Critical Analysis: A. Kessel-harris's 'What Is Gender History Now?' And D. Cannadine's 'What Is History Now?'

‘The historian is necessarily selective. The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate.’ (Carr, 1961, p. 8)

So wrote the eminent historian E. H. Carr in 1961 in his seminal work What is History?

In the above statement, and in the book as a whole, Carr boldly stated his belief that a historian should be far more than just a chronicler of events but should be an interpreter—a critical analyst searching for meaning and pattern in the past. To celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the original publication reflections on Carr’s legacy and impact by eminent historians from a wide range of perspectives on the past were captured in What is History Now? The chapter entitled 'What is Gender History Now?’ covers possibly one of the most significant developments in the intervening decades—that of women’s history and gender history. The author of this chapter, Alice Kessler-Harris, asserts that Carr’s advocacy of a radical approach was enthusiastically embraced by herself and other historians who, she claims, were united in having an enlightened ‘social and political consciousness’ (Kessler-Harris, 2002, p. 97). Her argument is that this new breed of historian used gender—the social construction of manhood and womanhood—as an interpretive category of analysis and constructed an alternative framework to explore the past. She argues that gender history has expanded dramatically in the intervening decades and delivered not only insight but a challenging interpretive stance that has joined class and race as an essential perspective for all historians. This essay considers the argument that Kessler-Harris advances, the evidence she presents, and the wider historiographical debate on gender history that 'What is Gender History Now?’ forms part of.

Inspired by Carr to explore beyond the traditional historical approach of ‘empirically-based objectivism’ Kessler-Harris argues that she, and historians like her, by acknowledging their own social identities and values, were emboldened to use gender as both an exploratory and as an interpretive mechanism (ibid., p. 96). Data previously discarded or ignored was recovered and by critical analysis through the lens of gender new facts were discovered. As Kessler-Harris emphasises, this new breed of historians was also assigning significance to these new facts—gender became essential in the ‘calculus of causes and explanations’ to constructing a fuller portrait of the past and historical change (ibid., p. 99). Kessler-Harris provides evidence for her claim by considering four historically influential arenas—identity, class, state formation, and colonialism—where, she claims, gender history has proven effective in delivering fresh insight and greater comprehension into power and hierarchy relations.

[bookmark: _Hlk537002]‘The Injunction to Domesticity’ is how Kessler-Harris highlights the use of gender to explore the ordering of the world and the shaping of expectations for men and women. Citing Anna Clark’s, The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the Working Class (1995) and Francesca Bray’s Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China (1997) as two outstanding examples of gender history Kessler-Harris considers they were significant both in delivering fresh insight but also in re-evaluating past historical perspectives. Gender history was asking questions about prior historical works being framed by

a powerful but un-regarded bias—being delivered by historians for whom gender-ordered domesticity was seemingly the natural order of things.

Kessler-Harris next highlights how gender history has been effective in providing fresh insight into the important role that gender played in class formation. Citing Clark (1995) and her analysis of the shifting meanings of manhood and womanhood in working-class culture— ‘the infusion of gender into the analysis of class’ (Clark, 1995, p. 2). This exposed the myth of domestic bliss before industrialism, the connections between family and political life for both men and women, and the hitherto marginalisation of women in working-class history. It challenged the notion of working-class consciousness being formed due to men and politics with women relegated to domesticity.

The third arena that Kessler-Harris uses to support her argument is highlighting how, through a gendered analysis, the history of state formation involved the deliberate strengthening of tradition—promoting the concept of the ‘male-breadwinner’ was a conscious choice. Citing Wilkander, Kessler-Harris and Lewis’s Protecting Women: Labor Legislation in Europe, Australia, and the United States (1995) the deliberate sexual division of labour can be seen to be revealed and in Susan Pedersen’s Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914-1945 (1993) the role that gendered assumptions played in the formation and development of the welfare state are made explicit.

The fourth piece of evidence Kessler-Harris provides is the role of gender in colonialism and racialised gender mechanisms. Further evidence is referred to in the use of gender in maintaining heterosexual cultural order through the construction of the post-war ‘nuclear family’ and the notion of the ‘sacred domestic space’.

One notable aspect that Kessler-Harris highlights in considering the impact that gender history has had is its disruption of the framework of methods, concepts and theories that structured the way history had settled into—a tradition of comfortable categories and paradigms built around a form of ‘intellectual masculinity’ (Davidoff, 1995, p. 3). The quote attributed to the American feminist Charlotte Bunch—'You can't just add women and stir'—captures the inadequacy felt by the generation of historians that Kessler-Harris was part of. Adding a paragraph or two about women to historical accounts dominated by the male experience would no longer be acceptable.

By the 1980s the term “gender” was increasingly being used to describe the culturally constructed ‘systems of sexual differentiation that affected both men and women’ and increasing numbers of historians were not just using gender as a perspective for women’s history but for all historical developments (Weisner-Hanks, 2001, p. 2). However, the culturally constructed nature of gender means it is, and was in the past, inherently unstable. Merry Weisner-Hanks in Gender in History (2001) explores how gender in constructed quite differently in cultures around the world at different times. She also considers how debates about the distinction between sex and gender might be seen to make gender such an arbitrary and contested term, however, she firmly concludes that understanding gender in its historical context is why it has proven to be such a powerful tool (ibid., pp. 3-5).

Gender history, as with many other disciplines, was influenced by “the linguistic turn”—a catch-all phrase that for the purposes of this essay will include deconstruction and poststructuralism—where the focus switch from events, people, and groups, and on to the words

used to construct discourse. A landmark work that had a major impact on women's history and put gender inequality centre-stage in using gender as a tool for cultural and historical analysis was Joan Wallack Scott's Gender and The Politics of History. Originally published in 1988 it championed the disruptive, destabilising impact that gender as a category of analysis had—one that brought women in from the margins (Scott, 1999, p. xii). However, in her 1999 revised addition reflecting back on the previous decade she raises a concern that '… "gender" seems to have lost its ability to startle and provoke us' (ibid.). And yet Scott's approach to analysing how language shapes the understanding of gender and the role that politics plays in determining the hierarchy of power relationships has endured.

The writing of history via the perspective of gender delivers fresh insight that is distinctive—it is far more than history as a 'scientific' exercise of searching for and telling a story through 'objective' facts. As Merry Weisner-Hanks asserts, writing gender history is a deliberate political act— '… the story we have been told is not only incomplete (all history is, of course, incomplete), but to some extent deliberately incomplete' (Weisner-Hanks, 2001, p. 239).

In 1961 Carr had nothing to say as regards women's history—gender as a category for historical analysis would presumably have bemused him. It is a sign of the seismic impact on the discipline of history that it is almost unthinkable today for any study about the past not to include analysis of the conceptions of gender and how they impact on social, political, and economic relationships.

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