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Author(s): Isabel V. Hull

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Feminist and Gender History Through the Literary Looking Glass: German Historiography in Postmodern Times

ISABEL V. HULL

THE purpose of this essay is not to provide a review of the extensive literature on women's history, gender history, or feminist scholarship,¹ but to reflect on the implications that these three vantage points have for the practice of writing German history. The framework for these reflections is the charge of the conference at which an earlier version of this paper was presented, namely, to consider the interdisciplinary, theoretical, and methodological challenges to historiography raised by "postmodernism." These challenges are roughly similar for all national historiographies, though Germany's historians, it could be argued, have distinguished themselves by their especially intense focus on state institutions, national events, aggregated socioeconomic structures, large organizations, and the theories and methods appropriate to these concerns. Such foci stand in particular danger of being dissolved by alternate historiographic interests, like feminist, women's, and gender history. When the center no longer holds, that is the "postmodern" condition; their part in dissolving the center is what links feminist, women's, and gender history to "postmodernism." Rather than rehearsing specific examples of how, say, women's history has challenged the received picture of German history, and thereby implicitly to suggest methods

I thank Biddy Martin and Mary Beth Norton for their helpful comments on an earlier draft and their bibliographical aid, and Laura Engelstein and the members of the German Women's History Group for their criticisms. None of these people is responsible for the opinions expressed here.

1. For Germany see Hans Sveistrup and Agnes Zahn-Harnack, *Die Frauenfrage in Deutschland: Strömungen und Gegenströmungen, 1790–1930, Sachlich geordnete und erläuterte Quellenkunde* (Burg bei Magdeburg, 1934); Deutscher Akademikerinnenbund, ed., *Die Frauenfrage in Deutschland: Bibliographie 1931–1980* (Munich, 1982); *Die Frauenfrage in Deutschland: Bibliographie, Neue Folge*, 3 vols. (Munich, 1983–87); and Ulla Bock and Barbara Witych, *Thema: Frau: Bibliographie der deutschsprachigen Literatur zur Frauenfrage 1949–1979* (Bielefeld, 1980).

of damage control, this essay instead attempts to discuss some of the broader theoretical and methodological issues that feminist scholarship poses to historians and to do so within the context of the “post-modern.” References to the specific German context are mostly in the footnotes.

Feminism as a movement and a body of ideas is the product of a modern social system (in the largest sense) that proclaims abstract equality for all people and then systematically denies it on the basis of sex (among other things) to half of them. It is therefore first and foremost a political movement. As the product of such a basic dis-juncture between ideology and actual practice, feminism engages in a radical critique of central institutions and sacred cows. This is equally true in the historical profession where feminism’s scholarly offshoots, women’s and gender history, perform similar tasks relative to historiography. In this paper I shall not distinguish between “gender” and “women’s” history, because both use the same methods and are products (broadly) of the same theoretical considerations. They both function inside general historiography in similar ways. Nevertheless, I shall return briefly at the essay’s end to the debate in feminist circles about “gender” versus “women’s” history.

In pursuit of its positive goals (equal treatment and representation of female historians in the profession, inclusion of women as a proper object of historical study, and going beyond this, the critical reformulation of the tools, assumptions, questions, and goals of historians), feminist historiography has often seemed most successful as a work of destruction. By taking the universalist claims of “historical science” seriously and by merely seeking to apply them to women, feminists discovered that traditional historical categories were nearly useless; accepted chronological divisions did not work; national boundaries were permeable; the analytical categories of social science (class, job, age, family status, religion) were either inapplicable or operated in completely different (indeed, sometimes opposite) ways for women than for men; major events or developments (the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the professionalization of medicine, the end of the Second World War) needed to be radically reinterpreted in relation to women; archives and data bases could not be used with their current organizational rubrics; and even the language most historians used (“man,” “he,” “the worker”) was obscurantist and analytically dysfunctional; on and on.

These unpleasant revelations were unwelcome especially to those mostly male historians who thought their house was in order. And there were many such historians, amongst both conservatives and self-proclaimed progressives. Despite the growing number of feminist-inspired historical studies, their increasing sophistication, and their unsettling implications for "history as usual," the established historical guild has only grudgingly permitted itself to be influenced by them. Most resistance to the implications of feminist historiography has come cloaked in academic argument, but has in fact been mainly a matter of naked power (or sociology), not intellectual scrupulousness. Thus feminist historiography is far better established in the United States than in the Federal Republic because the number of employed, tenured, female academics is higher (thanks primarily to extra-intellectual causes, such as more academic posts, greater room for curricular innovation within a more decentralized system of higher education, lower prestige of university teachers, greater flexibility of the court system in bringing threatening law suits, and greater strength of the indigenous women's movement).² While power is thus the primary factor in determining resistance to or acceptance of feminist historiography, power in this sense is not especially interesting to contemplate intellectually. I shall therefore turn to other difficulties raised by feminism, since these present genuine methodological and practical issues, many of which parallel or support the disciplinary critiques raised by "postmodernism."

One might begin inside feminist historiography and work out by identifying research assumptions or *Problemstellungen* that have been useful in adding to our general knowledge, but have not seemed to lead to a general reformulation of historical questions. Feminist scholars in Germany and America typically sum these up as: focus on women's organizations, research within the parameters set by the "separate spheres" ideology (i.e., sex roles, the family), "Great Women," women's oppression as a universal constant, and the origins of women's oppression.³ These topics or foci are ultimately hobbled by

2. For a lively review of the fate of women in academic life, especially in Germany, see Karin Hausen and Helga Nowotny, eds., *Wie männlich ist die Wissenschaft?* (Frankfurt a.M., 1986).

3. Gisela Bock, "Historische Frauenforschung: Fragestellungen und Perspektiven," in Karin Hausen, ed., *Frauen suchen ihre Geschichte* (Munich, 1983), 22–60, esp. 33–42; Joan W. Scott, "Women's History," in her *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), 15–27; and Claudia Opitz, "Der 'andere Blick' der Frauen in die Geschichte—Überlegungen zu Analyse- und Darstellungsmethoden feministischer Geschichtsforschung," in *Zentraleinrichtung zur För-*

the fact that they recapitulate the familiar structures of pre-feminist historiography and thus cannot break out of them. Either they situate women's experiences squarely within the domains that historically have been ceded to women, such as the family, child-rearing, or the domestic sphere, and thus do not bring into relief sharply enough the contingency of these institutions, their social construction, their change over time, or their relation to other (putatively "male," "public") systems. Or, such studies chronicle the emergence of women from this earlier "isolation." That is, they write women's history from within the emancipatory framework which from its beginnings was defined by its a priori exclusion of women. In such a schema women's history is the history of their "progress" measured against male standards masquerading as universal or human: access to the "public sphere," paid work, education, political rights, and so forth. The most radical-seeming break with this schema, the unrelieved litany of women's oppression, is in fact merely the negative of this structure. Although on one level one can learn a lot from studies of this sort, they cannot show us the way out of the impasse produced by the inadequacy of the theories that normally guide our profession. Summaries of women's history within this framework are flat and seem to lead nowhere. The disappointment produced by the emancipatory framework on the theoretical level is all the greater because emancipation in some form (from unjust legal, professional, economic, and political fetters) remains a major feminist goal. The temptation to write history according to the measure of emancipation is therefore often hard to resist.⁴

Historians sympathetic to women's history, and opportunists wanting to jump on a popular bandwagon, have found it difficult simply to add women's history to the old topical or analytical structures, even when it is done inside the emancipatory framework. Women's history doesn't fit. It breaks up the smooth narrative of progress. It confounds the analytical categories. Worse, it does not offer an easy alternative or synthesis to replace what it has disrupted. This has led historians

derung von Frauenstudien und Frauenforschung an der Freien Universität Berlin, ed., *Methoden in der Frauenforschung: Symposium an der Freien Universität Berlin vom 30.11—2.12.1983* (Berlin, 1983), 76–93.

4. Ute Frevert, for example, discusses these difficulties directly, but nonetheless structures her narrative along these lines: Frevert, *Women in German History: From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation* (Oxford, Hamburg, and New York, 1989), 1–8, 307–27.

like Jürgen Kocka to claim that women's history has failed to fulfill its "spirited promise of [historiographical] revision."⁵ In fact, this premature announcement signals a problem common especially to structuralists and social-science-oriented historians. Their commitment to explicit, grand scale, synthesizing and hierarchizing theory, their tendency to define themselves via theory and to build schools and exclude opponents on that basis, has made them understandably reluctant to grasp the radical critique that feminism makes of their endeavor. They are not helped, moreover, by the characteristic of much feminist historiography that it seldom flaunts either its theories or methodologies. Most feminist historians have received their guiding assumptions via their political involvement and/or through political texts. After the beginnings of second-wave feminism in the early to mid 1970s, they have rarely cited the latter. Most feminists know these works already. Furthermore, many of them are not of the same order as technical methodological works aimed at specific scholarly uses—they appear in often ephemeral, non-scholarly journals, or are discussed in (unpublished) conference papers or inside friendship networks, or come from disciplines that seem unrelated to historical work. In addition, the necessity to make their own scholarly product intelligible to non-feminist scholars seems to require that they emphasize established theory and frame their work as far as possible in recognizable, conventional debates. Historians who have never engaged in feminist political work and do not read (or even know where to find) feminist political writing are then under the impression that they have "read" feminist scholarship after they have read a collection of monographs on women's history. It is therefore easy for them to miss the point and it is comfortable for them to conclude that they have just acquired some tinsel they can hang on their old tree.

In short, self-conscious feminist theorizing has taken place less in historical scholarship than in the political arena and in other disciplines. In no discipline has feminist theory had a greater impact on mainstream disciplinary practice than in literary studies, especially French and English (less so in *Germanistik*). Perhaps not coincidentally, literary studies

5. Jürgen Kocka, "Das Haus der Geschichte hat viele Zimmer: Über tastende Versuche der Nachkriegszeit, Pionierleistungen und zukunftsweisende Neugründungen: Thesen zur Geschichtswissenschaft," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 20 June 1989, p. 9. I agree with David Crew's sceptical interpretation of this seemingly tolerant piece—see David Crew, "Alltagsgeschichte: A New Social History 'From Below'?" in this volume.

have been especially open to postmodernist preoccupations. It makes sense, then, to focus on feminist literary theory and its possible historical uses, rather than on the (significant) contributions other disciplines have made to feminist scholarship (such as anthropology, especially cultural anthropology, sociology, Marxist theories, etc.), particularly since some of these are the focus of other essays in this volume. Focussing on literary theory, however, tends to remove one from the historiography of Germany. Few non-German, and fewer German, feminist historians of Germany have overtly applied literary-critical methods in their work. Yet much of what they have accomplished and the problems they have focussed on, it seems to me, might be understood in a clearer way theoretically by reference to literary critical theories. That is, one might for the purposes of discussion conveniently organize feminist historians' work according to categories that feminist literary theorists have explicitly debated. It will still be necessary, however, to go beyond the confines of German historiography and to talk about feminist historical scholarship generally.

It is impossible to sum up adequately the variety of positions inside feminist literary criticism as it has developed in the past twenty years.⁶ I shall discuss briefly three foci that literary criticism shares with the interests of feminist historians generally: subjectivity/experience, "difference," and the critique of the disciplines, including history.

The effort to reclaim women's voices, to see women as not merely acted upon, but as actors, led directly to a confrontation with the problem of subjectivity. How do women construct their "identity" or sense of self (for example, by writing)? how does convention shape this process (for example through language, psychological relations, social institutions)? and what are the limits to the power of convention? Some feminist literary theorists argue that deeper psychological and linguistic structures cut across and disrupt shallower (social) structures. Their analytic preoccupation with apparently abiding structures seems to their critics to efface the particularity inherent in individual subjectivity. Thus other feminist critics have insisted on an enduring autonomy for the individual (writer). This debate marks one of the fundamental axes of disagreement within feminist literary theory.⁷

6. Toril Moi offers a succinct, but inevitably opinionated, introduction to feminist literary theory in her *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York, 1985). Her bibliography, 184–95, lists many of the major works for further reading.

7. The first position, which focusses on trans-historical linguistic or psychological categories,

Furthermore, addressing subjectivity demands questioning experience; that is, especially the mediations between “objective” experience and actual lived/interpreted experience (as fashioned by memory, language, ritual).⁸ On this point literary theorists have run into a problem. Most literary critical attempts to address these questions are confined to the West since the invention of the novel and therefore suffer from being limited to a peculiar historical moment when subjectivity in the form of individualism was the cultural expectation, which it was not in earlier times or in other cultures. The concentration on writing also makes these studies more sensitive to internal subjectivity or the dialogue with the self than they often are to inter-subjectivity or to more material rather than intellectual expressions of subjectivity (living in the world rather than writing). Because most historical inquiry focusses on groups, not isolated individuals, and because we rarely have evidence sufficient to sustain truly deep analysis of individual subjectivity, some of the preoccupations and insights of the literary critics remain for us only suggestive and cannot be directly applied to our own work. Perhaps for these same reasons feminist historians even in the U.S. have left virtually untouched psychoanalytic approaches, which in their Freudian and Lacanian varieties are ubiquitous in feminist literary studies.⁹ In German feminist historiography the emphasis on (female) subjectivity and experience has taken place more within the framework of social history (not, however, *Sozialgeschichte*) and its recent turn toward *Alltagsgeschichte*, than of literary theory. The cross-disciplinary contacts have thus come from cultural anthropology, *Volkskunde*, oral history, and elsewhere—disciplines or methodologies that other conference essays will be discussing. Their greater

is associated especially with French feminists. British and American feminists criticize this stance as threatening to sever the creation of the female individual from her (gendered) experience, and, thus, to undermine the very thing that makes her a unique subject with a unique point of view. As an introduction to this debate see Ann Rosalind Jones, “Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine,” in Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, eds., *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London and New York, 1985), 80–112; Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford and New York, 1987), 74–106; and Nancy K. Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York, 1988).

8. A fascinating account of how women experienced their bodies in the early eighteenth century (and implicitly how that experience changed over time) is Barbara Duden, *Geschichte unter der Haut* (Stuttgart, 1987).

9. Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof, eds., *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca and London, 1989) offers a good selection of various writings on this subject from across the feminist spectrum.

concentration on the social embeddedness of lived subjectivity has made some German feminist historians more open to the advantages of mid-level theory, such as that of Pierre Bourdieu, which can account for the structured, socially determined creation of subjects, who nonetheless act on and change these same structures.¹⁰ While Bourdieu has been barely “received” among American feminists writing on Germany, German feminists, to my knowledge, have had little to say about the epistemological debates on subjectivity that are so commonplace here.

Feminist academic practice led quickly to a critique of the academic disciplines that had for so long erased women from power and view and denied female subjectivity (however it might be constituted) in the most radical possible ways. The disillusionment with the disciplines was both personal/political and scholarly/epistemological. Feminists were denied secure appointments and scholarly recognition because the subjects they studied (women, gender, sexuality), or the methods they used, were classified as non-scholarly or simply unimportant. Thus, the personal fortunes of feminist scholars in academe were inextricably bound to academic-political and methodological issues. Feminist literary theorists have been particularly active in pursuing the epistemological dismemberment of disciplinary certainty, academic rationality, and the grounding of knowledge.¹¹ They have typically gone further than historians have in criticizing the partiality of knowledge, the limits of language, and the power agenda behind both. For their part, feminist historians joining the attack on the politics of the profession(s) and the canon-makers found an ally in Michel Foucault’s analysis of power/knowledge. Both saw the scholarly professions as an exercise of power via the ordering of knowledge; both attacked the pretension that historiography, including social-science-oriented historiography despite its protestations of self-awareness and self-critique, operated outside the power nexus, or discovered universal truth(s). The claim to universality and clean method hid a process of systematic exclusion and hierarchy-making.

Exploring the tendency of post-Enlightenment Western thought to

10. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977); *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984).

11. See, for example, Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (New York, 1981); *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981); *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1981).

construct its categories of self-understanding on the basis of the exclusion of and opposition to an “other,” of which “woman” then became the archetypal metaphor, led some feminist literary critics to lengthy dissections of “difference.” This was especially true of feminists close to deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, for whom “difference” is more a thought process than a (social) category.¹² But considering “difference” surfaced within the feminist political movement in another way with perhaps more direct relevance to feminist historical practice. The early tendency among feminists to think of “women” as a unitary, integral category, gave way to a much more differentiated realization that this, too, was a false, universal category obscuring all manner of crucial distinctions.¹³ The sensitivity to racial, cultural, age, physical, sociological, and other differences among people is probably nowhere more highly cultivated in everyday practice than among feminists. This can be a major political handicap because it undercuts solidarity necessary for political action (though one could argue that it encourages alliance-building). But what is a much discussed potential danger for successful political engagement is a significant advantage for historical analysis, which thrives on distinction.¹⁴

The concern with subjectivity/experience, “difference,” and the criticism of the disciplines has opened feminist historical scholarship to influences outside history, and aligned it with certain recent trends inside history, that have been both, perhaps not always helpfully or accurately, termed “postmodern.” Jane Caplan has presented in this volume a succinct and judicious discussion of the differences among “poststructuralism,” “postmodernism,” and “deconstruction.” The

12. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1973); Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1978). On the feminists, see Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Part II; Shoshona Felman, Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore, 1980); Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, 1987).

13. Feminist women of color were instrumental in shaping this critique: Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back* (Watertown, Mass., 1981); Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston, 1983); Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York, 1983).

14. Uta C. Schmidt discusses the dangers of over-identification with the subjects of feminist research via the assumption that the researcher's own contemporary experience of discrimination is the same as the experience of women in the past. Uta C. Schmidt, “Wohin mit ‘unserer gemeinsamen Betroffenheit’ im Blick auf die Geschichte? Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit methodischen Postulaten der feministischen Wissenschaftsperspektive,” in Ursula A. J. Becher and Jörn Rüsen, eds., *Weiblichkeit in geschichtlicher Perspektive: Fall-Studien und Reflexionen zu Grundproblemen der historischen Frauenforschung* (Frankfurt a.M., 1988), 502–16.

relation between feminism and these three manners of thinking is complex and controversial. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson write that the “mutual wariness” between feminism and postmodernism has been so great “that there have been remarkably few extended discussions of the relations between them.”¹⁵ What discussions there have been are divided about whether feminism is “a type of postmodern philosophy,”¹⁶ radically opposed to postmodernist principles,¹⁷ or uneasily related to them.¹⁸ I tend toward the last position and the rest of this article is written in that spirit. What follows is therefore not a would-be agenda for future feminist scholarship in German history. That sort of bird’s-eye-view, authoritative program reinforces the very disciplinary structures that feminism tries to overcome. Instead, I would like to discuss briefly what feminist historical scholarship seems to share with the “postmodern” and where that poses problems for historians.

Feminism and postmodernist critiques overturn the *Relevanzhierarchie*¹⁹ of the profession. What was previously deemed “central” is now seen as fragmented (the state,²⁰ its power relations, for example), an ideological construction instead of an anchored fact (the public/private

15. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, “Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism,” *Theory, Culture & Society*: 5 (1988): 373–94, quotation on 373. See also Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York, forthcoming).

16. As Jane Flax claims, “Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory,” *Signs* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1987): 621–43, citation on 624. Craig Owens finds that the feminist “insistence on difference and incommensurability may not only be compatible with, but also an instance of postmodern thought.” Owens, “The Discourse of Others: Feminism and Postmodernism,” in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle, Wash., 1983), 57–82, citation on 61–62.

17. Daryl McGowan Tress, “Comment on Flax’s ‘Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory,’” *Signs* 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1988): 196–200.

18. This is Fraser’s and Nicholson’s position, which calls for a “postmodern-feminist theory,” Fraser and Nicholson, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” 390–91. Sandra Harding seems to embrace similar ground in “The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory,” *Signs* 11, no. 4 (Summer 1986): 645–64, esp. 648–49.

19. Bock, “Historische Frauenforschung,” 25–29.

20. The “polycratic chaos” of the Nazi state and the “polycratic but uncoordinated authoritarianism” of the Wilhelminian state are commonplaces in German historiography: see Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, 2d ed. (London and New York, 1989), 61–80. But postmodernist interpretations view all (at any rate quasi-modern) states as diffused, multicentered, and continuously contested; they are no longer seen as an apparatus, but a process that occurs in many micro-centers. See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1977), 138, 213–16; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (New York, 1980): 92–95.

dichotomy²¹), and incapable of being understood except in relation to that which was thought to be peripheral (European imperialism/the colonized,²² wage labor/housework,²³ married respectability/pros-

21. Most recent feminist studies that have carefully examined some aspect of public/private have confirmed the ideological utility (for males and the institutions associated with their interests) and the analytical futility (for understanding how things work in practice) of this concept. Gisela Bock gives a pithy summary of this subject in "Challenging Dichotomies: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives of Women's Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences" (unpublished essay presented at the conference "Strategies for Women's Studies in the Humanities," Helsinki, 28–30 May 1989), 6–8. Karin Hausen's influential essay, "Family and Role-division: The Polarisation of Sexual Stereotypes in the Nineteenth Century—an Aspect of the Dissociation of Work and Family Life," in Richard J. Evans and W. R. Lee, eds., *The German Family* (London, 1981), 51–83, is the classic account of the elaboration of this gendered distinction in Germany. For a demolition of this distinction in the example of the German revolution of 1848 see the articles by Carola Lipp, in Lipp, ed., *Schimpfende Weiber und patriotische Jungfrauen: Frauen im Vormärz und in der Revolution 1848/49* (Moos/Baden-Baden, 1986). The best example for the Third Reich is Gisela Bock, *Zwangsterilisation im Nationalsozialismus: Studien zur Rassenpolitik und Frauenpolitik* (Opladen, 1986). For the ideological underpinnings to the distinction see Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, Calif., 1988). For the most recent discussion of public/private by German-speaking feminists see *Gegen-Öffentlichkeit, Feministische Studien*, 1/1989, especially Brigitte Studer, "Das Geschlechterverhältnis in der Geschichtsschreibung und in der Geschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts: Überlegungen zur Entwicklung der historischen Frauenforschung und zu ihrem Beitrag zur geschichtlichen Erkenntnis," 97–121, who is critical of the way feminists have used the public/private distinction in their research.

22. This topic is perhaps the *locus classicus* of the "de-centered" viewpoint. In a recent article three feminist anthropologists have suggested that postmodern thought occurred when dominant, white Western males "experienced a decentering as world politics [decolonialization] and economic realities [the United States becomes a debtor nation] shift global power relations. . . .": Frances E. Mascia-Lees, Patricia Sharpe, and Colleen Ballerino Cohen, "The Post-modernist Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective," *Signs* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1989): 7–34, citations on 15–16; bracketed comments are mine. The classical consideration by a literary critic is Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978). The importance of the critique of imperialism to feminist theory and practice could hardly be overemphasized.

23. The most sparkling account of this problem for Germany is still Gisela Bock and Barbara Duden, "Arbeit als Liebe—Liebe als Arbeit: Zur Entstehung der Hausarbeit im Kapitalismus," in *Frauen und Wissenschaft: Beiträge zur Berliner Sommeruniversität für Frauen, Juli 1976* (Berlin, 1977), 118–99. In the meantime women and work (paid and unpaid) has become one of the major foci of feminist scholarship; the secondary literature on this topic is immense. For an introduction see Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York, 1978). Dörte Winkler, *Frauenarbeit im "Dritten Reich"* (Hamburg, 1977); Ute Daniel, *Arbeiterfrauen in der Kriegsgesellschaft: Beruf, Familie und Politik im ersten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen, 1989); Renate Bridenthal, "'Professional' Housewives: Stepsisters of the Women's Movement," in Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, and Marion Kaplan, eds., *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York, 1984), 153–73; Jean Quataert, "The Shaping of Women's Work in Manufacturing: Guilds, Households, and the State in Central Europe, 1648–1870," *American Historical Review* 90 (1985): 1122–48; and the essays of Regina Schulte, Marlene Ellerkamp and Brigitte Jungmann, Dorothee Wierling, and Sibylle Meyer, in Hausen, *Frauen suchen ihre Geschichte*.

titution²⁴). Non-topics (women, sexual behavior) become legitimate objects of study, not as isolated phenomena, but in relation to other topics which together form systems previously hidden from view or only partially understood because they were not studied in their entirety. These non-topics had previously been the exceptions to generally accepted rules (all workers organize to defend their rights, except women, who do not join unions;²⁵ the bourgeois system is based on private property rights, except for married women, who lost theirs upon marriage;²⁶ liberal theory protects the right to personal privacy, except for pregnant women and non-heterosexuals²⁷). If you treat the exceptions as part of the rule, the rule's larger, invisible context and unacknowledged workings become clearer. This is one advantage to focussing on eccentricity and contradiction (or aporia, to use a favorite term of the philosophically inclined literary critics). This advantage is

24. The classic feminist account is Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (London, 1980). For Germany see Regina Schulte, *Sperbezirke: Tugendhaftigkeit und Prostitution in der bürgerlichen Welt* (Frankfurt a.M., 1979). On respectability: George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York, 1985); George L. Mosse, "Nationalism and Respectability: Normal and Abnormal Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Contemporary History* 17, no. 2 (April 1982): 221–46; and Isabel V. Hull, "The Bourgeoisie and its Discontents: Reflections on 'Nationalism and Respectability,'" *ibid.*: 247–68.

25. See Molly Nolan, "Proletarischer Anti-Feminismus: Dargestellt am Beispiel der SPD-Ortsgruppe Düsseldorf, 1890 bis 1914," *Frauen und Wissenschaft*, 356–77; Elisabeth Plössl, *Weibliche Arbeit in Familie und Betrieb: Bayerische Arbeiterfrauen 1870–1914* (Munich, 1983). For women inside the socialist movement see Jean H. Quataert, *Reluctant Feminists in German Social Democracy, 1885–1917* (Berkeley, Calif., 1974), esp. 161–88. On women and unions see Kathleen M. Canning, "Class, Gender and Working-Class Politics: The Case of the German Textile Industry, 1890–1933" (John Hopkins Univ., Ph.D. diss., 1988); Gisela Loseff-Tillmanns, *Frauenemanzipation und Gewerkschaften* (Wuppertal, 1978).

26. Ute Gerhard, *Verhältnisse und Verhinderungen: Frauenarbeit, Familie und Rechte der Frauen im 19. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt a.M., 1978), and Ute Gerhardt and Yvonne Schütze, eds. *Frauen-Situation: Veränderungen in den letzten zwanzig Jahren* (Frankfurt, a.M., 1988).

27. Wolfgang van den Daele, "Der Fötus als Subjekt und die Autonomie der Frau: Wissenschaftlich-technische Optionen und soziale Kontrollen in der Schwangerschaft," in Gerhard and Schütze, *Frauen-Situation*, 189–218. On the ideology of motherhood that partly undergirds this: Yvonne Schütze, *Die gute Mutter: Zur Geschichte des normativen Musters "Mutterliebe"* (Bielefeld, 1986), and Ann Taylor Allen, "Mothers of the New Generation: Adele Schreiber, Helene Stöcker and the Evolution of a German Idea of Motherhood, 1900–1914," *Signs* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 418–38. For the Weimar Republic, Atina Grossmann, "Abortion and Economic Crisis: The 1931 Campaign against Paragraph 218," in Bridenthal, Grossman, and Kaplan, *When Biology Became Destiny*, 66–86. On non-heterosexuals see Rüdiger Lautmann, *Seminar: Gesellschaft und Homosexualität* (Frankfurt a.M., 1977), chap. 2, "Diskriminierungsfeld Recht," 47–61, and Gisela Bleibtreu-Ehrenberg, "Antihomosexuelle Strafgesetze," in Lautmann, *ibid.*, 61–92; Rolf Ellermann, ed., *Soziale Diskriminierung Homosexueller* (Sankt Augustin, 1987).

diminished if the investigator interprets the exceptional or problematic as merely a system within itself and not part of something larger. That sort of isolationism (or seeming antiquarianism) encourages the oft heard query “how important is it?”, which pre-feminist historians like to pose in an effort to reestablish their hierarchy of relevance without acknowledging their own sociological and power interest in doing so. By insistently showing how taking something on the edge seriously forces one to rearrange the center, one demolishes that pseudo-question at its base.

Embedding the specific in a general context raises a certain problem, however. The temptation to resolve the contradictions or aporias by reference to a larger system that explains them away (à la Hegel) is a point of great tension between postmodern purists and many feminist historians. Literary critics especially are devoted to open-endedness and non-resolution. The greatest interpretive sin is closure. This is not a problem for historians, so long as one is simply acknowledging that documents or events are always capable of being differently interpreted; there is never one absolutely “correct” interpretation. Good historians have known that for a long time.²⁸ It is a problem if a commitment to non-resolution prevents you from daring to advance a meaning for some event or from posing certain questions of it. Postmodernism is much better at showing how something works than in answering why it does so, who does it, or what it might mean that it works like it does.²⁹ Some feminist historians have decided to rest content with “how” and resist posing “why,”³⁰ but they are in the minority as yet.

Few feminist historians, however, would be content to forget “who,” since the question of agency is critical to understanding process and to doing something about it (and feminism is still a highly political activity). For this reason feminist historians looking to literary theory are likely to hew closer to those critiques that emphasize the voice and autonomy of the female (in their case, writer) rather than

28. Peter Novick is less sanguine about this point: Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge and New York, 1988).

29. Jonathan Culler gives a clear discussion of how deconstructionist techniques can practice non-resolution without utterly sacrificing meaning: Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), esp. 134–55, 180–225.

30. Joan W. Scott, in response to a question, once answered that “how” had replaced “why” in her own work (Binghamton, N.Y., Autumn 1988). I am not sure if *Gender and the Politics of History* actually bears this out.

those whose analyses postulate something abstractly “feminine,”³¹ a “position” that anyone, including men, could theoretically inhabit.³² The death of the subject/author, whether by poststructuralism or by deconstructive reading, is thus highly problematic for feminists, whose analysis to a large extent still rests on the assumption that history is made by, among other things, gendered subjects.³³

The location of meaning is equally problematic and related to the “who” question. Recently some historians, including feminists, who are sympathetic to postmodernist critique have tried to approach the problem of meaning by focussing on “representation,” or the actual workings of symbolic forms and interactions. This approach has a number of advantages: for example, its sensitivity to the operation and limits of language, the seriousness with which it takes symbolic activity, its openness to cross-disciplinary contacts, and its scepticism regarding the way historians set about “proving” their assertions. But in some ways “representation” adjourns the problem of meaning in a perpetual, regressive spiral that, however, does not escape the question “representation of what?” Or the representationists escape the question altogether by embedding it in an all-powerful but diffuse “culture,” whose contents and agents are unclear. Fortunately, the practitioners of the representational approach are usually aware of these problems. A recent collection of essays on the subject explores overtly whether “a history of culture [can] work if it is shorn of all theoretical assumptions about culture’s relationship to the social world—if, indeed, its agenda is conceived as the undermining of all assumptions about the relationship between culture and the social world?”³⁴ The task of

31. For critical comment on these differing feminist stances see Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), and Biddy Martin’s review in *The Women’s Review of Books*, 4, no. 1 (Oct. 1986): 22.

32. See Culler, *On Deconstruction*, “Reading as a Woman,” 43–63, and Elaine Showalter, “Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year,” reprinted in Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, *Men in Feminism* (London and New York, 1987), 116–32.

33. Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen cite two pithy formulations of this problem. Andreas Huyssen: “Doesn’t post-structuralism where it simply denies the subject altogether, jettison the chance of challenging the ideology of the subject (as male, white, and middle-class) by developing alternative notions of subjectivity?” and Nancy Cott: “. . . in deconstructing categories of meaning, we deconstruct not only patriarchal definitions of ‘womanhood’ and ‘truth’ but also the very categories of our own analysis—‘women’ and ‘feminism’ and ‘oppression.’” “The Postmodernist Turn in Anthropology,” 15, 27.

34. Lynn Hunt, “Introduction,” to Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989), 10.

defining what “culture” is (if it can be considered a unified thing) and searching for it not just in its representational aspects, but in material conditions and activity, systematic and not, is a daunting, but necessary task in which feminists will doubtless be active.

The relativity of meaning is less hard for most historians to accept than many of our critics from literature, including some feminists, have assumed. That the sense of a document or event depends upon its relation to others, upon its context, is practically axiomatic. The problem arises when a hierarchy of relevance dictates a rigid context and thus a single (set of) meaning(s). Feminism and other critiques of the profession (*Alltagsgeschichte*, for example) unhinge the *Relevanz-hierarchie* and clear the way for multiple contexts and multiple meanings. This is less profound as theory (it has happened before and will happen again in historiography) than as method, and it has a profound impact on content. In fact, the literary theorists have had more problems using, defining, and shifting context(s) than historians have had, as they are perhaps acknowledging now by their newly found interest in history.³⁵ Their problems with context took the form of an exclusive focus on a text and how it works (to the exclusion of interest in the writer or her/his situation), or an expansion of the term “text” to include everything interpretable. Both of these strategies may be justified in literature, but the first makes history impossible to write and the second is a thoroughly unhelpful conceit. It pretends that there is no difference between a map, a tax roll, a diary, or a position paper from the *Justizministerium*, when it is precisely that difference in writer, intended audience, genre rules, in short, context, that determines how to “read” them. Such documentary differences are especially important in historicist considerations, where one is trying to ascertain the spectrum of interpretive possibilities most likely to have been intended or unintentionally expressed by the writer and understood by the contemporary reader. External interpretive considerations imported by the historian to find meaning in relation to other contexts undreamt of by contemporaries are useful and necessary, but are a different kind of reading and should be distinguished from the other sort. Disparate documents should all be read the same in only one respect—carefully. Insofar as literary theory has encouraged careful, nuanced reading, with attention to inconsistencies, submerged meanings, and operative

35. Peter Jelavich considers the “new historicism” of the literary critics in his contribution to this volume.

strategies within the text, it has been a boon to historians; but this is, once again, less a matter of theory than of method.

If I seem to be undervaluing theory somewhat it is for three reasons. First, fetishizing theory and method³⁶ was the major way that especially social-science-oriented opponents of feminist historiography have tried to belittle its accomplishments and discredit it altogether. Appeals to theory and method were (and are still) the first line of defense³⁷ for those historians who would like to continue to operate as if the history of males were the history of “man”kind, since this is the assumption that lies at the heart of most of the theories they use.³⁸ Within the profession “theory” and “method” are, alas, often mere ideological clubs wielded disingenuously, and nowhere is this truer than in German historiography.³⁹ Second, there has been a tendency in certain quarters of (especially the American) women’s movement to enunciate programmatic, “theoretical statements” regarding the

36. Theory and method are often collapsed together as a single element, especially in polemical usage. Throughout this essay I have understood theory as a structured explanation of the dynamics among parts of a system, or between systems. Method is the systematic manner in which one evaluates material, or selects material for evaluation. Theoretical assumptions can obviously dictate choice of method, but method is not wholly dependent on theory. Various methods, for example, *Quellenkritik*, hermeneutics, deconstructive readings, oral history, statistics, serial record linkage, and so forth, can be used inside many theoretical frameworks, or independently of them.

37. Typical: Jürgen Kocka, “Frauengeschichte zwischen Wissenschaft und Ideologie? Zu einer Kritik von Annette Kuhn,” *Geschichtsdidaktik* 5, no. 1 (1982), reprinted in Bodo von Borries, Annette Kuhn, and Jörn Rüsen, eds., *Sammelband Geschichtsdidaktik: Frau in der Geschichte I/II/III* (Düsseldorf, 1984), 271–78.

38. It should not be necessary to rehearse the abundant demonstrations of this fact. For brief discussions of the clash between feminism and various theories current in the social sciences see Sandra Harding, ed., *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1987). Even where social-science-theory-oriented historians perceive that gender is a fundamental principle of social organization and hierarchy, they are content to leave it untheorized and unexamined and to turn their attention instead to those social principles that apply to what they conceive of as the “public” sphere, and thus, primarily to men only. Hans-Ulrich Wehler makes this explicit in his *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte, 1700–1815* (Munich, 1987), 9–12, 125.

39. It is hardly accidental that the political turf battles within the German historical profession, since the founding of “scientific history” in the nineteenth century, have been expressed as disagreements about theory or method (*Methodenstreite*). Georg Iggers puts method at the heart of his narrative history of German historiography: *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, Conn., 1968), 269–70, 278–86. Although Iggers recognizes that historians’ conceptual schemas reflect their own social, political, and intellectual self-interests, he rarely presents the *Methodenstreite* within the discipline as political battles, nor does he consider their gender dimension. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography*, rev. ed. (Middletown, Conn., 1984), 203.

“nature” of women (or men), the fundamental causes of oppression, and so forth. These speculations find their way abroad and into historical scholarship, where their imprecision and sweeping claims ill suit them to the analytical differentiation a historian requires.⁴⁰ Better grounded, more scholarly examples of such large-scale theorizing exist, but they more often receive searching feminist criticism that discusses frankly their theoretical and scholarly implications and potential shortcomings.⁴¹ Third, it seems to me that the finest examples of feminist historiography (and literary criticism) have been characterized precisely by their sensitive and creative analysis of detail (which is, perhaps, simply another way to designate those peripheral, exceptional, eccentric things that are not supposed to count in the grand scheme). The analysis of detail then yields concepts which operate at a middle level, in relation to larger contexts, but which do not presume to put the entire world in order. It is the consideration of uncomfortable details that uncovers the inadequacy and pretension of the grand theories. In short, it has been the feminist points-of-view, the questions posed of the material and the methods made necessary by these questions, that have caused us to move forward much more than abstract blueprints or theory. For all this, feminists are neither theoretical nor methodological Luddites. Indeed, many of the most active feminist historians writing about German history came to their subject with a strong commitment to Marxist theory. For years they have grappled with the theoretical incongruities between the contours of Marxism

40. A good example is Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, which collapses the cultural, chronological, class, and other contexts of rape into a single, undifferentiated quintessence of male misogyny with but a single meaning. This universalizing assumption restricts the kinds of questions that even a subtle historian might pose of her data: Erika M. Hoerning, “Frauen als Kriegsbeute: Der Zwei-Fronten-Krieg: Beispiele aus Berlin,” in Lutz Niethammer and Alexander von Plato, eds., “*Wir kriegen jetzt andre Zeiten*”: *Auf der Suche nach der Erfahrung des Volkes in nachfaschistischen Ländern* (1985), 327–44, esp. 331, where Brownmiller’s thesis sets the parameters of Hoerning’s study. Another, smaller example: Ute Bechdorf, “Frauen als Kriegsbeute: Vergewaltigungen beim Einmarsch der Franzosen; Elsa Gärtner: ‘Eine wahre Begebenheit,’” in Ludwig-Uhland-Institut für empirische Kulturwissenschaft der Universität Tübingen-Projekt Gruppe “Heimatkunde des Nationalsozialismus,” ed., *Nationalsozialismus im Landkreis Tübingen: Eine Heimatkunde* (Tübingen, 1989), 95–98.

41. Three influential books that advance theories of over-arching sameness among women, called essentialism by its critics, are Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, Calif., 1978); Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York, 1988). All have received extensive, critical discussion among feminists.

and the demands of women's history.⁴² The very lack of fit between most theories conventionally used in historiography and the feminist project has made feminists more reflective about theoretical matters, not less. Similarly, the difficulties feminist historians encountered in trying to research hitherto "hidden" subjects like women, or the sexual system, have caused them to welcome new, interdisciplinary methods, and to be critically aware of a panoply of methodological errors common to many pre-feminist historians. These errors range from such simple (but far-reaching) matters as reading "man" as a universal, to accepting census categories as descriptive of society or economy, to confusing legal statute with actual behavior, to imagining documentary silence as evidence of enduring socio-structural sameness. In short, the feminist project itself sensitizes its practitioners to theoretical and methodological difficulties.⁴³

This essay has therefore been struggling with a paradox. Its task was to discuss feminist historiography from a theoretical and methodological point of view, when the theoretical (and less so the methodological) point of view, at least as we have inherited it, is precisely the problem.⁴⁴ This is not to say that the theories that have guided historians, or the methodologies they have required, are worthless; they're not. They have produced countless solid and intelligent studies from which we have all profited. They will produce more, because many of the questions they pose are still relevant and interesting from many perspectives. But not from all perspectives. The main theoretical statement that feminism has made is that the reigning scholarly theories are not universally valid, not disinterested, not uninvolved in the exercise of power, and not fit or adequate to set agendas for the entire profession.

42. The dilemma of Marxist feminists was one of the major organizing points for the development of feminist thinking about theory and method. For a recent account of this problem see Lydia Sargent, ed., *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (Boston, 1981); and Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter* (London and New York, 1988).

43. See Opitz's succinct discussion of methodological matters: "Der 'andere Blick,'" 85-89; and, as one example of a feminist view, Jean Quataert, "A Source Analysis in German Women's History: Factory Inspectors' Reports and the Shaping of Working-Class Lives, 1878-1914," *Central European History* 16, no. 2 (June 1983), 99-121.

44. After citing Marguerite Duras as the most anti-theoretical of feminists: "The criterion on which men judge intelligence is still the capacity to theorize and in all the movements that one sees now, in whatever area it may be, the theoretical sphere is losing influence. . . . It ought to be crushed by now . . . and be still," Hal Foster goes on to observe that most feminists "are ambivalent about theory . . ." because of "the inadequacy of currently existing theoretical constructs. . . ." Foster, "Feminists and Postmodernism," 79, n. 19.

Furthermore, feminism refuses to fill this theoretical void. In scholarship at any rate, feminism advances no universals.⁴⁵ It insists instead that all our perspectives, our theories, our methodologies are limited—and, they are all partial, in both senses of that word. At the moment feminism is concentrating on exposing those limits and tentatively going beyond them in discrete studies focussing on neglected subjects or inconsistencies in the old pictures. The landscapes that will emerge from this endeavor are still unclear.

Before closing I should like to consider two specific issues with historiographical ramifications that have occupied feminist scholars' attention of late: the distinction between sex and gender and the problem of men's history. The first was raised again recently in a thoughtful article by Gisela Bock.⁴⁶ She laments the English/American tendency to separate "sex," a biological category, from "gender," the social interpretation, structuring, and norming of male and female.⁴⁷ This distinction cannot be made in German (*Geschlecht* means both things and more) or in many, perhaps most other languages in which feminist scholarship is undertaken. Bock fears that the sex/gender division, which has appeared in Anglo-Saxon usage in the past ten years or so, merely repeats the old trap of assuming a given, unalterable biological base on which culture or society elaborates. Feminist scholarship has made great efforts (successfully) to show that "biology," as science, discipline, and concept, is by no means a given, and that even fundamental biological experiences of the body are strongly socially determined and change over time.⁴⁸ Therefore no linguistic usage should

45. An enormous number of feminist scholars who disagree about many things nonetheless agree on the importance of what one of them calls "fidelity to *parameters* of dissonance," rather than to "coherent theory"; that is, to theorizing from many different, clashing, irreconcilable perspectives. Harding, "Feminist Theory," 650. Also Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen, "Post-modernist Turn in Anthropology," 28; Flax, "Postmodernism," 633; Fraser and Nicholson, "Feminism and Postmodernism," 390–91; Uta Schmidt, "Betroffenheit," 516, following Regina Becker-Schmidt, "Probleme einer feministischen Theorie und Empirie in den Sozialwissenschaften," in *Zentraleinrichtung, Methoden in der Frauenforschung*, 224–37.

46. Bock, "Challenging Dichotomies."

47. The gender system, then, is the system of knowledge and domination (and their patterned, social reproduction) based on an assumed dichotomy between male and female.

48. Esther Fischer-Homberger, *Krankheit Frau, und andere Arbeiten zur Medizingeschichte der Frau* (Bern, Stuttgart and Vienna, 1979); Thomas Laqueur, "Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology," *Representations* 14 (Spring 1986): 1–41; Londa Schiebinger, "Skeletons in the Closet: The First Illustrations of the Female Skeleton in Nineteenth-Century Anatomy," *Representations* 14 (Spring 1986): 42–82; Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Madison, Wis.,

be tolerated that might suggest that things of the body are independent of social construction. She pleads that “sex” and “gender” should be used interchangeably to mean the interpreted body of males and females, or “gender” simply dropped.

There are, however, times when a historian wishes to refer to males and females without regard to the social trappings festooning them. This is a simple idea that only says that there are from the standpoint of genitalia usually two types of human beings; it claims nothing further. It ought to be possible to conceive of such an idea and express it without stumbling into the groove of biological determinism. But perhaps Bock’s misgivings are correct, and social reality will not (yet) permit a distinction of this sort. That would indeed be a loss to historians, but it points once again to the impossibility of escaping from the social and linguistic net into which we all are born and operate.

The second issue, men’s history, is not unrelated to this first problem, since the phrase “gender history” includes “men’s history.” Some feminists have seen in the trend to replace “women’s history” by “gender history” an attempt to undercut the former by the implicit critique that it was too particular, too tangential to the mainstream, and that male colleagues would find “gender history” more acceptable, since it also referred to them, and was less distressingly feminist. In a political sense, this suspicion has sometimes been justified; “gender history” has functioned on occasion in this way. But from an intellectual standpoint (and usually from an institutional one as well) “women’s history” is “gender history,” and so must it be for men, too. The same system(s) produce(s) them both and in direct relation to one another. In discovering that women were the product of larger processes of social construction, feminist scholars both retained and overcame the particularity in which ideology and institutions had imprisoned them. They retained it by demonstrating in detail how female lives, experience, networks, and existence had been differently fashioned from those of men. They overcame their particularity by discovering that men were equally subject to these processes, and that these were systemic. It is perhaps to be expected that male scholars will

1989); Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class and Political Culture* (New Haven and London, 1989); Duden, *Geschichte Unter der Haut*. For feminist critiques of biological science: Ruth Bleier, *Science and Gender: A Critique of Biology and Its Theories on Women* (New York, 1984); and Ruth Hubbard, M. S. Henifin, and Barbara Fried, eds., *Biological Woman: The Convenient Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

shortly discover that the ideological pretense to universality, that is that male socialization, experience, institutions, life patterns, and so forth are the measure of the human, has robbed them of their own particularity. We in fact know very little about men as gendered beings, or the processes that create them.⁴⁹ The universality of males was in many respects bought at the cost of profound self-alienation. One need only look at *The Encyclopedia* under “homme, morale” to discover that, in the place where the (male) author should have been talking about males, he discussed humankind, or, at the end, women.⁵⁰ Only when the discussion concerns women, in the article “femme, droit nat.,” do we find any mention of the education, civic duties, or passions peculiar to males.⁵¹ The discourse about women at least since the Enlightenment and perhaps before has thus been a veiled discussion about men,⁵² but it has been so oblique and distorted as to be almost useless for that purpose. The neglect of the study of male particularity means that there are no methods or theories available for this task except those developed by feminists to study women. If men are actually interested in themselves, they shall therefore have to turn to these, to “gender history” and “women’s history,” to help themselves along.

As the participants in this conference discussed the “postmodernist challenge” to historiography, it seemed to me that they found feminism a more and more palatable approach to doing history, the more they surveyed the threatening vistas offered by postmodernist (literary) theory. Partly this is no doubt due to the growing sophistication of feminist scholarship, to the suggestive areas of research it has helped

49. One of the few studies on this subject in Germany is Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien* (Frankfurt a.M., 1977). It is no accident that its subject is a putatively “peripheral” one, (unacknowledged) homoerotic bonding among World War I veterans and postwar Freikorps activists, nor that their troubled relationship to women, more correctly, to the ideology of “woman,” should play such a central part in the analysis.

50. M. le Roi, “homme, morale,” Denis Diderot, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres* (Lausanne and Bern, 1782), vol. 17, 675–82.

51. M. Desmahis, “femme, Droit nat.,” in Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, vol. 13, 929–37. On the encyclopedists’ views on women (but not men) see Abby R. Kleinbaum, “Women in the Age of Light,” in Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, eds., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 1st ed. (Boston, 1977), 215–35, esp. 220; and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Women and the Enlightenment,” in *ibid.*, 2d ed. (Boston, 1987), 251–77, esp. 261–63.

52. Isabel V. Hull, “Sexualität und bürgerliche Gesellschaft,” in Ute Frevert, ed., *Bürgerinnen und Bürger: Geschlechterverhältnisse im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1988), 49–66. See also the works cited in note 48.

open up, and to its widespread acceptance in other disciplines. But I suspect that one of feminism's strongest appeals lies in its very concreteness. It shares with Marxism a strong political commitment that prevents it from drifting too far from the analytical plane of social relations, despite the "instability" of its analytical categories. If it sometimes seems to historians that postmodernists exhibit philosophical cynicism, a devouring relativism, and a penchant for irresponsible, or at any rate light-hearted, anarchism, such cannot be said of feminists. Feminists have drifted toward postmodernist skepticism because again and again they could not make the conventional categories of thought work for them. But their political interests in deciphering and thus undoing the structures of power and authority in thought and practice draw feminists continually back to the knotty problems of subjectivity, difference, and the (re)production of knowledge, and to the social construction of these through time. The tensions inside feminist theory, the things that it cannot resolve or reconcile, but most of all, the understanding that it is not and cannot be the purpose of theory to reconcile, resolve, universalize—these aspects of feminism are a useful model for historians at the present time. There was a temptation among conference participants, as there is in the profession at large, to search for theories to replace the shattered edifice of "scientific history" with its promise of universal explanation, of hierarchies of subjects and ordered research agendas via coherent and exclusionary theory. It would be wiser, it seems to me, to allow the work of destruction begun on many fronts, including feminism, to continue. The coherences that are falling are no longer useful. We should not rush to erect new ones in their stead, for these, too, are liable to be constructed at the cost of ideas that cannot be thought, research that cannot be conceived, and relations that cannot be apprehended. It is better to continue to demonstrate rigorously the limits of the work that has already been done, so that, by knowing the limits of what has been written, we may understand what has not.