
AHR Forum
A History of “Gender”

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SCHOLARLY ARTICLES TEND TO HAVE LIMITED SHELF LIVES, but twenty years on, Joan Scott’s “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” has no discernible date of expiration. A cursory Google search leads to dozens of syllabi that feature it as required reading, and the figures from JSTOR attest to its durable popularity. Of all the *American Historical Review* articles on JSTOR, Scott’s has had by far the most traffic. Since JSTOR first began posting scholarly articles online in 1997, users have accessed “Gender” more than 38,000 times and printed more than 25,000 copies. For the past five years, it has consistently ranked in the top spot as the most frequently viewed and most frequently printed of JSTOR’s *AHR* articles.¹

What elevates one article above the rest? What creates the reputation that makes an article required reading for more than twenty years? In part, it may be a matter of architecture. Scott built “Gender” with an artful use of argument. In one brief essay, she managed to summarize the advent of gender history, provide critiques of earlier theories of women’s subordination, introduce historians to deconstructionist methods, and lay out an agenda for future historical studies. But as we all know, academic reputation rests on more than compellingly structured argument, even when the argument is displayed well in a top-tier scholarly journal.² For historians, the surest way to explain a text is to place it in historical context. Thus, a short history of “Gender” the article might help us assess its rise to prominence and its influence within the field of U.S. history. And an even shorter history of “gender” the concept might suggest the article’s longer-lasting contribution to American social thought.

AS SCOTT NOTED, BY 1986, feminists had already adopted the term “gender” to refer to the social construction of sex differences, and theorists had already posed “gen-

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¹ Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053–1075. Thanks to Robert B. Townsend, Assistant Director for Research and Publications of the American Historical Association, for supplying these figures, which were compiled on December 27, 2007. The exact figures are 38,093 viewings and 25,180 printings. The closest competitors (based on total viewings plus total printings) were Robert Finlay, “The Refashioning of Martin Guerre,” *American Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (June 1988): 553–571, with 21,558 viewings and 11,183 printings, and Melvyn P. Leffler, “The Cold War: What Do ‘We Now Know?’” *American Historical Review* 104, no. 2 (April 1999): 501–571, with 22,075 viewings and 9,495 printings.

² For an attempt to theorize the sources of scholarly reputations, see, for example, Michèle Lamont, “How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida,” *American Journal of Sociology* 93, no. 3 (1987): 584–622.

der" as an analytic category, akin to class and race. A few historians had begun to use the term "gender history" in addition to "women's history," and a handful had looked at men and masculinity as part of a gender history that did not focus solely on women. Scott intervened in this historiographic process at a critical moment. For some historians of women, the shift toward gender history was mostly unwelcome. To replace "women's history" with "gender history" and to include men and masculinity seemed to some at the time like a conservative retrenchment, a quest for respectability, or an abandonment of the study of marginalized and oppressed groups. Scott recognized the pitfalls and offered reassurance. She directly repudiated the use of "gender" as a de-politicized, social-scientized synonym for women or sex, and she promised to reinvigorate feminist history by expanding its realm of influence. In this way, she helped historians of women to approve (and other historians to discern) an emerging shift in historiography.

Scott outlined a problem faced by women's historians and proffered a solution. Two decades after the launching of the field, women's history was, she implied, stuck in a descriptive rut, relegated to the limited byways of social history inquiry. It had failed in its earlier claims to rewrite the master narrative of history, and it had not yet adequately explained the "persistent inequalities between women and men." Existing theories, Scott said, were ahistorical and reductionist. She offered a different approach for rethinking and rewriting history. Influenced by Derrida's deconstructionism and Foucault's formulation of dispersed power, she asked historians to analyze the language of gender, to observe how perceived sex differences had appeared historically as a natural and fundamental opposition. These perceived differences, she wrote, had often subordinated and constrained women, yes, but they had also provided a "primary way of signifying" other hierarchical relationships. This was the heart of her contribution: she invited us to look at how "the so-called natural relationship between male and female" structured, naturalized, and legitimated relationships of power, say, between ruler and ruled or between empire and colony. The history of gender could, it seems, inhabit more of the historical turf than could the history of women. It could even enter and remap the most resistant domains, such as the history of war, politics, and foreign relations.³

Although she promised to expand the realm of feminist influence, Scott could not deflect the critics from within her own fractious camp. Her embrace of poststructuralism and her consequent emphasis on the language of sex difference provoked a number of pointed rejoinders from prominent women's historians. Judith Bennett, for example, worried that "the Scottian study of gender ignore[d] women *qua* women," avoided reckoning with "material reality," and "intellectualize[d] and abstract[ed] the inequality of the sexes." Likewise, Linda Gordon suspected that a "focus on gender as difference in itself" as "a kind of paradigm for all other divides" had replaced "gender as a system of domination" and thereby substituted a pluralist vision of "multiple differences" for the study of "power differentials." Joan Hoff went further, even overboard. She accused poststructuralist gender historians, and Scott in particular, of nihilism, presentism, ahistoricism, obfuscation, elitism, obedience to patriarchy, ethnocentrism, irrelevance, and possibly racism. Poststructur-

³ Scott, "Gender," 1066, 1067, 1073.

alism, she found, “erased woman as a category of analysis,” undermined the “traditional stage of historical fact-finding” for those groups of women whose history had not yet been written, and damaged political activism for women’s rights. She titled her essay “Gender as a Postmodern Category of Paralysis.”⁴

The critical commentary also came from historians who did not write women’s history, especially those who questioned the linguistic turn. Critiques of Scott’s work came from both the left and the right. Bryan Palmer, for example, decried her repudiation of historical materialism, and Gertrude Himmelfarb complained about the undermining of fact, reality, and objectivity.⁵ In the United States, as others have suggested, “feminist historians” were “in the vanguard” of poststructuralist historical practice, especially in its manifestations outside of intellectual history, and Scott stood out at the front. In this sense, “Gender” came to represent something larger than itself. Scott served as the whipping girl not only for gender history but also for the challenges of poststructuralism, the revisionism of the latest new history, and the vogue—the “intellectual *haute couture*”—of imported French theory.⁶ She may not have enjoyed the public flagellation, but it no doubt played a part in attracting readers to her essay.

DESPITE THE MISGIVINGS OF SOME HISTORIANS, gender soon took on a life of its own. Within the field of U.S. history, much of the new work on gender had little direct connection with Scott’s essay. Case studies of the intersections of race, class, and gender, for example, and accounts of how various groups of women and men participated differently in politics, labor, and consumption did not necessarily draw on Scott’s Derridean, Foucauldian model. Some new histories of gender in public cited Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser more often than they cited Derrida and Scott.⁷ But Scott’s article did have unquestionable influence, even among those authors who did not adopt the deconstructionist method wholesale. In the 1990s, it inspired a cohort of scholars who wrote gender history in a range of forms and fields. Within this cohort, a number of authors followed Scott’s proposal to foreground the dis-

⁴ Judith M. Bennett, “Feminism and History,” *Gender and History* 1, no. 3 (1989): 258; Linda Gordon, review of Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, *Signs* 15, no. 4 (1990): 858; Joan Hoff, “Gender as a Postmodern Category of Paralysis,” *Women’s History Review* 3, no. 2 (1994): 149, 162. For additional critical commentaries, see, for example, Sonya O. Rose et al., “Gender History/Women’s History: Is Feminist Scholarship Losing Its Critical Edge?” *Journal of Women’s History* 5, no. 1 (1990): 89–128. Some of these authors addressed Scott’s essays more generally, not just the article “Gender.”

⁵ Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990), esp. chap. 5; Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Some Reflections on the New History,” *American Historical Review* 94, no. 3 (June 1989): 661–670.

⁶ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994), 226; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality,” *New Literary History* 16, no. 3 (1985): 521. On the “linguistic turn” in history, see, for example, John E. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” *American Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (October 1987): 879–907; Kathleen Canning, “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience,” *Signs* 19, no. 2 (1994): 368–404.

⁷ See, for example, Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825–1880* (Baltimore, 1990), and Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996).

cursive use of perceived sex differences and track how they constituted relationships of power. In U.S. history, the case studies of "women's worlds" and "female cultures" that had proliferated in the 1980s dwindled as accounts rose of the ways in which the language of gender had shored up hierarchies of race, class, region, politics, nation, and empire.

A quick (and, forgive me, incomplete) survey of just a few subfields of U.S. history establishes the point. In southern history, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall endorsed the gender project early on. "The South," she wrote in 1989, "provides a prime example of how gender signifies relations of power in hierarchical regimes." Other historians took up the task. Stephanie McCurry found that proslavery ministers and politicians repeatedly drew analogies between "the subordination of women" and "that of slaves," and thereby "endow[ed] slavery with the legitimacy of the family and especially marriage." They used the language of gender "to naturalize other social relations—class and race, for example." Laura Edwards reported similar analogies—between women and other "dependent" groups—in the Reconstruction-era writings of elite white southern men, who used the language of gender to legitimate their bid to monopolize political power. Historians also noted how the southern states themselves were coded as feminine within the United States. Nina Silber, for example, pointed to a post-bellum northern language of gender that portrayed the South as a "submissive" wife and helped to enable the "romance" of sectional reunion.⁸

In other areas, historians also attended to the ways that political theorists, government officials, and other writers used the language of sex difference to construct and sustain political and social hierarchies. In early American history, Mary Beth Norton described how seventeenth-century British male colonists established governments based on a gendered, hierarchical model of the family, and Kathleen Brown suggested that gender discourse shaped the emerging political order in Virginia from the first conflicts with the Indians through the course of Bacon's Rebellion. Jennifer Morgan illustrated how early European narratives of the New World "relied on gender," especially on accounts of monstrous Indian and African women, "to convey an emergent notion of racialized difference," and Toby Ditz delineated how eighteenth-century Philadelphia merchants stabilized their own fragile masculine status by feminizing and thereby stigmatizing their failed and dishonest colleagues as "weeping victims and harpies."⁹ At the other end of the chronological span, historians of twentieth-century U.S. politics examined how male politicians

⁸ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Partial Truths," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 910; Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York, 1995), 214, 224; Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana, Ill., 1997), esp. chap. 6; Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993), 10.

⁹ Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York, 1996); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996); Jennifer L. Morgan, "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500–1770," *William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997): 168; Toby L. Ditz, "Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (1994): 54. On gender more generally in early American history, see Toby L. Ditz, "The New Men's History and the Peculiar Absence of Gendered Power: Some Remedies from Early American Gender History," *Gender and History* 16, no. 1 (2004): 1–35.

used the language of gender to create a hierarchy in which they stood above their male opponents. In the early twentieth century, they cast male reformers as feminine and therefore lacking, and in the late twentieth century, they attacked male liberals in somewhat similar form. Gail Bederman and Arnaldo Testi showed how Theodore Roosevelt shook off the gendered smear by combining his reform agenda with an imperialist, racist hypermasculinity, and Robert Dean and K. A. Cuordileone elucidated how John F. Kennedy attempted to repel the aspersion with an aggressive expression of liberalism.¹⁰

Perhaps most surprising, gender history also made significant forays into the history of foreign policy, the field of U.S. history that had seemed most immune to the women's history enterprise. Scott had specifically called for such an intervention; in 1990, Emily Rosenberg responded and made the case for the potential benefits of gender analysis. Gendered imagery, she said, pervaded accounts of international affairs, legitimating foreign relations of domination and dependence. Andrew Rotter pursued the lead and showed how mid-twentieth-century U.S. policymakers had imagined India as feminine and India's male leaders as passive, emotional, and lacking in virility. In this case, the "feminization" undermined the opportunity for alliance between the U.S. and India. In other cases, though, the "masculinization" of nations and their leaders damaged international relations, while "feminization" eased them. Frank Costigliola, for example, investigated the writings of Cold War architect George Kennan, who shifted from feminizing a beloved Russia in the 1930s to portraying Soviet leaders as "monstrously masculine" and rapacious in the post-World War II years. Petra Goedde traced the inverse shift with regard to Germany. During World War II, American soldiers vilified the Nazi leaders, whom they understood as brutally masculine, but after the war they "developed a feminized image" of Germans as a population in need of protection, and thus, Goedde claimed, "paved the way toward reconciliation."¹¹

Historians also began to suggest that discourses of gender had promoted and sustained American military interventions. In *Fighting for American Manhood*, Kristin Hoganson explored "how gender politics provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars," as the subtitle of her book stated plainly. As they advocated war, jingoists and imperialists expressed heightened concern with masculinity and looked to the military to build and prove American manhood. They posed the

¹⁰ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago, 1995), chap. 5; Arnaldo Testi, "The Gender of Reform Politics: Theodore Roosevelt and the Culture of Masculinity," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 4 (1995): 1509–1533; Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst, Mass., 2001); K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York, 2005).

¹¹ Emily S. Rosenberg, "Gender," *Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (1990): 116–124; Andrew J. Rotter, "Gender Relations, Foreign Relations: The United States and South Asia, 1947–1964," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 2 (1994): 518–542; Frank Costigliola, "'Unceasing Pressure for Penetration': Gender, Pathology, and Emotion in George Kennan's Formation of the Cold War," *Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (1997): 1333; Petra Goedde, "From Villains to Victims: Fraternalization and the Feminization of Germany, 1945–1947," *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 1 (1999): 2, 20. See also the essays on gender in the Winter 1994 issue of *Diplomatic History*, especially Geoffrey S. Smith, "Commentary: Security, Gender, and the Historical Process," *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 1 (1994): 79–90; Petra Goedde, *GIs and Germans: Culture, Gender, and Foreign Relations, 1945–1949* (New Haven, Conn., 2003). For a useful review essay, see Kristin Hoganson, "What's Gender Got to Do with It? Women and Foreign Relations History," *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no. 2 (2005): 14–18.

Spanish soon-to-be enemies as both distastefully feminine and repulsively masculine—"effeminate aristocrats" and "savage rapists"—and sometimes also feminized the Cubans and Filipinos as well as their own domestic opponents. Mary Renda outlined a somewhat different masculine discourse of "interventionist paternalism" that underwrote the American occupation of Haiti. The gendered language of fatherhood helped U.S. policymakers and marines to justify imperialist violence as a manly attempt to protect, educate, and discipline the allegedly childlike Haitians. And Robert Dean wrote of the threats to the "imperial masculinity" of the mid-twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy elite. Politicians and policymakers used the language of gender to defend their own manhood and diminish that of their rivals, and thereby engaged, Dean suggested, in a "politics of manhood" that "crucially shaped the tragedy of the Vietnam War." Hoganson, Renda, and Dean (and the other authors mentioned above) did not confine their analyses to the deconstruction of binary oppositions, but they provided evidence of how the language of gender constructed and legitimated American imperialism and its violent manifestations.¹²

Taken together, these various works point, as Scott predicted, to the multiplicity of meanings that gendered language conveyed. In different historical contexts, masculinity represented strength, protection, independence, camaraderie, discipline, rivalry, militarism, aggression, savagery, and brutality, and femininity represented weakness, fragility, helplessness, emotionality, passivity, domestication, nurturance, attractiveness, partnership, excess, and temptation. The so-called natural differences between the sexes had no fixed and unchangeable meaning, and in their variety they provided potential meaning for a range of other relationships. As other historians have protested, though, the ultimate impact of the language of gender remained hard to discern.¹³ When (and how), as Scott asked, did the language of gender crucially structure experience and actually influence behavior and decision-making, and when did it simply add a convenient rhetorical flourish or embellish with a hollow cliché? When (and how), as Scott asked, did the language of gender constitute other relations of power, and when was it just a minor paragraph or a supplemental example within the narratives of social and political order? Even without all the answers, the growing number of studies of gender discourse pushed historians to recognize its pervasiveness, the diverse domains in which perceived sex differences appeared as model, analogy, and metaphor for hierarchical relationships, and the wide-ranging and changing meanings of masculinity and femininity in the modern era.

The studies also enhanced the reputation of Scott's essay and injected its message into traditional subfields of historical study. Almost all of the works cited above (and many other books and articles as well) mentioned "Gender," in the footnotes if not in the text. Some of them quoted it directly. It became a validating authority behind the monographic works that moved gender to the center of specialized subfields in which it had earlier stood at the margins.¹⁴ By the end of the 1990s, through a process

¹² Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), 11; Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915–1940* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2001); Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*, 243.

¹³ See, for example, Melvyn P. Leffler, "New Approaches, Old Interpretations, and Prospective Reconfigurations," *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 2 (1995): 195.

¹⁴ Scott's article also had a significant impact on U.S. labor history. See especially Ava Baron, ed.,

of repetition, "Gender" had reshaped the commonplace wisdom of the discipline. As a measure of its success, Scott's essay increasingly served as a voice from the recent past stating eloquently what everybody, it seems, already knew.

Meanwhile, Scott herself moved in new directions. In 1999, she questioned the ongoing vitality of the term "gender." In the 1980s, she wrote, gender had "seemed a useful category of analysis precisely because it had an unfamiliar, destabilizing effect." Now, however, it had "lost its ability to startle and provoke." In everyday usage, gender had become "a synonym for women, for the differences between the sexes, for sex." The word "gender" had crept into women's history without necessarily transforming the field. It appeared often in "predictable studies of women, or . . . of differences in the status, experience, and possibilities open to women and men." Many accounts failed to "examine how the meanings of 'women' and 'men'" were "discursively established" or to address the "variations of subjectively experienced 'womanhood.'" They thereby imposed a false solidity on the unstable and variable categories of "women" and "men." Scott now avoided the word "gender" and wrote instead about "differences between the sexes and about sex as a historically variable concept." She turned more concertedly to psychoanalysis, to the fantasies that enable identities, including the "phantasmatic projections that mobilize individual desires into collective identifications." In her 2005 book, *Parité! Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism*, and her 2007 book, *The Politics of the Veil*, she entered into current debates in French politics. She focused less on the language of sex difference and more on the language of universalism in contemporary France. In these books, she did not renounce the study of "gender," but she positioned French gender relations within a discursive analysis of "the abstract individualism" that animates French republican traditions.¹⁵

As one would expect, other historians also ventured into new territory. In U.S. women's—and now gender—history, they brought in race, sexuality, and nationality as equally useful categories of historical analysis, and they borrowed from postcolonial, critical race, queer, and political theory. Other forms of perceived difference seem to have constituted gender as much as gender constituted them. In particular, the call to address race had at least as much impact on U.S. women's history as the call to attend to gender. Historians of women and gender also turned to the policy history of welfare and wages, the legal history of marriage, and the social history of those who questioned and transgressed gender norms. Historians of women shifted away from the local community studies that had characterized social history and focused more on individual or collective biography, questions of law and citizenship, and transnational circulations of women and ideas about womanhood. They rewrote the history of women's movements with a closer eye to differences among women and conflicts among competing schools of feminists. At the same time, historians of manhood produced a series of studies of shifting conceptions, multiple variants, and

Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991). The article also had influence outside U.S. history, of course, but I will leave that to the other participants in this forum.

¹⁵ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, rev. ed. (New York, 1999), xi–xii, 204; Scott, *Parité! Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* (Chicago, 2005); Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, N.J., 2007), 154. See also Scott, "Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (2001): 284–304.

repeated crises of masculinity. Gender history, then, continued (and continues) to thrive in several incarnations, and despite the fears of early (and later) critics, it coexists and overlaps with, instead of supplanting or displacing, the history of women.¹⁶ Amid the profusion, Scott's article has taken on the emblematic role of a foundational text.

SCOTT'S ESSAY HAD ITS MOST OBVIOUS INFLUENCE in the fields of women's and gender history, but it also played a significant part in the broader shift from social to cultural history, from the study of the demography, experiences, and social movements of oppressed and stigmatized groups to the study of representations, language, perception, and discourse. In U.S. history, the rise of gender history was similar to and roughly simultaneous with changes in other identity-based fields of history, including African American, Latino/a, Asian American, immigrant, gay and lesbian, and working-class history. Gender history and the historical construction of masculinity had their counterparts in the history of race and the construction of whiteness, the history of ethnicity and the construction of national identity, the history of sexuality and the construction of heterosexuality, and the history of class and the construction of middle-classness. To a certain extent, the same left-leaning political energies that had informed much of the new social history informed the new cultural history as well. The irony is that social history, the alleged source of centrifugal fragmentation, had spun out into a cultural history that seems to have gravitated back—in the histories of masculinity, whiteness, national identity, heterosexuality, and middle-classness—to return, with a new and critical torque, to the pre-social-history center of historical inquiry.¹⁷ "Gender," and Scott's other writings as well, provided a key piece of the theoretical grounding for this historiographic trend.

Like all historiographic moments, this one, too, will no doubt pass. And when it does, what will we remember? We might consider another context for understanding the significance of Scott's essay and its larger contribution beyond historiography. We have only begun to historicize "gender"—that is, to write the history of the concept of gender itself. Scott's essay belongs in that history; it represents a turning point when U.S. feminist scholars pulled "gender" away from its scientific and social scientific origins, reworked its meaning, and suggested its broader social, cultural, and historical impact.

Scott dated the term "gender," in its contemporary usage, to the 1970s feminist movement, but the word has a longer history, even as a reference to the non-biological components of sex. Before the 1950s, linguists used "gender," as Scott acknowledged, to refer to a form of grammatical classification. The concept of socially constructed sex differences did not yet have a word to connote it. Nonetheless, theories of the social construction of sex differences emerged in tandem with theories of the social construction of other forms of group difference. From the early twen-

¹⁶ For more recent concerns that gender history will supplant women's history, see Alice Kessler-Harris, "Do We Still Need Women's History?" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, no. 15 (December 7, 2007): B6.

¹⁷ For a recent account of this trend, see Daniel Wickberg, "Heterosexual White Male: Some Recent Inversions in American Cultural History," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 1 (2005): 136–157.

tieth century on, social scientists engaged in a profound questioning of biological determinism and the categories on which it relied, not only with regard to sex but also with regard to race, ethnicity, national character, sexuality, criminality, and mental illness. By the mid-twentieth century, anthropologists and sociologists wrote of “sex roles” to refer to the culturally determined expected behavior of women and men and “sexual status” to acknowledge that different cultures accorded different social rankings to women and men. Psychologists used the phrases “psychological sex” and “sex-role identification” to point to a person’s acquired sense of self as female or male.¹⁸

In the mid- to late 1950s, John Money, Joan Hampson, and John Hampson, all then at Johns Hopkins University, introduced the term “gender” into this scientific literature. In a series of articles on intersexuality, they argued for the environmental determinants of “gender,” “gender role,” and “gender role and orientation,” just as others had earlier argued for the environmental determinants of “sex roles” and “psychological sex.” Children learned “gender” in early childhood, they argued, in the same way they learned a language. Biological sex, however it was defined, did not determine one’s “gender role and orientation.”¹⁹ Other scientists and social scientists picked up the new terminology. In 1962, psychoanalyst Robert Stoller and his colleagues at the University of California in Los Angeles opened the first Gender Identity Research Clinic (GIRC), and in 1968, Stoller published the book *Sex and Gender*, which seems to have been the first American book with the word “gender,” in its current non-linguistic form, in the title. For Stoller, gender referred to the particular balance of masculinity and femininity found in each person. It had “psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations.” Stoller was not a feminist. In fact, he worried about the erosion of gender roles and the developmental disturbance of “gender identity,” the new term he coined for “psychological sex.” He and his colleagues at the GIRC worked to instill masculinity in feminine boys and femininity in masculine girls. If gender was mostly socially constructed, then someone, they reasoned, had to repair it when it was improperly built. Stoller and his colleagues signed up for the job.²⁰

Influenced by the women’s movement, American feminists appropriated the word “gender” in the 1970s and transformed its meaning. Like others before them, feminist social scientists used “gender” to reject the notion that the perceived sex

¹⁸ On American social scientists and the social construction of sex differences, see, for example, Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, Conn., 1982); Carl Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York, 1991); Mari Jo Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

¹⁹ For uses of the new terms, see John Money, “Hermaphroditism, Gender, and Precocity in Hyperadrenocorticism: Psychologic Findings,” *Bulletin of the Johns Hopkins Hospital* 96 (1955): 253–264; John Money, Joan G. Hampson, and John L. Hampson, “Imprinting and the Establishment of Gender Role,” *American Medical Association Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry* 77 (1957): 333–336. Money later retreated from his early environmentalism; by the end of the 1960s, he speculated that early exposure to sex hormones and the neurophysiology of the brain (as well as environment) shaped gender identity. On Money, the Hampsons, and “gender,” see Bernice Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender* (Durham, N.C., 1995), chap. 3; Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), chap. 3.

²⁰ Robert J. Stoller, *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (New York, 1968), 9. On Stoller and the GIRC, see Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, chap. 3; Phyllis Burke, *Gender Shock: Exploding the Myths of Male and Female* (New York, 1996).

differences in behavior, temperament, and intellect were simply natural or innate, but unlike their predecessors, they rejected functionalism and questioned whether gender and gender roles were necessary or good. If gender was artifice, then many 1970s feminists saw little reason to maintain it, especially when it played a part in subordinating women. But gender, in its multiple variations, was not so easily willed away. It was built into the structure and practice of families, education, labor markets, and government policies, and it had deep roots in the everyday behaviors and fantasies of individual women and men. Some academic feminists, especially in the humanities, turned away from the study of gender roles, gender systems, and gender segregation, and focused instead on the reconstruction and reevaluation of femininities, women's writings, women's ethics, and women's worlds.²¹

Others searched for theoretical approaches that could explicate how perceptions of sex difference operated in language, psyche, and symbolic order. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, some American feminist literary critics turned to French poststructuralist theory. They drew on the works of Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida, and they translated the writings of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. They expanded their purview from "the woman reader, women's culture, and the woman's text" to "the whole of literature and culture." Cixous wrote: "Every theory of culture, every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems . . . it is all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that come back to the man/woman opposition." By the early 1980s, male literary critics recognized the feminist affinity to poststructuralism. In 1983, in *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton suggested that "the movement from structuralism to post-structuralism was in part a response" to the demands of the women's movement. In this rendition, feminism stood front and center on the poststructuralist stage.²²

In 1986, with the article "Gender," Joan Scott helped to bridge the gap between the feminist social scientists who critiqued "gender" and "gender roles" and the feminist literary critics who deconstructed textual representations of sex difference.²³ She wrote in a moment, as she noted, "of great epistemological turmoil," when social scientists were shifting "from scientific to literary paradigms," and when feminists were finding "scholarly and political allies" among poststructuralists. For Scott, gender was "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes," and also "a primary way of signifying relationships of power." Scott's dual definition allowed her to bring together the social scientists who rejected biological determinism and questioned the allegedly natural differ-

²¹ On 1970s feminists and "gender," see, for example, Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (Chicago, 1978); see also Rosalind Rosenberg, "Gender," in Theodore M. Porter and Dorothy Ross, eds., *The Modern Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 2003), 678–692.

²² Elaine Showalter, "Women's Time, Women's Space: Writing the History of Feminist Criticism," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3, no. 1/2 (1984): 35; Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" *Signs* 7, no. 1 (1981): 44; Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, 1983), 149. For American feminist adaptations of French theory, see, for example, Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst, Mass., 1980); *Writing and Sexual Difference*, Special Issue, *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981); *Feminist Readings: French Texts/American Contexts*, Special Issue, *Yale French Studies* 62 (1981). For critical commentaries by historians, see Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents*, chap. 9; Claire Goldberg Moses, "Made in America: 'French Feminism' in Academia," *Feminist Studies* 24, no. 2 (1998): 241–274.

²³ Scott was soon joined in this endeavor by Judith Butler; see Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990).

ences on which it was based and the philosophers, psychoanalysts, and literary critics who suggested that the language of difference sustained Western social and political order. She was not alone in this kind of endeavor. A year earlier, for example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (and others) had posited race as a “trope of ultimate, irreducible difference” that naturalized distinctions between “cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems.”²⁴ Within the United States, the scholarly study of difference and inequality, once firmly grounded in social science, had migrated to the humanities and taken root in the study of language. It soon spread beyond the analysis of literature and into the reading of multifarious texts, including the kinds of texts that historians typically use as evidence.

This abbreviated genealogy of gender might help to place Scott’s contribution in a broader context. For historians, Scott summarized explanations of gender inequality, captured an emerging historiographic trend, and imported theory to a discipline of committed empiricists. She promised both to expand the terrain of the new social and cultural history and to return to and revivify the traditional fields of historical study. In the 1980s and 1990s, her readers sustained her argument first by publicly debating its merits and then by applying its theory and its method of reading. Beyond the historical discipline, though, Scott’s essay entered into decades-long conversations on the social and symbolic constructions of sex difference. She helped to move the American concept of gender beyond its scientific and social scientific origins and nudged the American adaptations of poststructuralism beyond their recognized place in literary criticism. She suggested how the language of sex difference had historically provided a means to articulate relationships of power. In this way, she tied gender back to other forms of difference and pushed us to ponder the metanarratives that mutually constituted various social and political hierarchies. And ponder we should. This may, in the end, prove to be the enduring legacy of “Gender.”

²⁴ Scott, “Gender,” 1066, 1067; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes,” “Race,” *Writing, and Difference*, Special Issue, *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 5. Gates’s essay is the editor’s introduction to the issue; some of the other essays in the issue also address the language of race difference. See also Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History and the Meta-language of Race,” *Signs* 17, no. 2 (1992): 251–274.

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