
AHR Forum
Unanswered Questions

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WHEN I SUBMITTED MY "GENDER" ARTICLE to the *AHR* in 1986, its title was "Is Gender a Useful Category of Historical Analysis?" The editors made me turn the question into a statement because, they said, interrogatives were not allowed in article titles. Dutifully, I complied with this convention, though I thought the revision eliminated a certain rhetorical punch. Some twenty years later, the articles prepared for this forum seem to answer the question in the affirmative, and they do so with a rich variety of examples from recent historical writing. At the same time, they suggest that questions about gender are never completely answered; indeed, I want to insist that the term *gender* is useful only as a question.

As I read the articles, I couldn't help remembering the scowls that greeted the initial presentation of the paper, at a seminar at the Institute for Advanced Study in the fall of 1985. The Princeton historians had turned out to hear my talk—my first as a newly appointed member of the Institute faculty—and they were, to a man, appalled. Arms folded tightly across their chests, they drew themselves farther and farther back in their chairs and then left without a word. Later, some of their comments were reported back to me by friendly colleagues. Philosophy, not history, opined Lawrence Stone to all who would listen. I was spared the more negative reactions, though they were evident in that resounding silence. The establishment was clearly ready neither for gender nor for the poststructuralist theory that helped me formulate my ideas. I was shaken, but undaunted, since thinking in these new ways was far too interesting to send me back to orthodox history.

At the meetings of the American Historical Association in December, the paper got an entirely different reaction: critical but engaged responses from feminists, historians of women, and the growing band of our supporters. I was giving voice to—not inventing—some of the ideas and questions that the feminist movement had posed, looking for ways to turn political questions into historical ones. The paper was an amalgam of two sets of influences, one coming from history, the other from literature. The history side was the product of those amazing early Berkshire Conferences on the History of Women in the 1970s. It was there that I first heard mention of gender, in a talk by Natalie Zemon Davis, who reminded us that "women" were always defined in some relation to men. "Our goal," she said, "is to understand the significance of the *sexes*, of gender groups in the historical past. Our goal is to discover the range in sex roles and in sexual symbolism in different societies and periods, to find out what meanings they had and how they functioned to maintain the

social order or to promote change."¹ The literary side was a result of my time at Brown University in the early 1980s, working with feminist poststructuralist and psychoanalytic critics, among them Elizabeth Weed, Naomi Schor, Mary Anne Doane, and Ellen Rooney. They taught me how to think about the productive operations of difference, to understand that differences of sex were not set by nature but were established through language, and to analyze language as a volatile, mutable system whose meanings could never finally be secured.

I think it's right that the authors of the forum pieces remind us that I was not the origin of the gender concept, even among historians, but that my paper was a site where several lines of thought converged. "Joan Scott" is not, from this perspective, a person, but a placeholder, a representative for a collective endeavor of which I (Joan Scott the person) was only a part. That's probably why the article has endured: it had a familiar resonance, even for readers who did not agree with all of its arguments and who had no intention of following its suggestions. It set out some terms that we had to contend with, some theories that had to be engaged, and above all, it captured something of the excitement of those times: a way beyond ideas that had become stifling or stale, a set of openings to knowledge that we had yet to produce. "Gender" is about asking historical questions; it is not a programmatic or methodological treatise. It is above all an invitation to think critically about how the meanings of sexed bodies are produced, deployed, and changed; that, finally, is what accounts for its longevity.

The articles prepared for this forum testify to the myriad uses of the concept of gender as a way of interrogating history. They insist on the importance of context—temporal, geographic, political, ideological—for understanding the analyses it has enabled. No simple characterization can be based on the work they report. It's not a matter of how historians in and of different countries and eras rightly or wrongly applied some original idea of gender. As Heidi Tinsman puts it, "what constitutes useful categories of feminist analysis is a matter of geopolitics rather than epistemological catch-up." Another way to say this is that questions about gender can be asked and answered only in specific contexts. It is evident from these articles that gender is not a universally applicable concept with fixed parameters or referents; like "class," it is most useful when it points the way to specific investigations of meanings, whether of social relationships or rhetorical proclamations. There is no "language of gender" whose import can be extracted from its usages in order to measure its impact in good social scientific fashion. There are only diverse usages whose meanings must be read. And all that these readings can offer is deeper insight into the history we study, whatever its period or topic.

One of the striking things about these articles is their emphasis on the ways historians have looked at ideas about men and women, masculine and feminine, in order to illuminate politics writ large: war, empire, states, nations and nationalism, racism, revolution, resistance, communism and post-communism, party conflict, economic development. Various representations of masculinity and femininity have been invoked to mobilize constituencies, to tar enemies, to put groups and individuals in their place. Gender *is*, after all, "a primary way of signifying power." Two decades

¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition: The European Case," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 3-4 (1976): 90.

of research has made it abundantly clear that (to quote "Joan Scott") "gender constructs politics."

But oddly, or perhaps predictably, there are fewer questions posed about the ways in which "politics constructs gender," about the changing meanings of "women" (and "men"), and about the ways they are articulated by and through other concepts that seemingly have nothing to do with sex (such as war, race, citizen, reason, spirituality, nature, or the universal). Attention to gender, which emanated from the field of women's history, has not so much historicized "women" as it has worked with a fixed meaning for the category, taking the physical commonality of females as a synonym for a collective entity designated "women." Gender is said to be about the relationship between women and men, assumed to be not only hierarchical, but invariably so; the particular terms used to depict the relationship are seemingly less important than the asymmetry itself. And despite much innovative research on sexuality, gender—at least in historical discourse—most often refers to sexual difference, to an enduring male/female opposition, a normatively (if not distinctly biological) heterosexual coupling, even when homosexuality is the topic being addressed. It's not that women aren't given a history; of course they are. Ideas about them are said to change, as do their experiences; these vary in time and by class, ethnicity, culture, religion, and geography. The bountiful literature on women's social history is full of important distinctions that insist on the particularity of working or peasant or lesbian or medieval or Jewish or African American or Muslim or Latino or Eastern European women. But however much they attend to the quotidian lives of diverse populations, these differences take for granted an "underlying continuity of real women above whose constant bodies changing aerial descriptions dance."² Paradoxically, the history of women has kept "women" outside history. And the result is that "women" as a natural phenomenon is reinscribed, even as we assert that women are discursively constructed. To put it another way, the sex/gender binary, which defined gender as the social assignment of meaning to biologically given sex differences, remains in place despite a generation of scholarship aimed at deconstructing that opposition. (The deconstruction insisted that sex, like gender, had to be understood as a system of attributed meaning. Neither was about nature; both were products of culture. Sex was not a transparent phenomenon; it acquired its natural status retrospectively, as justification for the assignment of gender roles.) As long as "women" continue to "form a passive backdrop to changing conceptions of gender," our history will rest on a biological foundation that feminists—theoretically, at least—want to contest.³

This was the argument, already two decades ago, of Denise Riley's *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History*. It was published in 1988, the same year as my *Gender and the Politics of History*.⁴ The two books share a similar concern with feminism and history; both turn to poststructuralist theory for help; each speaks to the other. While my book addresses the question of gender as an analytic category, Riley's takes on the task of treating "women" in the same way. She

² Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (London, 1988), 7.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988; 2nd ed., New York, 1999).

offers a Foucauldian genealogy of “women”—a term more often treated as a transparent description. Even as she distinguishes “female persons” from “women,” her reading has often been mistaken for “a sort of Woman through the Ages approach”—something she specifically wanted to avoid.⁵ That this has been the case is a measure of how resistant history as a discipline has been to Foucault’s radical epistemological challenge, and also how well-disciplined history’s seemingly rebellious daughters have turned out to be.

It is worth considering Riley’s arguments a bit more because they illustrate a way to implement “Joan Scott’s” exhortation to ask not only how gender constructs politics, but how politics constructs gender. Politics, in that phrase, stands for more than power relations; it refers to the “external” influences on conceptions of women and men that apparently have nothing to do with them—notions of the soul or the universal or the human, for example, or of reason, imagination, science, and desire. Asking how “women” are defined in relation to ideas such as these is, for me, part of the unfinished business of the transformation in historical consciousness that the “Gender” article has come to signify.

Riley’s book is addressed to feminists, and to the difficulty posed for us by the need at once to insist on and to refuse the identity of “women.” This, she maintains, is not a liability, but the condition that gives rise to feminism. “‘Women’ is indeed an unstable category . . . this instability has a historical foundation, and . . . feminism is the site of the systematic fighting-out of that instability.” It is not only that there are different kinds of women assembled under the term, but also that the collective identity means different things at different times. Even for individuals, one is not always conscious of “being a woman.” The identity, Riley says, does not pervade us and so is “inconstant, and can’t provide an ontological foundation.” “The body” doesn’t provide that foundation either, since it is itself a concept that must be “read in relation to whatever else supports and surrounds it.” “For all its corporeality,” Riley points out, the body is not “an originating point nor yet a terminus; it is a result or an effect.”⁶

The absence of an ontological foundation might suggest the futility of women’s history; if there are no women, some of her critics have complained, how can there be women’s history, or for that matter, feminism?⁷ In fact, Riley makes “women” the object of historical investigation. She asks when the category comes under discussion and in what terms, and she points to the ways in which, at different historical moments, there have been different kinds of openings created for feminist claims. “The arrangements of people under the banners of ‘men’ or ‘women’ are enmeshed in the histories of other concepts too, including those of ‘the social’ and ‘the body.’ And that has profound repercussions for feminism.”⁸ Riley shows how, in early modern Europe, notions of the androgynous soul defined one kind of relation of “women” to humanity, whereas by the eighteenth century, attention to nature and the body led to an increasing emphasis on women’s sexuality. As “the social” found a place between “the domestic” and “the political” in the nineteenth century, it “established

⁵ Riley, “*Am I That Name?*” 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5, 2, 104, 102.

⁷ See, for example, Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Post-feminist” Age* (New York, 1991).

⁸ Riley, “*Am I That Name?*” 7.

'women' as a new kind of sociological collectivity."⁹ And, of course, until individuals were defined as political subjects, there could be no claim for citizenship or *political* rights for women. It's not just that women have different kinds of possibilities in their lives, but that "women" is something different in each of these moments. There is no essence of womanhood (or of manhood) to provide a stable subject for our histories; there are only successive iterations of a word that doesn't have a fixed referent and so doesn't mean the same thing.

DYAN ELLIOTT'S ESSAY DEMONSTRATES THIS as she reviews the work of Caroline Bynum and others on the gender fluidity of medieval spirituality: Christ as mother; viragos designated honorary men; lay brethren casting themselves in the image of female mystics. Medical discourse, she tells us, insisted that biological factors undermined "the stability of sexual binaries . . . the medieval categories male and female emerge as extremely fragile constructs, mere accidents of heat and moisture, ever-threatening to collapse into one another." Even if this led theologians to insist more firmly on maintaining male/female distinctions in other arenas, one sees that the distinctions are not the same as those offered by today's church fathers. And objections to those distinctions, however eloquent and courageous, could not have been the same as those that feminists would make today, despite Elliott's claim that their fragility is "in eerie anticipation of contemporary science's destabilization of sex as presented by writers such as Anne Fausto-Sterling." "Women" in the Middle Ages were not "women" as we think of them today; and this has important implications for the way we study women and write their history. It is not enough to illuminate material life in all its facets. Social histories of family structure or religious institutions or economic exchange are incomplete without attention to the question of *how* the collectivity named "women" comes into existence, who counts as included in that collectivity, and when its nature and behavior become a matter of concern.

It is interesting that there is a great deal of attention paid to the difficulty of translating the term *gender* into languages in which it doesn't exist, but there's no apparent problem with *women*. That's because gender is taken to be a conceptual category, while *women* is thought to be a descriptive term. Yet what "Gender" (the article) actually does is posit "women" and "men" as conceptual categories. It refuses the idea that those two words transparently describe enduring objects (or bodies) and instead asks how those bodies are thought. It assumes, with Foucault, that bodies are "totally imprinted by history" and that "nothing in man, not even his body, is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men."¹⁰ Riley elaborates this point for the admittedly different bodies of women:

we would need to maintain that women only sometimes live in the flesh distinctively of women, as it were, and this is a function of historical categorisations as well as of an individual daily phenomenology. To say that is by no means to deny that because of the cyclical aspects of female physiology, there may be a greater overall degree of slipping in and out of the consciousness of the body for many women. But even this will always be subject to different

⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, eds. and trans., *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977), 148.

interpretations, and nothing more radical than the facts of intermittent physiology really holds the bodies of women together . . . The body becomes visible as a body, and as a female body, only under some particular gaze—including that of politics.¹¹

It was feminist politics that brought “women” into view as an object of historical investigation. But, ironically, the project of creating a subject for contemporary feminism (an active, protesting collectivity, asserting their rights, seeking emancipation from oppression) tended to blur the lines of difference, whether temporal, cultural, or social. “Gender” was meant to historicize and relativize women and to conceive of them as integral to history, not simply as agents, but as “women.” The point was that the current subject of feminism (our collectivity) could not be projected retrospectively or laterally. Global feminism is an imaginary unity, a political vision, not an entity that preexists its articulation. “Gender” suggested that we had to problematize the very notion of how we came to think of ourselves in the way we did. It was not self-evident that women were conscious of themselves as “women,” not at all clear that “our bodies” defined “ourselves.” There was no “false consciousness” about what it meant to be a woman (even if consciousness-raising was a mobilizing technique). Rather, there were appeals to specific interests and experiences that, at a particular moment, got organized under the sign of “women.” The questions were, how and when did that happen, and under what conditions? To understand feminism (in its current and its historical manifestations), one had to think of it as a strategic intervention in a set of discourses that were not restricted to “women.”

Although there was a great deal of concern voiced about whether *gender*, added to or substituted for *women* (in book titles and course curricula), would weaken feminist claims, in fact *gender* signaled a deepening of the commitment to the history both of women and of “women.” I am arguing that no history of women is complete without a history of “women.” “Gender” was a call to disrupt the powerful pull of biology by opening every aspect of sexed identity to interrogation, including the question of whether or not male/female, masculine/feminine was the contrast being invoked. Riley reminds us that the insistence on the fixity of that opposition (on the essential “truth” of sexual difference) is itself the product of a certain history, and not one we should consider inviolate. Indeed, the tripartite hierarchies invoked by Dyan Elliott suggest that there were (and are) other terms than binary ones for thinking about how gender and sexuality have been imagined and lived.

JOANNE MEYEROWITZ WRITES IN HER CONTRIBUTION to this forum that when I “questioned the ongoing vitality of the term ‘gender’” in the 1999 edition of *Gender and the Politics of History*, I was “mov[ing] in new directions.” That’s not exactly right. Nor, in my book on the French feminist movement, *Parité*, did I focus “less on the language of sex difference and more on the language of universalism in contemporary France.”¹² My ongoing concern is with the question of how the differences between the sexes are conceived and what the effects of that construction are,

¹¹ Riley, “Am I That Name?” 105–106.

¹² Joan Wallach Scott, *Parité! Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* (Chicago, 2005), 10.

whether the object of analysis is French universalism, feminist movements, or the politics of the veil. It is true that in 1999 I was worrying about the fact that gender had "lost its critical edge," and so its ability to problematize historical materials. Instead of asking how differences were constructed and in what terms, it referred increasingly to an unchanging, taken-for-granted opposition between women and men. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the nature/culture distinction between sex and gender did not apply to ordinary usage: gender had become synonymous with sex or the difference between the sexes. The very language that needed to be analyzed was being used to reinscribe the biological body as the ground on which gender was constructed. The question was, and is, how can we disrupt that fixed association in the history we write?

Perhaps it is sexual difference that now needs to be problematized so that gender can be freed to do its critical work. For this I've found it useful to turn to psychoanalytic theory, not to its conservative articulations (which have, among other things, been used to shore up the heterosexual family as *the* key to normal psyches and stable cultures), but to the places where it addresses the difficulties associated with establishing the boundaries and meanings of sexed identities. On the one hand, "the psychic knowledge of sexual difference . . . is something one cannot not know."¹³ On the other hand, there is no certain knowledge of what it means. Its meanings are offered in the realms of individual fantasy and collective myth, and these aren't necessarily in sync with one another; nor do they determine the ways in which subjects relate to masculinity or femininity (assuming it, refusing it, rejecting the divide between them). Psychoanalysis sees no necessary correspondence between the psychic positions of masculinity and femininity and a physical body; indeed, it is "the body that comes to represent the psychic realization of sexual difference and not the reverse."¹⁴ The theory posits no fixed definition for masculine/feminine or for the differences between them; rather, it requires analysis to get at what they mean.

Of course, the analysis aims at uncovering the idiosyncratic meanings developed by individual psyches, but these are not forged independent of the conscious awareness of normative categories and their enforcement. Nor are the normative categories simply rational statements of desirable identification. They are attempts to eliminate the psychic confusion that sexual difference generates, to bring individual fantasy in line with cultural myth and social organization. Gender, I would argue, is the study of the relationship (around sexuality) between the normative and the psychic, the attempt at once to collectivize fantasy and to use it for some political or social end, whether that end is nation-building or family structure. In the process, it is gender that produces meanings for sex and sexual difference, not sex that determines the meanings of gender. If that is the case, then (as some feminists have long insisted) not only is there no distinction between sex and gender, but gender is the key to sex. And if that is the case, then gender is a useful category of historical analysis because it requires us to historicize the ways that sex and sexual difference have been conceived.

¹³ Elizabeth Weed, "Joan W. Scott's Useful Category of Analysis" (paper presented at the conference "In Terms of Gender," held at the Center for 21st Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, May 4–5, 2007), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The “language of gender” cannot be codified in dictionaries; nor can its meanings be easily assumed or translated. It doesn’t reduce to some known quantity of masculine or feminine, male or female. It’s precisely the particular meanings that need to be teased out of the historical materials we examine. When gender is an open question about how these meanings are established, what they signify, and in what contexts, it remains a useful category of historical analysis. Perhaps that question mark I had to remove from the title of the *AHR* article ought to have remained after all, if only to remind us that gender itself is a question that is only ever answered piecemeal through the investigations of scholars, historians among them.

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