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Feminist Theory and Historical Sociology: Two Views from the Field...

GROUNDS FOR RAPPROCHEMENT

by **Julia Adams**,
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Over a decade has elapsed since Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne wrote "The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology." Recently the ASA Theory Section Newsletter, Perspectives, re-examined the topic, in a 1996 exchange kicked off by the authors. Stacey and Thorne now disavow the very concept of a feminist revolution in sociology. Feminist ideas have become a trans-disciplinary force in the academy, they note, eroding disciplinary boundaries. No doubt! Yet Michael Burawoy responds that feminist contestation within the disciplines is still important, especially because resistance to feminism increases with a discipline's proximity to state power. This holds, it seems to me, of sub- and trans-disciplines too -- and historical sociology aspires to be both.

The historical sociology of state social provision certainly continues to resist the incursion of feminist theory, whether by insisting that welfare states are gender-neutral structures or by treating gender (if it's included

in the analysis) as a causal variable with two values corresponding to bipartite notions of biological sex. Feminist work shows that these approaches won't wash. As Ann Orloff (1993) emphasizes in her challenge to Esping-Andersen and the "power-resource" school, gender plays a tacit role in constituting the institutional dimensions and the variables that power-resource analysts rely on. Maybe Theda Skocpol's influential *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers* (1992) will help widen the breach in the mainstream ramparts.

But I want to make the opposite case, too, and argue that feminist theory should pay more attention to historical sociology. The most fruitful approach to studying state formation depends on forging a tactical alliance between historical sociology and feminist theory: one that acknowledges the tensions between each complex intellectual formation, but insists that each can learn from the other.

Take my own area of research, the sociology of European state-building, where feminism has made even less impact than on the mainstream welfare state literature. It's not that it has nothing to offer. Feminist theorists like Carole Pateman (1988) are rereading classical commentaries by theorists of state power in brilliantly subversive ways as they reconstruct the bases of the modernist theoretical canon. These texts have been scoured to reveal the lineaments of political discourse, as well as the patriarchal nature of early modern monarchical power, a source of legitimacy that hinged on perceptions of order and appropriate gender hierarchy in royal families. These arguments haven't made much of a dent in the sociology of state formation, but they've been eagerly expanded in some superb feminist historical scholarship, particularly associated with France (e.g. Hunt 1992). I'm convinced that if historical sociologists read this work carefully, they will see that early modern states cannot be understood apart from the discursive dimension of gender.

For all their virtues, though, feminist theoretical analyses have problems. They often reduce states to writings about states, building broad claims about politics on that rickety foundation. Concepts of states and politics are habitually folded into the category of political culture. Finally, states tend to figure as a single father or royal family. By mistaking the monarch (at most the court) for all of early modern European high politics, they substitute one node for a whole network of governance. They miss, for example, the potential political importance of corporate coalitions of, and struggles among, male officeholders lineally implanted in state apparatuses in their capacity as family heads (Adams 1994). None of this may matter if feminist theorists simply want to emphasize one discursive dimension (gender) of a particular institutional space (the court) in early modern states. But existing feminist accounts must be expanded and reworked if our goal is also to make sense of patterns of state formation and large scale historical change.

Early modern European states were patchworks of power. Many corporate bodies exercised piecemeal claims to sovereignty, as they negotiated or stumbled into uneasy relationships with one another. At the same time, and sometimes in the same patch, rational-legal bureaucratic styles of administration and appropriation coexisted with the patriarchal, patrimonial principles that had extended over generations. Contra Pringle and Watson (1992) and other postmodern feminist analysts, these states

--or any state or interstate system-- simply cannot be approached solely as a diverse set of discursive arenas. For these sprawling states were variably coherent, variably contradictory formations, resource-laden as well as discursively constructed, and should be studied with methodological tools adequate to their complex character. This goes double for the new political forms in today's highly developed countries, in Europe and elsewhere, which are now moving away from central statist structures of rule and redistribution.

Promising methodological paths are being explored by historical sociologists and merit the attention of feminist theorists interested in this topic or in any large-scale social change. First are approaches that take temporality seriously (Aminzade 1992). Large-scale processes can be broken down into narrative elements and reassembled in analytical sequences that are historically contextualized (Sewell, ed., 1992). Equally important is the synchronic side, for these processes inhabit bounded institutional sites and can be grasped by system-specific mechanisms -- pieces of theoretical reasoning that are independently verifiable and help us understand a part of other, higher level theories (Stinchcombe 1991). Current "feminist methodologies" --from the discourse theoretic to standpoint variants-- are too narrow to grasp the sorts of social and cultural transformations that interest historical sociologists.

Feminism is not about to lose its vanguard position in historical sociology, intrinsically tied to its subversive disciplinary and trans-disciplinary role, and that's a good thing. For its part, feminist analysis could benefit from opening up to greater substantive and methodological advances in "gender blind" historical sociology. It's crystal clear that historical sociology needs feminist theory, and more of it --but the converse is also the case.

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PROSPECTS FOR COURTSHIP

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What kind of relationship exists between historical sociology and feminism? How we represent this relationship influences the kind of engagement that will take place and the ways we map out the work that lays ahead. Clearly, space within historical sociology has been carved out for research on women and gender. Feminists sometimes have turned to historical sociology to engage issues central to their research and feminists have held important organizational positions in the ASA Comparative & Historical Sociology Section. As well, a particular project in historical sociology may enable a practitioner to see how gender is central to the ways social institutions operate, as Theda Skocpol (1992; 1993; but see Gordon, 1993) claims was the case in the making of her recent book. But the "engagement" of feminism and historical sociology has been marked by neither romance nor passion. Their relationship has not effected a paradigmatic revolution. (Stacey and Thorne, 1996) Despite their overlapping intellectual and political footings there has been relatively little cross fertilization. The differences in their concerns and approaches have meant that they also have been somewhat incompatible.

A particular project in historical sociology may enable a practitioner to see how gender is central to the ways social institutions operate, as Theda Skocpol (1992; 1993; but see Gordon, 1993) claims was the case in the making of her recent book. But the "engagement" of feminism and historical sociology has been marked by neither romance nor passion. Their relationship has not effected a paradigmatic revolution (Stacey and Thorne, 1996).

Despite their overlapping intellectual and political footings there has been relatively little cross fertilization. The differences in their concerns and approaches have meant that they also have been somewhat incompatible. The Comparative-Historical Sociology Section sessions have concentrated on macro-political sociology of the nation-state giving little attention to gender issues. Many historical sociologists continue to employ theories of power and social change that prioritize class and consider gender auxiliary. Not surprisingly those with multiple section memberships in the Comparative and Historical Sociology Section of the ASA are heavily concentrated in Political Sociology, Political Economy and Marxist Sociology.

Feminists have long had difficulty incorporating women and gender into class analysis. They have pointed to the ways traditional theories of

economic and political changes mask the ways gender is implicated in these processes and have challenged the significance of class as an overarching identity. Like the "unhappy marriage" of marxism and feminism (Hartmann 1981), the marriage of feminism and historical sociology has been an uneasy and unequal one. As a result, feminism's impact has been segregated and limited (Abbott 1994).

To be sure, many historical sociologists have moved away from Marxist deterministic explanations and mechanistic formulations. But the "marriage" of Marxism and feminism has not become more congenial in many "post-Marxist" analyses. Gender issues often remain subsidiary to what are considered the "really important issues of class formation, struggle and consciousness, and the "big" questions concerning politics, war, revolutions, urbanization and industrialization (e.g., in Biernacki 1995). Therefore despite the proliferation of feminist projects within historical sociology, many still wonder: "what difference does gender make?"

A better "marriage" between feminism and historical sociology would require historical sociologists to examine the field's foundational categories and to explore how they create the subjects they write about. By accepting as transparent categories such as "the worker," or "the citizen," or the separate "private" and "public spheres," historical sociologists have codified and reproduced the categories used by those with power in the past (Baron 1994).

Promising new directions are being forged by sociologists, historians and anthropologists who have experimented with new forms of writing and have become more self-conscious of the ways they represent their subjects of investigation. Historical sociologists need to explore their own discursive rules, the metaphors they depend on for analysis, and the ways their rhetorical strategies mask how gender operates or mark social processes as gendered in particular ways.

There are signs that historical sociology has become more "interculturally tolerant." (Skocpol 1988). It has been able to accept under its banner a variety of approaches, including various forms of neo-marxism, symbolic interactionism, microsociology as well as narrative analysis and "non-narrative presentations." Many have moved away from attempts to construct "grand theory" based on "big case comparisons" and atemporal general social models. It also is encouraging that historical sociologists have been engaging in reflection about the nature of their project. Ann Orloff (1995) has sought ways to encourage a "serious retrospective of where the [Comparative-Historical Sociology] section has been and where it is going."

But with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Ewa Morawska, Judith Stacey and Barbara Laslett) historical sociologists typically have been reluctant to relinquish their authority to make "truth claims" by considering the ways they create stories. Resisting the "linguistic turn" they have largely eschewed the idea that how we construct "truth" is political. While such reflection could mean the end of the field as we know it, an end to the notion that knowledge is "innocent," it would not, as Steven Seidman (1994) explained, mean the end of a human studies that entail "a commitment to an open, ongoing, inclusive conversation about society" based on an awareness of the power issues involved in the construction

and uses of knowledge.

Traditional disciplines have been justifiably wary of feminism. The "feminist project" in the academy continually unmask the workings of power embedded in prevailing disciplinary methods. If feminism has any "essential" meaning at all it is as a critical practice. Using its position as an "outsider," feminists have interrogated categories of analysis and provided reminders of what the disciplines have left out -- the excluded and silenced. Feminism's marginality has provided a position from which women could speak qua women. Integration, then, threatens the very foundation and basis for feminist critical inquiry.

Should feminists try to find a "home" in the disciplines? Is historical sociology a good place to "settle down"? If feminists continue to engage in "disciplinary warfare" as Michael Burawoy (1996) advocates, feminism risks losing its critical edge. There are limits to feminism's ability to continue to play a critical role from within the disciplines. Even if integration does not dull its critical edge, as some fear, there is danger in the "routinization" of feminist criticism. Feminism borders on being dismissed as the proverbial "nag"; and in the conventional comic scenario, this becomes: "she nags, he stops listening, nothing changes, she nags." (Morris, 1988) Herein lies another "feminist paradox" in the academy. It is no wonder that feminists express a deep ambivalence about their positions within their disciplines and the prospects for paradigmatic disciplinary changes.

Even if feminism cannot establish a "home" for itself within historical sociology as a place where it is safe, comfortable, and secure, a romance may still be possible. The tension in the relationship between feminism and historical sociology may be constructive, indeed necessary. While "marriage" may not be possible, feminism should continue to "court" the disciplines. Feminism's subversive potential lies in challenging disciplinary boundaries even as it exposes its own contradictions rooted in the paradoxical character of sexual difference (Scott, 1996; Lorber, 1994). The feminist project is multifaceted. Some of it necessarily takes feminists outside of the disciplines as an interdisciplinary enterprise. Some of it takes feminists out of the academy and into the streets. But part of its project is to engage in debate within the disciplines and to continue to strive for a feminist revolution.

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