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Deposited on: 18 October 2010
This volume marks the twentieth anniversary of *Gender and History* by revisiting and reasserting the potential of women’s history and gender history both to complicate and, more fundamentally, to revise received narratives of change. As Ludmilla Jordanova has observed, periodisation hinges on the privileging of particular vantage points and the selection of ‘symbolic markers’ according to ‘the weight given to distinct fields of human activity’, and thus constitutes ‘a form of classification of the past’.¹ Associated narratives of change are also determined by issues of scale, depending on whether the lens of analysis is focused, to use Fernand Braudel’s calibration, on the *longue durée*, the *conjoncture*, or the *evenementielle*, and depending on our formulation of the relationship between structure and agency.² Despite historians’ oft-articulated dissatisfaction with traditional period markers associated with teleological accounts of western civilisation – ‘ancient’, ‘medieval’, ‘renaissance’, ‘reformation’, ‘early modern’, ‘modern’ – their usage persists even if the narratives recounted about them have undergone serious revision as a result of the inclusion of a wider range of historical actors and as the moral or analytical frameworks for the evaluation of change have been dismantled and/or reconfigured. The incorporation of women, and the beginnings of a broader gender analysis that encompasses masculinity, has done much to refine and challenge the characterisation of these epochs but little to question the validity of particular ‘periods’ as discrete units of study.
Questions of change and periodisation implicitly and explicitly informed women’s history and feminist history from the beginning. The women’s history that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s was not only inspired by second wave feminism but also reflected its trajectories and themes. In the UK, for instance, where historians of women frequently had ties to the political Left and the labour movement, women’s history was simultaneously informed by and constituted part of developments in social and labour history. Sheila Rowbotham’s *Hidden from History* (1973) began with the words: ‘This book comes very directly from a political movement’; she was motivated by the desire to ‘unravel historically’ questions that arose in ‘the women’s liberation movement and on the Left about the situation of women in contemporary capitalism’. Such concerns had precursors in the work of early twentieth-century scholars, notably Alice Clark (1919) and Ivy Pinchbeck (1930), who investigated the impact on women’s work and lives of industrialisation and technological developments. New editions of Clark’s book were issued in 1968, 1982 and 1992, and Pinchbeck’s in 1969, 1977 and 1981, when feminist interest in these issues was rekindled. In the US, where feminist activism was commonly connected to the civil rights movement, much women’s history of the 1960s and 1970s shared liberal concerns about women’s claims to citizens’ rights. Earlier scholarship here had similarly focused on women’s rights and suffrage, the *History of Women’s Suffrage* (1881) being perhaps the best known example. By the end of the 1980s, the contributions to a volume marking the state of women’s history internationally, which spanned twenty-two countries and all continents, demonstrated the extent to which contemporary feminism not only stimulated women’s history but also injected it with a particular flavour according to diverse national and cultural contexts.
Histories of women inspired by feminism sought both to chart the changes over time that brought women to their present circumstances and to create change in the present in order to produce a future for them that was different from their past. The question of where women fitted into conventional accounts of change over time was rapidly reframed to ask, first, did women fit into such historical narratives at all, and second, were such changes positive or negative for women? Joan Kelly’s 1977 essay on whether women had a Renaissance is perhaps the most-cited example. Indeed, Kelly believed that interrogating accepted schemes of periodisation from women’s perspective was one of ‘the tasks of women’s history’. She argued that while conventional accounts of the Renaissance presented it as a period of great cultural progress, women’s legal, economic and political conditions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries deteriorated rather than improved. Kelly’s work had implications for the history of the Renaissance as much as for the history of women. The association of the Renaissance as a period of great cultural progress is challenged if conditions declined for some half of the European population. Over the past four decades, historians have applied similar questions to other centuries and regions.

While familiar periodising categories have been declared inappropriate for the history of women, they have not usually been replaced by alternative schemas. Historians have been less diligent in investigating the role of women and gender in constituting change. In work on women and gender in history, questions of periodisation and change appear often to have been jettisoned altogether in favour of continuities and stasis. Partly this is a consequence viewing History as a story of progress and women’s emancipation as the standard by which ‘progress’ for women is evaluated. Hence Gerda Lerner’s assertion in 1975 that ‘all history as we now know it is, for women, merely pre-history’. This not only applies to textbooks and surveys
(where broad brushstrokes are typical and not reserved for women’s history) but also constitutes a metanarrative favoured by certain kinds of women’s history, especially that informed by radical feminism with its emphasis upon the transhistorical nature of patriarchy and women’s oppression by men. Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), for example, roared across periods and continents, finding and illuminating patriarchy’s horrors in Indian sati, Chinese foot-binding, African genital mutilation, European witch burning, and American gynaecology. In this story of misogyny women are accorded little agency; or rather, their agency is punished by a society that insists upon their inferiority. For radical feminists, patriarchy, whatever form it takes, always and inevitably insists upon the oppression of women by men. Change over time from this perspective was insignificant as over the centuries patriarchy merely shifted to oppress women in new ways. Some forms of women’s history did allow for the potential of women’s agency and change within existing social, economic and political structures. Liberal feminists, for instance, emphasised the role of education in bringing about change in women’s status relative to men, while socialist feminists viewed such change as the desired and possible outcome of a broader restructuring of economic and political life.

From the outset, historians of women lamented the inadequacies, limitations, and inapplicability of existing explanatory and theoretical frameworks within academic history. Women’s history played a key role in the development of new methods and approaches to historical research in dialogue with practitioners of the then ‘new’ social history, the Annales school, and feminist scholars in other disciplines. Historians of women were also at the cutting edge of historical research in the 1980s and 1990s. One such development was that of comparative women’s histories across nations and continents as well as time. The International Federation
for Research in Women’s History/Fédération internationale pour la recherche de l’histoire des femmes was founded in 1987 in order to foster such comparisons.

Another was the cultural or linguistic turn, as historians of women, of sexuality, and masculinity were among the first to explore the implications of linguistic theories – especially poststructuralism – for History as a discipline.

The emergence of ‘gender’ as an analytic category is often associated with this shift as if there was a linear evolution from a focus on feminism (politics) to women (specialised history) to gender (theory). But this is an oversimplification of a far more complex trajectory. However defined, historians continue to research and publish research categorised as women’s and as gender history, and in many instances the distinction between them is false. The concept of gender was not new in 1986 when Joan Scott first published her essay on gender as a category of historical analysis (nor did she claim it to be). Nor did it ‘replace’ or sideline women’s history. In fact, both Gender and History and The Journal of Women’s History were founded in 1989, and Women’s History Review followed three years later. Issues of gender – the consequences of being male or female, the meanings ascribed to femininity and masculinity, the manner in which those categories are constructed, the practical repercussions of gendered language and concepts, and the relation of gender to power – were already present in women’s history and feminist scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s.

The category of gender was most thoroughly defined and theorised for historians by Joan Scott in 1986, and rapidly became the most popular tool employed to dig deeper the top soil that earlier women’s historians had turned up. Scott’s article is one of the most cited historical works of its time, leading to comparisons with E. P. Thompson in terms of its influence on the discipline in general. So great
an impact has her definition had that twenty years later, the editors of one volume of
gender history describe the concept of gender in Scott’s words without
acknowledgement in either the text or notes. Scott’s achievement was not to invent
‘gender’ but to define and theorise it as an analytic category in a more nuanced and
sophisticated way than historians had done hitherto, and to present a method of
analysing the concept at work in any historical period. A great strength of this
definition and approach lies in its potential to identify and analyse not only gender but
also other categories such as class, race, religion, ethnicity, or any other form of
difference, and – crucially – the ways in which they operate together discursively to
legitimate or undermine historically specific relationships of power. Gender thus
offered a lens by which historians could explore not only relations between the sexes,
women, or sexuality, but also markets, classes, diplomacy and, indeed, masculinity.
An approach that disrupted what seemed to be fixed oppositions such as
nature/culture, and public/private, and the analysis of how such language and concepts
changed over time and in different contexts, did allow for agency and change.
However, not everybody has interpreted Scott’s argument in this way.

The most heated responses to Scott’s work are perhaps from those who made
little or no distinction between her debt to poststructuralism and what they believed to
be the grave implications for the discipline of History of poststructural linguistic
theory in its purest form. In particular, critics suggested that the kind of gender history
advocated by Scott locked women into a position of inferiority via binary oppositions
in language, which allowed no room for change, and therefore, agency on the part of
women and other subaltern groups. A category of analysis that privileged language
(and representations) rather than experience (and reality) at its heart was both
‘difficult’ and ‘dangerous’ when applied to women’s history. Some works of gender
history may seem to (re)produce a history of gender that looks very much the same no matter which century or culture is examined. This, however, reflects a broader methodological shift which is not confined to gender historians. The cultural turn has brought with it losses as well as gains. While the influence of poststructuralism, literary and cultural theory, and symbolic anthropology has generated qualitative and textual analyses of particular historical moments, there is little attempt to explain change over time in much historical writing. It is perhaps this rather than the concept of gender per se that distinguishes much recent gender history from the women’s history of the 1970s. Yet change and periodisation were already thorny problems within women’s history: the tendency to measure change in terms of either progress or decline, liberation or repression, or alternatively to see these issues as transhistorical; the recognition that the category of ‘women’/’women’ itself collapsed in the face of the plurality of women’s experiences that defied generalisation about ‘the position of women’ and therefore its measurement over time. The fact that gender history proved not necessarily to solve all of these problems is not simply a matter of ‘gender’ leading us astray from what was otherwise a clearly lit path.

Neither have questions of chronology and periodisation been at the forefront of the history of masculinity since its dramatic growth out of the ‘new men’s studies’ of the 1980s. Some of the blame can again be laid at the door of the ‘new’ cultural history. Emerging alongside the cultural turn, the history of masculinity has emphasised the multiplicity and contingency of male identities, rather than a category that might be traced in a singular way across a linear time scale, and has prioritised representation above the material and subjective realities of men’s lives which provide the key to understanding historical agency and the link to questions of causation. As Laura Lee Downs has put it, ‘without some way of connecting discursive process to
social experience, historians are hard put to explain how the meanings of masculine and feminine might shift over time’ – let alone how gender has been a constitutive part of wider processes of transition.\footnote{20} The most ambitious account of change over time has been undertaken not by a historian, but by the sociologist R. W. Connell, in an attempt to identify the long-term roots of hegemonic forms of contemporary Euro/American masculinity in the Reformation, the rise of individualism, and the relentless engine of imperialism.\footnote{21} As Konstantin Dierks has observed, the history of masculinity has tended to work within received metanarratives rather than engage or challenge them.\footnote{22}

This general diversion from issues of chronology and periodisation is reflected in the content and coverage of *Gender and History* over the last twenty years. The inaugural volume of the journal included very little discussion of matters of change, with historiographical essays reflecting primarily on the relationship between women’s history and gender history, alongside innovatory work in the history of masculinity. While less concerned with challenging established chronologies than with staking out a feminist agenda for the analysis of enduring systems of patriarchal oppression, Judith M. Bennett’s landmark essay in that volume implicitly invoked the *longue durée* as the appropriate time-span for gender historians – a point to which she returns in her reflections below.\footnote{23} However, subsequent contributors have mostly retained narrower and largely conventional timeframes. One notable exception by Julia M. H. Smith, examining the place of women in the extensive cultural adaptation associated with the transformation of the Roman world, demonstrates the potential of gender history to illuminate key phases of transition without sacrificing complexity or resorting to generalisations about the position of women.\footnote{24} Several other essays have similarly sought to integrate gender analysis to enrich existing accounts of change, for
example in relation to class formation and its associated modes of capitalist
patriarchy, or the reconfiguration of the medieval into the early modern Italian
church. Yet the challenges of reshaping established chronologies, while repeatedly
lauded as a goal of gender history, have largely been overshadowed by the more
urgent imperative of widening coverage in order both to reflect the myriad forms of
gender construction and varied experiences of women and men, and to counter the
Euro- and US-centrism of gender analysis. Gender and History has arguably
achieved more success in broadening its geographical than chronological coverage
with reference to its stated aims of displacing periodisation based on the dominant
narratives associated with the post-Enlightenment West. The only period term to
receive any sustained critical engagement within the journal’s covers is ‘modernity’.  

This celebratory volume was envisaged as an opportunity to reflect on the
extent to which gender analysis suggests alternative chronologies to conventional
periodisation. More fundamentally, the essays it features explore the ways in which
gender functioned as a force of endurance or transition in the past, and the ways in
which it might have been constitutive rather than merely reflective of either continuity
or change. It seems a fitting tribute to twenty years of Gender and History to engage
questions at the heart of the discipline of history as a means of showcasing the
contribution gender analysis can make to our characterisation and classification of the
past. In the essays that follow, this has involved not only the rejection of some period
markers and the confirmation of others, but also the interrogation of some of the
foundational narratives of change associated both with women’s history and the
shifting construction of gender categories over time. Further, it has generated some
theoretical discussion of both how we are to approach women’s agency in the past and
how we might best deploy the concept of gender as a category of analysis in ways
which avoid partiality and anachronism. Obviously, constraints of space mean that we cannot offer exhaustive coverage of these wide-ranging questions and what follows is both geographically and chronologically limited to a few select (albeit as varied as possible) times and places. Sadly, geographical breadth in this instance has given way to chronological depth, despite our many efforts to solicit articles with a non-western and more global range. However the essays gathered here demonstrate the rich possibilities for rethinking the central tenets of European historiography – including several foundational claims of women’s and gender history – even from within the perspectives generated by western scholarship. And the many general reflections on methods for the classification of change and its implications for the interrogation of gender as a category will be of relevance to periods and regions that are not represented here. It is therefore hoped that this collection of essays will both re-open questions that were of fundamental importance to first and second wave feminist scholarship and stimulate further investigation both under and beyond the umbrella of gender history.

With one exception, the contributions that directly interrogate conventional chronologies reject rather than confirm the integrity of period markers in the light of gender analysis. Lynda L. Coon’s exploration of early medieval ‘somatic styles’ challenges both the notion of a ‘rupture’ between classical antiquity and the so-called ‘Dark Age’ and the assumption of an alien pre-Enlightenment sexuality based on a ‘one-sex’ model of the body against which a ‘modern’ sex-gender system has frequently been juxtaposed, emphasising the eclectic and varied use of classical medical teachings even by the clerical elites whose voices dominate the sources surviving from the seventh to tenth centuries. Investigating the more recent past, Padma Anagol demonstrates how historiographical privileging of the nationalist
response to imperialism in modern Indian history has obfuscated women’s agency under colonial rule and created a truncated account and inadequate appreciation of feminism in India and the broader formation of Indian subjectivities. Anagol’s essay provides a model of the problems generated by gender-blind scholarship and the legacy of its chronological frameworks which, in this instance, actively inhibit analysis of women’s agency. Critical too of discursive approaches to gender for their neglect of female agency and their lack of chronological moorings, Anagol goes on to place gender relationships at the heart of the formation of modern India, stressing its deep roots in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a corrective to an undue emphasis on the period from 1885 to 1947. Kevin Passmore is similarly critical of the way in which political religions theorists, explaining the rise of fascism as a feature of the transition between tradition and modernity, have afforded no space for women’s agency. Cast as the embodiment of tradition on the basis of femininity’s timelessness, women are associated with passivity and superstition in order to draw a distinction between the compliant (feminised) masses and the masculine elite. Passmore traces these assumptions back to the totalitarianism theory of the 1950s and 60s, and, more fundamentally, to the canonical thinkers of the sociological tradition from which political religions theory derives. Moreover Passmore warns that conventional sociology presents a problematic legacy that also risks being unheeded by gender historians.

The one conventional period marker that receives any defence amongst the essays below is ‘early modernity’. While happy to dispense with the organising principles and disciplinary boundaries associated with the term ‘Renaissance’, Merry Wiesner-Hanks argues that there certainly was an ‘early modern’ period for European women and that gender analysis is critical to understanding the key transitions with
which it is associated – in particular the Reformation, military revolution, and the
dramatic intensification of global interaction. Wiesner-Hanks is concerned not to
render women’s history ‘motionless’ over the *longue durée* by contrast to the changes
deemed definitive in men’s lives, and argues not only that women’s as well as men’s
lives were transformed by the key events associated with early modernity but also that
women were key agents and gender played a constitutive role in these changes. These
conclusions are given further weight by Martha Howell’s essay on the commercial
expansion associated with the early modern west. The commercial revolution, she
argues, was accompanied and *enabled* by the creation of a class-specific, normative
gender binary that newly afforded honourable masculinity to the merchant by
realigning production with the male householder citizen and domesticating (and
thereby taming) consumption as the purview of the virtuous wife. Gender was
inextricably bound up with and a dynamic force in the creation of the class identity of
the European bourgeoisie.

Alongside concerns with conventional periodisation, several of the
contributors are sceptical about some of the foundational narratives of change and
accompanying chronologies produced by women’s history and gender history.
Monica H. Green takes to task western feminist narratives concerning the history of
women’s healthcare, and rejects the categorisation of the late medieval period or
(more loosely) a pre-modern era as a ‘golden age’ for European women’s medical
practices in relation to reproductive health. Such accounts have come about, she
argues, from a politically motivated and polarising perspective that has produced a
partial story shaped by a moral framework which accords liberating potential to the
deeds of women and patriarchal oppression to the activities of men on the basis of
distorted evidence and, ultimately, in the face of improving medical outcomes. Lynn
Abrams wrestles with the stranglehold that the dominant narrative of ‘separate spheres’ has placed on the history of women in modern Europe and the paradox created by this model’s failure to represent women’s sense of their own past within local contexts. Exploring what happens when women’s voices are prioritised by historians, Abrams seeks a path through the dissonance created by the relationships between the general and the particular, the mainstream and the margins that leads her to more than a simple confirmation of the heterogeneity of female experience. Rather than a timeless exception to a European rule, Shetland women’s accounts of their own agency offer a situational corrective to the narratives told about modern European women and, more importantly, to the methodologies by which they are constructed.

Perhaps one of the most entrenched, albeit widely contested, narratives of change (re)produced by gender history has its roots in Thomas Laqueur’s argument that eighteenth-century Europe witnessed a fundamental shift in the construction of the sexed body as a ‘pre-modern’, ‘one-sex’ model – based on a male-female hierarchical continuum – was replaced by a ‘modern’, ‘two-sex’ system of incommensurable difference. Dror Wahrman revisits these claims, and the counter-arguments they have produced that emphasise either long-term continuities or enduring synchronic diversity (and which are also represented here in the essays by Lynda Coon and Monica Green). He does so less to adjudicate the merits of each side of the argument than to explore the relationship between gender history and cultural history and the methodological and conceptual limits of the latter’s ‘uncompromising constructivism’ which, he argues, lacks explanatory force when confronted with evidence of long-term continuity. Breaking one of the persistent taboos of feminist history against naturalising the body, Wahrman challenges gender historians to undertake a ‘corporeal critique’ in order to explore ‘where the culturally constructed
ends and the a-historical and extra-cultural begins; and thus, most importantly, how
they relate to each other’. This involves widening the lens of analysis to encompass
the deep historical perspective afforded by neurohistory – an example of which
Wahrman offers to complement other such forays on the basis of psychoanalysis or
evolutionary psychology.

Jeanne Boydston’s essay is also concerned with the conceptual limits of
gender analysis, but prescribes attending to local particularity above deep historical
continuity. Claiming that gender’s status as a ‘category of analysis’ risks ahistoricism
by reifying a contemporary, western epistemological order, Boydston argues that we
should instead approach gender as ‘historical process’ and historicise gender as a
concept. If gender is the product of social constructionism, then it should behave
differently across time and space. The appearance of long-term continuity for
Boydston, then, is a chimera that has been produced by the inability of the category of
gender to accommodate difference that does not conform to an oppositionally based
binary which risks (wrongly) assuming universal status across place and time.

Finally, by way of an epilogue to the volume, Judith M. Bennett contributes
some short reflections that once again reiterate the importance of the longue durée to
feminist history. Concerned that women’s history has narrowed its sights to the recent
past, Bennett urges historians of women and gender to reinvigorate history’s
relationship with feminist theory in order to restore its potential to address
contemporary agendas for change vested in the long view the distant past affords. We
have come, then, full circle to the agenda articulated by the emergent field of
women’s history in the 1970s. The essays in this volume have, however, proceeded by
way of some approaches and conclusions that are radically at odds with many of the
foundational methods and findings of both women’s history and gender history.
Noting that gender-blind scholarship has not been alone in producing partial accounts of female agency, several contributors confront the uncomfortable reality that women’s agency did not only occur in progressive domains, but could sustain and benefit from systems of oppression. Others wrestle with the conceptual constraints inherent in the deployment of gender as a category of analysis, particularly in relation to gender’s close association with both the strengths and weaknesses of cultural history. While Boydston advocates detailed attention to the particularities and localities that contradict an assumed oppositional binary pitting male against female, the general consensus is that the long-view is one that gender history cannot afford to lose. Nor can the discipline of history afford to be without the perspective this allows, since conventional timeframes are constructively enriched and challenged by gender history and the analysis of women’s agency in the past.


18 ‘Gender is not only a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, it also is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. It is of crucial importance for the creation of meaning in social and political life far beyond gender [as an object of study] itself’: Karen Hagemann and Jean H. Quataert, ‘Gendering Modern German History: Comparing Historiographies and Academic Cultures in Germany and the United States through the Lens of Gender’, in Karen Hagemann and Jean H. Quataert (eds), *Gendering Modern German History: Rewriting Historiography* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), pp. 1–38, here pp. 3–4. Scott’s essay is mentioned later, however: pp. 18-21.


22 Konstantin Dierks, ‘American Men’s History and the Big Picture’, *Gender and History* 18 (2006), pp. 160–4. See also the Special Section on periodisation and the history of masculinity, ‘What Have Historians Done with Masculinity: Reflections of


26 See, e.g., the introduction to the Special Issue on ‘Gender, Nationalisms and National Identities’, in which the ‘need to reconsider existing chronologies in the formation of nations’ in the wake of gender analysis is acknowledged but deferred as a task for the future. *Gender and History* 5:2 (1993), pp. 159–64.

27 See the editorial to issue 1 of vol. 6 of *Gender and History* (1994), reflecting on the first five years’ content, pp. 1–6. Similar concerns were echoed in the introduction to the Special Issue of vol. 11, on ‘Gender and History – Retrospect and Prospect’, celebrating 10 years of publication (1999), pp. 415–18.

28 See, e.g., the Special Issue on ‘Gender, Citizenship and Subjectivity’, *Gender and History* 13:3 (2001), and the forum on ‘Domestic Service Since 1750’, *Gender and History* 18:2 (2006).

29 The volume has its origins in a two-day workshop held at Christ’s College, Cambridge, in April 2007. We are grateful to the Master and Fellows of Christ’s College for hosting the workshop, and to the participants at the workshop for their
contributions. We are also indebted to the George Macaulay Trevelyan Fund for financial support for this event.