

# CROSSING BORDERS: TRANSNATIONAL ADVANCES IN THE HISTORY OF WOMEN

MARY P. RYAN and JUDITH R. WALKOWITZ

This issue of *Feminist Studies* presents a set of papers written by participants at a conference held at the University of Maryland in November of 1977.<sup>1</sup> More than 300 women and men from England, France, Amsterdam, Germany, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States met to discuss the theme of "Women and Power: Dimensions of Women's Historical Experience." To many of us this international assemblage was a rejuvenating occasion, infusing new ideas and energy into a scholarly and political enterprise which has consumed our attention for almost a decade. Historians from outside the United States were impressed and encouraged by the size and strength of feminist scholarship in North America, and by its ideological range and sophistication. American participants, for our part, were stimulated by our encounter with a contingent of highly sophisticated and politically conscious scholars from Western Europe. Typical of this international exchange of ideas was the workshop "Women and the State in the Third World" where concepts posed by American Marxists in an earlier session were applied to ancient civilizations in Africa and South America.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes our mutual dilemmas found intimate and poignant expression as when a report on an attempt to recover the history of women in the working-class neighborhoods of the Third Reich reminded us of the fragility of women's culture everywhere and the urgency of women's resistance at all times.<sup>3</sup>

It was not just national borders that were crossed and criss-crossed at the Maryland Conference. Many participants also deliberately violated the border between scholarship and politics. At the "Morality and Public Action" session, the "audience" listened to accounts of female reformers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century with an ear for their contemporary political meaning.<sup>4</sup> A French historian on the panel was asked to comment on recent elections in her country as well as on the revolution of 1848; other

listeners drew analogies between antebellum American sexual reformers and the organizations and tactics of the present-day New Right. The session was quickly transformed into an animated discussion, in varied accents and several tongues, informed by historical knowledge and enlivened by the pressing concerns of contemporary feminists.

The articles in this issue of *Feminist Studies* reflect this interpenetration of scholarship and politics. At the same time the articles illustrate a complexity of historical interpretation that was scarcely possible even a decade ago. The first five papers are empirical essays which illustrate these advances in feminist history. They cover a relatively short time span and small range of issues and geographical areas: all consider women in nineteenth-century Western societies. Yet the strength of these articles lies in part in their thematic modesty. Each historian has rooted her or his analysis in a very specific population of women—a single class, social movement, town, or individual. Each topic is also examined for its political meaning, be it utopian ideology, the policies of reformers, or modes of class and gender domination. Yet a penetrating economic, social, and political analysis is brought to bear on issues which conventionally have been regarded as private matters: domestic life, sexual practices, even fantasies, as they express sex and class relations. Without fanfare, these papers pass smoothly back and forth from class to gender, politics to the family, ideology to intimate relations. They manifest the “doubled vision” which Joan Kelly attributed to contemporary feminists in the postscript to the “Women and Power” conference.

Barbara Taylor’s paper on “Socialism, Feminism, and Sexual Antagonism in the London Tailoring Trade in the Early 1830s” rediscovers the early history of working-class feminism in Great Britain and seeks out its material and intellectual preconditions. In the debate over women’s work that erupted during the Owenite Tailors’ strike of 1834, Taylor finds a previously neglected socialist feminist impulse and criticism. Women of the artisanal class were active agents in creating Owenite feminist ideology and in advancing the principles of sex equality within their vanguard group. When confronting their men on issues of sex slavery, they often relied on the language and categories of bourgeois feminism, but reshaped these categories to meet the new social realities of their own class.

In “French Noblewomen and the New Domesticity, 1770-1830,” Margaret Darrow also portrays women as active historical agents, self-consciously trying to shape political events. Faced with the political debacle of the French Revolution, French noblewomen

retreated from a position of relative social integration and adopted instead a more rigid sexual division in the interest of class preservation. Thus, according to Darrow, the domestication of these elite women was not a result of the gradual assimilation of bourgeois domestic ideology; it represented, instead, an abrupt transformation of the social relations between the sexes within one generation. Consequently, French noblewomen were much more conscious of their changing roles and options than their aristocratic counterparts in England; and they were more aware of the public significance of their private social arrangements.

The next paper brings us back across the Atlantic to upstate New York in the early nineteenth century. It is here that Mary Ryan traces the social origins of the American Female Reform Society, whose local auxiliaries proliferated throughout the northeastern United States and preached a doctrine of sexual self-control to men as well as to women. Ryan considers this familiar social movement as an expression of women's politics as well as sexual ideology. She identifies the social networks that enabled the women of this antebellum community to create a quasi-public sphere in which they exerted considerable power over the attitudes and behavior of their neighbors. These female moral reformers, Ryan argues, took advantage of the relatively fluid social structure and autonomy of a small market town located close to the Western frontier; and in the process, they helped to mold the ideology and the character of an emerging middle class. Ryan also calls attention to some of the ironies and contradictions in this form of women's power, suggesting that sex-segregated women's networks such as the Female Moral Reform Society often display a built-in tendency to reinforce a traditional and domestic female identity. Ryan's application of the community study approach indicates how women can maneuver through and around class and social boundaries and thereby exercise power at the local level.

John Gillis's "Servants, Sexual Relations, and the Risks of Illegitimacy in London, 1801-1900," deals with a population of women who worked out their history under more restrictive circumstances. Gillis utilizes a remarkable set of documents: about 5,000 petitions for the admission of illegitimate infants to the London Foundling Hospital. These documents speak most directly to a select but socially critical group of women, the upper domestic servants. Gillis follows these women through a complex, precarious episode of their life cycle, as they gingerly maneuver to secure respectable and dependable mates, and, in this instance, suffer the hazardous consequences of extramarital pregnancy. It is ironic that the downfall of these servants seems linked to their own pretensions to re-

spectability; they were literally caught in the middle, trying to combine the customs of working-class courtship with the conduct expected by their employers. Gillis's work has important implications for women's history. He contributes new information to the now classical debate between Joan Scott, Louise Tilly, Miriam Cohen, and Edward Shorter on the meaning of illegitimacy. The unwed mothers of London were neither as lusty and fancy-free as Shorter presumes, nor were they as closely tied to the traditional family of origin as his critics argue; for work and family relationships continually influenced one another. Gillis's work also explores the relationship between women, marriage, and class formation. Upper servants brought hard-earned savings as well as training in bourgeois domesticity to their marriages with artisans and lower middle-class men. They also played a crucial part in reproducing the power hierarchy of Victorian society; for the master-servant relationship taught men and women their appropriate gender and class roles.

Leonore Davidoff looks more closely at this ritualistic role in "Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick." The liaison between Munby, a minor literary figure, and Hannah, his domestic servant and secret wife, illuminated the working out of class and gender ideology in face-to-face relationships. The story of Hannah and Munby is presented to us as a "folie à deux," where both participants cultivated each other's extreme fantasies of mastery and submission. Over the years Munby subjected Hannah to a rigorous training in "low-ness"; as an expression of her love for Munby, Hannah would call him "Massa," kiss his feet and lick the mud off his boots, and revel in cleaning out the backs of coal holes and water closets. Theirs was a story, as Munby wrote, "that a hundred years hence, no one would believe."

A striking case study of this sort inevitably raises the question of typicality. It is impossible to estimate how many Victorian gentlemen acted out their fantasies in this fashion; but recently published diaries reveal that other eminent Victorians led double lives and that they, too, were sexually obsessed with workingwomen. Moreover, as Davidoff states, sexuality was intimately connected with both "gender and class power, not just at an individual level but within the social system as a whole." Some Victorians undoubtedly rejected the repressive sexual prescriptions of the age; but that rejection was a consciously determined act, and not the easy, common sense adjustment that a few historians of sexuality might have us believe.

Taken together these five papers outline a distinct temporal pattern for the history of women in nineteenth-century Western Eur-

ope and America. The 1830s stand out as a period of particular power and possibility for women, both in Great Britain (as represented by the Owenites) and in the United States (as represented by moral reformers). The fact that women of the 1830s assumed such a powerful historical role may be related to the fluidity of class identities at a time when small-scale artisan production had not yet been fully eclipsed by the advances of industrial capitalism. At about the same time the shifting status of the aristocracy posed a similar challenge to the elite women of France. Judging from the accounts of domestic service, however, women's range of historical action seems to have narrowed later in the nineteenth century and become confined within the interstices of a more rigid class system. Significantly, the experience of workingwomen in domestic service played a large part in recreating and perpetuating relationships of servility which were simultaneously sex and class stratified. Hence, these papers suggest the shifting social, economic, and political circumstances which are most conducive to the alteration of the sex/gender system.

These articles also manage to circumvent the familiar poles of nineteenth-century women's history, the suffrage podium and the Victorian parlor. They effectively dissolve the conventional dichotomy between politics and family life. Implicitly, they alert us to the complexity of social relations inside households which go far beyond our conventional understanding of the "family." Although family historians have supplied historians of women with invaluable empirical studies and helpful methodologies, they have not proved to be the close allies which their common thematic concerns seem to warrant.

In "Examining Family History," Rayna Rapp, Ellen Ross, and Renate Bridenthal suggest that family historians too often take biological relationships as the essence of the family and the necessary center of the household, thereby relegating those social relationships of greatest interest to feminist historians to the unchanging realm of nature. Many historians treat the family as a discrete, clearly bounded institution which sets women off from "society at large." These critiques of family history, however, offer several theoretical propositions which might guide us beyond this impasse: for example, Bridenthal's substitution of the more encompassing term "mode of social reproduction" for the relations in which families are embedded; Ross's articulation of areas of significant emotional contact outside the home; and Rapp's illuminating analysis of the family as the normative means of recruiting individuals into class-stratified relationships in households. If family history is to be useful to feminists, it will also have to locate women more pre-

cisely within the household. As Ross points out, beneath the harmony and unity which historians often posit as the hallmark of family life, lurk distinct and at times competing interests of men and women, parents and children. The empirical history presented in this issue of *Feminist Studies*, as well as Elizabeth Fee and Michael Wallace's incisive review of recent work on the history of birth control, indicate how historians of women are already seeing well beyond these mystifying borders of family history; Rapp, Ross, and Bridenthal point toward a theory which integrates the work in this issue and can sharpen further scholarship.

In the postscript to this issue, based on a final plenary talk at the conference, Joan Kelly places these scholarly advances in historical and political perspective. Kelly uses the term "doubled vision" to denote the political perception acquired by the feminists of the 1970s who are able to replay the often fragmented experience of womanhood on a single screen which integrates public and private life, reproduction and production, home and work. Although such relations may have always been integrated, our perception of them as such is relatively new. Kelly attributes this change in our theoretical understanding to the social experience of contemporary women, the majority of whom now occupy central and contradictory positions in both the public work force and the private household. In this situation, and our consciousness of it, lie our opportunities and our challenges as feminists.

#### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>Participants in this workshop were Susan Kaplow, State University of New York, Empire State College; Elinor Burkett, Frostburg State College, Maryland; and Leena Osteraas, Worcester Polytechnic Institute.

<sup>3</sup>Ann-Marie Tröger, Freie Universität Berlin, at the Workshop "Political Activities of Women During the Inter-War Period." Other workshop participants were Anet Bleich, Universiteit van Amsterdam, and Sue Bruley, London School of Economics.

<sup>4</sup>"Morality and Public Action": Blanche Wiesen Cook, City College of New York, John Jay College, "Women Against War and Repression in Britain and America"; Genevieve Fraisse, Teacher of Philosophy, Paris, "Moralism and Feminism in Nineteenth Century France"; and Mary Ryan, State University of New York: Binghamton, "The Power of Women's Networks: The Case of Female Moral Reform in Ante-bellum America."