

WHY
HISTORY
MATTERS

Life and Thought

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This analysis has important implications for practical politics. Instead of engaging in the endless, fruitless and counter-productive activity of prioritizing discriminations and competing among targeted groups for scarce resources, it enables us to see the commonalities among them. New attempts at building coalitions between women separated by their "differences" can succeed if the differences are acknowledged and respected, even as alliances are formed on partial goals on which there is a commonality of interest. As Charlotte Bunch advised in 1985, an understanding of how the various forms of oppression interact is a necessary foundation for the building of valid coalitions. The systems of dominance are mutually constitutive, therefore they cannot be effectively attacked one at a time. The struggles against sexism, racism, antisemitism and homophobia are inextricably linked.

For historians, this more nuanced understanding of the various manifestations of the system of oppression—gender, ethnic, race and class formation—should enable us to put power relations into the center of any analysis we make. Instead of asking only, how true is this statement or observations for members of groups A-D (a merely additive, comparative approach), we can ask, how are the power relations expressed in this particular situation? How do they vary for different groups? How do the benefits of one group disadvantage another? How can the relationality best be expressed?

Lastly, we need to keep a basic principle in mind: It is not "difference" that is the problem. It is dominance justified by appeals to constructed differences that is the problem.

Why History Matters

The power and breadth of our own lives and the energy with which we reflect on them are the foundation of historical vision. (Wilhelm Dilthey, *Patterns and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society* ed. H. P. Rickman [New York, 1962], p. 87.)

All human beings are practicing historians. As we go through life we present ourselves to others through our life story; as we grow and mature we change that story through different interpretations and different emphasis. We stress different events as having been decisive at different times in our life history and, as we do so, we give those events new meanings. People do not think of this as "doing history"; they engage in it often without special awareness. We live our lives; we tell our stories. It is as natural as breathing.

Our self-representation, the way we define who we are, also takes the shape of the life story we tell. What we remember, what we stress as significant, and what we omit of our past defines our present. And since the boundaries of our self-definition also delimit our hopes and aspirations, this personal history affects our future. If we see ourselves as victimized, as powerless and overwhelmed by forces we cannot understand or control, we will choose to live cautiously, avoid conflict and evade pain. If we see ourselves as loved, grounded, powerful, we will embrace the future, live courageously and accept challenges with confidence.

Another aspect of history-making, namely, its function in the healing of pathology, is recognized and ritualized by most systems of psychology. People traumatized by abuse or negative childhood expe-

But those kept outside of these myths or those marginalized by them, experience them as destructive. In legitimizing the coherence of the "in-group" these stories and myths reinforce the deviant status of the "out-groups." By making distinctions between "us and them" appear to be natural, they reinforce a sense of alienation and "Otherness" in those excluded.

To those in power, history has always mattered. In fact, recorded history began as a means of celebrating the accomplishments of military chieftains, usurpers and kings. From the engraved descriptions of Urukagina of Lagash and the *stele* of Hammurabi of Babylon to the monuments and inscriptions celebrating the power of King Darius of Persia there goes a straight line of tradition to the officially endorsed histories glorifying the lives and deeds of emperors, kings, popes and various houses of nobility. These stories of the brave and good deeds of powerful rulers serve both to legitimize power and to maintain it by establishing the official version of events as the dominant version. Beginning in the Renaissance, state governments continually used history as a tool for legitimizing power and for creating a common cultural tradition based on that history. National histories, often mythical aggregates of facts and inventions, created a symbolic universe in which various contesting groups could shelter under a shared awning. The stories of the heroic deeds of ancestors supported the imperialist exploits of their 18th- and 19th-century heirs. Similarly, usurper regimes of the 20th century used history for their own purposes. Mussolini's gangs legitimized their accession to power by boasting of Roman roots and transforming the *fascies* of Roman ancestors into their party's name and emblem. German National Socialism created an elaborate official history extolling the mostly mythical deeds of Teutonic ancestors and rewriting more recent history to fit their version of "Aryan" racial superiority. The Communist regimes in Russia and in its satellite countries went to inordinate lengths to create "official" histories in which Marxist reconstructions of the past led inevitably to the triumph of the regime then in power. The United States, in its rise as a world power and in its claim to world leadership after 1945, used the doctrines of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny and the myth of the triumphant conquest of the West as a legitimizing explanatory system. George Washington—who could not tell a lie—, benevolent planter Thomas Jefferson, hard-working Ben Franklin, Andrew Jackson and

Daniel Boone, the frontiersmen—these became the heroic figures in the tale of the creation of an exceptional system which could and would combine power with genuine democracy. This story had to omit all mention of race, slavery, conquest of native people and oppressive constraints on many marginalized groups, including women. The history it told was not so much false, as one-sided and distorted.

Today, the nationalist, hegemonic version of state histories are everywhere being questioned and forced to compete with more balanced, complex and sophisticated versions of stories of the past. In the current public discourse about history, this contest over national history is what matters the most. In the U.S., the virtual "culture war" over definitions of the past has surfaced most recently in the bitter debates over National History Standards, the Smithsonian's Enola Gay exhibition and various exhibits on slavery. Traditionalists defend the older version in apocalyptic language as though history were a zero-sum game in which the old heroes would be inevitably demolished and forgotten were new heroes and heroines to enter the scene. Advocates of the new, more inclusive history point out that there is room in the American narrative for a broader range of heroes and heroines than we have hitherto included and that Abraham Lincoln's stature would not be diminished by the inclusion in the narrative of the story of Frederick Douglass. In fact, discussion of contending and contradictory narratives would more accurately reflect the tensions that existed in the lives of ruling elites and ordinary folk under a system in which both slavery and free institutions coexisted. Revisionist historians also point out that rewriting and reinterpreting the past in light of modern ideas and experiences has always been an essential aspect of historical thinking. The new history threatens only the hegemony of the history of the powerful; it does not threaten the essential integrity of the telling of past events.

Another aspect of the history of the powerful has been much under public scrutiny and needs to be considered here. This concerns "forgetting the past" and "selective remembering." After the Holocaust, after Vietnam, genocide in Cambodia, ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, whole nations, like individuals after trauma, take part in the great forgetting. The victors forget what brought them to victory and, when enough time has passed, they reconstruct a new story, based on selective memory. An entire generation of Germans tried thus to forget the past, "to let sleeping dogs lie," to forget what cannot be

altered. Americans have forgotten napalm bombing and the slaughter of Vietnamese villagers. The more recent atrocities mount corpses on the long-past and forgotten atrocities. Muslim peasants in their mass graves supposedly atone for the Serb partisans slaughtered by Croat fascists in the time of their grandfathers. The spiral of bloodshed builds over time, on the principle that the victors control the story of the past until they are overthrown, then the victims tell their story in blood and rape. Civil wars and racist persecutions thrive on selective memory and collective forgetting.

Herein lies the bloodiest of proofs that history matters.

Just as the healing of personal trauma depends on facing up to what actually happened and on revisioning the past in a new light, so it is with groups of people, with nations. Germany's post-World War II recovery depended on its confrontation with its guilt for fascism, Holocaust and war. Restitution to the survivors and some effort at outlawing the racism that made these horrors possible were steps in the direction of healing. By contrast Austria, in maintaining the fiction of its having been "the first victim of Nazism," engaged in massive, collective forgetting, evaded responsibility for its participation in the Nazi regime and its machinery of war and destruction, and managed to exonerate most its war criminals. The result was continuing antisemitism, without Jews, and the rise of proto-fascistic political parties. It is only recently, more than fifty years later, that the Austrian government is attempting to deal more honestly with the past and to address restitution to the victims. The inability of the U.S. to come to terms with its complicity in slavery has made conflict over race a permanent feature of U.S. political life in the 20th century. In the former Soviet satellite nations the seeds of future conflicts lie buried in a great forgetting and in selective memory of the past. In each of these cases, honest attempts at more inclusive remembering would create mental attitudes and political realities that would weaken the power of ancient conflicts to ignite new fires.

What we do about history matters. The often repeated saying that those who forget the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them has a lot of truth in it. But what are "the lessons of history"? The very attempt at definition furnishes ground for new conflicts. History is not a recipe book; past events are never replicated in the present in quite the same way. Historical events are infinitely variable and their inter-

pretations are a constantly shifting process. There are no certainties to be found in the past.

We can learn from history how past generations thought and acted, how they responded to the demands of their time and how they solved their problems. We can learn by analogy, not by example, for our circumstances will always be different than theirs were. The main thing history can teach us is that human actions have consequences and that certain choices, once made, cannot be undone. They foreclose the possibility of making other choices and thus they determine future events. For example, in 1831 the Virginia House Assembly met to discuss the abolition of slavery, which had become unprofitable in the state, but, unable to envision how white Virginians might live peacefully with large numbers of free Blacks, they decided instead to continue the slave system and increase restrictions on free Blacks. Within the next few years, the governments of all the Southern states abridged the freedom of speech and curbed the rights of protest of all those who opposed slavery. Once these decisions had been made, it was impossible for alternatives to the slave system to be publicly discussed in the South. This set of decisions narrowed the range of future choices for the South and made a peaceful solution of the conflict between the North and South virtually impossible.

Nations, like individuals, have to take responsibility for their past actions. The only way to avoid the determinism inherent in past choices is to confront errors made and openly reverse one's course. In the present time, the new South African government has approached its task of reconstruction in a way exemplary of such an approach. It has admitted the racist, oppressive past, explored its consequences and rejected its pattern.

Selective memory on the part of the men who recorded and interpreted human history has had a devastating impact on women. Women are everywhere and have always been at least half of humankind. It is inconceivable that their actions and thoughts were inconsequential in the shaping of historical events, yet women have been presented as though they had no history worth recording. The only women to have entered the historical record are those who were "stand-ins" for absent husbands or brothers, women who did what men did, rulers, queens. In effect, this process of selective remembering has taught both men and women that women did not contribute to the making of civilization

in their own right. Thus, women have been taught to think of themselves as persons who cannot make significant contributions to society in the public realm. This massive distortion of the true record could happen because those who did the selecting were ignorant and contemptuous of the activities of women. The value system by which they judged "historical significance" valued the activities of men over those of women. Warfare and the distribution of wealth were considered more important than child-rearing and the building of communities. By accepting such criteria of selection, historians committed the basic error of seeing the half as the whole, remembering one half and forgetting the other. Selective memory deprived both women and men of the ability to construct a truthful picture of the past.

Many groups other than women have been subject to such "forgetting." Slaves, peasants, colonials have been marginalized and deprived of their history. Selective memory and the distortion of history have long been the powerful tools of oppressive regimes. It is worth noting that whenever subordinate groups have come to power they have tried to define and recover their history. This oft-repeated process testifies in its own way to the deeply felt need for a history of formerly oppressed people.

In order fully to understand how and why history matters, let us look more closely at the two groups which have for the longest time in human history been marginalized and oppressed—women and Jews. The persecution of Jews begins with their slavery in Egypt, sometime late in the second millennium B.C. The subordination of women is as old as patriarchy, which we can date as having been firmly established in most of the areas of the Ancient Near East by the middle of the first millennium B.C. While the chronology of their victimizations is not too different, the two groups differ in several important ways. Women are half of any given population; Jews were always a small minority. Women were always fully integrated into the life of the group that subordinated them, while Jews were easily segregated and marginalized. Women's subordination was perceived by them as "natural" since it came to them through family, state and religion. Jews saw their oppression and persecution as coming from outsiders to their own group and could thus use group cohesiveness, nationalism and religion for resistance. But the most important way in which the two groups differ is, I believe, in their relation to history.

Jews once were Hebrew tribes and later on people living in Jewish kingdoms, distinguished from their neighbors solely by different religious beliefs. After the Babylonian conquest and in the diaspora they became religious believers with a peculiar history which set them off from other groups. Jews were early on conscious of their peculiar relationship to history and built this consciousness into their religious ritual. The story of their slavery in Egypt and their deliverance is part of the annual religious observance of Pessach, the reenacted story of Queen Esther and her struggle against Haman, the oppressor of her people, is the substance of the celebration of Purim; and the story of the resistance of the Maccabees to Babylonian oppressors is the essence of the feast of Chanukkah. One can argue that the Jewish religion with its teleological emphasis on the coming of the Messiah incorporated history into religion in a way that earlier religions had not done. Thus, for Jews, their history, which was full of disasters and persecutions, was also a record of heroic figures resisting oppression. Jewish history became a primary tool for the survival of the people.

This was very different for women. Women have lived in a world in which they apparently had no history and in which their share in the building of society and civilizations was constantly marginalized. Women have also for millennia been denied the power to shape the formation of the dominant institutions of society. Whatever impact they were able to have on such institutions as the Church, the State, the Law, the Military had to be made from the margins, through "influence," not power, and through the mediation of men. Most important, women have been denied the power to define, to share in creating the mental constructs that explain and order the world. Under patriarchy the record of the past has been written and interpreted by men and has primarily focused on the activities and intentions of males. Women have always, as have men, been agents and actors in history, but they have been excluded from recorded history.

It is by now quite obvious that this long history of marginalization decisively affected women's self-perceptions, attitudes and group actions, even though it only recently has been properly "named." Denied any knowledge of their history, women were also denied heroines and role models. In the absence of stories of resistance and opposition, women internalized the ideology of patriarchy and participated in maintaining and strengthening it by transmitting its rules faithfully to

their children of both sexes. The tiny minority of Jews, persecuted for millennia, expelled from country after country, their communities destroyed, their leaders killed, then in the 20th century subject to the most savage scientifically organized genocide in history, could and did survive and even build a state. Women, half of the human race, subordinated, deprived of knowledge and resources for millennia, raped and often physically abused, could not recognize their own condition and organize to resist it until the last two centuries. People without a history are considered not quite human and incorporate that judgment in their own thinking. Unaware of any possible alternative, they cooperate in their own oppression. *Not* having a history truly matters.

The comparison of women to Jews can illuminate yet another aspect of the importance of history to human life. It concerns the way experience interacts with thought in the formation of personal identity.

Jewish history for several millennia is the history of a people without a geographical center, without a country, and subject to varying cycles of assimilation and expulsion from a great variety of other cultures. Being God's "chosen people" based on one's religious beliefs was one thing; being a people marked by homelessness, diaspora, persecution and exile was quite another historical experience. Whether in a state of assimilation or one of retrenchment and retreat, every Jew, man, woman and child, carried the burden of that history as a shaping force within memory and psyche. Thus, one can speak of the Old Testament Jews as people of one category; the diaspora Jews as people of another. Their knowledge of the possibility of persecution and discrimination, which is imprinted on the consciousness of even the most assimilated Jews, those of Weimar Germany, those in the former Soviet Union and in the United States, makes them sufficiently different from the neighbors among whom they live to be acknowledged and recognized. Thus, what makes Jews "Jews" is their historically developed experience.

I reason that similarly, what makes female persons gendered women is not their biological, but their historically developed experience. There is not only a biological, a bodily difference between men and women, but there is a historically conditioned difference. Throughout the nearly four thousand years of patriarchal society, women have largely been kept out of power; they have been educationally disadvantaged; they have been discriminated against in the allocation of re-

sources. They have been placed in the position of dependents. For the past two hundred years women, in their independent movements, have fought against these restrictions in an organized way and, inch by inch, against great resistance, have gained some ground. But the long historical experience of relative powerlessness and exclusion from the dominant institutions of society has given women a different psychological and attitudinal heritage, which is expressed in a female way of acting and reacting. I reject the biologically grounded argument for female difference, at least in part, but I recognize the historically grounded difference between the sexes as an important factor which must be taken into account in any analysis of the situation of women.

I will go further. The biological difference between men and women became significant as a marker of subordination only by the cultural elaboration of difference into a mark of degradation. In pre-state societies, before the full institutionalization of patriarchy men and women's biological difference found expression in a sexually based division of labor. Women, either nursing babies, pregnant or encumbered with small infants, pursued different economic activities than men did, without this difference necessarily marking them as inferior or disadvantaged. It is the cultural elaboration of "difference" into a marker of subordination, a social construction which is historically determined, which creates gender and structures society into hierarchies. In historical time, which coincides with institutionalized patriarchy, Simone de Beauvoir's formulation that "one is not born, but one becomes a woman" is accurate. But what makes "the woman," i.e., the woman-under-patriarchy, is not her sexual difference but her historically created genderedness.

All of women's history deals with subjects who are gendered women, women functioning under patriarchy and with the weight of a gendered past on their shoulders. It would be nice to have a separate word to distinguish them from female persons living prior to patriarchy, but since we do not have such a word, I use the term "women" with the understanding that it means "women-under-patriarchy." If that is understood, I can say without being mistaken as a supporter of essentialism, that the historically constructed gender differences between men and women are far more important than their biological differences.

In both the case of women and the case of Jews this historically based

difference leads to behaviors which are distinguishable from those of members of the dominant group. In this sense, there is indeed a woman's culture, a woman's vote, a woman's way of social behavior and interaction and it is *not* biologically determined.



That women's self-perceptions were diminished by a centuries-old tradition that put them outside of history and denied their agency in building human society and culture has been proven over and over again. Women's ambitions were lowered by the absence of heroines. For generations the most talented women put their energies into realizing themselves through the achievements of a man, be he brother, husband or son. Women expressed the disappointment and frustrations of their situation in their creative writing, the women characters they created and with whom they identified.

One way this found expression was in the struggle to create women's history. For centuries women amassed collections of "women worthies," heroic and achieving figures who, strung along a time chart, could prove the intellectual worth of women. They could and did provide the heroic models women generally lacked. In studying these lists, which occur in every century, I found that women never cite the lists other women had compiled before them, but frequently made use of the lists compiled by men. That was probably due to the fact that they did not know other women had done this particular work before them, for women's books were not reprinted with the frequency or given the length of life of books by men. It also reflected the conviction shared by men and women, that women were not authority figures. For a woman in the 19th century, such as Sarah Josepha Hale, to cite the lists of male predecessors, such as Livy and Boccaccio, was more impressive than to cite the work of then virtually unknown women, such as Christine de Pisan, Laura Cereta and Rachel Speght. The absence of women's history reinforced the absence of female authority in intellectual matters.

When women discover their history and learn their connectedness to the past and to the human social enterprise, their consciousness is inevitably and dramatically transformed. This experience is for them transcendent, in that it enables them to perceive what they share and always have shared with other women.

The new Women's History has undertaken the task of reconstructing the missing half of history and of putting women as active agents into the center of events in order that recorded history might at last reflect the dual nature of humankind in its true balance, its female and its male aspects.

Women's History of the past thirty years has offered a corrective to "selective forgetting," seeking a holistic worldview in which differences among people are recognized and respected and which records the commonality of human striving in all its variety and complexity. In remembering wholly one can fight the system of distortions and half-truths out of which sexism, classism, racism and antisemitism grow like poisonous weeds.

Women's History, the essential tool in creating feminist consciousness in women, is providing the body of experience against which new theory can be tested and the ground on which a feminist vision can be built.

We have now come back to the point at which we started. We live our lives; we tell our stories. The dead continue to live by way of the resurrection we give them in telling their stories. The past becomes part of our present and thereby part of our future. We act individually and collectively in a process over time which builds the human enterprise and tries to give it meaning. Being human means thinking and feeling; it means reflecting on the past and visioning into the future. We experience; we give voice to that experience; others reflect on it and give it new form. That new form, in its turn, influences and shapes the way next generations experience their lives.

That is why history matters.