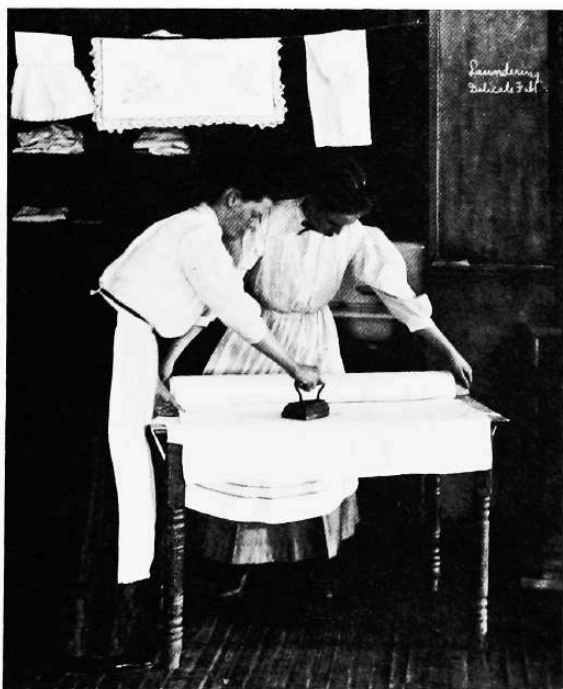
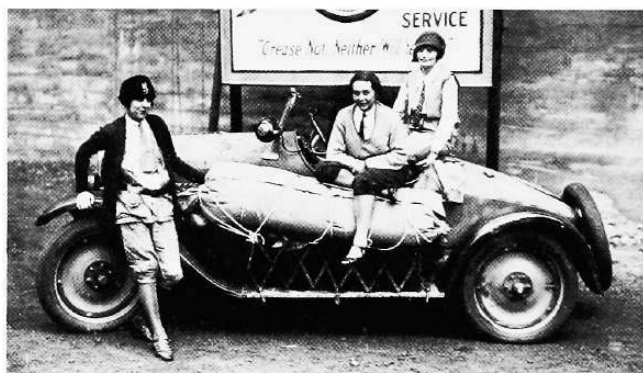




TOWARD A USABLE PAST



WOMEN'S HISTORY in the United States has been politically charged from the beginning. Like other insurgent branches of history born in the 1960s, it exposed the implicit politics in what had previously passed as "objective" or "scholarly" inquiry. In the 1980s, however, women's history has become a respected subfield within the discipline. It is now important for feminist

siders to the great sweeping changes wrought by men in power. Historians who were feminists accepted the challenge and began what became a flood of new scholarship on the social history of women which poses a growing challenge to historical tradition.

The work of contemporary feminist historians, inspired initially by the women's liberation movement,

can have a broad impact on the evolution of the women's movement. Historical scholarship provides the material that allows a reformulation of basic political and theoretical dead ends. Put simply, the historian's work matters in the real world.

But it is also important to explore the existing frameworks for women's history and their practical manifes-

Feminism as History and Politics

Sara M. Evans

historians to reconsider the relationship between the field of women's history and the social movement that gave it birth.

Women's history was born because the feminist movement in the late 1960s, like all social movements, required a vision of history. Contemporary feminists rejected the static images of females as governed by unchanging biological and familial roles and therefore out-

tations in the ongoing activities of the feminist movement in order to gain a new kind of clarity about the questions we ask. The intersection of academic heritage and feminist commitment is a point of tension fraught with danger as well as significance. Any approach to the past contains an implicit theory of social change and future possibility, assumptions that can function as a distorting lens, as feminist critiques of traditional historiography have so powerfully revealed. When made explicit and subjected to critical examination, however, such assumptions provide new and creative avenues for research as they generate hitherto unasked questions about the past.

Historical frameworks that are limiting or inadequate in comprehending women's past in all its complexity, on the other hand, reinforce political activities which are similarly limiting. In the early 1970s feminist historians defined the field and advocated a radical and sweeping approach to women's past.¹ They argued that historians had tended to concentrate either on women's "contributions" to history or on their oppression; neither approach offered a satisfactory method of understanding the experiences of most women. The feminist historians urged instead that women's lives be studied on their own terms, a process that might well require entirely new categories of analysis.

¹Some of the earliest examples include Gerda Lerner, "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History," in *Journal of Social History*, 4:333-356 (Fall, 1969), and "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," in *Feminist Studies*, Fall, 1975, p. 5-15; Ann D. Gordon, Mari Jo Buhle, and Nancy Schrom Dye, "Women in American Society: An Historical Contribution," and Sheila Ryan Johansson, "'Herstory' as History: A New Field or Another Fad?" both reprinted in Bernice A. Carroll, ed., *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, 75-92, 400-430 (Urbana, 1976). Subsequent articles along similar lines include Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman and the New History," and Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition: The European Case," both in *Feminist Studies*, Fall, 1975, p. 185-198 and Spring/Summer, 1976, p. 83-103; Jane Lewis, "Women Lost and Found: The Impact of Feminism on History," in Dale Spender, ed., *Men's Studies Modified: The Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines*, 55-72 (New York, 1981).

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THE CONTRIBUTION history or "women worthies" approach assumes that, while men have made history, women have contributed to every major historical event

or process. The greatest practitioner of this mode was Mary Beard, whose *Women as a Force in History* provided both a model and a foil for recent scholarship. This approach avoids a full feminist critique of the discipline but looks for women within the given parameters of activities traditionally deemed historic. Only those who step outside the norm, who act essentially as powerful men have acted, are "discovered." Because such women were deviant, however, questions about them bypass the historical realities of most women.²

The political dimension of contribution history is an assimilationist assertion that women should enter the public arena as freely as men: equal opportunity history. Focused on women in public life, it implies no critique of personal or family life nor any challenge to the subordination of these spheres to the public. The popular press features this version of feminism and women's history; books and articles about great and exceptional women in the past bolster the contemporary myth of the "superwoman," who manages career and family with ease. Where high school and college texts have begun to add a few "great women" to provide role models, the message becomes: women must increase their contribution to public life by learning to get ahead in the ways that men do.

Betty Friedan's recent work, *The Second Stage* (1981), represents a version of this mode at its most ahistorical. In her haste to eliminate what she views as feminists' angry excesses, Friedan accords virtually no weight to the past. She speaks vaguely about "evolution" moving toward the feminine, allowing women for the first time to be themselves while taking their place in history by transcending the conflicts between work and family. The magical quality of her solution illustrates the fact that, when history finally becomes irrelevant, so does political strategy.

The organizations associated with this vision have been on the front lines of the battles around the New Right, the Equal Rights Amendment, reproductive choice, and affirmative action. Their members, often called moderate feminists, concentrate on practical lobbying skills and work through the courts and the political parties. In recent years political observers and some moderate feminists have voiced fears that feminists are no longer setting the agenda but instead are just defending gains already made. In part, such judgments reflect the limitations of equal economic opportunity as a goal: "women who are like men should be treated equally with men." But most women are not like men. They continue to bear principal responsibility for child care and housework; their labor-force participation follows the rhythms of a different and changing life cycle; and

they face continuing discrimination. A failure of politics to address these realities also results in the reification of single-issue solutions such as the ERA which place the entire burden of sexual equality on a single legal change. Or the failure may lead to a retreat into individualism and purely personal solutions.

At its best, however, contribution history can help broaden women's sense of their own possibilities. Because most women in the past, however prominent, are not represented in our received tradition, their rediscovery brings the shocked recognition of our own impoverishment.³

THE SECOND APPROACH to women's history asserts that women have been brutalized, dehumanized, and defined as secondary by every known culture in history. This could be called victim history because it investigates the origins of women's oppression and the nature of patriarchy. In many ways it is focused on the actions of men toward women rather than on the actions of women. The works of early feminist theorists Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millett, for example, emphasized women's history as a story of oppression. Firestone argued that "throughout history, in all stages and types of culture, women have been oppressed due to their biological function." Millett offered an early analysis of patriarchal and misogynist images and structures in American literature. Each drew her framework from Simone de Beauvoir, who asserted in *The Second Sex* that men had made history and that women had been the passive and dependent "other."⁴

²Davis, in *Feminist Studies*, 185–198. The best source on Mary Beard is Anne J. Lane, ed., *Mary Ritter Beard: A Sourcebook* (New York, 1977). See also Bernice A. Carroll, "Mary Beard's Woman As Force in History: A Critique," in Carroll, ed., *Liberating Women's History*, 26–41.

³Excellent examples of this positive use of traditional women's history are the "Found Women" column in *Ms.* in the mid-1970s and Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter, eds., *Women of Minnesota: Selected Biographical Essays* (St. Paul, 1977). Feminist scholars are also demonstrating the rich interpretive possibilities when the questions and perspectives of woman-centered social history are applied to traditional subjects of political activity and "famous" women. See, for example, Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870–1920* (Urbana, 1981); Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Women's Rights and Abolition* (New York, 1971); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven, 1976). There is also a large and growing literature on the suffrage movement.

⁴Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 83 (New York, 1971); Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York, 1970). Sheila Ryan Johanson was one of the few to address explicitly the interpretations

Such analyses sprang from the necessity of convincing feminists and others that women's oppression was real and must be opposed. Like contribution history, this version accepts the primacy of the public realm which, in our own culture, reflects and legitimizes male oppression. The popularizers of victim history such as Mary Daly tend also to generalize the particular, to assume that "there exists a worldwide phenomenon of sexual caste [which is] basically the same whether one lives in Saudi Arabia or in Sweden." Such a view shifts rapidly from specific historical examples to statements about the universality of women's oppression; it builds a history and a politics on a moment of rage. Daly portrays the pervasiveness, the power, and the horror of women's oppression, past and present, for the purpose of breaking through to a radically new concept, to new perceptions of time and space. In looking for the commonalities in women's experiences, she refuses to flinch or speed past the horrors she uncovers.⁵

There is a clarity, a fearlessness in this rage that informs the best of radical feminist theory. Yet an interpretation of women's past that centers on oppression tends to be ahistorical. It emphasizes subjugation in a way that obscures historical specificity and differences due to class, race, ethnicity, religion, and economic sys-

tem. Victim history also replicates one of the problems feminism intends to combat: the view of women as passive. The only women who appear as historical actors in Daly's version are the hags, the furies, the witches — brave women, to be sure, and worthy of attention. All others are consigned to victimization. Since they have no way to embrace a feminist future without cutting off such a past, they must reject or perhaps transcend history. To build something totally new, some turn to a subculture, not as a basis for action but rather as an apolitical solution, abandoning the confrontation with history altogether.

The politics accompanying oppression history is similarly flawed, as the insistence on seeing women primarily as victims leads to serious weaknesses in the contemporary women's movement. Because "they" seem so strong and "we" so weak, fears of co-optation are accompanied by a tendency to purism and separatism. Such fears of contamination necessarily mean losing touch with the lives of most women, lives that are not and never intended to be "pure." For example, when a group of black women in Minneapolis proposed to sing a gospel hymn at the 1981 Take Back the Night march, they were told that the song's references to God were "offensive to women." Thus, in order to participate, women were required not only to oppose violence against women but also to subscribe to a particular version of the feminist critique of traditional religion.⁶ Such strictures all too easily eclipse the process of organizing, of building a movement. While the angry awakening on which the politics of victimization builds is necessary, it also leaves one feeling overwhelmed and powerless. In its most extreme form this politics speaks primarily to the already convinced. The fear of contamination makes it difficult to reach out effectively to anyone whose rage is not at the same pitch.

All of these problems reflect the lack of a sense of agency. To be effective, anger must be channeled and disciplined; to build a movement, women must learn to accept and understand deep differences and to recognize the small victories when they come. They must believe in their capacity to reshape history.⁷

ANOTHER, open-ended approach, which Gerda Lerner and others have called "woman-centered history," begins by asking questions about what women have done. It does not bypass the realities of oppression, but it accords women the dignity of historical actors, of having survived, created, and shaped the ways change occurred. In contrast to the focus on exceptional or oppressed women, it shifts the analysis away from the

of Firestone and Millett and to trace them to De Beauvoir. In addition, Gerda Lerner published an early critique of feminist theory, pointing out the tendency to view women historically as victims: "The Feminists: A Second Look," in *Columbia Forum*, 13:24-30 (Fall, 1970).

⁵Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, 2 (Boston, 1973); Robin Morgan, ed., *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist*, 9 (New York, 1977); Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, 8 (New York, 1976).

⁶"Take Back the Night" marches are public demonstrations in which women assert their right to walk public streets, unafraid, at any time of day. Such marches in the Twin Cities have been held on Hennepin Avenue, a center of pornography stores, strip joints, and rough bars, since 1979. Information about the planning process in 1981 comes from private conversations with several women who were involved. The first such march was in Germany in 1977. For a history of the movement, see Laura Lederer, ed., *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York, 1980).

⁷At its best, an analysis of women's oppression which pre-
sumes the possibility of women's own agency merges with the social history of women and transcends the limitations of victim history. Some of the most successful such work has come from Marxist feminists whose analysis is structural and explicitly historical. See for example, Linda Gordon, "What Should Women's Historians Do: Politics, Social Theory, and Women's History," in *Marxist Perspectives*, 1:128-137 (Fall, 1978); Joan Kelly-Gadol, "The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," in *Signs*, 1:809-823 (Summer, 1976).

male norm. In the words of Jane Lewis, "woman-centered history demands that we rethink what is 'important' in the past and how we analyze it."⁸

This fundamental intellectual shift has informed most of the creative work in women's history in the last decade. Taking women as subjects, not just objects, of history, it presumes that gender itself is a force shaping all other historical processes. On this new terrain we have begun to generate the data with which to pursue and debate a broad range of theoretical possibilities, creating "not only a new history of women but also a new history."⁹

The social history of women reveals, for example, that female experiences of industrialization differed sharply from those of men in the same class. Women played a fluid role in the family economy of the working classes, moving in and out of the marketplace according to family needs. Kinship networks and family relations, in turn, influenced housing patterns and work relationships. The texture and complexity of such women's lives is startling in light of previous stereotypes. Surprising, too, was the discovery that at the heart of the growing Victorian middle class was a female subculture which nourished gender identity and collective action.¹⁰

A comparative analysis of feminist movements in the United States has enriched social movement theory by revealing the critical importance of female networks. Such communal environments as missionary societies, mothers' clubs, moral reform associations, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union extended and subverted women's roles simultaneously. Though based on domesticity, they provided arenas outside the family over which women had a considerable measure of control — arenas which they "owned." In these environments women learned to speak in public, to organize, to raise and manage money, and finally to understand the complete illegitimacy of their exclusion from public politics. A point of view that saw church and family only as structures of oppression or that examined women only in public, political activities would simply not recognize these women or the subversive meanings of their daily lives. Attention to the personal dimensions of women's networks has further revealed the powerful bonds that sustained the women as they challenged a range of social inequities.¹¹

It is possible, however, to romanticize women's role by emphasizing their culture and autonomy without analyzing the nature of the boundaries within which they act. Such analysis would not critically examine family and kinship structures themselves or the public roles that women have in fact held. Nor does it pose clearly the need for the transformation of community itself.¹²

More satisfying would be an approach that seeks to avoid prior assumptions about what women did or did not do. One example is archaeologist Janet Spector's proposal in a study of Plains Indians that we begin with the simplest questions: What did women do? Where did they do it? Was their work daily, weekly, seasonal? Did they perform tasks alone or in groups? With men or with other women? How did their tasks mesh with other tasks which comprise the total economy? What were the possible social dimensions of the ways in which their activities and spaces were organized? Such an analysis might lead us back to the familiar categories of family and kinship, public and private, ideology and reality, or it might reveal a much broader range of possibilities and allow for the creation of new categories of analysis.¹³ The fact is that until we can view the past through the eyes of

⁸ Lewis, in Spender, ed., *Men's Studies Modified*, 60.

⁹ Gordon et al., in Carroll, ed., *Liberating Women's History*, 89.

¹⁰ For examples of what is now a rapidly growing literature, see Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York, 1978); Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Class, Sex and the Woman Worker* (Westport, Conn., 1977); Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1978); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in 19th Century America," in *Signs*, 1:1-29 (Autumn, 1975); Barbara Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn., 1981); Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago, 1972); Blanche Weisen Cook, "Female Support Networks and Political Activism," in Nancy Cott and Elizabeth Pleck, eds., *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women*, 412-444 (New York, 1979); Estelle Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1981); Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*.

¹¹ Additional discussions of female networks and social movements may be found in Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," in *Signs*, 7:545-566 (Spring, 1982); Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1890-1920," in *Feminist Studies*, 5:512-529 (Fall, 1979). For a discussion of free social spaces and social movements see Sara Evans and Harry C. Boyte, "Schools for Action: Radical Uses of Social Space," in *democracy*, Fall, 1982, p. 55-65.

¹² Jean Bethke Elstain, "Antigone's Daughters," in *democracy*, April 1982, p. 46-59. See also "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium," in *Feminist Studies*, 6:26-64 (Spring, 1980).

¹³ Janet Spector, "Male/Female Task Differentiation: A Framework for Integrating Historical and Archeological Materials in the Study of Gender and Colonization," unpublished paper presented at the 5th Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Poughkeepsie, New York, June, 1981.

women, unbounded either by patriarchal stereotypes or by our own limited experience, we cannot know the multitude of ways and places in which women have been historical agents.

The historical vision that women do indeed have a past on which they can stand in creating a new future is essential to a feminist politics that is militant, healthy, and self-respecting. Such a politics is grounded in the confident knowledge that women have always been agents and creators of history. The result is a kind of militant patience: militance because sexual equality is not inevitable but must be fought for with skill and tenacity; patience because no single battle represents the total struggle and losses can be placed in the long perspective. The enemy is not monolithic and neither is the solution. Furthermore, the process of working for change has a broad range of side effects which enhance the ultimate goal as women gain self-respect, confidence, concrete skills, a broadened sense of their rights, and a deepened sense of sisterhood.

An awareness of the great cultural diversity in women's historic experience fosters a pluralistic rather than a monolithic feminism. Feminism has always had many definitions and many dimensions precisely because women are as diverse as humanity. They share the plight of their sex, but, as important, they share the fate and the perspectives of their race, class, cultural, ethnic, and religious groups. Where female subcultures exist, they are usually contained within the boundaries of race and culture. To reach across those boundaries requires a deep appreciation of women's particular cultural and historical realities.

THERE IS A NEED for communal spaces where women can develop group awareness and skills for public leadership. Feminists must build on the strengths inherent in women's rootedness in community, recognizing that churches, neighborhood movements, and community or ethnic organizations provide such spaces. At the same time, they should not underestimate the resistance of those institutions once the women within them begin to mobilize.

¹⁴See Smith-Rosenberg, in *Signs*, 1:1-29; Cook, in Cott and Pleck, eds., *A Heritage*, 412-444; Blanche Weisen Cook, "'Women Alone Stir My Imagination': Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition," in *Signs*, 4:718-739 (Summer, 1979); Christina Simmons, "Companionate Marriage and the Lesbian Threat," in *Frontiers*, 4:54-59 (Fall, 1979).

The development of women's music, coffeehouses, and restaurants is a good example of current feminist organizing that fosters and enriches women's community. The lesbian movement in particular has recognized the importance of its members becoming visible to each other and to society. Furthermore, the celebration of contemporary lesbian community raises historical questions. The answers have begun to reveal complex and powerful dimensions of women's past.¹⁴

Organizers of clerical workers face the different problem of creating communal spaces in the glass and steel worlds of modern offices. Rather than relying on traditional labor union methods, national organizations like 9-to-5 and Women Employed have borrowed skills as well as tactics from direct action community organizers. They applied these to a feminist perspective on clerical work, especially the petty humiliations of the office-wife syndrome. These organizations carefully foster a sense of community and the transmission of leadership skills among members, and they conduct colorful and humorous demonstrations to gain media attention on issues of key symbolic importance to women workers. In addition, they consciously draw on the history of working women and women's participation in labor struggles and movements for social justice.

Finally, a recognition of the breadth and diversity of women's past and present should encourage analysis that recognizes the feminist dimension of every human problem or issue. Such analysis will depend at least in part on whether the historical resources needed are available. The feminist movement, like any democratic social movement, will build its vision of the future — implicitly or explicitly — on some vision of the past. Having a history is an essential prerequisite to claiming the right to shape the future; exploring the great variety of the past frees us from some of the cultural blinders that limit our sense of possibility in the present.

Feminist historians must stay rooted in the feminist movement, which pushes them to ask new questions and to sharpen their critiques. In turn, the movement itself will be severely impoverished if professional historians lose that sense of broader audience. We need a history that gives us vision and hope, that accords our foremothers the dignity we claim for ourselves, that reveals their capacity to act and to effect change. But we must never underestimate the obstacles which they faced.

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