MODERN WOMEN’S HISTORY: 
A HISTORIOGRAPHY 

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‘Historians construct stories, stories which necessarily have a narrative shape… The stories which they construct, from laborious archival work ordered by conceptual frameworks are grounded through an attempted comprehensiveness in relation to evidence, a commitment to look at countervailing accounts, an effort to test interpretations against others, the practices of good scholarship. … [this remains the case, but] the meaning of being an historian over the last twenty years, of trying to do certain kinds of historical work, has significantly changed.’ [Catherine Hall] 

Current Issues in Women’s History

It is now almost commonplace to look at the development of women’s history in Britain in terms of the political and social movements of the mid-to-late twentieth century. It was at that point that writers like Dale Spender began to ask ‘why were the women of the present cut off from the women of the past and how was this achieved?’ The history of women, it came to be argued, had been obscured, hidden and lost, because no one had taken an interest, no one had recorded it, it was not... 

1 C. Hall, White, Male and Middle Class, Explorations in Feminism and History, Cambridge, 1992,1-2. 

2 Parts of this paper were originally delivered as a plenary paper for Women’s History Network Eastern Region, March 1996, held at Northampton College of Higher Education, Northampton, UK. 


written; women were not, it had been believed, the legitimate subjects of history. From the 1960s there was a paradigm shift, one in which historians began to argue that the experience of the economically powerless and politically inarticulate was important. At the same time, women began to explore their own marginalized position, and women's history emerged as they made shift to look to the past. Sheila Rowbotham's influential and groundbreaking *Hidden From History* (1973) emerged from this impulse:

This book comes very directly from a political movement. The decision to work over some of the territory I had gone through and find out more came out of discussions in women's liberation and on the left about the situation of women in contemporary capitalism. I felt it would be helpful to try and unravel historically some of the questions we kept raising. This was both because of my own uncertainties and because I felt it could help to make our discussions less abstract.  

By the 1980s, when Spender was writing, it was therefore widely established in feminist circles, in Gerda Lerner's words, that 'Women's History is indispensable and essential to the emancipation of women.'

Harnessing to this politics, women's history writing moved from what Natalie Zemon Davis has subsequently called the 'women worthies' approach, to what Gerda Lerner has labelled 'the women's contribution' history. The 'women worthies' approach chronicled the lives of exceptional women. It provided examples of women's capacity, and role-models for emulation. Many of these histories were hagiographies,  

Because the prevalent view had been that historians should only be concerned with change and with major political and economic movements, while women, if they conformed to their ascribed feminine roles, did not play a decisive role in such processes.


9 Lerner, 1986, 3.

10 For a history of Pinchbeck and other women historians belonging to this milieu, see Maxine Berg 'the first women economic historians' in *Economic History Review* XLV, 2 1992, 308-329.

11 For example, see Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, New York, 1983 on Owenism; or, more recently, Dorothy Thompson *Outsiders, Class, Gender and Nation*, London, 1993, on Chartism.
discourse, something that in itself was relatively new in the 1980s in the UK/US context, and which remains controversial. Indeed, the bounds of what might be called ‘theory’ – especially the application of what is variously termed post-structuralist or ‘postmodernist’ theory – have been the site of heated debate within women’s history, not just what might be termed the ‘mainstream’. Looking at the key historiographical texts and referring to the Women's History Review, the vehemence of the discussions centred on ‘theory’ as they emerged in the 1990s is striking, as will be seen.

But, what became clear through these debates and a willingness to look at the construction of History as a discipline, was that women had already used a variety of genres, including biographical and fictional writing, to produce histories covering a wide range of subjects in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And, that ‘historians have long been interested in women and specifically in whether women have a distinctive social role and hence history’. What also became clear was that during the nineteenth century – when Rankean/positivist models of history were being validated – these alternative forms as well as much of their subject matter were increasingly far from acceptable to the male authors of the emergent profession of History. As demonstrated by Rosemary Mitchell, women historians did not write histories of the political mainstream, rather they worked in ‘subsidiary areas of study, study as female biography, court history, social ‘morals and manners’ history, art history, as well as travel history’. Women were therefore neither the authors nor the subjects of History, and by the early twentieth century it had to be argued first and foremost that women had a place in History if they were to be studied, while women as authors of history were largely neglected. Hence, Jack H. Hexter, reviewing Mary Ritter Beard’s Women as a Force in History (1946), summed up the prevalent view, which has persisted in some quarters, that because historians were concerned with change, in which women did not play a decisive role, then women could not be a legitimate subject of study: ‘We know who is mainly behind those trends and developments and movements’ that had formed the stuff of history, he argued. ‘For better or worse it was men.’ Hexter was always a proponent of what he called ‘processive explanation’ – the search for moments of transition – which has been much debated, but this wider understanding of the discipline has persisted. Indeed, though much of the work carried out by those studying women’s history in reshaping the discipline has been source-lead, as Purvis rightly notes, and therefore conforms to the empirical model of what a historian should do, their work (including their subject-matter) has often been attacked – e.g. G. Elton, see Past and Present (1987), and H. Hymans, see Empire and Sexuality, 1990 – in part because of its explicitly political stance in valuing women as agents of change and therefore as subjects of study, not only for their polemical take on women within the profession, or criticism of history as written within the mainstream. As Ludmilla Jordanova has observed with reference to the conventions of history writing, if nothing else, this tells us a considerable amount about what has been and is thought of as ‘History’.

What June Purvis notes in her survey of the field, is that, where included, women were written into the narrative as comic elements - see Dangerfield's The Strange Death of Liberal England (1935), reprinted up to 1970. Or, the domestic being woman’s sphere, as figures in family history - e.g. Perkin The origins of modern English society 1780-1880 (1969). ‘Accounts such as those by Dangerfield and Perkin’ Purvis therefore argues, ‘reveal vividly the politics of history writing, something that is not confined to such texts but found in all histories’. This point, that History is ultimately a set of

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13 Established in 1992, and now one of the leading UK journals in the field, others being the History Workshop Journal and Gender & History.


agreed practices, and a pursuit grounded in the same difficulties of communication as any other discipline, is now reiterated throughout feminist historiography. This is a logical progression from the arguments of the early 1970s, as what feminist historians sought from that period was a shift not only in the subject matter of history, so that women might be included, but also a necessary revision of the dominant ‘politics of history writing’ in order that that shift could take place. Nonetheless, by the 1990s, a clear division had emerged between ‘feminist’ and ‘women’s’ history – despite the two often being used interchangeably by critics and practitioners alike. The latter, which is about women and can be non-feminist, emerged largely from the new forms of social history that developed through the twentieth century, from the Annales school onwards. The former, which is derived from a range of feminist theories (quite diverse in themselves), can be about any subject, but grew out of the women’s movement of the 1970s. The difference is a difference of politics.

Methodology of Feminist Women’s History

Differences in politics have lead to differences in methodology – though the question of how to ‘let the documents speak for themselves’, when there are so few documents remains central to the formation of both women’s and feminist history – therefore the focus of the remainder of the paper will be on feminist women’s history-writing. In addition, it should be borne in mind that feminist historiography itself varies considerably across national boundaries. As Selma Leydesdorff has argued, despite the similarities in its general project and despite international debate, feminist women’s history can still be nationally determined. She highlights how it has often been concerned with the need to come to terms with the past, for instance, in Germany, though in Italy its parallel development with the women’s movement has led the subject to focus on cultural issues. In Britain, which forms the subject of the current paper, it is now as noted almost a truism to say that women’s history has been predominantly linked to labour history and socialist theory.

Most British feminist historians in the 1960s-70s were following E. P. Thompson’s attempt to write a ‘history from below’, as Hall has observed, within which capitalism was seen to oppress women in equal measure with patriarchy. This new concern to value the experiences of women, to look at the activities of women, challenged not only the content of traditional history, as we have just seen, but also the emergent Marxist history. Nonetheless, according to June Purvis, and though a minority voice within Britain, it was radical feminism which offered the newest approach to the subject. This division, between those who might be described as Marxist/socialist feminists and those who have been called radical feminists, remains today, and could certainly still be seen in the pages of the Women’s History Review in the 1990s. For example, an article by Bridget Hill entitled ‘Women’s History: a study in change, continuity or standing still?’ stands against Judith Bennett’s reply ‘Women’s History: a study in continuity and change’. The issue of ‘change’ became contested here due to the need to see women as historical agents of change – in order to be legitimate subjects of history – and the ongoing, basic concern with historical materialism. Hence, Hill argued that women’s history ‘has increasingly stressed continuities. ... What is needed, it has been argued, is for feminist historians to abandon traditional periodisation of history and invent their own. ... What has resulted is a proposed approach to women’s history, ... that is, I believe, both wrong and a-historical.’ Given earlier concerns around this issue, such as those of Hexeter quoted above, this is a debate which, I would argue, is as much about the legitimacy of women’s history within the discipline as a whole, as it is about the importance of recording and interpreting women’s actual experience.

Radical feminism therefore not only ‘offered the major challenge to the dominant socialist feminist historiography,’ as Purvis says, it also provided the most powerful criticism of the dominant forms of history-writing. It achieved this through an attack on both traditional history and socialist/labour history, an attack which other feminists

22 Purvis, 1995, 6-8.
had largely fought shy of attempting. Radical feminist history demanded the reconceptualisation of history, and rewrote the methodology and concerns of history in consequence. Hence ‘by the mid-1970s’, Hall says, ‘a distinctive radical feminist voice had emerged, with its own historical agenda, challenging and fertilizing socialist feminism’.

By the 1980s, however, another form of women’s history was developing: gender history. This began by looking at the way gender roles have developed over time and took the concepts of both femininity and masculinity, as opposed to the biological categories female/male, as artefacts worthy of historical scrutiny. This is where the second key issue for women’s history emerges, the one that I highlighted at the outset as particularly fraught, namely the question of theory: post-structuralism/postmodernism, or the ‘linguistic turn’.

Gender historians do not see language as a transparent medium. They argue that there is no simple/single ‘true’ reading of any historical text or source and that it is impossible for historians to return to/exactly reconstruct the historical events they study. Joan Scott, for example, a leading proponent of the field, has said that history should be ‘about how the subjective and collective meanings of women and men as categories of identity have been constructed’. She is interested in studying texts to see how representations of men and women are constructed, rather than in what Purvis has called ‘the material reality that happens to people’. Hall talks about the way in which:

‘the tensions between the teller [of the story] the tropes of the discourse (the beginning, the middle, the end), and what are understood to have been the events, are consciously worked on . . . Historical research is always premised on a relation between past and present, is always about investigating the past through the concerns of the present, and always to do with interpretation. Historians attempt to interpret past realities and the meanings which they were given through language (for there is never only one real meaning, or one set of meanings), realities which can only be reached through forms of representation, which can only be read textually (in the widest sense of the term), which can never be grasped in an unmediated way.’

In other words, the terms of the debate are again partly grounded in the issue of agency and (some form of) materialism. By the 1990s there was a seeming distance between those who studied the cultural and those who studied the material. This is a debate that was particularly tense because of the original training in empirical methodology that most practitioners still received (and receive) within the discipline itself. Indeed, the same debate emerged within what feminist historians coined “male-stream” history.

But, we can begin to see the particularly contentious nature of the issue in feminist history from Purvis’ response to Scott’s project, or approach, as ‘focusing on gender...rather than on women, and . . . deconstructing the term ‘women’ and concentrating on the differences between women rather than what they have in common.’ Purvis’ reaction to reading of Scott differs from another leading feminist historian writing in the 1990s, Jane Rendall, who says: ‘Joan Scott has persuasively argued that the radical potential of women’s history ‘comes in the writing of histories which focus on women’s experiences and analyze the ways in which politics construct gender and gender constructs politics.’’ Here Rendall supports historians who have used Foucault and arguments from postmodernism and post-structuralism. But, even Rendall offers a number of difficulties/reservations with these approaches, concerns which focus on a concern to look at texts that relate to the illiterate; a need to continue using ‘older historical practice’; and desire to continue using political approaches, to keep women in view and to recuperate those not yet visible.

Purvis was critical, like many others, of this approach as: 1) running the risk ‘of intellectualising and abstracting the inequalities between the sexes. The material forces that shaped women’s lives as wives, mothers sisters, mistresses, lovers, employees, political activists and friends receive little attention.’ Following Joan Hoff, who had already written about the subject in especially vehement terms, Purvis argued 2) that as a result of losing sight of ‘flesh-and-blood women’ women will no longer be seen as agents of change in history, she posited that gender history was implicitly less radical than women-centred history because ‘equal consideration is given to men and women’ within it. Quoting Mary Evans, from Out of the Margins, Purvis maintained

30 Hall, 1992, 10.
32 Purvis, 1995, 12.
33 Hall, 1992, 1.
that ‘gender’ must inevitably be a less threatening concept within the academy, with a gloss of ‘complexity’ to it which made it more acceptable. She contended that, 3) less space was given to the study of women within this framework and that ‘women’ would disappear again from the agenda. While, 4) the practice would give rise to ‘men’s studies’, which, according to Lois Banner, must work to hide male power and privilege through the study of ‘masculinities’ that deny patriarchy. Purvis went on to argue that, 5) the stress on the production of knowledge by Scott ‘plays down key concerns of feminist historians, namely to explain what the world was like for women and why it was that way.’ 6) The emphasis of the differences between women, as studied by Denise Riley, and ‘the deconstruction of the term “women” ...denies the existence of women as a political category and as a subordinate class; it also denies women a position from which they can speak, based on their embodied experience of womanhood.’ Finally, 7) Purvis disliked the use of post-structural terminology in the US, which she said ‘“distances” them from scholars in Western Europe who are ignoring post-structuralism or subjecting it to rigorous questioning - and from women in Eastern Europe and Third World countries who are just beginning to research their past, and who see much of this “trendy” theory as “irrelevant or even counterproductive”’.37

Purvis did go on to add, though, as did most others within this debate in the 1990s, that gender could be a useful tool, if used in the ‘traditional social science sense’, and where ‘grounded in feminist politics rather than abstract post-structural theorizing.’ She would therefore be happy to see studies of the contested and negotiated ‘different meanings of the term “women” in different historical epochs’; to unmask the construction of masculinity; and ‘to explore all aspects of gender relations – political structures, cultural representations, symbolic systems’. But, she argued, this had already been done without post-structuralism; in her view feminist historians already recognised the differences between women, including those of race, sex, and class. She therefore stressed that it was ‘important for feminist women’s historians to research and explore women’s differences while also acknowledging and recognizing the common ground of these female genders against male genders.’38 Similarly, Jane

37 Purvis, 1995, 13-14. NB Indian historians of women are in fact using these approaches to look at discourses of race and gender; for example, see Aparna Basu, ‘Women’s History in India: an Historiographical Survey’ in (eds.) Offen et al., 1991. The introduction to Offen et al. Writing Women’s History is relatively sympathetic to post-structural approaches/ new theory/deconstruction.

38 Purvis, 1995, 14.

Rendall – who Purvis cites39 – highlighted Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff’s Family Fortunes, as the best/most successful example of this kind of writing, and described it as: ‘a history which has as much to say of masculinity and of capitalist structures, as it does of femininity and of domesticity, in a survey as rich in cultural analysis as in discussion of material life.’40

Thus, Purvis, like many feminist women’s historians including (to some extent) Jane Rendall, largely laid claim to an empirical model of history in the 1990s, grounded in the ‘material conditions of women’s lives’, and to a realist mode of narration. However, in Rendall’s view this also meant accepting and even promoting the use of a diverse range of sources – archival, literary, material – and drawing on a variety of methods – including those from other disciplines. ‘An interdisciplinary project’ Rendall therefore offers, ‘may have two purposes: to locate and pursue the common ground between disciplines and to illuminate by difference and comparison. (so) ...We (historians) have not only to learn from literary and psychoanalytic paradigms, but to melt those with our own.’41 Hence, Rendall went on to urge ‘feminist historians who combine a theoretical and political perspective which deploys the insights of other disciplines,’ to challenge the ground mapped out by ‘social historians, rooted in empiricist traditions’. She exhorted these feminist historians to ‘confront the myth of objectivity.’42

The crucial phrase here is political perspective. Purvis, Rendall and others have remained consistent in applauding the rewriting of the discipline of history and its methodologies when that rewriting is explicitly political or provides a platform for action. And, though writing about feminist theory rather than feminist history, Mary Maynard provides a particularly interesting comparison here with her comment from the same period, that the feminist

researcher is ... involved in interpretation. There has been some discussion about this amongst feminists, with the suggestion that to do anything other than simply let women ‘speak for themselves’ constitutes violation. The problem with this is that it overlooks the fact that all feminist work is

39 Purvis, 1995, 14, fn 85.


41 Rendall, 1991, 52.

theoretically grounded; whatever perspective is adopted, feminism provides a theoretical framework concerned with gender divisions, women’s oppression or patriarchal control which informs our understanding of the social world. It is disingenuous to imply otherwise. No feminist study can be politically neutral....

In other words, if feminist research – which can be extended to include feminist women’s history – is to be political, i.e. feminist, then that research even if empirical, according to Maynard, will be inevitably grounded in theory. ‘An emphasis on experience’ she therefore observes, ‘is not, ... unproblematic.’44 Within this model, neither women, nor the sources can simply speak for themselves.

Feminist, gender and women’s history and the ‘evidence’

In understanding where this debate came from, it is necessary to look at the fundamental practice of women’s history. As already noted women’s history, of any stripe, has first and foremost to deal with the absence of women, not just from traditional history, but also from its primary materials. This has drawn women’s historians, especially feminist women’s historians, to use a wide variety of sources:

- Official documents, including: censuses, reports, tax registers, parish registers
- Non-governmental published and archival documents, including social surveys, letters, newspapers, legal papers, political tracts
- Literary texts, poetic, prose-based and fictional
- Visual texts, including cartoons, oil paintings, architectural plans, water colours, photographs
- Material culture
- Oral testimony

In other words, women’s historians use ‘traditional’ sources, but also almost any text or piece of material culture from the past; as a result feminist women’s history of necessity as well as standpoint has become inherently interdisciplinary. Indeed, even within mainstream history, Arthur Marwick lists these as legitimate sources in the Nature of History45 and I would argue that feminist history has been of central importance, with the Annales school and social history, in bringing about this change. But, it was this application to a wider range of sources than were normally used, and the need to use old sources in new ways, that lead feminist historians to the theoretical questions outlined above. As a result, feminist historians predominantly work within what we could describe as an historicist frame, aiming to recognise the historic specificity of the sources used, the exact cultural context of the author and reader, and the historical construction of meanings and practices. Feminist historians, Rendall notes, now ‘look at language, symbol, form, and at the challenge of the subjective’,46 and though they often use the largely empirical methodology of Rankean history, especially when looking at the ‘material forces that shaped women’s lives’,47 they recognise that no history writing can be done in a value-free vacuum. By discussing such points as a key element of self-reflexive practice they explicitly challenge the concept of objectivity that lays at the heart of the discipline as delineated in the nineteenth century. In fact, subjectivity is valued.

As Selma Leydesdorff has observed, feminist historians look for what is hidden, for silences, which allow them to use old texts in new ways. This is not just a matter of filling in gaps where women are missing:

‘Feminist historians have specialised in searching out the story behind the sources. They are no longer just concerned with naming what is clearly visible; they are also concerned with a story which is not described in so many words. Through accounts, for instance, about what is expected of men, we learn a great deal about expectations with respect to women.’48

Leydesdorff therefore argues for the study of the ‘conscious and unconscious repressions in the memory of an individual and of a culture.’49 Here, there is an overlap with the concerns of oral history, where there has been an increasing recognition that what is absent/unsaid, is as important as what is present/said. Joan

44 Maynard, 1994, 23.
49 Leydesdorff, 1989, 19.
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Sangster subsequently raised similar issues when addressing the use of oral testimony in women's history. When Sangster argues, we recognise that oral history should not be seen as a simple 'stop gap' that fills in the blanks, or as 'a purer version of past', and see that interviewer and interviewee create the source together, it becomes clear that oral histories are 'expressions of ideologies - whether dominant, submerged, oppositional' as she suggests, and that 'gender, race and class, as structural and ideological relations, have shaped the construction of historical memory'. Men and women remember and speak about the past differently, which is a matter of historical presentation and not just evidence. Hence Sangster says 'class, race and ethnicity,' and fits with the ethos of the

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Conclusion

Since the 1990s, the practice of feminist history while still grounded in the empirical has widened to incorporate the linguistic turn. Meanwhile, historical work outside of academic institutions has become more commonplace and fits with the ethos of the other key left-wing influence in Britain, the History Workshop Journal, which argued from its inception in 1976 that history is lived and therefore should be written beyond


51 Sangster, 1994, 7.

52 Sangster, 1994, 7.

53 For example, the UK Women's History Network not only works to bring women's historians together in the academy via national events, but through regional forums also seeks to involve independent researchers.

academic/professional bounds. The History Workshop Journal has supported feminist history and has been critical of British historical empiricism, which ignores new theoretical debates, ever since, and in 1985 demanded that feminists recast the whole of history, not just women's history, in new ways. Yet, there are still gaps, especially on international subjects, black and Asian history, and older periods that when identified give feminist women's historians cause for concern. As a recent (2002) paper suggests, feminist women's history is still financially marginalized in the UK compared to the US; in the UK women's history does not attract the funding required to undertake large-scale archival work (especially abroad), and still mostly takes place in the post-92 'new' universities, which limits its scope and its status. Meanwhile, a plenary at the International Federation for Research in Women's History in 2003 highlighted the drift forward in time that could be discerned in those papers published by women's history journals.

Meanwhile, the kind of approach just described, the search for what is unconscious, repressed, hidden and the understanding of history as the expression of ideology, requires the recognition that there may be no final certainty/truth in the history that is finally written. This idea is beginning to emerge, hence, Helga Grubitzsch, talks of an 'approximation to a true account', 'historical probability' and 'the possible reality' of women's lives. What this suggests is that there may no longer be closure in the historical narratives described by Catherine Hall.

Women's history starts and finishes with a central problem - how do you do research/find the truth about women's lives without any evidence? What happens if you cannot let the documents speak for themselves because there are no documents? These questions destabilise traditional historiography, and they have caused feminist history to change too. We see the impact of this in practice in The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davidson, which claims no closure, and works self-reflexively in a

54 History Workshop, 1985.


56 4th Conference, IFRWH, 2003: Professor Judith Bennett (University of North Carolina, USA) Who's Afraid of the Distant Past? The Relevance of the Premodern in a Postmodern World

detective mode. We also see it in the continued location of feminist history at the margins of the academy. However, its feminist practitioners see this in itself as being far from problematic. Hence, Hall says:

the margins can be a very productive terrain – a space from which both to challenge establishments and develop our own perspectives, build our own organisations, confirm our own collectivities....The dream remains – a kind of history that ... retains its critical edge, is open to new voices, and always in a dynamic relation to the political world in which we live.58

58 Hall, 1992, 35.