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Gender in History

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G*ender in History* is a timely publication. The field of gender history is reaching maturity in two senses. Firstly, numerous studies have been published about the impact of gender at various times and places. Professor Merry Wiesner-Hanks draws on this wealth of scholarship and her own research to provide a welcome overview of gender in global history from prehistory to date. Secondly, the reach of gender history is expanding too. Not only are more studies of gender being published, but the use of gender as a tool of analysis in ?mainstream? history is also increasing. A book like Richard Price?s *British Society 1680-1880*, for example, does not need ?gender? in its title to make it an integral element of analysis.(1) In this light I would recommend *Gender in History* as a set text for all students beginning a degree in history, alongside more conventional fare like E. H. Carr?s *What is History?*(2) It should not be restricted to those students (in my opinion still too often predominantly female) who select a course in which the main topic of study is gender. For, crucially, it demonstrates that gender is as significant as social class, race and ethnicity as a category of historical analysis, as well as providing novice historians with many insights into understanding history. This is not to ignore that it is also of value to more experienced historians, particularly because of its thematically arranged suggestions for further reading.

One of the most vexed questions in gender history is the relationship between social gender and biological sex. In her introduction Wiesner-Hanks leads readers through this complex debate, making them aware of the profound uncertainties about markers of sexual difference and the performative nature of gender, its adaptability and impermanence of meanings for men and women. The colliding ripples from such theoretical pebbles as post-structuralism, queer theory, post-colonial theory and critical-race theory also currently disturb the choppy waters of history. Wiesner-Hanks expertly navigates them to show that their cumulative impact for gender historians is to attack assumptions about the universality of experience. The wide chronological and geographical scope of this book certainly reveals that gender is historically and geographically contingent. The author explores variations between cultures and among social, ethnic and racial groups within one culture to illustrate the diverse ways in which family, economy, law, religion, politics, education, culture and sexuality informed women?s and men?s lives and were in turn moulded by gender. These processes were complicated by colonialisation, empire and migration, which spread some traditions and created ?new? traditions. It is impressive that the author presents this information in an interesting and coherent way, avoiding the pit-falls of stereotyped over-generalisation and numbing lists of counter-examples.

Wiesner-Hanks does us a great service by charting the distinctions and variations in gender structures, but her book also reveals the striking number of common themes across the world. Women are invariably linked with the home. This is expressed in a number of ways from possessing fewer legal and political freedoms than men to their absolute physical restriction within the home. These are tenacious phenomena. Laws were only repealed or amended within the last century and Chinese foot-binding, which began around 1000 and forced women to remain within the confines of the home, did not completely die out until the 1930s. Veiling, of course, is still going strong, with the first recorded evidence from the ancient Near East around 3000 BCE testifying both to its longevity and its independence of specific religious traditions. These practices are usually justified by ideas about protecting women from other men and, therefore, blood-lines and inheritances from impurity. *Gender in History* reminds us, however, that several factors have influenced the extent to which such traditions are enforced. Most commonly, necessity has ensured that many women have possessed more agency in terms of making decisions and managing family, household, domestic economy and property than these customs and law codes would suggest. Seclusion, for example, has often signified membership of a wealthy elite. Thus peasant women in China did not have their feet bound, because they needed to work. This occasionally cut across gender, so that it was elite men in the Ottoman Empire who rarely left the household. Other traditions have altered gendered domestic roles. Jewish men who took the ideal path of devoting themselves to piety and the study of religious texts were economically dependent upon their wives, who worked to support them and their children. Of course those wives whose husbands were absent through work or war and conquest were more likely to make unilateral decisions and choices.

Gender in History?s thematic approach highlights other contradictions at the heart of the home and marriage. Many homes were and are the site of profound domestic double-standards, with women doing all the domestic work, whatever their other labour. It is equally prevalent in political systems founded upon equality between the sexes. In the Soviet Union, for example, women made up more than half the full time labour force but continued to do most household work. One only has to read the eighteenth-century washer-woman Mary Collier?s poem *The Women?s Labour* (1739) to see that women have long recognised the injustice of this.(3) Ideologies about the relationship between husbands and wives further complicate the gaps between prescription and practice. Writers as far apart as those in Classical Rome, Protestant early modern England, and the Jewish tradition, for instance, have advocated companionship and shared interests and activities between spouses, while also demanding wives? subordination to husbands? authority. The two are not necessarily incompatible ideas, but I am inclined to believe that they set up a potentially conflictual situation when they were so often contradicted by the realities of wives? contributions to domestic life.

This book emphasises that mixed messages about women and men are hardly unusual. In particular, many religious traditions convey conflicting ideas about the relative status of the sexes because they draw upon existing traditions to articulate their message and shape their ritual. In animism, paganism and shamanism

women and men are often perceived to have the same access to the spirit world. This can be empowering for women but it does not always equate with equal status with men and can have dangerous consequences. After all, close contact could be with bad spirits as well as good, leading in some cases to accusations of witchcraft. A not dissimilar double-edged sword existed in more formal text-based religious traditions where women have been viewed as possessing a ?natural? facility for spirituality. Combined with ideas about their weakness they can thus easily be seen as susceptible to diabolical influences. Those women who have been moved by divine inspiration to get involved in military or political affairs are often subject to harsh measures to remove them from this sphere. Although religions like Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism make spiritual fulfilment equally available to both sexes, and while female saints and deities have provided positive role models, women have still been conceptualised as the secondary, subordinate sex to men. They also threaten male achievement of spiritual goals. In Buddhism and Christianity, for example, men have at times been obliged to be detached from desire in order to achieve the sinless life necessary for enlightenment or spiritual fulfilment. As a result women were defined as sexual temptation. Actually, a theme that permeates this book is the way that women have been seen as a threat to everything from morals, genetic and property inheritance, to financial liquidity and social order. Thus their exclusion from many institutions often appears to be a defensive act.

Parenting, according to *Gender in History* is as gendered as other roles carried out within the home. The bearing and rearing of children has moulded women?s lives to a far greater extent than fathering children has impacted on men?s, and interestingly this continues to be the case where effective contraception is widely available. There are examples where men?s status shifts on the birth of their first son, but in most cases their lives are not expected to adapt to the arrival of children as women?s do. The ideological connotations of parenthood are equally gendered. Fatherhood has often been considered as the root of political systems and was invoked as a symbol by nations like Nazi Germany?s ?fatherland? and monarchs like James I and VI of England and Scotland, but the rhetoric of motherhood has had a far greater impact on ordinary women?s lives. In both authoritarian dictatorships and democracies, ideas about women?s ?natural? role as mothers have served to promote pro-natal measures and limit their education and employment opportunities. Nevertheless, Wiesner-Hanks shows how often the ideology has also been used positively. Though formal power is usually gendered and socially stratified, we know that women and low-status men have participated in political life. The rhetoric of motherhood is one way in which women claim a ?right? to enter the political arena. Women across the world, for example, invoke their special status as mothers to complain against abuses of human rights. Maternity has also been used as a way to claim the right of citizenship for women. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and the United States and twentieth-century Egypt and Iran, women?s role as mothers was combined with ideas about their superior moral status to demand better education and opportunities. It was claimed that this would allow women to better guide their husbands and rear their sons in the necessities of civic virtue, morality and public service. Nevertheless, *Gender in History* reminds us that while women are always to be found fighting alongside men for political rights, freedoms, and justice through debates, boycotts, demonstrations, riots, guerrilla tactics, and warfare the resulting law codes and constitutions often fail to give them equal status to men. If they did, as following communist revolutions, they still did not give women?s concerns high priority.

If motherhood has been a potent symbol, Wiesner-Hanks also draws into sharp focus the way that gender, sex and race are entwined as metaphor. Nowhere is this clearer than in war, conquest, colonisation and empire. Victors in battle and territorial conquest are invariably eulogised as virile and masculine, losers degraded as weak and feminised. Indigenous peoples have been imagined as passive and/or hyper-sexualised and sexually voracious by their colonisers. Representations of the act of colonisation frequently draw on the image of men penetrating ?virgin? territories. America in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries, for example, was portrayed as a naked woman in a feathered headdress. Disturbingly, as *Gender in History* illustrates, human bodies all too often act out these gendered metaphors. At various places and times marriage has been more than a sign of alliances between different groups, serving to confirm conquest. Thus Aztec and Inca leaders married the daughters of the rulers of the tribes they conquered. Rape is the most violent physical enactment of conquest, either of defeated soldiers or women on the losing side, depending on prevailing attitudes to same-sex relations. The enforced sexual services of indigenous women, following

the conquest of territory and peoples, performed a similar purpose.

This survey of gender reveals how often the modern world judges civilisations by their treatment of women. For some an ?advanced?, ?civilised?, ?modern? society is one in which women possess extensive legal and institutional freedoms. Thus nations have sought to ?prove? that they were worthy of independent status by improving the lot of women. Educating women was a sign of modernisation and progress in India, as was passing laws against veiling in Turkey and Iran in the 1920s and 1930s. Others have consciously rejected this formulation. Christian and Islamic fundamentalists use traditional authoritarian gender hierarchies to symbolise their superior purity and morals. For fundamentalist movements within Islam the veiling of women also underlines their rejection of western cultural imperialism and commercialisation. In extreme cases like the Taliban regime this even led to removing women from the professional roles to which Muslim women often have access in order to cater for women in an all female environment. For all this, the impressive range of examples in *Gender in History* powerfully demonstrates that there is in fact no straightforward link between modernisation, advanced economic development, extensive civil institutions and the emancipation of women. After all, rapid economic development, for example, can be achieved without equality for women, or, for that matter, men. Likewise it is not only male dominated societies that are warlike or aggressive. Men can value diplomacy, as an alternative to war, and societies with women in political positions of power can be bellicose.

This simplistic equation of modernity, civility, economic success and female emancipation is rendered even more problematic by Wiesner-Hanks? observations that emancipation does not have any unified meaning in practice. Laws asserting equality between the sexes are not always enforced or taken-up, particularly when impetus for change came from outside the area. Women themselves do not always view such changes as beneficial. Crucially, she shows that the debate about whether women are better served by asserting their rights and establishing equality with men, or by determining and meeting their different needs as women continues throughout the world. As this book further demonstrates, equality of opportunity does not always equate with improved status. It is clear that the exclusion of women from training, for example, explained their absence or lesser participation in the ?major? fields of art, literature and music. In contemporary US, nonetheless, though women take up higher education in Fine Arts at the same or higher rates than men, female work is not displayed in galleries in the same proportions as male work. Equally, numerous cultures have denied women the ability to participate in many institutions and derive formal power, by denying them access to training to write. Yet societies with oral cultures to which both sexes had equal access were also inegalitarian and failed to offer women the same status as men.

Gender in History shows that the whole question of status is tricky in itself. Status has long been and continues to be defined in masculine terms. While it may arguably be beneficial that women derive status in specific spheres, it is noticeable that few men wish to be admitted to them. It does not help that the level of status and remuneration accorded to occupations and skills depends upon whether they are predominantly carried out by women or men and are reclassified when this shifts. As Wiesner-Hanks shows, this occurs again and again. For instance, when various countries strove for mass education in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, those primarily employed as teachers were women because they were a cheap way to supply the necessary large numbers of teachers. Subsequently teaching was down-graded in status and remuneration. In early modern Europe brewing moved from a primarily female activity to a male one, as did midwifery in the eighteenth-century, and both were accorded more value and pay as this occurred. We need not be complacent about this phenomenon since keyboard skills have experienced a similar gender-shift. Typing, a ?female? skill was transformed with the advent of computers, into ?male? keyboard skills, associated with new technologies and mathematics, and consequently better paid. Similarly, new creative genres developed by women, like miniature portraits on ivory or paper collage, have failed to achieve the status of the ?major? arts. Genres in which women continued to work were devalued. Thus flower painting, once seen as an important branch of still-life, was re-categorised as trivial painstaking craftsmanship when women predominantly carried it out. As Wiesner-Hanks remarks, there is some justice, since folk art, in which women could participate, has come to be highly prized.

Wiesner-Hanks warns us that we will feel puzzled, angry, depressed or defensive after reading this book. She is right. Even after a few years of familiarity with scholarship on gender in early modern and modern British history, I am left with the despairing recognition that women have been and are being oppressed in explicit and implicit ways across the globe. For despite the book?s claims to be about gender it is essentially about women. It makes it clear that for the majority of people, men?s and women?s daily experiences were similar since they were focused upon survival. It does indicate that many men as well as women are exploited and often denied access to education, political representation and religious scriptures. But, crucially, this is more likely to be through lack of wealth and property than through gender restrictions. There is little sense that masculinity is as restricting or limiting a force on men as femininity is on women. Even where ordinary women have exercised authority, it is usually conceptualised as derivative from men, or restricted to specific areas of life with men theoretically holding the highest authority. In short, despite the differences in the formulation of gender across time and space, the overwhelming impression is one of pervasive and resilient gender hierarchies, which are a profoundly negative force for women. Obviously this is in part the result of the book?s nature. A text book simply cannot offer the intricate analyses that serve to distinguish between abilities and rights. As a narrower focus can reveal, the former allow women and men to do much more than the latter would indicate. Importantly *Gender in History* serves its purpose by shattering complacency and preconceptions about relationships between the sexes. It also raises questions about gender, its relationship with status and power and its meanings for individuals. Wiesner-Hanks concludes hoping that her book will lead readers ?to engage in your own political acts and know that if it does, aspects of your life that mirror the chapters you have read ? your work, religious worship, creative outlets, sexuality, and family relationships ? may not be the same?.(p. 239) Though such questioning might be easier for those readers living with freedoms in the first place, the notion that the personal is the political still has not lost its force and it is a plea to which we should all pay attention. Whatever else it does, this book will certainly alter lives by stimulating some readers into research to answer the questions it raises for them.

Notes

1. Richard Price, *British Society, 1680-1880: Dynamism, Containment and Change* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1999), p. 205-33.Back to (1)
2. E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London, 1961).Back to (2)
3. Mary Collier, *The Women?s Labour: an Epistle to Mr. Stephen Duck in Answer to his late Poem, called The Thresher?s Labour* (1739), cited in V. Jones, ed., *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (Routledge: London, 1990).Back to (3)

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