THE HISTORY OF WOMEN AND GENDER (1970-2003): ACHIEVEMENTS AND THE CHALLENGES AHEAD[1]

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First of all, I would like to say how glad I am to be part of your program on Historiography. My aim in this lecture is to offer an overview of work in the History of Women and Gender and to try to suggest how this field is related to some of the themes that you have been reading about in Georg G. Iggers' book *La ciencia histórica en el siglo XX. Las tendencias actuales.*

INTRODUCTION: THE EARLY YEARS

However, to begin, I would like to go back to the early 1970s, in order to transmit the sense of excitement of those years, when work on this subject was just beginning in North America, and subsequently in Europe, and explain how stimulating it was to have colleagues in many places who were trying to develop a new field. 1970 was an important year for me personally because it was around that time that I published my first works

1 Conferència pronunciada a la Facultat de Geografia i Història de la Universitat de Barcelona, l'1 d'abril del 2003. Fou organitzada conjuntament pel Màster "Cultura històrica, comunicació i noves professions" del Departament d'Història Moderna, el Deganat de la Facultat i el Departament d'Història Contemporània. La redacció de *Pedralbes* agraeix a l'autora el seu permís per aquesta publicació. Transcripció a càrrec de Philip Banks.

concerning the History of Women. This was the time when, after having written about the Protestant Reformation among working people in Lyon, France, I decided to undertake the study of women within this same period and geographical area.

In the same year, as a consequence of having become interested in historical writing, I wrote a paper on women as historical writers from Christine de Pisane, a medieval woman who wrote a history of Charles, a king of Burgundy, through the women historians of the French Revolution. It was the first time that I had considered such a question of historical writing and the question I posed myself was: What do women do when they write history?

The excitement of the period when I first undertook studies in this field involved several aspects. First of all, it involved looking for sources for the study of women. Traditional scholars insisted that there were no sources; that nothing could be found. However, such sources did exist, both in the form of works written by women and as texts written about women; and there were ways to find material about women in the archives. In addition to pursuing the sources, we would share this information with colleagues all over North America. In those pre-computer days, this involved time-consuming typing, correcting and copying. Once this mechanical work had been done, we used to send our results to each other and share them. As a result, there was also a considerable amount of information exchange: researchers would tell each other about possible sources: how, for example, to find out about women in the labor force; how to find out about childbirth or women in fields such as medicine and politics. The main aim of spreading this information was to enable scholars to use it for their courses.

A second aspect that I should emphasize is that from the very beginning, scholars in this area adopted an interdisciplinary approach, that is to say that we did not deal with only history. In fact, I am convinced that one of the subjects that facilitated interdisciplinary approaches was the study of women. It may not have been the only subject, but it was an important one as the History of Women cannot be considered without touching upon social, economic, political, and even biological and psychological history. So from the very beginning it was very much a multidisciplinary subject.

A further point I should make about the enormous interest in the field in those early days was that a very important feminist movement

simultaneously reinforced the scholarly interest, the scholarly enterprise and the scholarly project. Our classes were very large and many more people that we could have expected attended the academic meetings.

INITIAL AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

a) The historical record

As far as our aims and objectives were concerned, there were two very different goals. On the one hand, there was what might be called "filling in the historical record", in other words collecting the "facts" in fields that ranged across the spectrum from family life to economics and social mobility. A second aim was to find out what women were writing and publishing. That is, of course, those women who were literate. Thirdly, we wanted to find out how they were participating in politics, from figures at the level of queens and princesses to peasant women who might be participating in grain riots or some kind of rural activity. To sum up, in those early stages we were largely interested in establishing what women were actually doing in different fields.

At the same time, there was great interest in women's attitudes, in women as witnesses, and we made every effort to find about what women thought about different subjects, whether it was religion, family, religious life or politics. The third very important aspect within the historical record that we were interested in was to establish what attitudes were towards women, which is obviously not the same thing as what women's attitudes were. We were interested in such subjects as the structures of thought about women, the symbol systems of male-female, the hierarchical arrangements of masculine-feminine, animal-angelic that were inherited from medieval thought and also to be found in early modern thought, whether it was medical or legal in background. We were also interested in prescriptions and laws about women. In fact, one of the most interesting conflicts or tensions from the beginning was the contrast existing between what women thought and what the social system taught; and between what women did and what was said in the thought about gender. We were interested in the relationship between behavior and practice, women's points of view and the political and social construction of women. The tension that formed part of our work from the very beginning was not only of particular interest, but I think it was

also very closely related to some of the historiographical questions that arise when dealing with postmodernism.

At this point, I would like to mention an example of this idea of contrasting opinions taken from the course that I first taught in 1971, when a colleague, Jill. Conway, and myself founded the first History of Women course in Canada, one of the earliest in America. I always began that course with an excerpt from the *Malleus Maleficarum,* the most famous early tract on witchcraft. In case you are not familiar with this work, it is a fifteenth-century text, written by an inquisitor, containing a chapter entitled "Why are witches mostly women?". The author then goes on to provide all the reasons about the female character in answer to that question.

The course would start with that chapter and then, in order to get the contrasting viewpoint, we used to consider a book by the learned Italian-born writer, poet and historian Christine de Pisane, who lived in France. Christine de Pisane wrote a wonderful book called *The Book of the City of Ladies*, which states the opposite of what was said in the *"Malleus Maleficarum"*. What Christine had to say about women was favorable, but it was not necessarily what women did, although what women do is influenced by what they think. Finally, after reading these two contrasting views, we would begin to look at areas such as women in family life, women in economics and so on.

b) The contribution of the History of Women and Gender

In those early days, we also had a second main goal, which was: What difference does knowledge about women and their works make? In addition to having the information, what difference does it make for thinking about history or for subjects as varied as state building, national movements or economic change or for understanding how religious movements started? In other words, there were both historiographical and philosophical goals. We did not think just about women; we were also worried about what difference the subject made in understanding major historical processes, for example, historical periodization, state building, welfare policies, racism mechanisms, social reproduction and transmission.

To give you some very early examples, let me refer you to one of the first books that posed that question, a work written by Joan Kelly in the early 1970s entitled *Did Women have a Renaissance?* The title was

addressed to the question of historical periodization and the question she asked was: "Was the Renaissance something that happened only to men?" This is not the place to elaborate on her answer but, in brief, we could say that to a certain extent women were also part of the so-called Renaissance movement. We can therefore say that once scholars started to look at the subject of women, and once they looked at the working people that formed part of my own interest, the Renaissance looked different. We had a different concept of what was going on in the Renaissance than if princes were the main field of study. This was a particularly early example.

RESULTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

a) The historical record

Looking back thirty years later, I want to ask the following question: How well did we do as regards fulfilling those early goals? In terms of filling in the historical record, the amount of publication has been extraordinary in every field across the board, from ancient history to contemporary history. For instance, I was in Madrid and in Granada recently and took the opportunity to look at the impressive number of Spanish publications produced by the various institutes of Women's History in recent years, covering every period in Spanish History. They deal with subjects as diverse as women in medicine through one of the most interesting recently published books, about women in Al-Andalus, by Manuela Marín. She examines mostly Muslim women, but also Jewish and Christian women in fields such as work, law and marriage. I could also refer to the work done by friends here at the University of Barcelona, such as Mary Nash's early work on demography and eugenics in the twentieth century and Montserrat Carbonell's work in the History of Economics Department, on poor women and hospitals in late eighteenth century Barcelona. She has gone on to study the economic strategies of poor families where women's action was very important. As a result, in terms of filling in the record, I think a lot has been done, but much still remains to be done.

b) The contribution of the History of Women and Gender

I would now like to turn to the other question, changing ways of thinking about the field, changing the ways of conceptualizing history and

historical periods. Joan Kelly's book, in which similar questions were asked about the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Reformation, has already been referred to; in this respect it was certainly confirmed that women had a Reformation, and, in fact, they were major actors in those fields.

As regards state building, I think some of most important changes over the past thirty years have come from the relationship of women and gender to the subject. It is now absolutely impossible to think about state building without connecting it to issues of family structure, of family strategy and of thought about the family in political theory. Recent studies on John Locke, particularly on the relationship of John Locke's theory to the constitutional theory of the state, started to make a major contribution when people noticed, and in this respect Gender History was of fundamental importance, the critically important chapter in which John Locke links the structure of marriage to the contract in the state. Everybody who looks at the political philosophy of John Locke or Hobbes would now at least ask the question: "How does argument about the family relate to argument about the state?"

Similarly, within the field of Economic History, one of the consequences has been a shift away from emphasis on questions such as production towards other aspects such as consumption and tastes.

THE PRINCIPAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN'S HISTORY

In my opinion, the intellectual arguments and debates that have arisen within the field of the History of Women and Gender have also affected the way we perceive other fields of study in which factors such as social status, conflicts of power and domination have an important role to play. These discussions can perhaps be considered under four headings.

1.The question of equality and difference

The basic question here is whether it is preferable to conceptualize women as regards their relations with men in terms of their common interests, such as the family, and similar intellectual and moral capacities, or whether better results can be achieved if differences with men and same sex or gender similarities are stressed. These might be seen, for example,

in their social relations with other women, in women's worlds or in the area of women's sensibilities.

This is not a new debate as it goes back more than two hundred years. In the eighteenth century there were women writer's who emphasized the similarities and the achievements of women within traditionally male fields. On the other hand, in the same period, there were other women writers who stressed women's difference. According to them, women were as good as men but they were different. They may not have been as good at abstract subjects like geometry, but they were more moral, they were more sensitive, they were more ethical, and they were better at practical things. It can thus be seen that there were some feminists that took the position of difference in the eighteenth century.

It is interesting to note that the same argument occurred in the research and courses on women in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Some people like Louise Tilly and Joan Scott adopted a somewhat Marxist approach, one that stressed men and women working together. Although they might have very different interests, they still considered family strategy as a kind of unit. However, at the same time in North America, there were articles or books being published by scholars such as Carol Smith-Rosenberg, whose book called *The Women's World of Love and Friendship*, places particular emphasis women's friendships, women's alliances and women's special partnerships with other women. Consequently, there have been, and still are, different ways of conceptualizing matters.

Turning to the question of war and peace, there have been several books written by very good scholars, which have focused on women as leaders in peace movements, women as lovers of peace par excellence, which insist upon that type of women. Nevertheless, simultaneously there have been those historians, including myself, that have studied women's participation in violence movements. What kind of strategies do they use when they are violent? Are there differences between women's violence and men's violence? Several books have also been published concerning women in the armed forces, especially within the context of World War II.

Therefore, there have been two very different approaches, leading to stimulating intellectual reflection, which can be applied in other fields. For instance, there is a great deal of work being done in America on African-American black-white relations over the centuries. It might be added that these issues of likeness and sameness, of strategic alliance or difference,

arise constantly in any field which is conceptualized in terms of a group: peasants-landlords, black-white or Catalan-Spanish. When the focus is some kind of a group relation, this difference will inevitably be a factor involved.

Let me conclude this section with two points: the first one is a book reference and the second, my own view. The book reference is to Joan Scott's *Only Paradoxes to offer*. The idea of that book, which considers the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is that when you face a group, when an effort is made to focus on a group like women, but, at the same time, one of the points of interest is the relationship of the group to men, it always gives rise to the paradoxical situation of looking at similarities and differences.

The second aspect is practice. What most of us did and what I certainly did, was that we sometimes worked in one register, studying the similarities, and sometimes in the other register, looking at the differences; we sometimes looked at men and women together, sometimes separately, rather than opting for one position or another. However, the argument continued.

2. The nature of gender

The second major argument that we had concerned the nature of gender. A chapter of Igger's book on Postmodernism considers this subject and the way the History of Women was both influenced by Postmodernism and contributed to the formation of the idea. Gender and sex were a constant subject of debate for us. We aimed to establish, on the one hand, to what extent gender and sex are determined by biology and physiology and, on the other hand, to what extent certain modes of behavior, maternal behavior, for instance, are programmed in the different genders, and to what extent our styles of behavior are really totally historically constructed and totally flexible.

From the beginning, Women's History favored a degree of construction; that was an in-built feature of our work because we were interested in change over time, change from society to society. A great deal of comparative work was undertaken. I never taught a History of Women course that only dealt with one nation. Although there are many books on the History of Women in the United States, or on the History of Women in Spain, the real intellectual force of the study of the History of Women and Gender was to make use of a more comparative approach. Scholars looking at the History of Women within Spain would be expected to look

at different class levels, and rather than generalize about all women the aim was to see differences and the reasons for their existence.

Thus, from the very beginning, there was an argument in which we looked at diverse patterns in gender relations not only over time, but anthropologically and in different kinds of societies. Different patterns, sometimes known as symmetries or asymmetries, in other words different patterns in the distribution of power and property, were considered. Very interesting results were produced together with very different models, which we might call of symmetry. In some societies you can find symmetry with women strong in one aspect while men were strong in other areas. This phenomenon was given the name of 'trade-off'. Symmetries are sometimes found in relation to power and economics, but the main point was always variety.

One of the main questions was how far one was prepared to go in talking about construction in gender behavior? This question will be returned to when I talk about "queer theory", associated with gay and lesbian research. Scholars who wanted to place particular emphasis on issues of reproduction and motherhood or parenting perhaps wanted to limit how far they were prepared to go on the notion of gender as a completely constructed category.

In thinking about the construction of gender, we tended to argue, especially for the seventeenth and eighteenth century, about the factors and situations that facilitated women's advance with regard to property and power. There was one school of thought that said that the Enlightenment ideas of John Locke, contractual ideas, the ideas that led to the French Revolution, were positive for women because they facilitated the way women thought about themselves and their relationship to politics. In contrast, another group said that John Locke's ideas had negative results for women, as his idea was merely a contract for propertied men and his model citizen was totally masculine. They considered that what promoted a better relationship for women, a better construction of life for women, was the aristocracy – being a woman at court. Consequently, there were two very different concepts and many more arguments to take into account.

3. The subordination of women

The third argument that we had, and it is still going on, is related to the second, but it is slightly different. It concerns the sources for the

subordination of women in many societies. Was this subordination universal or did it vary from place to place? Reference can only be made to some of the principal theories.

The first was Catherine MacKinnon's theory of sexual domination, which sees sexual domination or penetration as the real source for women's domination from the very beginning of time. She focuses literally on sex. Secondly, there were scholars who looked at the economic system that expanded Karl Marx's theories or variants on them. The third school of thought considered the source of domination as a way of upholding social systems of domination and hierarchical stability in society. There were also those, like Michel Foucault, who did not talk about women, but whose theory was adopted by some historians of women, who interpreted it as a variant on power relations, on the way in which power is not only located in the center, but how power is dispersed and integrated into small groups. There are, therefore, several different ways of conceptualizing the issue.

I should add that this argument goes back to the early modern period when people speculated on why women are subordinated to men; rather than look at the Bible or at the *Malleus Maleficarum*, they tried to think about the question in historical terms. They imagined an early time, in which some variants of sexual domination were the search for power and economic domination. This approach can be seen as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

I think my own preference when I was teaching was closest to the third and fourth of these theories. I preferred to look at the interplay between social systems of power and political systems of power and the ways in which family structure, symbol systems and metaphorical systems had reinforced power structures. However, generally speaking, this was a lively debate, which is still on-going.

4. Sexuality

The final debate, which is in some ways more closely related to the present time, as will be seen when I consider queer theory, is the subject of sexuality. Generally, when I say sexuality I mean sex as physical behavior, not gender. The interesting question that arose in this context was: Is the study of sexuality in its various forms part of the History of

Women? Should it form part of courses? Should it be part of any book on the History of Women?

When reading the books from Spain that I bought recently, sometimes it was present to a small degree, and sometimes it was not a part of the History of Women at all. If one looks at the six volumes of the *Historia de las Mujeres en Occidente* by Michelle Perrot and George Duby, prostitution is there because it is women's work; family, love and beauty are there because they form part of marriage, but sex is not a part of this history. The study of sex, homosexuality and lesbianism was considered unacceptable for the French reading public.

On the other hand, my own courses always included a unit on sexuality: apart from covering family, love and marriage, we dealt with sex: for instance, women's sense of sexuality, with their husbands, their lovers, and lesbians. There has also been a lot of work on prostitution in Spain by Ruth Perry, among others. However, this debate remains unresolved. For the moment, at least in North American writing, there is always some attention paid to this question of sexuality and lesbian and gay issues, but the question of how important they are is still hotly debated.

CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

1. New frontiers in history, anthropological and literary research

Finally, I must try to consider the current situation. When I say this, I am thinking much more, I fear, of the North American scene, and what I am about to say might not be significant for Spanish studies or Spanish historiography in this field. First of all, many of us who have been working in this field perceive a great interest in what is called Transnational History, that is to say in conceptualizing history beyond national boundaries. This has been greatly stimulated by work in Postcolonial History; in fact some of the first challenges to conceptualizing history within a national unit came from countries such as India, where the historiography of the so-called Subaltern School of Historical Writing made a point of not writing national history because it was considered to be the English approach. Secondly, there has been a great deal of work and

interest in colonial relations in North America, in Anglo-American scholarship, and in French scholarship as well. Thirdly, there is a great deal of interest right now in ethnic studies, in immigration studies, in Chicano studies and in African-American studies. There is a great deal of interest in immigration and diasporas. Finally, much work is being done on slavery studies. Indeed, much of the excitement lies in these fields, but the question is: What are the implications for the study of women when these fields are the ones in the vanguard? What implications do these kinds of studies have for the History of Women and Gender? And are the women and gender programs responding to these new changes? The answer is 'yes' and 'no'. You cannot carry out a study of postcolonial issues today without including women as an element. However, the important question is: Are women going to be the central issue or simply a part of a wider examination of colonial and postcolonial societies?

2. Universal and local values and the impact of globalization

The second major change is related to the first one. Here I think this would be as important in Spain as in North America and England and France. What are the implications of a post-colonial world for thinking about values, both universal values and local values? The stress on a continuation of local and distinctive features is particularly important. Moreover, the existence of huge communication systems has very interesting implications for some of the debates about sameness and difference and about evaluating gender systems. In the past, we were trying to consider them over time and in anthropological terms, but once that kind of debate involves China, India and Africa as part of the picture in thinking about sameness and difference, it reaches another level; and the question of how to evaluate, for example, the relationship of men and women on that kind of scale is always very challenging and stimulating.

3. The emergence of "queer theory"

I would like to turn to the third change that has been important intellectually, at least in North America. I am not sure how much importance it should be given, but it is certainly interesting. It is what I called the emergence of "queer theory". This is the term that is used to describe what used to be called Gay and Lesbian Studies; it is used to describe a broader way of thinking about gender and sexuality than merely

relating it to gay and lesbian people. It had its negative side, but some positive aspects as well. In the first instance, it involved identifying gay writers or musicians. However, this was not the most interesting aspect of this project. Its most interesting philosopher has been a very serious scholar called Judith Butler, who is a lesbian woman living in a lesbian family. Nevertheless, the point is that in her writing, she has made a very extreme argument for the construction of sexuality, much more extreme than in the debates we used to have, including even in regard to issues of subordination and domination. The exponents of this theory almost talk about sex and gender as performance, as in a theater. The assessment of what would be equal, of what would be just, appears rather different when you read some of their writings. In particular, their writings address the question of what we even mean by the category of gender. A very interesting woman, a professor at Harvard Law School, really seeks to question some aspects of the category of women. This is a very profound challenge to limit the notions of women and men as categories and gender as a category of analysis.

To sum up, as regards current trends, there would seem to be three main areas of interest: the development of new fields, particularly the transnational and postcolonial ones, which are both wider and yet more local than the nation; the implications of globalization of thought for what we analyze and for what we write; and finally the contribution of "queer theory".

FUTURE PATHS OF ENQUIRY

To close, I would like to mention briefly three trends that I think are likely to acquire increasing significance in the coming years in this field. In the first place, there will be an increasingly global perspective, in which the history of women is explored with a new global consciousness. Secondly, a further expansion of the interdisciplinary approach to include areas that have received relatively little attention to date can be expected. This new interdisciplinary outreach might include such areas as the History of Law. Finally, the topic of the History of Women will continue to have great importance for research and teaching purposes, but, at the same time, the perspective and focus will continue to vary.