OXFORD READINGS IN FEMINISM

FEMINISM & HISTORY

Joan Wallach Scott

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Feminism and History

Edited by

Joan Wallach Scott

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Joan Wallach Scott

FEMINISM AND HISTORY

There is a long history of feminists who write the history of women in order to make an argument for the equal treatment of women and men. Typically, this approach has involved substituting positive examples of women's capabilities in place of negative characterizations. Countering stereotypes has built a tension into the writing of women's history. On the one hand, an essentializing tendency assumes (with feminism's opponents) that there are fixed characteristics belonging to women. (The disagreement is over what they are.) On the other hand, an historicizing approach stresses differences among women and even within the concept of 'women'.

For centuries, those advocating the elevation of women's status have culled the past for examples of exemplary figures: artists, writers, politicians, religious devotees, scientists, educators. Depending on the period and the purpose, they assembled stories to counter the presumptions about female incapacity contained in the prescriptive literature or legal codes of their day. When the argument was about education, feminists came up with stunning cases of brilliant women to demonstrate that learning did not distort femininity or, more radically, that sex had nothing to do with the operations of the mind. As feminists mobilized to demand citizenship in the wake of the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century, they pointed to the political capacities of queens and of ordinary women such as Joan of Arc to legitimize their claims that political rights ought not to be denied them because of their sex. A wonderful example comes from a speech delivered in 1793 to the Parisian Society of Revolutionary Republican Women by 'La femme Monic', a haberdasher:

I am grateful to Mary Louise Roberts and Debra Keates for their careful critical readings.

From the famous Deborah, who succeeded Moses and Joshua, to the two Frei sisters, who fought so valiantly in our republican armies, not a single century has passed which has not produced a woman warrior. See how Thomyris, queen of the Scythians, battles and conquers the great Cyrus; the Marullus girl chases the Turks from [Stylimène] . . . Joan of Arc, who forced the English to flee before her, shamed them into raising the siege of Orléans . . . Without my having to cite for you the individual names of these courageous female warriors . . . I will remind you of the virile and warriorlike vigour of that colony of Amazons whose existence has been cast into doubt because of people's jealousy of women. . . . What do all these examples prove, if not that women can form battalions, command armies, battle, and conquer as well as men? If any doubt remained, I would cite Panthee, Ingonded, Clotilde, Isabelle, Margueritte, etc., etc. But I will not stop here, and I will say to these men who think they are our masters: Who delivered Judea and Syria from the tyranny of Holofernes? Judith. To whom did Rome owe her liberty and the Republic? To two women. Who were those who gave the final lesson in courage to the Spartans? Mothers and wives . . . If women are suited for combat, they are no less suited for government. How many of them have governed with glory! My only problem is how to select examples. Theodelinda, queen of Lombardy, brought down Agilulf and extinguished the wars of religion which were blazing in her territories. Everyone knows that Semiramis was a dove in the cabinet and an eagle in the field. Isabelle of Spain governed with glory. Here again is a woman who supported the discovery of the New World. In our times Catherine of Russia achieved what Peter only outlined . . .

The examples go on and on as Monic seeks to prove conclusively that women 'deserve to govern', that they do so better than men, and that in a republic they ought not to be excluded from government and administration.[1]

I cite this speech not only because its excess so clearly illustrates my point, but also because it has a double resonance. It is evidence of the way feminists in the past have turned to history to legitimate their demands, and it is evidence that is available to us as a result of the efforts of recent feminist historians (in this case, Darline Levy, Harriet Applewhite, and Mary Johnson, who combed the archives for documents about women in Paris during the tumultuous years of the French Revolution). Inspired by the feminist movement of the 1960s, these historians set out to establish not only women's presence, but their active participation in the events that were seen to constitute history. If women's subordination—past and present—was secured at least in part by their invisibility, then emancipation might be advanced by making them visible in narratives of social struggle and political achievement.

The titles of some of the major books of that period—*Becoming Visible, Hidden From History*—reveal this preoccupation with making women evident to readers of historical accounts. By recovering stories of women's activism, feminists provided not just new information about women's behaviour, but new knowledge—another way of understanding, of seeing, women, and another way of seeing and understanding what counted as history. For if women were present and active, then history was neither the story of 'man's' heroism nor the means by which exclusive masculine agency (rational, self-determining, self-representing) was affirmed. As a corrective to the phallocentric themes of most historical accounts, women were portrayed as makers of history. But the metaphor of visibility carried contradictory messages. Equating visibility with transparency made the feminist historian's task simply the recovery of previously ignored facts. When the questions of why these facts had been ignored and how they were now to be understood were raised, history became more than a search for facts. Since new visions of history depended on the perspectives and questions of the historian, making women visible was not simply a matter of unearthing new facts; it was a matter of advancing new interpretations which not only offered new readings of politics, but of the changing significance of families and sexuality.

The feminist recovery of women for history has been a far-reaching, complex, and contradictory project. It is beset by a version of the 'sameness versus difference' conundrum that feminists have long faced as they argued for equality with men. Feminist historians have made the identity of 'women' coherent and singular at the same time that they have provided empirical evidence for irreducible differences among women. Feminist historians have offered examples from many centuries and countries to counter contemporary claims that women are, by physical constitution and psychological temperament, weaker, more passive, more concerned with children, less productive as workers, less rational, and more emotional than men. This approach simultaneously establishes women as historical subjects operating in time and makes the idea of 'women' singular and timeless: those women in the past (or in other cultures) whose actions set precedents for our own are taken in some fundamental way to be just like us. (They have to be like us if the comparisons and precedents are to be meaningful.)

Even as it created this sense of identity over time, however, the work of historical recovery turned up women whose difference from 'us' needed to be acknowledged and explained. Could a shared

identity of 'women' exist at all if the conditions of life and the meanings of actions were fundamentally different from our own? The eloquent writings of seventeenth-century aristocratic Frenchwomen might be used to prove that women as a group did not lack creative talent, but they also raised the issue of how these particular women came to write as they did. The facts of the hard working lives of early English factory women may have demonstrated an innate capacity for women to work, but they also provoked questions about how such work was tolerated in societies that equated domesticity with femininity. And how to interpret eroticized expressions of passion for one another by early nineteenth-century North American women living according to the rules of heterosexual social organization? The specificity and diversity of historical evidence cannot easily be read as a simple manifestation of the innate capacity of women.

This is perhaps another way of saying that conflicting understandings of the uses of the past have been intrinsic to the project of feminist history. The desire to legitimize feminist claims about women in order to consolidate an effective feminist political movement treats 'women' uniformly and so ahistorically. But the creation of women as subjects of history places them temporally in the contexts of their action, and explains the possibilities for such action in terms of those contexts. Thus history contains examples of fundamental differences, in experience and self-understanding, among women, potentially undermining the political task of creating an enduring common identity.

The unresolved question of whether 'women' is a singular or radically diverse category, whether 'women' is a social category that pre-exists or is produced by history, is at the heart of both feminist history and the history of feminism. This ought not to be surprising when we consider that the two are interrelated projects. Feminism as a politics appeals to the 'women' in whose name it acts as if they were a permanent and clearly distinguishable social group in order to mobilize them into a coherent political movement; the history of feminism thus has been the history of the project of reducing diversities (of class, race, sexuality, ethnicity, politics, religion, and socio-economic status) among females to a common identity of women (usually in opposition to patriarchy, a system of male domination). To the extent that feminist history serves the political ends of feminism, it participates in producing this essentialized common identity of women.

At the same time, however, and as part of the aim of recovering

women's past, feminist history analyses the conditions which have or have not produced a shared identity of women by examining the different contexts in which women have lived, the different ways in which they have experienced their lives, the different influences of their acquiescence or resistance to the rules societies have elaborated for their behaviour. The results of this analysis point to fundamental differences in the identities attributed to and avowed by women. These identities change over time, vary in different societies, and even change for the same women depending on the contexts they are in. Except for the fact of the similarity of their sexual organs, it is hard to find a common identity (based either on an objective oppression or subjective perception) between aristocratic *salonières* in the seventeenth century and nineteenth-century middle-class housewives, or between those religious women of the Middle Ages who sought transcendence of their bodies in the service of Christ and twentieth-century sex workers whose bodies serve as a source of income.

Feminist history has provided both a subject (women) and a lineage (a long line of foremothers) for contemporary feminist political movements as well as ways of analysing the emergence of such subjects and movements in the past. It has posited 'women' as a social category that pre-exists history and, at the same time, demonstrated that the very existence of the social category of women varied according to history. I would say that, difficult as it is to live with tension, this is one of those useful and productive tensions worth living with. Feminism has provided focus, commitment, and critical stimulus for those of us who have undertaken to write history from its perspective, while history has provided an important and sobering corrective to the essentialist tendencies of feminist politics.

DIFFERENCE AS AN ANALYTIC CATEGORY FOR FEMINISM

Feminism's search for a common ground for 'women' repressed differences but it did not eliminate them. We can read the history of feminist movements in terms of a tension between unity and difference. In the United States, feminists divided over questions of slavery and race. Not everyone accepted Soujourner Truth's argument in 1851 that she, too, was a woman—having borne and nursed thirteen children. In fact, claims for women's rights often

came from feminists who did not include African-Americans when they spoke of 'women' in universalist terms. Early in the twentieth century a meeting of French feminists divided over the question of class. When the majority defeated a resolution calling for a day off for domestic servants (some delegates argued that girls with free time might become prostitutes), socialists among them denounced feminism as a cloak for middle-class women's interests. Some argued that there could never be solidarity among women across class lines. Defending feminism as a movement for all women (and 'women' as a homogeneous category), Hubertine Auclert replied, 'there cannot be a bourgeois feminism and a socialist feminism because there are not two female sexes'.[2]

Auclert's comment seeks to deny the problem of (class) difference that it also recognizes. The feminist movements of the late twentieth century have not been able to or willing to deny differences in the same way. Indeed, it could be said that difference is at the very heart of the practice and theory of contemporary feminism; national and international debates among feminists have been understood in terms of differences among women. In the United States in the late 1970s 'women of colour' took this name as a way of exposing the implicit whiteness of feminism. They argued that race could not be set apart in considerations of women's experience and that, therefore, the differences among white and non-white women might be irreducible—their needs and interests so different as to preclude the formation of a common programme. The African-American poet Audre Lorde (in an argument that recalls the French debates about class) put it this way at an international feminist conference in New York in 1979:

> If white American feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of color? What is the theory behind racist feminism?[3]

The issue of sexuality has posed formidable questions of difference as well, leading to serious fractures in feminist solidarity and to the appearance of 'radical' feminism—a term used to refer to those who deem heterosexuality the source of women's oppression. The French philosopher Monique Wittig argued in this connection that lesbians were not 'women' since they were outside the symbolic economy of heterosexual relationships. Could there then be a com-

mon feminist ground for lesbians and 'women'? Who were the 'women' to be mobilized for feminist campaigns?

Over the past twenty years successive United Nations conferences on women and population (in Copenhagen, Nairobi, Mexico City, and Cairo) have revealed as many differences as similarities among women in the First and Third Worlds, West and East, North and South, whether the topic is family planning and infant mortality, development and economic opportunity, or legal status and political participation. Differences within the established categories of difference, such as race and ethnicity, have also troubled deliberations; not all black women or Islamic women or Jewish women share the same conceptions of femininity or social role or politics. In post-communist societies, as in post-colonial societies, politics, ethnicity, and religion lead women to identify their needs, desires, and interests so differently that it has been hard to articulate a readily shared agenda. The recent history of feminism shows not the impossibility of establishing such an agenda, but the fact that it does not emerge automatically when women get together. Rather, the platforms and policy recommendations offered in the name of 'women' were produced by intense negotiations. It is this political process that identifies 'women'; they do not exist as identical natural beings outside of it.

As differences among feminist activists have become increasingly visible and contested, feminist historians (many of them activists as well) have sought to understand difference by giving it a history. Much of the effort has involved descriptions of differences among women; gender identity is compounded and internally differentiated by social and sometimes political identities. The categories are offered as self-evident facts; there are working-class women, African-American women, Muslim women, bourgeois women, peasant women, lesbian women, Jewish lesbian women, socialist women, Nazi women—the list goes on and on, peopling women's history with the complexity and diversity that characterizes standard histories focused on men. But the descriptive labels which separate these different women often also essentialize them. In place of a singular 'women's' history, we now have fixed categories of working-class or African-American or Islamic women. Writing their history without asking where the identities come from, when they arise, and what ends they serve, gives these groups a certain eternal being.

But, just as metaphors of visibility assumed *and* contradicted the transparency of the social category 'women', so histories of different groups of women implicitly raise questions about the relational and

contingent nature of difference. The category 'working-class women', for example, refers descriptively in many studies to wage-earning persons with female bodies. But when, in some historical contexts, 'working-class women' has meant only white wage-earning women, it has not been enough to add 'white' to the descriptive label. Some kind of analysis is needed of a complicated and highly specific relationship of power. What is the process by which race or class becomes salient for making social distinctions in certain periods and not in others? What is the relationship between gender and these other categories? Does race take priority over class and class over gender, or are there inseparable connections among them? Under what conditions? In what circumstances? These questions call for an analysis of how, specifically, differences such as those of class, race, and gender are constructed. In the late twentieth century, difference has become an important analytic category for feminism.

Describing difference establishes social distinctions as social facts; analysing the history by which those differences have been produced disrupts their fixity as enduring facts and recasts them (and the social hierarchies they organize) as the effects of contingent and contested processes of change. Difference and the different identities it establishes (for and among women) are understood relative to specific contexts—to history.

Describing differences among women establishes the fact of separate identities, but also raises the issue of the relational nature of difference. When we ask how nineteenth-century white women dealt with black women, or English women with Indian women, we imply that those identities had something to do with one another, that they were not only interconnected socially, but definitionally. Part of being white, in other words, meant not being black; Englishness was established in contrast to Indianness. Identity did not inhere in one's body or nationality, but was produced discursively by contrasts with others. And these contrasts, whether of race or class or gender, have had a history. Historian Thomas Holt has written, for example, of the ways in which 'black' and 'white' identities were conceived by African-Jamaican rebels during the Morant Bay uprising of 1865.

> Contrary to the dominant discursive system, which identified blacks as those who worked and whites as those who ruled, the Morant Bay rebels appear generally to have recognized as white those directly implicated in the system of their oppression (planters, magistrates, and their supporters) and as black those who were the victims of that system. In more lim-