

Member Column

Why We Still Need Women's History

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I received my MA in Women's History from Sarah Lawrence College, home to the first graduate program in Women's History, founded by Dr. Gerda Lerner in 1972. Although my class shared a recognition of the importance of women in history, we frequently disagreed on how gender should be used as a category of analysis. Our seminar rooms were filled with loud, impassioned, even comical arguments about race, class, power, sexuality, and the legitimacy of universal sisterhood. For example, a good friend became so worked up over what she perceived as a threat to the concept of "sisterhood" that she brought a copy of Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* to class, only so she could dramatically drop it on the seminar table while making a point about the day's reading. Within this unique environment, we were free to dig deep into criticism of theories and scholarly arguments, without having to defend women's history as a discipline.

In 1979, Gerda Lerner published, *The Majority Finds Its Past*, where she argued that "Women's history asks for a paradigm shift." Lerner asserted that women's history demanded "a fundamental re-evaluation of the assumptions and methodology of traditional history and traditional thought." In our Sarah Lawrence bubble, which Lerner herself had created, we were fully invested in this conceptualization. I didn't realize it then,

but that understanding of women's history as a paradigm shift was a gift. I was fresh out of my BA, and I was frustrated with the dense theory and the real *work* participating in Lerner's paradigm shift involved. As a result, I had a very tumultuous relationship with one particularly important theorist, Joan Scott.

In *Gender and the Politics of History*, Scott challenged historians to address how bringing women to the foreground as important actors in history might not be *enough* to force the paradigm shift we desired. Scott demanded that we assess the ways in which history itself had reified gender differences, recapitulating "women" and "men" as universal categories. I was reluctant to engage with Scott's critiques because they forced me to take responsibility for these issues in my own work. Scott argued for a "reflexive, self-critical approach," which would elucidate the "particularistic status of any historical knowledge and the historian's active role as a producer of knowledge." As a 22-year-old MA student, a "reflexive, self-critical approach," was daunting and nerve-wracking. Scott's work suddenly made my own scholarship infinitely more complicated. It took me a few more years to fully appreciate what that unnerving, frustrating experience has done for me as a scholar and a person. As I expanded my understanding of the role of the historian and began to couple my research of women and gender with the role of racism and settler colonialism within the American state, I realized what was at stake in Scott's call for reflection and self-criticism. Writing women's

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history wasn't just about inserting women into history, but, for me, writing women's history fundamentally changed how I thought about all categories of historical identity formation.

During a 2012 seminar on theory in my current PhD program, we were assigned another Joan Scott essay. By then, as a "wizened" graduate of Sarah Lawrence, I

felt more of a connection to and appreciation of Scott's work. But this time, Scott faced additional challenges reaching the graduate student audience. The reaction to Scott was personal.

And to be clear, no one brought Robin Morgan to class to dramatically drop on the seminar table. Reading Scott was challenging for some, not because of her critique of universal gender categories, but because she was *talking about women and gender*. Students became defensive about their own research, claiming that there just were no women in their sources. The critique culminated with a colleague asking, "Well, if there's women's history, why isn't there men's history?" This all-too-recent exchange reflects the reality that women's history might not quite be, in Scott's words, a "recognized insider" within the field of

history. Something about women's history itself is still challenging for today's students.

So why do we still need women's history? Training in women's history provides the opportunity for self-criticism and self-reflection and expands what are considered legitimate lines of historical inquiry. When we frame our

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understanding of women's history as the paradigm shift that it is, as conceptualized by Lerner, Scott, and many others, it becomes bigger than women. It even becomes bigger than gender. It is about recognizing that the historian plays a role in the production of knowledge and about interrogating seemingly fixed

categories. It is about challenging what is "significant" in history. It is threatening and uneasy, nerve-racking, and frustrating. That is why we still need it.

¹ Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 180.

² Ibid.

³ Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 7.

⁴ Joan Scott, "Feminism's History," *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 2 (2004), 11.