

# HISTORY OF WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

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Historical Articles on Women's Lives and Activities

*Edited by Nancy F. Cott*

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## 1. Theory and Method in Women's History PART 2

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Edited with an Introduction by

Nancy F. Cott  
Yale University

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# Series Preface

In the space of one generation, women's history has become the fastest-growing area of scholarship in U.S. history. Since the resurgence of feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s, insistent questions about the historical meanings of "woman's place" have sowed and reaped a garden of scholarship. Where scholarly works used to be bare of mention of women, academic enterprise has now produced a vigorous growth of books and articles, bringing to light diverse women of every region, race, class and age. This research is marked by a renovating intent that refuses to accept as "human" history a history of men. Interest is lively and debate is stimulating and sought after: attendance at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women rivals the size of the annual convention of the American Historical Association.

While books in women's history are daily increasing in numbers and strength, as in any fast-developing field the scholarly literature in the form of articles is most expansive and up-to-the-minute. All the history journals now publish articles on women's work, domestic settings, family relations, household matters, female politics and organizations and so forth, and new journals have sprung into being to concentrate on such topics. Women's historians publish in numerous regional and thematic history journals as well as in feminist outlets and in journals of other social science disciplines. This series brings together a collection of outstanding articles from the field, almost all written in the past twenty years and more than half published during the 1980s. It brings together, in volumes organized by topic, essays otherwise widely dispersed. These volumes reprint only articles that originally appeared in journals, not chapters of books; review articles are not included. Articles have been chosen for overall quality and for range. Each one was chosen for one or more of the following reasons: because it is the standard authority on its subject matter; represents an important statement on a topic by a recognized scholar; presages an important book to come; provides a first look at new evidence or new methods; or opens an untapped area or new controversy. Older articles have been reprinted if their data or interpretation have not been surpassed or if they marked an important stage in the historiography, even if since superseded.

The historical coverage of the series extends from the Revolutionary era to the 1960s. The articles themselves are dated from the 1940s through 1988. Volumes are organized by topic rather than time period. Within each volume, the

articles are ordered chronologically (with respect to substance), so that the whole can be read as an historical overview. The only exception to this ordering principle is volume 1, on Theory and Method, in which the contents are arranged in order of publication. Within each volume there is an attempt to include articles on as diverse kinds of women as possible. None of the volume topics is regionally or racially defined; rather, all volumes are topically designed so as to afford views of women's work, family lives, and public activities which cut across races and regions. Any volume in the series stands on its own, supplying as full a treatment of a designated subject matter as the scholarly literature will provide. Several groupings of volumes also make sense; that is, volumes 2 through 5 all center around domestic and family matters; volumes 5 through 9 consider other varieties of women's work; volumes 9 through 11 concern uses and abuses of women's bodies; volumes 12 through 14 look at major aspects of socialization; and volumes 15 through 20 include organizational and political efforts of many sorts.

As a whole, the series displays in all its range the vitality of the field of women's history. Aside from imbuing U.S. history with new vision, scholarship in this area has informed, and should continue to inform, current public debate on issues from parental leave to the nuclear freeze. By bringing historical articles together under topical headings, these volumes both represent accurately the shape of historical controversy (or consensus) on given issues and make historians' findings most conveniently available for current reference.



# Introduction

Over the past twenty years there has been an evolving discussion of theory and method in women's history, which the articles in this volume represent. The articles span from the first articulation of a framework to be designated "women's history," to very recent discussion of the concept of gender in history. Also included are critiques of standard American history texts from the perspective of women's history, controversies among women's historians concerning the definition of the field, and assessments of its distinctiveness as compared to family and social history. Since books on theory and method in women's history are rare, this collection of articles gives an unsurpassed overview of historians' thinking about their field.

As in women's studies more generally, the first self-named practitioners in women's history, starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, saw before them three tasks: a task of critique, a task of research, and a task of theorizing. That is, first it appeared necessary to point out omissions and distortions in existing historical scholarship regarding the historical experiences of women. Both the findings (or lack of findings) and the theory behind traditional historical scholarship appeared to exclude or minimize women's parts as historical actors and to wholly neglect questions about the relations between the sexes on any but a superficial level. Second, it appeared equally necessary to devise new kinds of research, to rescue women of the past from their relative obscurity or invisibility by producing new evidence, by finding documentary or other sources which would reveal women's lives. Third, it also appeared necessary to think anew about what was important in history, to question the assumptions of traditional historical scholarship regarding the historical actors and eras worth defining, to bring to light new questions, new models of inquiry in which women's lives and roles would be more obviously central than had been the case with traditional historical questions about nation-states.

In these tasks historians of women also shared a great deal with others busy defining a "new social history" which would concern ordinary people more than affairs of state, and would focus on continuous processes of social experience more than discrete political events. Spurred by social reform and political protest in the 1960s, these scholars wanted to look at history "from the bottom up" rather than from the point of view of ruling elites. To do so, social historians looked beyond the famous treatises, diplomatic correspondences, or

records of state which had supplied historians for generations, and sought first-person sources of the nonfamous population (such as folktales, oral histories, diaries, religious narratives), and also sources which would yield quantifiable data about masses of people, such as registers of births and deaths, factory rolls, records of prisons and hospitals. With the latter data, some social historians began to stress social science methods: explicit conceptualization and hypothesis-testing, systematic comparison and analysis of long-term social trends, in preference to the narrative chronicle or the description of unique or extraordinary events.

Historians of women fostered and participated in these same trends, but not simply or entirely. Sometimes, rather than search for new kinds of documents, women's historians had only to look anew at commonly-used sources to find that material on or by women there had been overlooked because of historians' foregoing lack of attention to questions about women. Often, rather than using social science methods, women's historians employed traditional narrative forms or biographical treatments--some of the oldest arms in the historian's arsenal--but used these to the revelation of female experience. By and large, feminist aims distinguished women's historians from other social historians. If the overall intent of new social historians was to reveal the lives of the "anonymous," the overall intent of women's historians was to show the unlooked-for possibility--as an important art museum exhibit titled it--that "Anonymous' Was a Woman."

The gathering force of investigations into women's history in the early 1970s propelled basic rethinking of periodization and conceptualization in history, once women were seen as part and makers of it. Some of the most striking early scholarship questioned whether the standard periodization of Western civilization "worked" from women's point of view: "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" asked Joan Kelly, in an important essay. Arguing that developments in state formation, advancement of capitalism, and extension of learning to men in Italy in the 14th and 15th century brought a contraction rather than expansion of women's liberties, she concluded that the answer must be "no."<sup>1</sup> Historians of women highlighted the significance of their endeavor by showing that eras typically characterized as ones of progress or democratization--e.g., the Jacksonian "era of the common man" in the United States--might have opposite meaning for women.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, historians' investigation of women as historical actors revealed phenomena thought to be well-known in entirely new light: with attention to women's participation (in the factory and at home), the "industrial revolution," for example, now appeared as a transformational stage in the sexual and familial division of labor as well as a matter of technological or narrowly economic change.

At the same time, historians had to consider how to conceptualize women as a social group. Were women always the subordinate sex? What were

the constraints or choices that shaped women's place? Did women's situation vis-a-vis men resemble, or could it be understood as analogous to, the proletariat's relation to the bourgeoisie in Marxist theory; or the inferior caste's relation to the superior in traditional Hindu society; or blacks's relation to whites in the United States? Like feminists in many other walks of life, historians of women debated these analogies and emerged with consensus that none was suitable: the relation between the sexes was foundational and unique, and deserved analysis in its own terms. "We [historians of women] have made of sex a category as fundamental to our analysis of the social order as other classifications, such as class and race," Joan Kelly asserted in 1976.<sup>3</sup> Theoretical questions stemming from this premise have animated the field of women's history since then. The implications of making sex a fundamental category have remained to be argued. Questions of women's consciousness of themselves as a gender group--formulated on Marxist, feminist, and other sociological grounds--have been central to many historical investigations. Whether to evaluate women's experiences from a point of view inside women's culture, or also from men's vantage point, has been a matter of some contention. Equally important has been the effort to clarify how to conceptualize and treat historically the relations between the sexes. Since Natalie Zemon Davis sounded this theme in 1975--"we should not be working only on the subjected sex any more than an historian of class can focus exclusively on peasants. Our goal is to understand the significance of the *sexes*, of gender groups in the historical past"--it has echoed in and out of women's history.<sup>4</sup> Recent scholarship can be described as being both about women and about gender--the symbology and social organization of the sexes. While the awesomely large work of uncovering women's lives has often taken precedence, practitioners in women's history have embraced the double aim, especially more recently. Both efforts have been needed, and they are complimentary. Without historical investigation of women's lives, the functions and meanings of sex in the social order remain inexplicable. Without examination of the power relations and inclusive aspects of interrelations between the sexes, women's situation cannot be understood.

#### Notes

1. Joan Kelly, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 137-164.

2. E.g., Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson," *Mid-Continent American Studies Journal*, 10:1 (Spring 1969), 6 [in vol. 5].

3. Joan Kelly, "The Social Relations of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1 (Summer 1976), 816.

4. Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women's History in Transition: The European Case," *Feminist Studies* 3 (Winter 1975-76), 90.

## REFLECTIONS ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY

Leila J. Rupp

American women's history, like other areas of American history, has tended to neglect the twentieth century in favor of its predecessor, the nineteenth. The nineteenth century emerges from historical scholarship as a dynamic period in which the process of industrialization transformed women's work and family roles. Research on nineteenth-century American women has shed light on a variety of topics previously unexplored and, more important, has led the way in defining the themes and conceptual frameworks of women's history. Scholarship on the twentieth century, on the other hand, has been scanty and has not yet identified the major trends and developments that have shaped the lives of women in contemporary society. But the body of literature on American women in the twentieth century is growing, and we need to think about the direction it is taking.

One thing immediately noticeable is a lack of continuity between the two centuries as they emerge from historical writing. It is as if the First World War destroyed the old Victorian world and created a new one in which women went to work in department stores and offices, forsook their homosocial world for a heterosocial one, and turned their backs on feminism. The myth of the New Woman continues to exercise its tenacious influence on our thinking about twentieth-century women's history, and it is time that we realized what the New Woman shared with her nineteenth-century sisters. At the same time, historical scholarship has too often applied concepts shaped by nineteenth-century experiences to the twentieth without considering the differences between the two periods. We can only hope to create for the twentieth century the sort of rich materials that already exist for the nineteenth if we understand the nineteenth-century base of many of the existing concepts while using them to develop appropriate conceptual frameworks for the twentieth. This essay attempts to apply some of the approaches and concepts that have emerged in research and writing on nineteenth-century American women's history to the twentieth century. It focuses on three particular areas that have proven central to women's history: work, women's culture, and feminism.

The impact of industrialization on women's lives is a central theme in

existing scholarship on nineteenth-century women's history. From histories of women's work to studies of sexuality, reproduction, and the family, the process of industrial development plays a role, if it does not always hold center stage. In the area of women's work we know that industrialization meant different things for different women, depending on their class, race, ethnicity, age, marital status, and region of the country. Early studies tended to lump all women together and assume that industrialization brought immediate and drastic change. Debate over the nature of the impact of industrial development on the status of women—beneficial or harmful?—continues, although the arguments on both sides have increased in sophistication. Not only have historians recognized that there can be no talk of a homogenous group of "women," but, even more important, they have begun to explore the complexities that had previously been obscured by discussion in overly simple terms of the shift from a "traditional" to a "modern" society.

Scholars have discovered that the process of transition from a preindustrial to an industrial economy involved a carrying over of traditional work patterns into the emerging modern sector. For example, Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, in European history, have shown in *Women, Work, and Family* (1978) that the transition from the family economy of preindustrial days through the family wage economy of early industrialization to the family consumer economy of the twentieth century was characterized by a greater degree of continuity than earlier scholarship recognized. Tilly's and Scott's model, based on British and French patterns, has proved valuable for women's historians working in all fields. Other historians, too, such as Virginia Yans-McLaughlin in her work on Italian immigrants (*Family and Community* [1977]), have emphasized the lingering of traditional work patterns in modern settings.

The concept of transition, replacing the simplistic notion of a radical shift from preindustrial to industrial society, is important when we turn our attention to the development of a mature industrial economy. We need to know how that development affected women employed in all sectors of the economy, as well as women working only within the four walls of their homes. What we know now is that industrialization—which had at first brought about the definition of most women's work as "nonproductive" (that is, not paid)—began to draw women into the labor force in ever-increasing numbers. We also know that the female labor force, which was once predominantly young and single, began to include more and more older and married women. We know that the twentieth century saw middle class married women enter the labor force in significant numbers for the first time. And we know that women have moved increasingly into what

Patricia Branca (*Women in Europe since 1750* [1978]) dubs the "white blouse" sector, especially into clerical and sales work.

What we do not know is how these changes relate to specific historical events, and how they affected the roles and perceptions of women in society. How did the brief involvement of the United States in the First World War affect women's work? Maurine Greenwald's forthcoming book, *Women, War, and Work*, promises to explore the connection. Renate Bridenthal's work on German women in the interwar period ("Something Old, Something New: Women Between the Two World Wars," in *Becoming Visible*, ed. Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz [1977]) showed that the much-touted "liberation" of women after the war was a sham and that the process of the rationalization of industry helped to proletarianize working women and push some women into the arms of the Nazis and other extreme right-wingers, who promised a return to simpler times. We need a comprehensive analysis along these lines of the myth and reality of the New Woman in American society.<sup>1</sup>

We know more about the impact of the Second World War on women, although there is no agreement about the verdict. William Chafe, for example, argued in his interpretive survey of twentieth-century women's history (*The American Woman* [1972]) that the Second World War served as a watershed for women and that changes in the employment patterns of married middle class women resulted from the war. In her new book on the depression (*To Work and to Wed* [1980]) Lois Scharf agreed, although she admitted that the patterns existed even before the war. In *Wage-Earning Women* (1979) Leslie Tentler saw the years from 1900 to 1930 as the "opening decades of a truly mature industrial economy" (p. 2), with 1930 marking the transition to contemporary patterns of women's work. I suggested in my own work on the war (*Mobilizing Women for War* [1978]) that the long-term trends in the employment of women are more significant than the war for understanding the postwar patterns of labor force participation. New work on the war—such as Karen Anderson's *Wartime Women*, scheduled to appear this year—should help to clarify the impact of the war.

The increasing level of employment of married middle class women in the second half of the twentieth century has received the lion's share of attention from historians. But married middle class women remained a distinct minority in the work world, and yet we know very little about the work lives of other women. A number of works explore the history of working women, but few reach very far into the twentieth century. An exception is Susan Kennedy's *If All We Did Was to Weep at Home* (1979). But Kennedy's subtitle, *A History of White Working Class Women*, makes clear the limits she felt forced to place, for practical reasons, on her research. Most women's

historians are aware that work has played a very different role in the lives of minority women than it has in the lives of white women, and this conceptual distinction, as well as the difficulties of research, has often led to an acknowledgment of exclusion rather than inclusion. David Katzman considered the experiences of black women in his study of domestic service from 1870 to 1920 (*Seven Days a Week* [1978]), but too often black women disappear in our historical scholarship. It is to be hoped that the 1980s will see more research that corrects the bias of the historical record by including and integrating the experiences of women of color.

In women's history the issue of work is important not only in itself, but also because employment takes women out of the domestic sphere, out of their "place" in the home. One of the important questions in women's history concerns the impact of work on the consciousness of women. The old notion that work "liberates" women is simplistic and incorrect. Tentler argued that work was, for white factory workers in the first decades of the twentieth century, a conservatizing experience that reinforced traditional female values even more than did the family environment. It should not be surprising that the low-paying, low-status work available to women in a sex-segregated work force was not "liberating." For the later decades of the century we need to explore the impact of employment on the married middle class woman for whom it was a new experience. Did the married women who continued to justify their work as essential for the family's maintenance see their new activities as part of their family roles? Did this mean that work did nothing to decrease their economic dependence or to increase their participation in family decision making? Here again the nineteenth-century scholarship can suggest some fresh approaches. In *Women at Work* (1979) Thomas Dublin, for example, refuted the old idea that the women mill workers in Lowell remained part of the family economy because they sent their wages home by showing that the women exercised control over their earnings and developed a sense of independence from their families. Perhaps the same has been true of married women working in the twentieth century. Even if women justified their work through reference to traditional values, their earning power, however meager, might have given them some sense of economic independence and greater right to participate in family decisions. We need to know more about all aspects of women's work and its relationship to family roles: solution of child-care problems, the effect (if any) on the sexual division of labor within the home, the impact of consumerism and "labor saving devices" on women's decision to work, the role that women's earnings played in boosting a family to "middle class" status.



If we apply what we have learned about the complexities of industrial development in its early stages to women's experiences in the twentieth century, we will have a richer history, one that includes women of all classes and races and carefully considers what different work experiences meant for women in different contexts.

Because so many nineteenth-century women did so much of their work within the home, scholars have paid a great deal of attention in recent years to the domestic world that women created. The concept of women's culture, which grew out of the insistence that women in history have been actors rather than merely passive victims, is one of the most important in women's history. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's groundbreaking article "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America" (*Signs* 1 [1975]) described and analyzed the domestic culture of friendship and intimacy women created within their sexually segregated sphere in nineteenth-century American society. Smith-Rosenberg challenged the traditional evaluation of Victorian sexuality as repressive and presented the beneficial effects for women of a sex-gender system that had previously provoked only denunciation for its "separate spheres" ideology. In *The Bonds of Womanhood* (1977), Nancy Cott acknowledged Smith-Rosenberg's pioneering work but took issue with the timing and class origins of the women's culture phenomenon presented in "The Female World." Cott argued that female friendship as a way of life began in the eighteenth century among young upper class women and spread to middle class women of all ages in the mid-nineteenth century.

Cott's notion of change over time is important for twentieth-century women's history. What happened to the women's culture of the nineteenth century? Nancy Sahli addressed this question in "Smashing: Women's Relationships Before the Fall" (*Chrysalis* 8 [1979]). Sahli argued that the last two or three decades of the nineteenth century witnessed growing suspicion toward and condemnation of relationships between women. The intense relationships that had been so readily accepted in earlier years because they had not challenged the sex-gender system began to seem threatening as feminists, college graduates, and other independent women joined middle class married women in a female world. In her social history of the birth control movement (*Women's Body, Women's Right* [1976]) Linda Gordon associated the changing attitudes toward women's relationships with the "sexual revolution" of the early twentieth century, a revolution defined by increasingly common premarital heterosexual intercourse for women. This "revolution," a result of a general shift in values from the importance of thrift to the importance of consumption as well as the spread of popularized

Freudian concepts, was "so specifically heterosexual . . . that it tended to intensify taboos on homosexual activity and did much to break patterns of emotional dependence and intensity among women" (p. 194).

What all of this would seem to suggest is that the transformation of the Victorian sex-gender system in conjunction with the ongoing process of industrial development wrought dramatic changes in—if it did not destroy—the women's culture of the nineteenth century. Yet the existing work on nineteenth-century women's culture has proved so compelling that historians have tended to apply its insights to twentieth-century contexts without exploring the changes that occurred over time.

Take, for example, two recent works on prominent women in the worlds of education and politics: Anna Mary Wells's history of two famous Mount Holyoke women, *Miss Marks and Miss Woolley* (1978), and Doris Faber's infamous biography of Eleanor Roosevelt's friend, *The Life of Lorena Hickok* (1980). Both of these authors struggled with the question of the nature of relationships between women, and both ultimately seized on Smith-Rosenberg's work, misusing it in the process of proclaiming that their subjects did not have sexual relationships with women. Wells, shocked by her discovery of ardent love letters between Mount Holyoke president Mary Woolley and professor of English Jeannette Marks, decided that "the relationship began in the childlike ignorance of sexual matters in which many young women of their generation were kept before marriage, and that when they became more sophisticated they voluntarily renounced all physical contact" (pp. x-xi). Faber dismissed with some difficulty the evidence of a physical relationship between Roosevelt and Hickok on the grounds that they were women "brought up under almost inconceivably different standards" (p. 354).

Although all of the women featured in these books were born in the nineteenth century, we cannot ignore the fact that their relationships existed in a context very different from that described by Smith-Rosenberg and Cott in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Especially in the case of Hickok and Roosevelt, it is absurd to pretend, as Blanche Wiesen Cook has pointed out, "that the years 1932-1962 now belong to the Victorian age or the 19th century" ("Exploitative Book Distorts Relationship," *New Directions for Women* [March/April 1980], p. 12). Faber distorted the relationship between Hickok and Roosevelt because she could not bear to think that Eleanor Roosevelt passionately loved another woman, and she uses the concept of nineteenth-century women's culture to do it. In the process Faber confuses two distinct phenomena: the intimate, loving, and supportive relationships among women, often based on mother-daughter ties, that existed among women restricted to a domestic sphere, and passionate love between women, which has always existed but has not always been named. In the nineteenth century the distinction is not always clear because, according to

Smith-Rosenberg, nineteenth-century culture permitted a great deal of freedom in moving along the sexual and emotional continuum that ranges from committed heterosexuality to uncompromising homosexuality. Scholars have recognized the difficulties involved in applying the label "lesbian" to women in the past; some, like Cook, define "women who love women, who choose women to nurture and support and to create a living environment in which to work creatively" as lesbians.<sup>2</sup> Recent research on the history of homosexuality shows that the concept of a homosexual identity only emerged in relatively recent times; as Sahli showed, interest in homosexuality ("inversion" in nineteenth-century terms) in general and lesbianism in particular burgeoned in the late nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> By the twentieth century we can speak of a "lesbian identity" in American society. Local research projects throughout the country are beginning to explore the history of lesbian and gay culture in the pre-gay liberation and women's movement years.<sup>4</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok, then, lived in a society in which some women identified as lesbians and built lesbian communities. The existence of a lesbian identity—and Roosevelt's and Hickok's knowledge about lesbianism, which Faber discusses—makes it imperative that we recognize both the differences between their lives and those of women involved in the bar culture or the emerging lesbian movement and the common elements of their experiences. While it is important not to assume that all women who loved other women saw themselves as lesbians, neither will it do to dismiss their love as "Victorian."

But this is not to suggest that the women's culture of the nineteenth century became the lesbian culture of the twentieth. The ongoing process of industrial development transformed the nineteenth-century domestic world; as women moved into educational institutions, reform movements, and the labor force, the old female world lost its vitality. We know that women's colleges and women's organizations maintained a women's culture into the twentieth century; we know less about whether the sex segregation of the labor force fostered a women's culture at work. Dublin has shown that the women's culture of the Lowell mills had a profound impact on labor organizing in the 1830s and 1840s, and Tentler has explored the conservative influence of the women's culture in early-twentieth-century factories, but we need to know a great deal more about women's culture in the work world of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

It is possible that, over time, women transferred aspects of women's culture from the home to school or work. In writing twentieth-century women's history, then, we need to explore women's culture within the changing context of women's lives, and we need to separate analytically the emerging lesbian culture from the broader women's culture, at the same time that we acknowledge the role that woman-oriented women played in

women's trade unions, women's colleges, and women's organizations. Further research and conceptualization is necessary before we will be able to understand how and why women's culture changed, and what role it played in twentieth-century women's history.

Historians have to date paid less attention to the changing nature of women's culture than to the relationship between women's culture and feminism. Nancy Cott, along with other scholars, argued that women's culture maintained the existing sex-gender system by accepting the notion of separate spheres and making palatable to women the restrictions on their activities, at the same time that it provided the basis for feminist organization to challenge the sex-gender system. A recent symposium in *Feminist Studies* (6 [1980]) took up the issue of the relationship between women's culture and feminist politics. Ellen DuBois pleaded for an avoidance of the glorification of women's culture and for a renewed emphasis on feminism and politics in the writing of women's history. Smith-Rosenberg, who took the strongest position in opposition, advocated the centrality of women's culture to women's history. The debate is an important one, with major implications for an understanding of the history of feminism. Smith-Rosenberg suggested, at the end of her response to DuBois, that we need to explore the relationship between the demise of women's culture and the death of feminism in the 1920s and 1930s. In this way she linked women's culture directly to feminist politics, thus rejecting the idea that women's culture could also keep women from challenging the sex-gender system. She also touched the vital question of the fate of feminism in the twentieth century.

Did feminism die in 1920 and spring back to life in the 1960s? A number of historians have wondered what happened to feminism after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, but none has devoted exhaustive research to the women's movement after the suffrage victory. William O'Neill blasted the suffragists for failing to attack marriage and the traditional family, and he placed the blame for the death of feminism squarely on the shoulders of the feminists in *Everyone Was Brave* (1971). In *The Woman Citizen* (1973) J. Stanley Lemons studied women reformers and concluded that feminism survived the suffrage victory, only to succumb in the 1930s. Scharf's book on the depression explained the death of feminism in the 1930s as a result of a narrowing of vision of the movement in response to the economic catastrophe of the depression. Susan Becker's forthcoming book, *The Origins of the Equal Rights Amendment*, promises to analyze American feminism between the wars. This kind of work is sorely needed, because we still know very little about twentieth-century feminism.

Part of the problem is lack of clarity in our—mostly implicit—definitions of feminism. Gerda Lerner urged precision in the definition and use of our

terms in her contributions to the *Feminist Studies* symposium. In exploring the history of feminism after 1920, we must be careful to distinguish between feminism as an ideology and the women's movement as a social movement. We know from Aileen Kraditor's research on the suffrage movement (*The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* [1965]) that feminism had less and less to do with the motivation of suffragists as the movement expanded its membership. To some extent we can talk about the "death of feminism" before 1920. After 1920 the movement shrank, but perhaps it regained its feminist purity. In any case feminism, as a world view that ranked gender a primary category of analysis or explanatory factor for understanding the unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources in society, lived on. We need to look beyond official statements and activities to the ideas and lives of women who were feminists. My own current research on the women's movement after 1945 suggests that the movement survived by sheltering a feminist culture that valued intense commitment to feminist work and friendship and intimacy among women; these characteristics held the movement together at the same time that they limited its ability to recruit participants.<sup>6</sup>

The feminist culture of the postwar period fits Estelle Freedman's definition in "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930" (*Feminist Studies* 5 [1979]) of a public female sphere—a separatist sphere—that served as the basis for feminist politics. Freedman argued that feminism grows out of women's culture and, more specifically, out of separatist female institutions. She explained the demise of the women's movement in the 1920s as a result of women's move away from female institutions and women's culture, leading to the loss of the networks and resources that made the women's movement possible.

Freedman's argument about the connection between the women's movement and women's culture, and her identification of a new public female sphere in the twentieth century, are sound and exciting, but I would argue that feminism and the women's movement survived the suffrage victory, however weakly. We need a great deal more research on twentieth-century feminism; fortunately, this promises to be a lively area for research in the coming years.<sup>7</sup> Analysis of the women's movement between 1920 and the 1960s will provide an important perspective on the contemporary movement, in conjunction with works such as Sara Evans's study of the origins of the radical branch of the movement (*Personal Politics* [1979]). It will also help to understand better the processes involved in the development of feminism as an ideology and the women's movement as a social movement.

Not all of the existing work on twentieth-century women's history, of course, fits into the three areas discussed in this essay. Neither have I at-

tempted here to discuss all of the important scholarship on work, women's culture, and feminism. I have tried to suggest how some of the concepts developed in scholarship on the nineteenth century might be useful in the writing of twentieth-century women's history. Clearly there is need for a great deal of research on all aspects of women's lives. It is my hope that in the 1980s we will begin to understand how the transition to a mature industrial economy affected the work and family lives of women of all classes and races; how women's culture changed as the boundaries between domestic and public spheres blurred; and what happened to feminism and the women's movement in the postsuffrage period. With the economy in crisis and the political pendulum swinging to the right, we have a great deal to learn from the experiences of depression, war, reaction, and domestic upheaval.

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1. See Estelle B. Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920's," *Journal of American History* 61 (1974): 372-93.

2. Blanche Wiesen Cook, "Female Support Networks and Political Activism," *Chrysalis* 3 (1977): 48. See also *Frontiers* 4 (1979), a special issue on lesbian history.

3. Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1977); Mary McIntosh, "The Homosexual Role," *Social Problems* 16 (1968): 182-91; *Radical History Review* 20 (1979), a special issue on sexuality in history.

4. Madeline Davis, Liz Kennedy, and Avra Michelson, "Aspects of the Buffalo Lesbian Community in the Fifties" (Buffalo Women's Oral History Project, paper presented at the National Women's Studies Association conference, Bloomington, Indiana, May 1980). Other projects are located in Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. See also Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, "Lesbianism in the 1920's and 1930's: A Newfound Study," *Signs* 2 (1977): 895-904.

5. M. Christine Anderson explores this idea in "Sorority in the Workplace: Female Friendship in the Novels of Josephine Lawrence" (paper presented at the Ohio State University Women's Studies Research Forum, Columbus, Ohio, October 1980).

6. Leila J. Rupp, "The Survival of American Feminism: The Women's Movement in the Postwar Period," forthcoming in *Reshaping America: Society and Institutions, 1945-1960*, ed. Robert H. Bremner and Gary Reichard (Columbus: Ohio State University Press). I am currently working in conjunction with Verta Taylor on a project that involves interviewing participants of the women's movement in the post-1945 period.

7. Nancy Cott and Estelle Freedman, among others, are currently working on feminism in the 1920s and 1930s.

## WHAT THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT HAS DONE TO AMERICAN HISTORY

CARL N. DEGLER

**A**LTHOUGH MOST PEOPLE SEEM to think of the past as fixed and unchanging, much like a landscape, historians are more likely to see it as a seascape in which the scene is constantly changing and shifting. For the past does alter as we uncover new evidence from our rummaging through archives or stumbling upon sources not known to have existed before. It alters even more as we ask new questions of the past when our present-day concerns demand a new history. This, for example, is what happened when the place of black people in our society was a live issue in the 1950s and 1960s. A new impetus was thereby given to the study of slavery in the United States, the result of which was the greatest outpouring of historical research on a single topic in all of American historiography. In sum, the very definition of the past is continually being altered.

One of the most recent redefinitions of the content of the American past has been the new history of women. That this burgeoning interest in women's past is directly related to the modern women's movement can come as no surprise, for just as the new self-consciousness among blacks in the 1960s required a history, so the new consciousness among women has demanded nothing less. Only through history can a cause, or an issue, or a social group gain an identity, a sense of who or what it is.

The modern interest in women has reshaped the discipline of history in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most obvious has been to

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