

The Sources of First Wave Feminism

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Some Starting Points

- Women's history as a field
 - Grew out of feminism and feminist consciousness:
 - There is another story to be told
 - History can relate to power in the present
 - To restore women to history and history to women is to empower women
 - with mythologies, stories, heroines, and strategies

What is Feminism?

- Simple definition:
- Women and men are inherently equal even while women and men are inherently different from each other
- Feminism is the commitment to creating a world in which a person's human rights and possibilities are not proscribed because of her or his gender (and in the larger sense, by any other element of identity – race, class, sexuality, national origin, etc.)

Is feminism a “women’s” movement?

- In the sense of “exclusive” to women? – NO!
 - Many of the key players have been nonwomen (also called “men”!) like Mill, Condorcet, Garrison, Douglass, our fathers and brothers, etc.
- In the sense of one in which women have played a key and central role? – yes.
- But it is worth remembering that a movement for the social and political equality of a group which is consistently the majority can hardly be called “minority politics”

So, let's understand

- How women's historians think and work
- And the history of feminism in America (especially the production of the “First” and “Second” Waves of feminism)

Historical Theoretical Frameworks of Women's History

- **Compensatory History/Contribution History**
- **Separatist History**
- **“Women as Minority Group”**
- **“Women-centered” History**
- **Gender and Sex as Categories of Analysis**

Women's History Now:

- Informed by Third Wave feminism
- Does not assume sisterhood and equality within gender
- Confronts the political uses of history directly
- Acknowledges victimization but rejects the identity of “victim”
- Focuses on strategies of resistance and survival (“agency”)

Issues and focal points

- “Separate Spheres”
 - Public and Private
 - Is the Public “male” and the Private “female”?
 - If so, why?

Issues and focal points

- Female Oppression and Female Agency
 - To what extent are women victims of oppression at the hands of men (or patriarchy)? To what extent are women free to shape their own lives?
 - Why do women themselves adopt (or internalize or even promote) their oppressors' arguments?

Issues and focal points

- Women's Culture
 - Does it exist?
 - Would female culture exist without patriarchy and exclusion?
 - What is the relation between female culture and gender consciousness?

Issues and focal points

- Gender Difference/Gender Equality
 - What are the differences between men and women?
 - Where do the differences come from? (nature/nurture, innate vs. learned)
 - Does inequality stem from difference?
 - Should the goal of feminism be to increase or decrease difference?

Issues and focal points

- Epistemological Issue of Women's History
 - If we are feminists, can we be “objective historians”?
 - What counts as knowledge and who gets to decide?
 - Is women's history only polemical?

Why does women's history matter?

- For history as a field of study
 - Challenges periodization and structures of history
 - Challenges accepted interpretations
 - All “invisible” things are important to historians
 - History is the art of uncovering the previously-invisible

Why does women's history matter?

- Women's history gives women power
 - Knowing your own history is power
 - Finding your own heroines is power
- Who doesn't have a history? What is the fate of the person without a history?

The Challenge of the Feminist Roots of Women's History

- The feminist movement has been dominated by white female experience
 - Be a woman first, and then be anything else after
 - Privileges gender over any other category like race, ethnicity, class, sexuality
 - But those things can be more important than gender in a lot of situations
 - Treats gender in an additive rather than a transformative way => (let me explain....)

Additive Identities



Additive vs. Transformative Identities

- Additive:
 - “pop-bead”
 - female + Black (Rosa Parks) = female (Emma Goldman) + Black (Martin Luther King)
- Transformative:
 - Rosa Parks is differently a woman from Emma Goldman and differently Black from Martin Luther King.

Which brings us back to the Third Wave...

- No assumption of sisterhood and equality within gender
- Confronting the ways in which women (as part of society which does so) have also used gender constraints against others
- Acknowledges victimization of those who are not the dominant, but rejects the identity of “victim”
- Focuses on strategies of resistance and survival (“agency”) against the context of social and cultural constructs
- And attacks essentialist arguments (how postmodernist we are!) with constructivist ones.

But...

- Hard to understand what is distinctive about the "Third Wave" until you understand the "First Wave" and "Second Wave"
- And in discussing "New Women," we are looking at the apotheosis of the First Wave, as well as the birthplace of the Second. So... history of feminism time.

Feminism Comes to America

- Scottish Enlightenment – John Locke
- French Enlightenment – Condorcet, de Gouges
- American Enlightenment – John Otis, *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* (1764); Abigail Adams
- English Liberalism – Mary Wollstonecraft; John Stuart Mill

John Locke 1632-1704

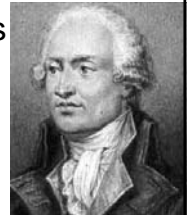
- The Glorious Revolution
 - *First and Second Treatises on Government* (1689)
- Nuclear family is the base unit of any free society
 - With women as key figures
 - As co-equals with husbands



Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743-94)

- "De l'admission des femmes au droit de cité" (1791)
 - (On the admission of women to the rights of citizens)
- Attacks the foundations of the argument against women's equality:

– Surely they were all violating the principle of equal rights by debarring women from citizenship rights, and thereby calmly depriving half of the human race of the right to participate in the formation of the laws. Could there be any stronger evidence of the power of habit over enlightened men, than the picture of them invoking the principle of equal rights for three or four hundred men who had been deprived of equal rights by an absurd prejudice, and yet forgetting it with regard to 12 million women? For this exclusion not to constitute an act of tyranny, we would have to prove that the natural rights of women are not exactly the same as those of men, or else that they are incapable of exercising them.



Condorcet on Women (1)

- Women had right to speak out in public
- Women were reasonable, sensible, with a sense of morality, and were very often leaders
- Argued that women, as people, also must not be unfairly ruled
 - links it to taxation without representation
 - says patriarchy is a restriction of women's rights to representation
 - Male tyranny negates the concept of liberty

Condorcet on Women (2)

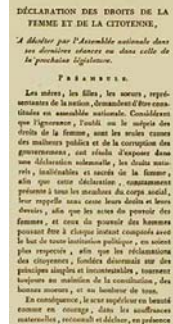
- Condorcet argued women were obviously men's equals
 - except in matters requiring brute strength
 - the brightest women were already superior to men of limited talents
 - and improvements in education would readily narrow what gaps there were

Condorcet on Women (3)

- Condorcet concluded with his generation's most detailed statement of the political rights and responsibilities of women:
 - "Perhaps you will find this discussion too long; but think that it is about the rights of half of human beings, rights forgotten by all the legislators; that it is not useless even for the liberty of men to indicate the means of destroying the single objection which could be made to republics, and to make between them and states which are not free a real difference."



Olympe De Gouges (1748-93)



- *Déclaration de Droits de la Femme et la Citoyene* (1791)
 - Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen (from Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, 1789)
- Demanded a women's assembly, suffrage, and education.
- Charged with treason under the rule of the National Convention
 - Arrested, tried, and executed by guillotine in 1793

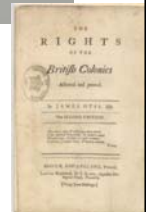
Enlightenment Debate in America

- Early American politics shaped by the Scottish and French Enlightenments
 - Especially John Locke, seen as the philosophical father of the U.S. Constitution
 - And Condorcet, who was a close friend of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin
- Some Americans address women's rights directly

James Otis and the Woman Question



- James Otis of Boston
- Author of a 1764 pamphlet, *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*
- Asked questions about the origins of government.
 - And if it was based on the original social compact, he wanted to know who were those present and who were thus parties to that compact.



James Otis on the Social Contract

- "Who acted for infants and women, or who appointed guardians for them? Had these guardians power to bind both infants and women during life and their posterity after them? What will there be to distinguish the next generation of men from their forefathers, that they should not have the same right to make original compacts as their ancestors had? If every man has such right, may there not be as many original compacts as there are men and women born or to be born? Are not women born as free as men? Would it not be infamous to assert that the ladies are all slaves by nature? If every man and woman born or to be born has and will have a right to be consulted and must accede to the original compact before they can with any kind of justice be said to be bound by it, will not the compact be ever forming and never finished?"

Otis's Embarrassing Questions about Women's Roles in the Revolutionary Republic

- "If upon the abdication all were reduced to a state of nature, had not apple women and orange girls as good a right to give their respectable suffrages for a new King as the philosopher, courtier, petit-maitre and politician? Were these and ten millions of other such...consulted?"

Abigail Adams (1744-1818)

- Series of letters between her and John Adams throughout the Constitutional Convention in which she urges him to support women's equal citizenship
- Influenced by Scottish and French Enlightenment thinkers



Abigail to John, 31 March 1776

- "I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation."
- "That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex."

John to Abigail, 14 April 1776

- "I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient -- that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent -- that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented."
- "We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems.... which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticot.... A fine Story indeed."



Abigail to John, 7 May 1776

- "I can not say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to Men, Emancipating all Nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives. But you must remember that Arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken -- and notwithstanding all your wise Laws and Maxims we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our Masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet."

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97)

- British writer and philosopher
- *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)
 - A strong advocacy for making women equal through education and legal change



Wollstonecraft (1)

- Writing in response to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord's 1791 report to the French National Assembly that women should be educated in domesticity for the betterment of the nation
- Wollstonecraft argues that women ought to have an education commensurate with their position in society
 - women are essential to the nation
 - As the teachers of their children
 - And as the companions (rather than mere wives) to their husbands
- Argues that double standards prevent women from fulfilling their potentials

Wollstonecraft (2)

- Women are human beings deserving of the same fundamental rights as men
- Builds on the argument of “inalienable natural rights”
 - Since God gives those rights to humans, for one part of society to deny them to another part is a “sin.”
- Limits of her feminism
 - Never explicitly states women’s equality
 - Intended to argue that in a longer essay, but died in childbirth before she could write it.

Wollstonecraft (3)

- In arguing for women’s human rights, she invokes religion to attack the “religious” arguments for women’s exclusion from those rights:
 - “Let it not be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things; I have already granted, that, from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue. I speak collectively of the whole sex; but I see not the shadow of a reason to conclude that their virtues should differ in respect to their nature. In fact, how can they, if virtue has only one eternal standard? I must therefore, if I reason consequentially, as strenuously maintain that they have the same simple direction, as that there is a God.”
 - Meaning: if not all men are virtuous, this does not disprove that men are *capable* of virtue (because that is God’s will); so if not all women are reasonable, the fact that some *are* should be taken as proof that women are capable of reason, as men are capable of virtue. And if women are capable of reason, God made them so, as God made men capable of virtue. To prevent women from *being* so is a sin.

John Stuart Mill (1806-73)

- English philosopher and member of Parliament
 - *On Liberty* (1859) championed individual freedom vs. an oppressive state
 - “The Subjection of Women” (1869)
 - Clearly influenced by, and possibly co-authored by his brilliant wife, Harriet Taylor
 - Mill credited her as his co-author



Mill’s “The Subjection of Women” (1)

- Sees women as “obviously” equal to men in intellect, if not in body.
 - Subjecting women is wrong and holds humanity back
 - “... [T]he legal subordination of one sex to another — is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a system of perfect equality, admitting no power and privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.”
 - And posits that women’s subjection is the symbol of oppression
 - “Under whatever conditions, and within whatever limits, men are admitted to the suffrage, there is not a shadow of justification for not admitting women under the same.”
- Advocates the emancipation of women on utilitarian grounds
 - It would elevate all society by placing an emphasis on thought over brute strength and end a system which coarsens human interaction
 - “The anxiety of mankind to intervene on behalf of nature...is an altogether unnecessary solicitude. What women by nature cannot do, is quite superfluous to forbid them from doing.”

Mill’s “The Subjection of Women” (2)

- Denies the knowability of women’s “supposed inferiority”
 - Because there has never been true freedom for women or just compensation for their labors and contributions
 - “I deny that any one knows or can know, the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in their present relation to one another. Until conditions of equality exist, no one can possibly assess the natural differences between women and men, distorted as they have been. What is natural to the two sexes can only be found out by allowing both to develop and use their faculties freely.”
- Concludes:
 - “... [T]he legal subordination of one sex to another — is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a system of perfect equality, admitting no power and privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.”