a slippery concept in theory, but in practice it usually acts as a stable category—for its time and place—that can critically determine a person's life chances. This practical categorization of "women" matters today, and it has mattered in the past; it is therefore a proper subject of feminist thought and feminist history. Please note my caveat "for its time and place"; the category "women" does not have a practical meaning that transcends all other categorizations, but it does have practical meanings in specific contexts. Second, in dealing with the differences that fracture the category "women," scholars find useful Mary Maynard's distinction between universalizing (which suppresses differences) and generalizing (which seeks patterns among differences). The former is to be avoided; the latter is critical to both the feminist project and historical writing. Third, differences among women present not insurmountable obstacles but instead strategic opportunities. Rather than building walls between women, the articulation of difference is leading to greater understanding, better coalitions, and a stronger unified—but not unitary—category of "women."

Feminism also does not dictate, as some people sometimes believe, that there is anything inherently "womanly" about women. Some feminisms have argued that women are more moral than men, or more maternal, or more pacific. Others have so emphasized victimization that it can seem a basic female trait. But these are branches of feminism, not the main trunk. Feminism's chief observation about women is also its motivating force: women's relative disadvantage visà-vis men. Almost every girl born today will face more constraints and

restrictions than will be encountered by a boy who is born today into the same social circumstances as that girl. As a feminist, I consider this a wrong that should be righted. The disadvantages that women today face vary considerably, especially by class, race, religion, sexuality, and world region, yet, despite these variations, the general characteristic of female disadvantage remains. This disadvantage does not, however, cast women as hapless victims. Women's history has shown, again and again, that women have not been merely passive victims of sexual inequality; women have also colluded in, undermined, survived, and sometimes even benefited from the presence of patriarchy. Benefited from patriarchy? Certainly. In fifteenth-century Europe, an elite woman like Christine de Pizan was able to increase the coin in her purse by employing women instead of men because, as one medieval handbook advised, "a woman will work for much less money than a man would take." In most societies today, well-off women do the same, paying other women low wages to clean their houses, watch their children, and paint their nails. There is no doubt that the oppression of women can have endured so long and in so many places only thanks, in part, to women's collusion in the oppression of women.

FEMINISM AND DIFFERENCE

Some feminists have sometimes been inattentive to other social inequalities, such as those created by class, race, religion, sexuality, and people who have supported feminist goals have eschewed the label "feminist" and preferred such other terms as "women's rights" or "womanist." Yet feminism did not originate in the West, nor has it been a Western phenomenon of little resonance for women in other parts of the world; as Antoinette Burton has emphasized so concisely, women in early twentieth-century India, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Japan, China, and Latin America were advocating for women's rights just as were suffragists in Europe and the United States. All these feminisms were and are not the same, but all share the core conviction that women, like men, should be able to realize fully their humanity. Even though feminism has been unfairly stereotyped as a single sort of Western, individualistic feminism, women's rights advocates worldwide have continued to claim the term as their own and put it to their own uses. For example, in Afghanistan, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) not only courageously fights for women's rights but also readily labels its founder a "feminist," and in Africa, more and more activists are embracing a feminism of their own making. Some women's rights organizations—the U.S.based MADRE, which works with sister organizations in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and the Middle East, is one example—still usually avoid the term "feminist." But feminism has never been a Western-only phenomenon and is not so today. Instead, its worldwide impact is evident everywhere: in the presence of women from ninety-five countries at the 2002 Women's World Congress in Uganda, in the thriving United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), in the ratification by 162 nations of the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and in the proliferation of feminist NGOs.

Feminism itself has a fraught history that is, at once, admirable and abominable. Feminists have sometimes heroically tackled male supremacy, speaking strongly in the face of ridicule and hostility. But feminists have also sometimes horribly linked their own struggles to the

elitist, imperialist, racist, and heterosexist agendas of their day, as, for example, did some nineteenth-century white feminists in the United States and their middle-class counterparts in Britain who objected to the extension of suffrage to black and working-class men, respectively.

Today, feminism boasts a myriad of contemporary meanings and movements, of which the two most fundamental divides are long-standing. The first distinguishes between those who seek equality with men (and hence an eventual erasure of sexual difference) and those who seek to maintain sexual difference but establish equity between the sexes. The second distinguishes between feminist thought and feminist activism, a divide that has broadened in recent decades as academic feminism has drifted away from its activist moorings. But these two divides are just two of many, for the feminism on which feminist historians draw is an extraordinarily rich, varied, and contested tradition. For Barbara Smith, feminism is "the political theory and practice to free all women; women of colour, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, Jewish women, lesbians, old women—as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism but is merely female self-aggrandizement." For Joan Scott, feminism is "a site where differences conflict and coalesce, where common interests are articulated and contested, where identities achieve temporary stability—where politics and history are made." For Charlotte Bunch, feminism is "an entire world view or gestalt, not just a laundry list of 'women's issues.'" None would recognize herself in caricatures of feminism as essentializing women, or ignoring other social inequalities, or hating men, or bewailing women's victimization, or addressing only Western concerns, and all root their feminism, as I do, in advocacy on behalf of the full humanity of women. We might argue about how to best accomplish that advocacy and where it might lead us, but at a fundamental level, feminism really might be as simple as that.

Feminist History, Women's History, Gender History

All historians of women are not ipso facto feminist historians. When William O'Neill published his history of U.S. feminism in 1969, for example, he forthrightly denied any feminist sympathies. "I have avoided the question of whether or not women ought to have full parity with men," he wrote, opining that "since we do not know what genuine equality would mean in practice, its desirability cannot fairly be assessed." In the 1980s, modern European women's history was briefly rocked by a controversy over purported feminist "betrayals" of and "threats" to women's history. And in 1996, Helen Jewell sought to distance herself from feminism in her survey of women in medieval England, claiming that it would be a mistake to start "from a modern feminist perspective which may not be transferable to the Middle Ages." Such explicit disavowals of feminism are not common in the writing of women's history, but others have sought to distance themselves from feminism in more subtle ways. As Joan Scott has noted, for example, the shift in the 1980s from "women" to "gender" was fueled in part by a search for "political acceptability." Because "gender" had an apolitical cast, it was often preferred to the more threatening "women." This remains true today. Bernard Capp, reacting in 2004 to a feminist critique of his *When Gossips*

Meet, recently averred that he prefers "gender history" for the supposed "plurality of perspectives" that it allows.

Let me be clear in response: feminist history does not entail distorting evidence and twisting conclusions. As a feminist historian, I respect the possibilities and limitations of my sources; I strive to approach the dead and different people of the Middle Ages with what Ruth Roach Pierson has called "epistemic humility"; and I would never manipulate my research findings to suit any conclusions readymade.37 Yet I am, like all historians, more than a reporter of facts newly discovered; I am also an interpreter of the facts as I see them. My work necessarily reflects my feminist politics, just as the interpretations of all historians reflect their political views: that is, feminist politics informs the questions that frame my research

Feminist history" (history informed by feminist politics) is sometimes taken to mean the "history of feminism" (history of the people, movements, and ideas that have sought to improve women's lives); the two are best kept distinct.' Feminist history is not strictly equivalent to women's history. The two are tied by a strong recursive link, since so many readers assume that any study of women is ipso facto feminist, but the link can be undone either by explicit authorial disavowal or by more subtle historical practices. There are also some feminist historians who work on topics unrelated to women, gender, and sexuality. Gabrielle Spiegel, for example, is certainly a feminist, but her published work has focused mostly on history-writing, both in the Middle Ages and today. Similarly, Karen Halttunen is a feminist whose work on the intellectual life and culture of the nineteenth-century United States ranges far from "women's history."

Before feminism, "gender" was a humble grammatical term that signified nothing more than an inflection—masculine, feminine, or neuter—given certain nouns and pronouns in some languages. "Sex" meant the categories of male and female, but it also, rather awkwardly, denoted sexual activity. Because gender provided a more polite (that is, less tinged by sexuality) signifier of differences between women and men, feminists began in the 1970s to replace "sex" with "gender"—so that the "sexual division of labour" became the "gender division of labour" and "sexual differences" became "gender differences." As a lawyer writing briefs for the U.S. Supreme Court, Ruth Bader Ginsburg began to use "gender" when a secretary advised her, "I'm typing all these briefs and articles for you and the word sex, sex, sex, is on every page. Don't you know those nine men [on the Supreme Court], they hear that word and their first association is not the word you want them to be thinking? Why don't you use the word 'gender? It is a grammatical term and it will ward off distracting associations." In much the same way and at about the same time, "gender" also began to signal a more professionally acceptable approach to history.

"Sex" and "gender" had also begun to develop entirely different connotations among feminists, especially feminists in the academy: "sex" indicating biological differences between women and men, and "gender" indicating the ways in which societies elaborate on those biological differences. Hence, a baby girl was understood to be of the female sex, but her pink frock indicated her female gender. ***This definition of gender as "a social category imposed on a sexed body"*** has defined contemporary feminism.'

Antifeminists hate the distinction; for example, a papal letter of 2004 emphatically reaffirmed the preeminent importance of biological distinctions between women and men, asserting that a focus on the social construction of such differences undermines families, heterosexuality, the authority of the Bible, and Catholic faith.' But some feminists now question the distinction, too, arguing that it gives too much weight to biological absolutes by implying that human bodies always provide two sexes clearly distinguished by genitalia, chromosomes, or other somatic markers. They can point to cases of indeterminate "sex" at birth when physicians and parents make social decisions about the sex/gender of an infant—social decisions that are then surgically imposed on the infant's body.

"Gender" has proven difficult to translate into many languages; until the 1980s, feminists managed to differentiate between biological and social constructions without the aid of "gender"; and the term has never firmly taken hold except in the English-speaking world.' But because sex/gender clearly differentiates aspects thought to be biological from those thought to be social, it still has practical use. Even more important, feminist historians simply cannot do without "gender," because the term has taken on a life of its own within our field. When the journal Gender and History was launched in 1989, its editors stressed the new journal's feminist stance, its firm commitment to "the recovery of women's past experiences," and its interest in "addressing men and masculinity as well as women and femininity." This expansion of the field of vision to include men, masculinity, and relations between women and men was not entirely new (very few women's historians had ever studied women in isolation from men), but it was newly emphasized. The editors also spoke about gender as a "symbolic system," an insight that drew on the theoretical inspiration of Joan Scott. In an immensely influential article published in the mid-1980s, Scott argued that feminists should move from looking at the causes of the social construction of gender to the meanings of gender, particularly gender's use as a metaphor in human relations and activities. Arguing that gender is a "primary way of signifying **relationships of power**," Scott sought to bring women (or really, gender) into traditionally male areas of history. Because, for example, women rarely wielded political power in Western societies, political history had remained largely untouched by the history of women; but, Scott argued, gender was present in the rationales, languages, and discussions of politics, even if women themselves were not. To Scott's mind, this discourse-based approach promised to transform history, for it subjected all historical subjects—not just women—to gender analysis.

Scott's advocacy of feminist history argued that we no longer needed to examine just women's lives or even just the social construction of female and male; we could look everywhere—even at such traditionally prestigious and "male" historical subjects as politics, intellectual discourse, and economics—for gender used as a "primary way of signifying relationships of power." In the 1940s, Jack Hexter had excused the absence of women from history by asserting that ***women were simply not in the places that mattered, that "through no conspiracy of historians, the College of Cardinals, the Consistory of Geneva, the Parliament of England, and the expeditions of Columbus, Vasco de Gama, and Drake have been pretty much stag affairs.***"

And as feminism itself has matured, changed, and survived media assault many have turned away from explicit feminism. When women's history was a nascent and marginalized activity, its founding mothers wrote freely and often about patriarchy and women's oppression. In 1975 Gerda Lerner wrote straightforwardly:

For most of historical time, woman is oppressed not through her reproductive sexuality—that is, through the need of society to assign most of a woman's adult lifespan to tasks of child-bearing and child-rearing—but through the devaluing of such activities by men as they institute organized society. Women are oppressed also through sexual exploitation, as manifested in the rape of women of the conquered group by the victors, the rape of women of subordinate classes by the masters, in the millennia of organized prostitution, and in the constant pressure on single women to make marriage and family service their main career. Women as a group are oppressed through the denial to them of access to educational opportunities on an equality with men and, finally, through the denial to them—for longer than to any other group—of political representation and power in government.

By the 1980s we were already speaking less forthrightly than this, replacing "oppression of women" and its implication of male agency with the more neutral "subordination of women." This shift was subtle and even unconscious, much like the turn in the 1970s from "sex" to "gender," but Lerner herself characteristically examined her own changing lexicon. In 1986, she reported that she preferred "subordination of women" to "oppression of women" because the latter term, in her view, problematically implies male agency, an absence of female complicity, and "the consciousness of the subject group that they have been wronged." I'm not convinced by her arguments, but neither my preference for "oppression" nor hers for "subordination" carries much weight today.

Instead, both have almost disappeared in favour of still milder terms, ones that do not even specify which sex (or gender) is disadvantaged: terms like "gender hierarchy," "gender inequality," and "gender imbalance." These are the sorts of phrases that predominate, for example, in articles published from 2001 through 2004 in the three major English-language women's history periodicals—*Journal of Women's History, Gender and History, and Women's History Review.*

Since the 1990s, Catherine Hall, Kathleen Canning, Judith Newton, and others have commented on a tendency in some women's history to defer to male authorities and overlook the earlier intellectual work of feminist scholars. Postmodernists have been singled out for criticism; but this practice extends as well to many sorts of theoretically inflected women's history. Within certain academic contexts, this citational strategy makes good sense: it reflects the maleness of traditional philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, and historical epistemology; it emulates a standard rhetorical strategy of building arguments on the authoritative statements of "great men"; it builds from high theory drawn on philosophical premises (for example, Jacques Derrida on difference) rather than middle-range theory drawn more on empirical insight (for example, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Valerie Amos, and Pratibha Parmar. But these practices of reference are nevertheless problematic: they obscure the accomplishments of female scholars; they defer to men whose works either ignored

women (for example, Michel Foucault) or problematically considered women (for example, Jacques Lacan); and they reinforce the age-old assumption that abstract intellectual work is the work of men. No one is objecting to the just recognition of men's important contributions to feminist history. Medieval women's history, for example, owes a great debt to the advocacy of David Herlihy in the 1960s and to the insights since of such historians as Stanley Chojnacki and Jeremy Goldberg; their work is quite rightly cited by feminist medievalists all the time. But let us beware of the needless evocation of male authority and consequent suppression of female authority. Women's history should enhance, not diminish, the intellectual reach of feminist scholarship.

Our recent swing toward biography also raises new challenges. In the 1970s, feminist historians, armed with the then-dominant methods of social history, eschewed the study of great women and sought