

**HISTORY
& THE CHALLENGE OF
GENDER HISTORY,**

**followed by debate with
June Purvis and Amanda Weatherill,
'From Women's History to Gender History:
A Reply to "Playing the Gender History Game"',**

By Penelope J. Corfield

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HISTORY & THE CHALLENGE OF GENDER HISTORY¹

One first general question can be posed before all others. Has studying the history of women - and now the history of gender - enriched the study of history? And the answer is unequivocally in the affirmative.

Despite some initial doubts and scepticism, the history of gender has proved an integral part of the study of the past. It has brought new perspectives, discovered new data, opened up valuable new areas for enquiry, generated new debates, and simultaneously established itself as an essential component of all forms of holistic analysis. In so doing, furthermore, women's history has creatively transformed itself into gender history. That has not happened without controversy. But it confirms that the subject has its own internal dynamic as well as sharing in wider changes within the discipline.

Women's history, in other words, has not rested upon its early laurels. In twenty-five years, between 1970 and the mid-1990s, it has moved rapidly from a fringe interest into a mainstream one. Whereas initially it was considered as a

¹ The author expresses thanks to all participants at the 1995 *Conference of North West Branch of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies* for animated discussions, and especially to Diana Donald and Frank O'Gorman for the initial invitation to participate. A short version of the original talk, expanded into an article, was also published in *Constructions of Gender in C18 Britain: Transactions of a Conference of North West Branch of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Nov. 1995* (1996), pp. 3-8.

raffish or eccentric subject for historians to study, it has now become normalised. Indeed, the speed of its assimilation may well be disconcerting to the pioneers. They have scarcely had time to enjoy their success before their own role has been transformed from that of path-breaking iconoclasts into established icons, ripe for challenge in turn by the next academic generation.

Clearly, one of the major reasons for the success of women's history has been its inclusion within a wider scholarly move by historians into social and cultural history. The tides and times were favourable to the change. Once a narrow political history was gradually widened and a mechanistic economic history was rejected in favour of a broader approach, then the history of women - and logically therefore also of men - was an obvious component of an ecumenical social history.

Moreover, the new subject itself helped to force change onto the intellectual agenda. It raised explicit questions about how social history should be studied. How was the past to be viewed? What was the key to understanding earlier societies? Specifically, was the history of women to be studied in commiseration with their burdens? Or in celebration of their resistance to repression? Or simply because they had been there? Put very schematically, women's history has provided examples of all these approaches.

Outrage at injustice was one initial motive for the quest to recover women's past. Despite the efforts of a notable generation of feminists in the early

twentieth century,² the ‘second sex’ had remained for too long *Hidden from History*.³ Hence it was relevant to analyse all the different ways by which women had been rendered invisible, and in so many different societies over such a long time. Aristotle's seminal contribution to the western cultural tradition was but one of the best known marginalisations of those with the misfortune not to be born into the powerful half of humanity:⁴

The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules and the other is ruled; this principle of necessity extends to all mankind.

This proved an influential attitude. Furthermore, it was sanctified subsequently by mainstream Christian teaching: nature's rules were created by God. As a result, gender roles were to be viewed as matters that were settled for all time - beyond human choice or intervention, and thus certainly beyond dispute. Hence it was futile for women to fret at their secondary status, as one cleric explained kindly in 1875:⁵

² The works of Alice Clark and Ivy Pinchbeck, influential enough in their day, were subsequently neglected until the attentions of a new generation of feminist historians revived interest in publications such as A. Clark, *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London, Routledge, 1919; later edns 1968, 1982, 1992) and I. Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* (London, Routledge, 1930; later edns 1969, 1981).

³ The title of a pioneering work by S. Rowbotham, *Hidden From History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London, Pluto Press, 1973).

⁴ Aristotle, *Politica*, with commentary by B. Jowett, in W.D. Ross (ed.), *The Works of Aristotle* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1921), Vol. 10, p. 1254a.

⁵ [W.W. Andrews? or J.S. Davenport?], *Woman: Her True Place and Standing - An Address*

It is not a question of personal superiority at all: it is a question of place and relation to be determined by God, our Creator, who sets His creatures where He pleases, and yet never arbitrarily, but in the profoundest wisdom and love.

Reacting against such views, it was equally possible to analyse all the different ways in which the 'second sex' had not accepted their subordinate fate. Rather than a story of victimisation, women's history could be reinterpreted as an epic of resistance. Women were seen not as passive sufferers but as active in empowering their own lives - despite the sundry cultural, theological, political and even legal fetters that hampered them. From this perspective, theirs was a saga not so much of restrictive structures but of creative agencies. Hence Rosalind Miles's *Women's History of the World* (1989) ends by quoting a combative modern pop song:⁶

If I have to, I can do anything -
I am strong,
I am invincible,
I AM WOMAN!

So much for Aristotle and centuries of undervaluation.

But these rhetorical excitements have generally been overtaken by the very success of the subject. Women's history has quickly merged into the mainstream of social and cultural history. As that has happened, the approach has been

by an American Clergyman (Edinburgh, 1875), p. 5.

⁶ Song by Helen Reddy, quoted in R. Miles, *The Women's History of the World* (London, Paladin, 1989), p. 288.

professionalised - losing in polemical edge but gaining in analytical balance. Women have been moved onto the research agenda while militant feminism has not. Two recent synthesising studies by established historians may be taken as conferring the full mantle of respectability.⁷ Now women are being studied 'simply' as women. In addition, the history of men has begun to attract attention. Of course, that still leaves many central questions. What were or are women 'simply' as women? Or men 'simply' as men? These debates, however, now form part of much wider discussions about the nature of historical enquiry.

Given the creative richness of women's history, a second general question can then be formulated: has this new focus for study in itself transformed the discipline? That indeed was the hope of at least some of the pioneers. 'Herstory' would not just update 'history' but would launch historical studies onto a distinctive and innovatory pathway: it would generate 'not only a new history of women but also a new history'.⁸ The whole intellectual landscape would change. 'Clio, the muse of history, is now a liberated woman', it was proclaimed

⁷ Especially praised is the magisterial study by O. Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, Vol. 1: 1500-1800* (London, HarperCollins 1995), with its stress both upon experience and ideas. Meanwhile, A. Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500-1800* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995) focuses chiefly upon the public discourse(s) and is weaker on the eighteenth century.

⁸ A.D. Gordon, M.J. Buble and N.S. Dye, 'The Problem of Women's History', in B.A. Carroll (ed.), *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays* (Urbana, Ill., University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 89.

cheerfully in 1973.⁹ As such, she would renovate the profession by introducing more women into academe - and at the same time rethink the whole project. A ‘terrible beauty’ would be born, in the form of a new epistemology - a whole new way of knowing. It would amount to a ‘reconceptualization of historical practice’.¹⁰ What was needed was ‘a more radical epistemology’ to match a more radical feminist politics and a more radical feminist history.¹¹

An exemplary indicator of the transformed approach was the popularisation of a novel verb. Henceforth history was to be ‘gendered’. This term was more frequently invoked than closely defined. It did, however, signal the new creed: cultural formations could not be studied without a central awareness of gender roles. Indeed, as though to hammer home the point, some of the most eminent male pioneers of a left-leaning social history were criticised for their neglect of this perception.¹²

Yet has the new research achieved a conceptual recasting of history (as opposed to contributing an important new dimension)? The answer to the second

⁹ Conference paper (1973), published as essay by S.R. Johansson, “‘Herstory’ as History: A New Field or Another Fad?” in Carroll (ed.), *Liberating Women’s History*, p. 400.

¹⁰ J.W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 53.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4. See also discussions on pp. 4-10, 53, 55-6.

¹² For example, E.P. Thompson was firmly chastised by Scott, *Gender and Politics*, pp. 68-90; and rebuked more gently by C. Hall, ‘The Tale of Samuel and Jemima: Gender and Working-Class Culture in Nineteenth-Century England’, in H.J. Kaye and K.C. McClelland (eds), *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Oxford, Polity Press, 1990), pp. 78-102.

general question, by contrast, must be in the negative. Women's history, or gender history as it is becoming, does not operate within a new epistemology. It does not require an intellectual quantum leap to understand the works of its practitioners. Gender historians communicate with their peers, under the capacious mantle of 'history', without any difficulty. Indeed, it is easier to call for a new epistemology than to create one.

Excited calls for a 'new breakthrough' were understandable in the heady early days. In retrospect, however, they can be seen to share much of the hyperbole that characterises innovation. Thus economic history was greeted early in the twentieth century as the new way of studying the past; prosopography in the 1950s was touted as the means to unlock the history of parliament; the advent of the computer in the 1960s was supposed to transform the practise of research; cliometrics in the 1970s was going to banish imprecision and usher in a new era of quantification and model-building; women's history in the 1980s was prepared to throw off the chains of patriarchy and to introduce a new woman-centred view of the world; and currently (in the mid-1990s) postmodernists promise - or threaten - a new form of social history and the end of scientific rationalism. In each case, the initial excitement was genuine. Each time the dust dies down, however, it appears that the extensive parameters and variegated techniques of historical knowledge have absorbed the innovation rather than mutated into a fundamentally new discipline.

Of course, it should not be assumed that there are no analytical, methodological, evidential or theoretical problems in interpreting the past. There are plenty. Yet the endeavour to resolve the difficulties as scrupulously as possible is one that is shared by all historians.

Gender history, moreover, has so far been notable for raising yet more analytical problems rather than for adopting one settled viewpoint. Such an achievement is, of course, an index of vitality. The exploration of historical gender is generating new debates, not new doctrine - new arguments, not new consensus.

For example, one perplexing issue relates to the significant chronologies of continuity/change. When historians abandoned a narrow political perspective upon the past, many hoped that a new temporal framework could be constructed. After all, what real significance did dates such as 1066 or 1689 or 1832 have for gender identities in England? And the same sceptical question could be asked about the history of gender in all countries with reference to their key political moments. It has, however, not proved easy to construct an alternative chronology.

Some historians resolve the problem by excluding change entirely. Women's history may be 'the history that stands still'.¹³ From this viewpoint,

¹³ See review essay by J. Bennett, 'History That Stands Still: Women's Work in the European Past', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14 (1988), pp. 269-83. The title of this essay is derived from E. Le Roy Ladurie's inaugural lecture entitled 'L'Histoire immobile' (1973), published in his *The*

deep continuities ensure that, whatever the changing outer framework, the structural repression of the world's child-bearers remains unchanged. It means too that the lost 'Golden Age' of woman-power never existed. Discarding nostalgia for non-existent past is helpful to scholarship. But to adopt a model of eternal stasis is not a satisfactory alternative. 'No change' conceals too much cultural and historical variation to be convincing as an interpretation.

How else can matters be viewed? One bold attempt has been proposed by Rosalind Miles. Her interpretation is a secularised narrative of: primitive paradise, followed by a prolonged fall and an eventual, if gradual, redemption. The ancient rule of the Great Goddess was ousted by male power (bolstered in western culture by the teachings of Aristotle and Pauline Christianity). Only with the Enlightenment - and then only slowly - came a new awareness of women's abilities and the start of their modern liberation.¹⁴ The narrative incorporated both change and continuity. Nonetheless, this general schema has also failed to win acceptance. Not only has the original matriarchy of the Great Goddess proved impossible to locate in historical time; but the subsequent prolonged 'rule of man' has (like the no-change-at-all model) glossed over too many centuries and

Mind and Method of the Historian (Brighton, Harvester, 1978), pp. 1-27.

¹⁴ Miles, *Women's History of the World*: the section titles indicate the overall trajectory, from section 1 'In the Beginning' with the rule of 'The Great Goddess' (pp. 36-56); section 2 'The Fall of Woman' (pp. 81-145); section 3 'Dominion and Domination' (pp. 149-218); and section 4 'Turning the Tide' (pp. 221-88).

cultural permutations to be anything more than a loose generalisation that conceals more than it illuminates.

A more nuanced categorisation and chronology is therefore required. There is, however, no sign as yet of this emerging. In common with much recent social and cultural history, women's history has been stronger in synchronic than in diachronic interpretation. When general long-term trends are invoked - such as the separation of work from the household and the banishment of women from a public sphere of production into a private sphere of demure domesticity - there is no agreement as to when these changes occurred. In England, estimates vary from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries - a very wide margin for disagreement.¹⁵ This is particularly striking since the alleged change is considered to be absolutely fundamental.

Meanwhile, other historians dispute either that the new banishment of women into the private sphere occurred at all or that whatever did happen can be best described in such terms.¹⁶ This is, of course, the stuff of lively debate and will no doubt prompt more much-needed research. What, if anything, did change significantly? and how, when and why? Excellent questions. But the lack of synthesis in reply means that women's history has not so far produced a

¹⁵ A. Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *Historical Journal*, Vol. 36 (1993), p. 413. And see discussion generally, pp. 383-414.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, passim esp. pp. 399-412.

commanding new temporal framework with which to revolutionise the rest of history. And that is without men. Once the problematic timetable of historical masculinity is added into the equation, things become yet more complicated.¹⁷ Were changing roles for women always, often, sometimes or never correlated with concomitant changes for men? There is as yet no answer.

Incidentally, it should be noted that this marked thematic and chronological uncertainty is by no means unique to gender history. On the contrary. It closely matches the absence of consensus across the subject generally about both the nature and timing of the ‘grand trends’ of time.¹⁸

That said, gender historians have other conceptual problems of their own to preoccupy them. There is a rumbling debate over what exactly is being studied. How is gender formed? And how therefore should it be studied in the past? Is it a biological ‘given’? Or is it derived from social and cultural expectations about gender roles? Or by some possibly changing combination of the two? And, if formed or strongly influenced by social expectations, how can those best be studied? Can public rhetoric be taken as direct proxy for communal beliefs? Or,

¹⁷ M. Roper and J. Tosh, ‘Historians and the Politics of Masculinity’, in Roper and Tosh (eds), *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (London, Routledge, 1991), pp. 5, 19, call for a historical perspective upon masculinity but warn that such a history will not be a simple ‘linear’ narrative.

¹⁸ P.J. Corfield, *Naming the Age: History, Historians and Time* (Egham, Royal Holloway Inaugural Lecture series, 1996), pp. 24-35.

conversely, could the official discourse (for example, clerical admonitions to women) represent the inverse of actual behaviour?

Again, these are fascinating questions that deserve debate. Initially, some feminists implied that there was a given woman's nature that could be traced through history. This view is known as 'essentialist'. Currently (1996), it is out of fashion, although it may still have some lurking adherents.¹⁹ Instead, the new emphasis is strongly in favour of a social 'constructionist' view, derived from the writings of Michel Foucault on the history of sexuality.²⁰ He himself was not particularly interested in the history of women. His interpretation, however, stressed the potential plasticity of gender roles. Those were not (and are not) innate, in Foucault's view, but were (and are) socially 'constructed' through discourse.

It was this approach in particular which helped to transform 'women's history' into 'gender history'. The quest has become an examination of how social roles were created and sustained historically. It was not an exclusively feminist agenda at all. Hence the discourse about masculinity was just as relevant

¹⁹A comment by L. Roper, 'Introduction', in her *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London, Routledge, 1994), p. 3, might appear to open the door to a revived essentialism or perhaps to a synthesis that includes some essentialist elements: 'Sexual difference has its own physiological and psychological reality'. She adds admonishingly that failure to accept this reality amounts to a 'denial of the body' (p. 4). See also discussion pp. 17-18, 21, 26-7.

²⁰ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 3 Vols (Paris, 1976, 1984, 1986; Engl. transl. 1979, 1986, 1990). See also L. McNab, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992).

as that about womanhood.

However, the shift in emphasis and methodology within the subject has raised its own problems. Can gender history best be studied by reference to the public discourse? And what constitute satisfactory sources for such a study? Do prescriptive works (such as sermons and advice books) really provide an unproblematic picture of everyday behaviour? Or is it as misleading to deduce the history of gender from conduct books as it is to derive the history of cookery from published recipes? or the history of child-care from child-rearing manuals?²¹ or the history of morals from sermons? or the history of manners from etiquette books? or the history of motoring from a close reading of the Highway Code? After all, it was not unknown for public advice either to precede or to lag behind - or even to contradict directly - the changing patterns of social practice.

Furthermore, as literary experts remind historians, it is also important to allow for varieties of 'reader response'.²² Conduct books might propose, but they could not automatically dispose. Men and women were not mere ciphers. The stuffier social conventions were sometimes more honoured in the breach than in

²¹ This point is excellently demonstrated in J.E. Mechling, 'Advice to Historians on Advice to Mothers', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 9 (1975), pp. 44-63.

²² The need for more research into reader response is noted by Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres', p. 408 and n. 95; and the same applies to listener response, in the case of sermons and speeches. For a modern study, see J.A. Radway, 'Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 9 (1983), pp. 53-78; and discussion of methodologies in J. Rose, 'How Historians Study Reader Response', in J.O. Jordan and R.L. Patten (eds), *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

the observance. Indeed, those historians who argue that gender roles are socially constructed do not have to imply that men and women perform parrot-fashion on the strength of conduct books. Human socialisation is much more complex and variegated than that.

Descriptive literature, too, is not without its own problems. Such writings often conveyed prior assumptions or stereotyped observations or repeated mythologies. Not every account of the behaviour of men and women in the past constitutes reliable social reportage. Hence all forms of evidence need careful scrutiny and - without prior testing - none should be assumed to depict gender roles realistically or to have imposed them upon a passive population.

Above all, it is unwise (though easier) to take a unitary view of 'discourse'. Public debates were often pluralistic and divided. Social attitudes could be diverse. It cannot therefore be assumed that there was always a single set of ideas about the proper social roles for men and women. Closed non-accessible societies, with a monochrome ruling ideology, might produce a greater tendency to conformity. Open, trading societies with pluralist social institutions might promote greater diversity. In every case, the issue needs to be discussed. At present, there is a good case for banning from gender history all references to a singular 'discourse', unless a specific case has been made for its usage.²³ Social

²³ In urging this advice prescriptively, the author is aware that reader response in a diversified culture means that not everyone will follow it.

attitudes, debates, customs in the plural - yes. But a past (and present) that is automatically assumed to be subject to one controlling 'discourse', as inscribed in literary texts - emphatically no.²⁴

Where does this leave gender history? These new theorisations of sexuality and new approaches to reading texts have manifestly enlivened the subject. Indeed, both have proved especially welcome, since gender history was ready for a stimulus to new research. The dramatic impetus derived from 1970s feminism was beginning to wane and fragment, as political feminism itself began to diversify. Rousing denunciations of 'patriarchal oppression' have given ground to the milder language of exploring 'inequalities between the sexes'.²⁵

Similarly, the influential contributions of Marxist-influenced gender historians, who made great play of adding gender to class, have run into problems, as the Marxist interpretative scheme (including Marxist concepts of class itself) have been challenged by some and bypassed by others.²⁶ A focus

²⁴ Although far from all those referring to 'discourse' intend to make a philosophical declaration, the term was made fashionable, at least in origin, by a post-structuralist neo-idealism that holds that there is no reality outside the text and that knowledge is gained by deconstructing texts in order to discover (and often to expose) the controlling discourse.

²⁵ For a (sorrowful) assessment of the muting of explicit feminism within academic gender studies, see J. Bennett, 'Feminism and History', *Gender and History*, Vol. 1 (1989), pp. 251-72.

²⁶ The instability of 'class' as a concept does not mean it has no historical purchase; but it does pose problems for a Marxist interpretation that assumes an irreducible and clear-cut class conflict throughout history.

upon ideas about sexuality and the body became a bold and attractive way to change the analytical focus.

With such interesting themes to explore, it is not difficult to predict that the study of gender will continue to be one of the most challenging areas of research in social and cultural history. Moreover, it is probable that the next stage will be one of creative ferment - both in ideas and in themes. There is much yet to be done. Indeed, as fresh research unfolds, it becomes more and more apparent that the subject, far from being definitively explored, has hardly begun. A diversity of issues remain to debate. One development that has been signalled within gender history itself is the quest to develop more complex models of social and gender relationships.

Hitherto, much discussion has been couched in terms of dichotomous alternatives. No doubt, the contrast between biological man and woman has subconsciously encouraged a dualistic mind-set. Women's history has in particular been too often analytically beset with dichotomies.²⁷ But these may be false. How helpful are either/or scenarios? Do they stimulate fresh research? or do they unduly constrict the possible range of answers? Should historians of gender have to choose analytically between nature/culture, work/family, public/private, sex/gender, equality/difference, integration/autonomy as rigidly

²⁷ Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, pp. 26-7; and G. Bock, 'Challenging Dichotomies: Perspectives on Women's History', in K. Offen, R.R. Pierson and J. Rendall (eds), *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1991), p. 1.

opposed alternatives?²⁸ These debates are not, of course, confined to women's history. Currently (1996), the Habermas-derived distinction between 'the public' and 'the private' is also much debated within a wider social history. As a result, it will be interesting to see where and how this dichotomy gets a thorough critique. And, of course, it will be even more interesting to see what new perspectives arise from the challenge to dualism. Overthrowing the dominance of the 'two' should provide scope for a much more ambitious and diversified analysis. It will also chime more sympathetically with human experience, since both past and present societies have seen more than two types of sexual behaviour and more than two varieties of possible gender roles.²⁹

Finally, the study of gender offers a crucial challenge to the study of history as a whole. It does have to offer a whole new epistemology to do that. There is no need to invoke a warm, female intuition in lieu of a cold, male logic. That would endorse a crude stereotyping that most historians - other than the most obdurate essentialists - would reject. Similarly, there is no need to reject the possibility of achieving a reasoned understanding of the past, even if there are many

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 1-23, identifies the first three dualisms as old ones and the latter three as new ones that have recently crept into the study of women's history.

²⁹ This is well shown by studies such as J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1980) and A. Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London, Gay Men's Press, 1982).

acknowledged problems in the task. The fact that not everything can be known with certainty does not mean that nothing can be known. So gender history does not have to depend for its credibility upon a postmodernist dismissal of 'Enlightenment reason'.³⁰

The issue is much more direct than that. It simply asserts that the study of history, as a route to knowledge, must include the history of gender. Exactly how significant a factor it is deemed to be is a matter for continuing argument. But knowledge must be holistic - it cannot be expanded in a ghetto. Certainly, to ignore gender is to sacrifice depth, breadth, realism. And, happily, to include it is a task that has been stirringly begun but emphatically not yet completed. There is much new research to be done - and debated. Let a thousand research projects bloom.

SEE ON FOR RESPONSE TO SUBSEQUENT DEBATE:

³⁰ A warning against too enthusiastic a feminist endorsement of postmodernist critiques of reason is contained in D. Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1992 edn), pp. 9-15, 178-86, 223-7. Similarly, the framework of aspirations for a feminist philosophy, sketched by E. Grosz, 'Philosophy', in S. Gunew (ed.), *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct* (London, Routledge, 1990), p. 169, argues that this should expand rather than abolish the concept of reason. See also discussions in, variously, H. Crawley and S. Himmelweit (eds), *Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994), esp. pp. 334-69; Gunew (ed.), *Feminist Knowledge*, passim; J. Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"', and N. Fraser and L. Nicholson, 'Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism', both in S. Seidman (ed.), *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 153-70, 242-61.

**June Purvis and Amanda Weatherill,
“Playing the Gender History Game”,
Rethinking History, no. 1/3 (1997), pp. 241-58
argued that abandoning women’s history
for the delusive cause of gender history is a retrogressive move from the
point of view of women.**

**Penelope J. Corfield’s response is entitled:
‘From Women’s History to Gender History:
A Reply to “Playing the Gender History Game”’,
Rethinking History, Vol. 3/3 (Autumn 1999), pp. 339-41**

I thank June Purvis and Amanda Weatherill for their comment ‘Playing the Gender History Game’, which provides a close reading of my article ‘History and the Challenge of Gender History’, *Rethinking History*, 1:3 (1997), pp. 241-58.

There does not in fact appear to be substantive disagreement about my analysis of the achievements/failures of women’s history to date. We do, however, diverge markedly in our assessments of the nature and merits of current research trends. This seems worth exploring further.

Briefly, I argued that the field of women’s history, having begun by rescuing the history of women from undue oblivion, has now begun to broaden into a wider gender history. The extended perspective includes the history of men/women/gender identities and all forms of gender relationships. There are lots of reasons for this shift, not least the fact that no separate ‘herstory’ has emerged. In my view, the capacity of the subject to broaden itself is a sign of intellectual vitality.

By contrast, Purvis and Weatherill argue that women’s history both is not - and should not be - mutating into gender history. They believe that a clear distance should be kept. The maintenance of women’s history as a separate

field will offer, in their view, the best chance for the formulation of a specifically feminist 'herstory', outside the 'male/stream'. As context for this view, Purvis and Weatherill see feminist academics within British and American higher education as imperilled ('Playing the Gender History Game', pp. 4-5), and they buttress their case by reference to the poor representation of women among the professoriat.

Our debate therefore centres around two questions. Firstly, is women's history shifting towards a broader gender history? On that, the best reply is that time will show.

And, secondly, is such a shift, if occurring, a 'bad thing' (by implication, either for understanding the history of women - or for women's position in academe)? I think not.

The details of my reply are summarised under three definitional headings. *Feminist history*: An explicit feminism, concerned with the just appreciation, advancement, and theoretical understanding of the roles of the *quondam* 'second sex', was and remains a common motivation for the study of women's history. Indeed, the changing interaction between feminist theories and research praxis is a wonderful topic for investigation in its own right.

Yet there is no easily identifiable and separately feminist women's history. The dividing lines between feminist and non-feminist versions are highly subjective. No single approach has been established to act as a litmus test. Modern feminism has become a very pluralistic and argumentative affair. As a result, one historian may consider herself to be feminist; yet not be so accepted by others. Other subjects share the same dilemmas of identification. For example, there are debates over the nature of feminist epistemologies (Alcoff and Potter 1993) and of feminist geographies (Women and Geography Study Group 1997), while the editor of *Deconstructing Feminist Psychology*

also observes that the intersection of feminist theories with psychology has generated not ‘a stable topic area, but rather ... a site of contest’ (Burman 1998: 3).

Feminism therefore provides an approach (or, rather, a range of approaches) that may be applied to history, as to many other subjects especially within the humanities and social sciences. That being so, it seems just as feasible to apply feminist perspectives to the history of gender as it does to apply them to the history of women.

Women’s history is a field of study that is defined by its subject matter. It contains a range of approaches; but the most common shared assumption is that women must be regarded as independent historical agents in their own right. ‘Anti-womanism’ as a motivation for studying women’s history is very rare, no doubt because historians who believe women to be historically insignificant do not wish to waste time in studying such trifling beings.

Overall, the advent of women’s history has been admirably effective in broadening and deepening historical research. It has not led, however, to a new ‘grand narrative’ or to a separate ‘herstory’ as some (though not all) pioneers had hoped. Women’s history remains enmeshed in the rest of history. It interacts particularly strongly with social and cultural studies. Incidentally, the widespread terminology of ‘gender’ has itself been much encouraged by women’s history specialists. They often refer, for example, to social structures as being ‘gendered’, or displaying an uneven gender balance of power. Such linguistic creativity, if now sometimes hackneyed, showed that analysts of women’s history were early aware of the way that women’s status was located within wider contexts.

Gender history is thus not a cuckoo in the nest. It is instead a logical development, signalling the explicit consideration of men and of gender

relationships. In particular, it indicates that ‘man’ is no longer deemed to be an ahistorical concept that is beyond analysis. ‘Gender history’ thus refers to the history of gender in all its aspects, just as ‘women’s history’ is the name commonly given to the history of women.

Reconfiguring the field emphasises the adoption of a broad perspective. It does not signal the analytical primacy of men. Nor does it imply a covert attack upon women’s history or upon women’s historians. On the contrary. The change has occurred as a gradual progression. There is extensive overlapping between practitioners. Indeed, it could be argued that the new nomenclature merely reflects what has long been happening in practice. Women’s history courses already discuss, without controversy, topics relating to the history of men. Equally, the journal *Gender and History* stressed at its inception in 1989 that it sought to broaden rather than to undermine women’s history, by confronting gender relations ‘from a feminist perspective’ (*Gender and History* Editorial Collective 1989: 1).

Shifting the name has not therefore stemmed from any sudden loss of confidence in female agency. The explicit analysis of gender relationships has instead highlighted new questions. For example, are changing roles for one gender always/often/sometimes/never accompanied by contrapuntal changes for the other? There are, however, no rules for research in this or any other field. Historians of gender can and do focus upon any aspect of men and/or women’s history, as they choose. But these issues can all be viewed within a multi-gendered ‘humanist’ field of study.

Among other things, such ecumenicalism provides a helpful analytical framework for *men’s history*, bringing this subject in from the cold. Otherwise, it should presumably be left to languish, awaiting the advent of a separate masculinism.

Knowledge is too multifarious, interactive, and ever-expanding to be pigeon-holed into a discrete 'malestream' version (Purvis and Weatherill, p. 6) or rival 'female/stream', just as it does not fall into separate streams for people classified by their race, class, religion, politics, looks, physical ability, intelligence, and so forth.

Lastly, the shift from women's history to gender history will not, in my view, prevent efforts to remedy the regrettable shortage of women among the professoriat. Nor will it silence feminists, whether male or female. What do others think?

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