
BACKGROUND BOOKS

FEMINISM IN AMERICA

Feminist movements may come and go, but it appears that feminist scholarship is here to stay.

From its inception as an interdisciplinary course at San Diego State University in 1970, "women's studies," currently taught in more than 523 college and university programs, has gained a prominent place on the academic menu.

Signs of what women's studies advocates call "mainstreaming" are evident everywhere: Princeton recently became the first in the Ivy League to establish a tenured chair in women's studies; the Organization of American Historians is now publishing four "teaching packets" intended to fuse women's history with college survey courses on Western civilization and U.S. history.

With one foot in feminism and one in academe, women's studies hopscoches between politics and scholarship. Its practitioners are guided not by a common perspective but by a highly divisive question: What does it mean to be female—historically, biologically, and culturally? Add feminist goals and stir: It is no wonder that meetings of the National Women's Studies Association often take on the tenor of a United Nations emergency session.

Much of the controversy in and around women's studies harkens back to the early feminists' nature/nurture quandary—are women by nature the same as men (only nurtured to be different) or are they something akin to a separate species? Among university administrators, this delicate question often underlies the lingering debate over whether the study of women truly requires, to borrow from Virginia Woolf, a field "of one's own."

Among scientists, the question has launched extensive inquiries into gender, such as Anne Fausto Sterling's **Myths of Gender** (Basic, 1986). Sterling claims that our past and present biologi-

cal assumptions about men and women are highly speculative and often based on "cultural conceptions" that affect behavior and in turn can determine "the way our bodies grow"; even the 10 percent difference in height between the sexes may be culturally induced.

Carol Gilligan's **In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development** (Harvard, 1982, cloth; 1983, paper) is more concerned with how the differences between men and women, whether biological or cultural (both, says Gilligan), are often turned against women. Gilligan disputes theories developed by Freud, Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and other thinkers, who concluded that women are morally deficient. She argues that because "masculinity is defined through separation [from the mother], while femininity is defined through attachment [to the mother]," the standard psychological literature, written by men, rewards men for a separatist morality based on abstract principles such as justice and equality; it penalizes women for a morality based on an ethic of "interdependence" and care.

In feminist historical scholarship, the nature/nurture problem often shows up as a subtle narrative bias: Women, clearly similar to men, were bamboozled into feeling different, herded into housework and procreation, and largely denied the satisfactions of outside work. Mary Ryan's **Womanhood in America** (New Viewpoints, 1975, cloth; Franklin Watts, 1983, paper), for example, examines the "gender system" that "sentenced" women to "inferiority."

A variant describes how women, clearly different from men—and possibly superior—gladly formed a distinct feminine culture that revolved around domestic life. As Gerda Lerner somewhat inelegantly puts it in the preface to her **Female Experience: An American**

Documentary (Bobbs-Merrill, 1977, cloth & paper): "The history of women is the history of their on-going functioning *on their own terms* in a male-defined world. . . . They rebelled against and defied societal indoctrination, developed their own definition of community, and built their own female culture."

After what appears to have been a prudent silence during the militantly feminist 1970s, many scholars are now trying to revise or amplify the highly critical positions several noted historians staked out back in the 1960s, as they turned their attention to feminism for the first time.

Among them were William O'Neill, in **Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America** (Quadrangle, 1969), Carl Degler, in his essay "Revolution Without Ideology: The Changing Place of Women in America" in **The Woman in America**, edited by Robert J. Lifton (Boston, 1965), and Aileen Kraditor, in **The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement** (Columbia, 1965, cloth; Norton, 1981, paper).

"Moral and intellectual bankruptcy" was their verdict on the often racist and opportunistic 19th-century feminists, a charge taken up by William Leach in **True Love and Perfect Union** (Basic, 1980, cloth; 1983, paper). Leach argues persuasively that the feminists were not so much bankrupt as "vexed" by a "confusion" between their ties to the reigning American individualism on the one hand and their communitarian yearning for "perfect union" on the other.

"The 19th-century feminists," he concluded, "would have been wise to abandon individualism" and embrace "the humane and democratic character of their cooperative vision."

Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller examined another side effect of individualism in **Liberty, a Better Husband: Single Women in America; the Generations of 1780-1840** (Yale, 1984).

The author discovered that, starting in New England, increasing numbers of white middle- and upper-middle-class daughters, despite the dominant "cult of motherhood," took to heart Louisa May Alcott's remark that "liberty" was "a better husband than love." In 1850, the percentage of "spinsters" in Massachusetts was twice that in the nation's population at large; this same "cult of blessed singleness" emerged later in the South and the West.

Several new books have pulled together the increasingly specialized feminist scholarship of the last two decades. Nancy Woloch's eminently fair-minded and readable **Woman and the American Experience** (Knopf, 1984, cloth & paper) portrays many groups of women that are now a focus of interest in women's studies: pioneers, plantation wives, laborers, prostitutes, maids, missionaries, and socialists—along with white middle-class housewives—from Colonial times to the present.

Jacqueline Jones's **Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present** (Basic, 1985, cloth; Vintage, 1986, paper) assimilates a wealth of research on black women, resisting "oppression" rhetoric to record these women's efforts to preserve fragile family ties.

Much new scholarship has revived women's contributions to past scholarship, starting with Rosalind Rosenberg's **Beyond Separate Spheres: The Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism** (Yale, 1982, cloth & paper). Rosenberg surveyed the iconoclastic work of forgotten social scientists Marion Talbot, Jessie Taft, and Elsie Parsons. These women's "insistence that the vast majority of observable sex differences could be traced to cultural conditioning," in violation of "Victorian science's bedrock belief in the primacy of biology," paved the way for today's stress on social determinants, says Rosenberg, al-

though male mentors received much of the credit.

Feminist scholars have also generated great interest in primary sources. The indisputable heavyweight: the six-volume **History of Woman Suffrage** (Little & Ives, 1881-1922; Arno, 1969). This 6,000-page labor of love was begun by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan Anthony (who "hated every minute" of it) and completed by Matilda Gage and Ida Harper. It provides our only comprehensive portrait of the woman suffrage movement, drawn from the clippings, letters, speeches, journals, and legislative reports of the time, which Susan Anthony had the foresight to preserve.

An important Civil War document resurfaced when literary critic Edmund Wilson came upon the diary of a high-ranking Confederate official's wife while doing research in South Carolina in 1962. He thought it "a masterpiece."

The diary was published in a recent unexpurgated edition, edited by C. Vann Woodward, as **The Private Mary Chestnut** (Oxford, 1984).

"There is no slave after all like a wife," wrote Chestnut—rather disingenuously, for she was at the center of events in Virginia and South Carolina throughout the war.

Among many rich primary source anthologies compiled by women's studies scholars are Nancy Cott's **Roots of Bitterness: Documents of the Social History of American Women**

(Dutton, 1972, cloth & paper), a collection of diaries, letters, and published works from Colonial to present-day America, and Judith Anderson's **Outspoken Women: Speeches by American Women Reformers** (Kendall-Hunt, 1984, cloth & paper).

The speeches range from Anne Hutchinson's 1637 testimony during the Salem witch trials to Mary McLeod Bethune's 1933 address, "A Century of Progress of Negro Women."

It is difficult to predict how women's studies will evolve as a new generation of less politically minded scholars gradually supplants the fervent feminists now at the helm. Will the pioneers' hopes for women's studies be realized—or will their vision someday seem as quaint as the early suffragists' dreams of social transformation?

Consider the suffragist echo in a recent Ford Foundation report by Catharine Stimson, a founder of the leading women's studies quarterly, *Signs*, and chairman of the National Council for Research on Women:

"In the United States, women's studies, like the contemporary reconstruction of gender relations, is under way. . . . It may not yet have achieved a full public understanding of its purpose . . . but its direction is clear—toward nothing less than a new architecture of consciousness and culture."

—Ann J. Loftin

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ann J. Loftin is an associate editor of the *Wilson Quarterly*. Some of the titles in this essay were suggested by Rutgers's William L. O'Neill and by Esther Stineman and Susan Searing, authors of the forthcoming *Women's Studies: A Recommended Core Bibliography, 1980-1985* (1986). For related titles, see *WQ Background Books essays on The War on Poverty* (Autumn '84), *Blacks in America* (Spring '84), *Men and Women* (Winter '82), *Children in America* (Autumn '82), and *The Changing Family* (Winter '77).