History and Difference

Histories of the progress of democracy, of the expanding participation of individuals and groups in the social and political life of the United States, are often based on the notion of access. Emphasis usually goes to the physical connotation of this term. Thus, we metaphorically represent the gaining of access to resources, spaces, and institutions as passages through doors and gates, over obstacles, and around barriers and blockages; we measure accessibility quantitatively by noting the number of people or members of groups who gain entry.

While this emphasis has been useful for detecting discrimination or democratization, it has drawn attention away from important qualitative issues. How are those who cross the thresholds received? If they belong to a group different from the one already “inside,” what are the terms of their incorporation? How do the new arrivals understand their relationship to the place they have entered? What are the terms of identity they establish?

These questions assume that entry alone does not solve the problems of discrimination, that organizations are hierarchically differentiated systems, and that physical access is not the end of the story. They are questions relevant generally to the study of social organization, but they have been posed most forcefully by those

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concerned about gender and race. That ought not to be surprising, since our culture has embodied difference in generative organs and skin color. The difficulties experienced by the bearers of these marks of difference indicate that access is more than a matter of "getting through the door."

The question of difference is often posed sociologically, but it is also conceptual. The social practices of the members of a craft or a profession are intimately related to the ways they interpret the meaning of their work. The knowledge said to be vested in a profession like medicine or history implies its structure, organization, and membership. Historians, for example, have until recently pictured their archetypal actor, the universal human agent, as a white male. Although they have assumed that Universal Man stands for all humankind, in fact this representation creates hierarchies and exclusions. Women, blacks, and various others have been either invisible as historical subjects or somehow depicted as less central, less important, than white men. As in written history, so in the organization of the historical profession: white men have predominated; women and minorities have occupied a secondary place.

Since the 1960s there have been changes both in written history and in the historical profession. Both developments involve what might be called the fall, or perhaps the particularization, of Universal Man. As it has become less possible to subsume historical subjects under the single category of "man," so women, blacks, and others have become visible and important, not only as subjects of history but also as professional historians.

Examination of the articulation of difference—the hierarchical and unequal relationships among different groups—reveals the interdependency of knowledge and organizational behavior. We understand the full meaning of occupational identities only when we see who is included in them, how differences among practitioners are dealt with, which differences matter, how they are understood, and whether they change over time. Difference, then, provides insight into what might be called the culture of a profession or the politics of a discipline.

My interest in this paper is in a particular kind of difference—gender, or sexual difference. I focus on women historians who, by virtue of holding doctorates in history, academic positions, and memberships in the American Historical Association (AHA), were recognized as members of the profession of history. Having accepted
the discipline in its double sense—as a system of training and a system of rules—they qualified from the beginning as professionals. Their inclusion in an elite body of professionals, however, was not without complication. For while they assumed that access ought to give them full entitlement to professional identity, they regularly encountered reminders of their difference. Their perceptions of and reactions to how they were treated varied over time and in accordance with many factors, not the least of which were their understandings of history (their conception of the knowledge they professed) and their definition of who was considered a historical subject. The experience of these women historians as they grappled with the problem of difference demonstrates how concepts of history that posit a unitary process experienced by a Universal Man pose an obstacle to equality.

I

When the American Historical Association was founded in 1884, women were included as members. The executive council resolved that “there is nothing in the Constitution . . . to prevent the admission of women into the Association upon the same qualifications as those required of men.”1 In the effort to organize the discipline, women were accepted as AHA members if they had some university training and used the scientific method considered so crucial to the new professional history. While holding advanced degrees granted women nominal membership in the tiny elite of scholars who constituted the AHA,2 even those who did not hold Ph.D.’s were considered eligible, for the shared goal of founders such as J. Franklin Jameson and Herbert Baxter Adams was to disseminate history throughout the nation with the help of talented researchers and teachers. Despite this seemingly open policy, however, women faced discrimination once they were admitted to the association. The discrimination was sometimes subtle, sometimes quite explicit, and rested always on the assumption that, ultimately, sexual difference mattered.

Recruiting women to the AHA fit the larger democratic mission of the organization’s founders. They were determined to wrest history from the gentlemen antiquarians whose practice, they felt, undermined the tenets of science.3 The founders promoted a new kind of
professional history that opposed the more difficult study of institutions and politics to an older antiquarian focus on picturesque traditions and colorful incidents (what medieval historian Nellie Neilson referred to scornfully as "the praise of ladies dead and lovely knights"). And they attacked as elitist and somehow unscientific the notion that good historians must have classical training and literary sensibility. Jameson articulated the issue clearly in 1891:

Now it is the spread of thoroughly good second-class work . . . that our science most needs at present; for it sorely needs the improvement in technical process, that superior finish of workmanship, which a large number of works of talent can do more to foster than a few works of literary genius.

By including women in the AHA, the founders underscored their democratic, leveling impulse, their desire to "bring all the historical resources of the nation within the purview of [the] Association," and their belief that their science could be mastered by any intelligent person. There was, in fact, an important point made by women's practice of scientific history: the power of objective investigation was such that it overcame any feminine predisposition to pursue quaint or esoteric topics. There was also a complicated symbolic dimension to the inclusion of women in the organization, and it relied on the oppositions of masculine/feminine and male/female. Whatever the sex of its practitioners, the old history was represented as feminine, the new as masculine. By enlisting women on the side of scientific history, its proponents demonstrated that they had vanquished whatever aristocratic and romantic tendencies remained in their newly organized discipline.

There were also quite straightforward reasons to bring women into the new association. Women represented an important institutional constituency for the creation of history departments and the implementation of standardized history curricula in the high schools, academies, and colleges of the nation. If the new history was to triumph, it had to be properly conveyed; the AHA founders approached their teaching with missionary zeal. In the 1880s and 1890s, women's colleges represented a significant component of the academic world, and (although headed by men) they were increasingly staffed by female teachers. Women who were members of the AHA could thus serve the useful function of bringing history to their
strongholds—the women’s academies and colleges. Nellie Neilson fulfilled that task at Mount Holyoke College; Lucy Maynard Salmon, whose field was American history, did the same at Vassar. When she was hired in 1887, President James Taylor wrote to Herbert Baxter Adams that the “inadequate provision” for history at his institution would soon be remedied. “The recent appointment of Miss Salmon . . . will doubtless result in the satisfactory reorganization of the entire department.”

AHA spokesmen insisted that the same history curriculum be taught to both women and men. They saw no irony in assigning students roles as members of the English House of Commons and having them debate issues of constitutional and legislative policy (a teaching method used in the 1880s and 1890s at Wellesley and Johns Hopkins), despite the fact that women had no vote and no formal political role in either the United States or England. In addition, women were not excluded as objects of historical interest. Adams, for example, urging that history’s scope go beyond a focus on great men, reminded his colleagues of

the unnumbered thousands, yea millions, of good men and true, and of faithful, devoted women . . . [who] support good leadership and carry humanity forward from generation to generation. It is often the biography of some plain man, like Abraham Lincoln, or some self-sacrificing woman, like Florence Nightingale, that affords the greatest encouragement and incentive to ordinary humanity. But we must remember that no man, no woman is worthy of biographical or historical record, unless in some way he or she has contributed to the welfare of society and the progress of the world.

Despite some gestures in the direction of treating men and women equally, however, historians in the late nineteenth century treated them differently. This followed from the way history was conceptualized, from the assumption that processes of change were evolutionary, linear, and unitary. Welfare and progress were considered essentially political concepts, and progress was measured as movement toward democratic self-government. Adams advocated the study of “towns, plantations, parishes, and counties” as well as states and nations. Large and small, the units of analysis were polities and the conception of study was unitary and integrated. The small units
echoed the large; they provided ways of understanding how political organization worked and under what circumstances it progressed.\textsuperscript{11}

The notion of history as the study of progress toward democracy embodied the assumption that the same linear process applied at different rates and in different forms to all people. The assumption of unity and universality made it possible to include all sorts of groups in history, but it also made specification of their difference unnecessary. A single, prototypical figure represented the historical subject: white (Anglo-Saxon), Western man. The study of history for Adams and his colleagues was the study of politics, and this meant the study of “man in organized society.” The purpose of such study was self-knowledge, which “leads to self-determination and self-control.” Beyond that, history’s teaching had important political consequences, for it led to “self-government . . . the highest and best result of the experience of man in society.”\textsuperscript{12}

In pointing to these examples of man as the subject of history, I do not mean to say that historians like Adams excluded women from their conception of history; they did not. Rather, they subsumed women—including them in a generalized, unified conception that was represented in the idea of man but was always different from and subordinate to it. The feminine was but a particular instance, the masculine a universal signifier.

The consequences of such thinking were at once to deny and to recognize difference—to deny it by refusing to acknowledge that women (or blacks or Jews) might have a fundamentally different historical experience, and to recognize it by somehow disqualifying for equal treatment those different from the universal figure. This double effect was evident in the way history was written: middle-class white men were the typical subjects acting to make things happen, while women were represented (if at all) as “devoted” and “faithful” figures ensuring generational continuity through reproductive roles that were in a sense timeless and therefore outside history. It was also evident in institutional and organizational arrangements—in the leadership structure, for example, of the AHA. For despite the AHA’s gestures of formal inclusiveness, it was simply taken for granted that the members who really mattered, as well as the leaders, were white men. The language of universality rested on and incorporated differentiations that resulted in unequal treatment of women in relation to men.
Adams worked hard to keep women as members of the organization, but it was always clear that they were women, special individuals differentiated not by achievement or training but by their presumed "natural" endowments and their association with women's colleges. The AHA, for example, held an annual "smoker" for the men of the association, while the women historians and wives of historians attended a "colonial dames' tea." Lucy Salmon wrote to protest these arrangements in 1905: "We do not care for afternoon teas where we meet society women, and deprecate entertainments that separate the members into two classes, men and women." But women's objections to this segregatory practice were ignored.

The AHA never went beyond tokenism when it came to including women in leadership positions. Lucy Salmon was the only woman to serve on special committees (eventually including the executive council) in the early period, but when she urged Adams to include another woman on the Committee of Seven (the group concerned with the teaching of history), he wrote to a friend that he was "inclined to think that one woman is enough!" In 1919, as a member of the council, Salmon lamented her inability to increase the number of women sharing power in the AHA:

I do not wish to seem to press the names of women for membership on any of these committees; and yet, as I think I have written more than once before, I can but feel that the Association has by self-denying ordinance been deprived of the services of a good many women.

This situation continued well into the 1960s. Arthur Link (president of the AHA in 1984) has noted that for most of the association's history, "women were given short shrift in positions of leadership and governance." Only five women were included among the ninety-six members of the executive council before 1933, he says, and women were represented on committees in a ratio of about one to nine, an underrepresentation in relation to female membership in the association.

Although there were high points for women in the AHA, these never resulted in a clear end to discriminatory treatment. The 1920s and 1930s, for example, saw a rise in the numbers of women who earned Ph.D.'s and were employed in history departments (especially in women's colleges). Yet as the prestige and power of research
universities grew in this period, women were increasingly marginalized in their confinement to undergraduate faculties and female institutions. By 1920 women constituted about 19 percent of the members of the AHA, but not even 5 percent of its leadership. The prevailing tone was of an elite male club whose formal structure and informal social practices made women secondary members.

The patterns continued with little variation into the postwar period. Howard K. Beale, writing in 1953, noted that "discrimination against women is persistent," and part of a broad set of biases "against Negroes, Jews, Catholics, women, and persons not 'gentlemen'" that operated throughout the profession of history. In 1970 a special AHA committee systematically documented the effects of these biases on women. The committee had been set up in response to the demands of women historians who argued that the recruitment of large numbers of women to the field of history, in process since the mid-1960s, would not itself guarantee equality; instead there had to be explicit attention to eradicating discrimination. The committee's document, known as the Rose Report (for its chair, Willie Lee Rose), gave evidence of the long history of systematic underrepresentation of women within the AHA and the profession as a whole, and recommended the creation of a standing Committee on Women Historians (CWH) to provide advocacy and monitor statistics in an effort to "secure greater equity for women as prospective students and teachers of history." By appointing this committee, the AHA formally acknowledged the persistence of gender differentiation and the need to attend to it as a long-term structural problem.

In the history of women in the AHA, one moment does stand out as a distinct exception to otherwise exclusionary practices at the leadership level: a woman became president of the association in 1943. Yet the election of Nellie Neilson was only a brief triumph of what seems to have been a coalition of progressive historians and organized feminists in the larger context of coalitions and popular-front mobilizations against fascism on the eve of America's entry into the Second World War. Neilson had been nominated for second vice-president (which automatically put her in line for the presidency) in 1940, a year that was particularly auspicious for its attention not only to women but to other previously neglected groups. Under Merle Curti's chairmanship the AHA program committee arranged several sessions on the theme of "the common man." Selig Perlman
spoke on class in American labor history, W.E.B. DuBois chaired a panel on the Negro in the history of the United States, and Mildred Thompson presided over a session on women in history.22

The attention to women’s history and the election of Neilson were the results of years of lobbying by women, some of them organized at the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians (founded in 1929), others simply acting out of deep feminist commitment. They were active enough in 1939 for the chair of the nominating committee to note in his report the existence of a feminist bloc.23 Their pressure coincided with the determination of progressives like Curti and Beale to practice democracy within the association, to assert history’s connection to the democratic processes it chronicled, at the very moment that constitutionalism and liberalism were under siege in Europe. The committee was explicit about its goal of including women, and wrote to all AHA members in May 1940 urging them to nominate and vote for “women of distinction” who “have not had sufficient recognition among the Association’s officers.”24

The election of Neilson did not, however, constitute or even initiate an evolution toward equality for women. The general pattern of underrepresentation persisted throughout her presidency, and as the war came to an end, that pattern was reinforced by a decline in the numbers of women receiving doctoral degrees and jobs in the field of history.25 In addition, a new discourse emerged that emphasized the masculine qualities of the historian. It associated those qualities with the preservation of national traditions and democracy and with scholarly activities that renewed commitment to the kind of heroism that arose during the war effort. Calling for greater appreciation of businessmen’s efforts to build America, Allan Nevins suggested in 1951, for example, that historians abandon “feminine idealism” and portray businessmen in “their true proportions as builders of an indispensable might.”26 The contrast between idealism and materialism, sentimentality and might, was presented as a contrast between femininity and masculinity; and although the contrast did not speak about women directly, it clearly implied an association of Cold War ideology with gender in depicting the traits and attitudes of the typical historian.

“I have seen in my generation the rise, and now the beginning, of the closing of doors to women,” wrote Beatrice Hyslop, a historian of the French Revolution, as she contemplated retirement from Hunter
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College in 1969.27 Hyslop’s comments referred to the 1950s and early 1960s and their contrast to the years of her doctoral work in the early 1930s. Ironically, she wrote just as a great transition began, but it would still be many years before women were regularly included in positions of power in the AHA, and it was not until 1987 that another woman, Natalie Zemon Davis, assumed the office of president.

II

While the AHA formally endorsed inclusiveness and spoke a language of universality, that language nonetheless implied difference, and the AHA still represented the typical historian and the typical historical actor as a white male. Women’s likeness to this universal type was not taken for granted; it had to be demonstrated in the behavior of each woman. Thus, regardless of skills and training, women faced the challenge of repudiating the disabilities assumed to belong to their sex.

This was no easy task, whatever the strategy adopted. One could choose to ignore systems of differentiation and accept their limits so as to operate within them; but this, of course, left the systems in place and often put a great burden on the individual, who usually attributed the treatment she received to her own failings. One could consider specific instances of discrimination the result of the misogyny of particular persons and thus avoid making generalizations. One could acknowledge that there was systematic unequal treatment based on gender and condemn such injustices as violations of democratic principles. One could affirm the difference of women and elevate it to a position of complementarity or even superiority to men. Whether in the name of equality or difference, collective action by women could be extremely effective politically; but it held a potential for underscoring women’s separate identity, of pointing up rather than playing down the contrast between male and female historians.

Since 1884 professional women historians have used all these strategies to combat discrimination, sometimes in combination. Examining these strategies gives us a way to grasp the operations of a profession as a differentiated system—to understand the effects of such a system on the persons perceived to be different and, in this
case, to see how professional women historians formulated their critiques in relation to prevailing concepts of history.  

Lucy Salmon’s strategy was to insist that women be included in the concept of humanity. As she made clear to the AHA, the practice of excluding women contradicted notions of universality and equality and resulted in a waste of available talent. She believed firmly in coeducation (she held bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Michigan), though she always taught at a women’s college. While she accepted the limits of available employment, she constantly battled President Taylor’s attempts to regulate women faculty members’ lives at Vassar.  

Women, she believed, should be treated no differently from men; any other policy would be irrational or unjust.

The same conviction led Salmon to campaign for women’s suffrage: she believed that the vote, once won, would guarantee the full and equal participation of women in a variety of political institutions (including, undoubtedly, professional associations). In fact, society would be the ultimate beneficiary, she asserted, because so many more talented and able people would be involved in the business of politics.

Salmon based her argument on the idea (shared with her professional colleagues and evident in all she wrote) that history meant progress toward democracy and equality. She saw prejudice against her sex as a matter of individual attitude or a reflection of insufficient experience, intelligence, or education—the relic of a less civilized past, destined eventually to disappear. Thus, she wrote of Woodrow Wilson, with whom she had studied for a Ph.D. at Bryn Mawr, that his life was governed by narrow and self-serving ambition. Furthermore, he did not like teaching, and

he was singularly ill-adapted to teaching women. He had apparently never had any of the normal relationships of life with women, he assumed that women were quite different from men, and he made, I felt, no effort to understand them. He always assumed that they were intellectually different from men and that, therefore, they would not interest him. I am quite sure that he never whole-heartedly believed in college education for women. He once said to me that a woman who had married an intellectual, educated man was often better educated than a woman who had had college training. All of this used to amuse me and I never presented any other side of the subject to him or stated my own views—it would have been useless to do so.
I felt that his opinions were simply derived from a limited educational and social experience and hoped he would some time learn better.30

Like many of her contemporaries, Salmon participated in professional life assuming (even as she recognized or experienced discrimination) that equal treatment was her due. For her, “progress lay in the direction of obliterating rather than emphasizing the differences between men and women.”31 Salmon’s biographer noted that she “distrusted any movement which recognized a special ‘woman’s sphere,’ ” and that she refused to acknowledge any such movement in her writing, her professional and political activities, or her personal deportment.32 Such recognition would only perpetuate the false idea that biological differences between the sexes should be the basis for educational or professional distinctions. “Do not think,” she wrote to a colleague, “that . . . I am not interested in the work that women are doing, I am intensely interested in all good work, but not specially because it is done by women.” She conceded that women labored under many disabilities but insisted that these “must be removed . . . by women individually rather than collectively.”33

Lucy Salmon succeeded in gaining professional prominence during her lifetime, and she individually removed obstacles to women. She increased the participation of women on AHA committees, and established an informal women’s network to encourage and support women students who aspired to be historians. When she died, she was eulogized as an “original” thinker by Edward Cheney, who urged the publication of an unfinished manuscript of hers because “we ought not to allow anything she wrote to disappear.”34 Arguably, her work was more profound than that of many of her male associates, including Herbert Baxter Adams. Yet her name virtually disappeared from accounts of the history of the profession, including John Higham’s History, a celebration of the discipline since its institutionalization in 1884 that was published in 1965. Higham’s book demonstrates the workings of gender difference and the limits of individualized strategies to deal with it. Not only is Salmon’s name absent from its pages on the leading historians in America but so are the names of virtually all women (and blacks). No works by women are included in any of the summaries of historiographic debates; Mary Beard appears in two footnotes as the author of a book about her husband and as coauthor with him of a book entirely credited to
him in the text; and Nellie Neilson’s presidency of the AHA is not even acknowledged in passing.35 The invisibility of women in this book is not the result of their absence from the ranks of practicing historians and active AHA members; rather, it follows directly from the assumption that a universal white male figure can be used to typify the historical subject and that those different from him are insignificant because they are at once represented and excluded by him. To insist, as Salmon did, on the irrelevance of gender difference in the face of this kind of thinking was to attack the effects but not the source of differentiation, exclusion, and discrimination.

Another strategy was to reform the institutional policy of excluding women. This effort—sometimes by individuals, sometimes by collectively organized groups—emerged most forcefully in the 1920s and 1930s, a period of great ferment nationally and within the discipline of history.36 Chairs for women were endowed at the research universities in attempts to rectify the virtual absence of women faculty from these male strongholds. George Herbert Palmer was probably following his wife’s (Alice Freeman’s) wishes when he left money to establish a full professorship for a woman in the University of Michigan history department. Similarly, Florence Porter Robinson, herself employed to teach home economics at Beloit College though she held a Ph.D. in history, left her estate to the University of Wisconsin to fund a chair in history for a woman. In both cases the donors stipulated that salaries and terms of employment be identical to men’s.37

The issue of positions for women at universities was also taken up by the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, an organization founded in 1929 by professors at East Coast women’s colleges who wished that “we scattered women historians could get together oftener to exchange ideas.” Returning on a train from an AHA meeting, a group of women discussed how they might generate a “greater sense of comradeship in our craft.” According to Louise Loomis’s recollection, the goal was to create an informal opportunity for discussion and “social contact” among themselves.38 There was also resentment against a new practice among male historians to gather for informal conferences that explicitly excluded women. Although the members of the Berkshire Conference insisted they were not a “pressure group,” they were an interest group and they exerted pressure on the AHA in the name of women.
From the first meeting on, they discussed ways to improve the situation of women historians. They planned a program of exchange professorships so that women could vary their experience outside the confines of their own institutions. This plan was never implemented, however, because of the impact of the Depression and of other more pressing concerns. Faced with informal discrimination, such as the preference for hiring men in women’s colleges, and outright discriminatory laws against married women enacted by state and federal legislatures, the Berkshire Conference examined “the professional outlook for women” in the 1930s by comparing the hiring patterns, ranks, and salary scales for women and men.39

Emily Hickman of the New Jersey College for Women seems to have been the most outspoken and imaginative of the leaders. At one meeting she suggested that the American Association of University Women (AAUW) make a “statistical survey of the possibilities in academic life for women.” She also thought that “biographies of eminent women” should be published “with a view to disproving rumors that none is suitable for a [college] presidency.” Sending in nomination after nomination and urging sympathetic men to support the nominees, she turned the group’s attention to the inclusion of women in positions of power in the AHA.40

The Berkshire Conference represented an organized effort to improve the situation of women historians, though it was confined to the East Coast. Acting with a sense of commitment to the feminist cause, women in other regions—sometimes clustered in women’s colleges, sometimes isolated in coeducational institutions—also organized campaigns to place women in positions of power. An example is Mary Williams, a Latin American historian who received a Ph.D. from Stanford in 1914, taught briefly at Wellesley and then at Goucher College, and agitated for the nomination of Nellie Neilson to the presidency of the AHA in 193341—the year Louise Phelps Kellogg, a member of one of several informal women’s networks, served on the nominating committee.42 The detailed story of these highly political efforts has yet to be written, but even a glance at them suggests a widespread and determined effort by women to challenge the inequities they suffered because of their sex.43 Unlike Lucy Salmon, these women advocated and undertook collective action to challenge structures of differentiation within their profession.
The general ferment of the 1930s contributed to the kinds of action they took. Not only were interest groups a visible part of social and political life during the New Deal; they were increasingly the focus of historians’ attention. John Higham has characterized the “new history” that came into full prominence in the 1930s as “progressive history.” It focused on conflicts between sections and economic groups; “rather than unity, [it] emphasized diversity.”44 The story of the United States that progressive historians told was one of social protest, of the organization of movements that struggled in the name of the less privileged for improvement and change. The idea that a universal human subject existed did not disappear; indeed, the appeal for equality was made in the name of inalienable human rights. Neither was there change in the optimistic belief that history was a story of progress toward social as well as political democracy. The story was, however, increasingly complicated by the interplay of competing interest groups.

In this context, women identified themselves as an interest group. Their interest came not from some inherent need or sameness but from their experience of discrimination. They argued that irrelevant biological differences had been invoked to deny them jobs, leadership positions, and power; intellectual capacity and professional ability, they insisted, had nothing to do with sex. Yet if the disabling effects of differentiation were to be fought, collective action by women as women was necessary. The point was to include women in whatever was considered human, to insist on the androgyny, as it were, of Universal Man.

Not only did women press their interest as members of the profession of history; they also assembled archival sources and wrote histories of women. Their goal was to establish the fact that women were, as Mary Beard’s book title put it, “a force in history.”45 Their focus was on women’s positive contribution to the building of societies and cultures, a challenge to the presumed passivity and irrelevance of women and therefore to their invisibility in the historical record. Visibility was to confer humanity on women and to make self-evident the terms on which equality ought to be practiced.

Feminists of the 1920s and 1930s appealed to democratic principles and the belief in the universality of man to justify their right to full participation in the profession. They assumed that their interests were those of all historians; only prejudice prevented women’s
fulfillment of these interests. On one level, there was nothing in the masculine representation of the historical subject to prevent women's identification with it; they thought of themselves as viable actors capable of effecting change. Yet equality proved more difficult to procure than to demand because the symbol of man was less susceptible to pluralization than it seemed. The claim to man's universality rested on an implied contrast between difference and particularity; as long as man was universal, the mere existence of woman demonstrated her specificity. This proved repeatedly to be the case in the AHA, despite the articulate and forceful pressure feminists brought to bear. Beatrice Hyslop pondered the frustrations of the situation in these terms:

Where a woman has the ability to be a prominent historian, why should there be discrimination just because she is a woman? A young man starting on a career wants an even chance to show his ability and to compete for rewards. Women historians ask for the same equality of opportunity. Too many times they are not even given a chance . . . Is there something about history . . . that excludes competence on the basis of sex?46

Hyslop thought not, but I suggest there was: differentiation on the basis of sex was implicit in the abstract but unmistakably gendered concept of man as the representative human subject. As long as historical actors and historians were represented as men, it would be difficult for women to put into effect the equality they believed was their due.

III

In the 1970s women historians used another kind of collective strategy. Committed to equalizing conditions for women and men, the new approach nonetheless emphasized difference in a way that some earlier feminists found discomfiting, if not unacceptable. Attention to the interests of women as professionals, the organization of women's caucuses, the publication of separate journals, and the writing of women's history all ran the risk of validating, even if only inadvertently, the difference between women and men.

The new emphasis on difference took shape in a national context generated by government policies of affirmative action that established and legitimated movements of organized interest groups of
women, blacks, and others. In 1961 President Kennedy's creation of national and state commissions on the status of women set in motion processes that resulted in the founding of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966. Within the AHA, the Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession (CCWHP) emerged in 1969 as the voice of women's interests. Its pressure led to the formation of the AHA committee that issued the Rose Report in 1970.

That report opened a new era for women's participation in the AHA. After 1970 patterns of exclusion began to be reversed: women were appointed to key committees and elected to the council, and they gained increased impact on association policies (for example, they produced guidelines on fairness in hiring and tenure for departments of history). The standing Committee on Women Historians (CWH), established in the wake of the Rose Report, was the force behind these changes. It designated women as a separate constituency requiring an advocacy of their own and gave them access to high-level policy deliberations.

The CWH was at once a symbol and an agent of change. No longer was it easy to use gender differences to categorize and thus to discriminate among historians. In furthering a separate collective identity for women historians, the CWH made them visible as a definably different group, and they won important concessions because of that visibility. Indeed, visibility made it possible to identify the negative aspects of differentiation and thus to counter discrimination; it also enabled positive political action by women as women historians.

The difficulty came in establishing the terms of identity. Should one simply reverse the valence and accept the differences already assigned to women but assess them positively? Should one substitute other unifying female traits, or define the common interest as a rejection of the terms of difference that others had imposed? If one rejected the terms of difference, in what name did one do so—humanity? Didn't that then return to issues of humanity's masculine representation and women's problematic relationship with that concept?

These questions (by no means yet answered) became even more acute with the emergence of women's history as a major field of scholarly inquiry in the 1970s. The organizational visibility of women coincided with their appearance as historical subjects in
association with a reconceptualization of history that was evident by the early 1960s. This new vision of history was preoccupied, according to Higham, “with the tendency of stable structures to break down,” with “the disastrous erosion of all institutional authority.”

It turned away from formal politics to various areas of human experience, including work, family, and sexuality. It questioned the concept of history as linear progress toward democracy, and the convention of representing humankind in unitary terms. Historians wrote books about conflict and struggle, about changing modes of domination, about social hierarchy and resistance.

In the process they introduced a plurality of historical actors whose special points of view and varied stories had to be revealed because they were not the same as those of the “typical” white man. The archetypal figure became particularized. The Renaissance was not a “renaissance for women”; the discovery of America became, in part, a story of Indian removal; manifest destiny was exposed as an ideological justification for imperialist expansion; and slavery became not a “peculiar institution” but a chapter in the continuing story of American racism. The different stories of women, blacks, the poor, and the colonized were not reducible to a single narrative line about the American man. But how could they be told?

For the most part, histories of these different groups were written as separate narratives alongside or in opposition to what was dubbed “mainstream history.” Women’s history became a subdiscipline within the field of history and generated a prodigious new scholarship on the lives and experiences of women. The new knowledge demonstrated what previous accounts had implicitly denied: women were agents of history, and their lives yielded insight into unstudied realms of human existence in addition to well-studied processes such as industrialization and urbanization.

The new women’s history was often cast in terms that affirmed the separateness and difference of women in implicit contrast to the world of men already known to history: women had a separate culture, distinct notions of the meaning of work and family, identifiable artistic or literary signatures, and particular forms of political consciousness. The documentation of this women’s world became an end in itself; simply establishing its existence was considered a significant challenge to the mainstream. Historians assumed they knew all about the category “woman”; they ascribed its negative
aspects to male dominance, or “patriarchy,” its positive aspects to women’s resistance, or “agency,” without examining how the classification “woman” acquired social and political meaning in particular contexts. This kind of women’s history provided evidence for the existence of something that could be called a separate female sphere. Having made women visible, historians had also emphasized women’s difference from men and had thus both challenged and confirmed the established narrative of American democracy: challenged it because they questioned the typicality of the traditional history, yet confirmed it because the stories about women were so different from the standard story as to seem parallel but not central—sometimes even trivial.

Both effects are evident in current professional practice. On the one hand, there are historians like Carl Degler who recognize the need for a new concept of history:

What is meant by history or the past will have to be changed before [women’s history] becomes a part of it . . . since the conventional past was not only conceived (invented?) by men but includes, almost by definition, only those activities in which men have been engaged, while ignoring almost entirely the historical activities of women . . . The challenge is now to rethink our conception of the past we teach and write about so that women . . . are included.

On the other hand, most departments of history reject Degler’s challenge and treat women’s history as a separate field of study. For positions in nineteenth- or twentieth-century social history they hire people who have written about miners or railroad workers but reject those who have written about seamstresses or female textile workers as being “in the wrong field.” The historians responsible for this kind of action commonly give the explanation that “we already have a women’s historian.” They consider the subject of women to be a special one that lies outside traditionally established fields. At bottom, they refuse to recognize the particularity and the specificity of men, the uselessness of the concept of Universal Man. In the face of this refusal, which evokes tradition, the legacy of civilization and the return of narrative on its behalf, integrating women into history is just as daunting a task as including women as equals with men in the concept of humanity.
The strategies of women historians have all foundered on the issue of difference as a conceptual and structural phenomenon. How to recognize and refuse terms of discrimination, how to act collectively on behalf of women without confirming the notion of a separate female sphere—these have been persistent dilemmas, never fully resolved. Indeed, debates about how to resolve them are at the center of current discussion among feminist historians. Women’s history poses the same questions as women’s collective action in the profession of history: Can the historical narrative—the great story of Western civilization or American democracy—sustain the pluralizing of its subject? Can we conceive of humanity in terms that are not gendered? Can we think about difference without reference to a norm, without establishment of a hierarchical ordering? Not easily—or at least not yet.

The continuing inequality of various groups challenges the ideal of democracy as the extension of access to ever-greater numbers of people. To adopt this simple notion of pluralism as a theory of democratic inclusion is to ignore the ways in which difference establishes and institutionalizes the various meanings of power. It has been impossible to demand equality without somehow recognizing difference, but too much insistence on difference (as Lucy Salmon pointed out) undercuts claims for equality. This conundrum exists not because of faulty strategy on the part of those who seek equal treatment but because of the inability of certain theories of liberalism to take difference, even as it defines equality, into account.

To resolve the equality—difference dilemma, we must critically analyze the categories we most often take for granted: history, women, men, equality, difference, the terms of liberal theory itself. Rather than assume to know the meaning of these terms, we need instead to examine them as they have been developed and used in specific historical contexts as the products of culture, politics, and time. We cannot write women into history, for example, unless we are willing to accept the notion that history as a unified story was a fiction about a universal subject whose universality was achieved through implicit processes of differentiation, marginalization, and exclusion. Man was never, in other words, a truly universal figure.

The processes of exclusion that established man’s “universality” must be the focus of the new narrative. One aspect of those processes involved the definition of women and the attribution of particular
characteristics, traits, and roles to women to differentiate them from men. The difference historians have documented in so much of women’s history was constructed through processes of exclusion; it did not arise from some essential quality inherent in the female sex. Thus “women’s experience” and “women’s culture” exist only as expressions of female particularity in contrast to male universality; they are not realms of empirical data but concepts through which a certain vision of social life is realized.

Differentiation also involved constant readjustment in the relationship between equality and difference. Absolute equality has never been achieved, but for particular purposes in some contexts the exclusions enforced against certain differences have been suspended. The relative importance of some differences has varied with time and circumstances. For instance, sex differences did not limit access to the profession of history, but they became a major consideration for the AHA in establishing leadership and allocating power within the association. It is this kind of story that must constitute the focus of new historical narratives.

The presence of difference complicates the story of democratization as a process of access, for many inequities persist even after physical barriers are removed. The problem of difference also indicates that power relationships within presumably homogeneous organizations are related not only to sociological distinctions among practitioners but also to the very conceptions of knowledge produced and protected by a discipline or a profession. This is not to say that access and concepts of difference are distinct issues, for there is clearly a relationship between them: lines of inclusion and exclusion are drawn in terms of difference, as are internal hierarchies. Still, it seems useful to distinguish among kinds of differentiation and not to conflate such issues as access and internal hierarchy even though both involve drawing lines according to sex. These related processes have a history that requires precise recounting. Precision of focus and close analysis permit appreciation of how varied and yet how persistent are the interconnections between gender and the politics of a discipline such as history.
I am grateful to Jill Conway and Jacqueline Goggin for their critical readings of the first draft of this paper, and to Goggin for generously providing me with information she has gathered in her own extensive work on the subject of American women historians. Elizabeth Weed provided crucial advice for conceptualizing the argument.


2 Fewer than 100 scholars held Ph.D.'s in history before 1900; among these were eight women. Many more women, however, held master's degrees or were working on Ph.D.'s. The other women recruited to the AHA in its early years were members of historical societies, archivists, librarians, and (historian) wives of male historians. → William Hesseltine and Louis Kaplan, "Women Doctors of Philosophy in History," *Journal of Higher Education* 14 (1943), pp. 254–59.


6 Ibid., p. 13.


8 Ibid., pp. 213–17. See also his *Methods of History Study* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1884).


10 Ibid., p. 10.

11 Although the focus of much of this work was on formal politics, it sometimes extended to other kinds of institutions—even to things as seemingly remote from politics as domestic service. Lucy Salmon, for example, who had written a master's thesis on the "History of the Appointing Power of the President," made domestic service the subject of a book she wrote as part of her preoccupation with the history of democracy. She saw the institution of service as a remnant of an aristocratic social system that perpetuated dependence and subservience, and she devised ingenious ways to study the history of service and its current practice. She did not conceive of the project as a separate study of the family, the private sphere, or of women. Rather, her argument was that domestic service was an economic and political phenomenon and, as such, within the province of scientific historical
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15Ibid., p. 954. Salmon’s perseverance resulted in an increase in female representation on AHA committees; at the end of her council term in 1920, there were four women on various committees. See Goggin, “Challenging the Historical Establishment,” p. 37.
17Referring to the period 1926–39, one study concluded, “teaching history—or even holding positions in which graduate training in history is of some use—is predominantly a man’s occupation. Part of the reason for this situation is the more limited job opportunities for women. No woman teaches history in a man’s college, although men may teach in a woman’s college. Coeducational institutions employ a far greater percentage of men than women.” Hesseline and Kaplan, “Women Doctors of Philosophy in History,” pp. 255–56.
20In the early 1960s much of the discussion of women in the professions had assumed that an increase in numbers would end discrimination. Barnaby Keeney, then president of Brown University, wrote in 1962 that “all things being equal, 50 percent of the professors in the total of colleges and universities ought to be women...” in “Women Professors at Brown,” Pembroke Alumna 27 (October 1962), pp. 8–9. See also Jessie Bernard, Academic Women (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1964), p. xii; and Lucille Addison Pollard, Women on College and University Faculties: A Historical Survey and a Study of Their Present Academic Status, (New York: Ayer, 1977).
23Annual Report of the AHA, Proceedings—1939, p. 58. I am grateful to Noralee Frankel for helping me locate these materials.
24Historical News: The American Historical Association,” American Historical Review 45 (1939–40), p. 745, cited in Goggin, “Challenging the Historical Establishment,” p. 52. The members of the 1940 nominating committee were Howard K. Beale, Paul Buck, Curtis Nettles, and Judith Williams. Beale, its chairman, had long championed the inclusion of blacks in the council and other committees. Although that effort repeatedly failed (indicating the degree of racism in the AHA), he supported the movement to name a representative from another “different” category—women.


It would also be interesting, if one had more time, to look at what might be called the uncritical strategies—those that insisted that individual excellence or tact could overcome the disabilities of sex. Thus the authors of a 1953 study on the Radcliffe Ph.D. ended their book by suggesting the best way for women to succeed: “The solution . . . is for women to do work of such high quality that no question of ‘competition’ arises. It would take a very prejudiced anti-feminist to refuse to employ, on the ground of sex, a woman who has demonstrated ability and achievement clearly superior to that of the men available.” *Graduate Education for Women: The Radcliffe Ph.D.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 108. The book also contains reports from women Ph.D.’s on their strategies. One tells how she tried to “hide [her] mind” (p. 36); another does “not attempt to press forward as strenuously as a man would” (p. 39); another simply dismisses her exclusion from social events “like clubs and stag dinners” (pp. 27–28). For many, any evidence of stridency or feminism constitutes dangerous behavior, to be avoided at all costs (pp. 26, 38). The point seems to be either to be so competent that one’s sex is excused or to be so discreet that it goes unnoticed. In either case, the evidence for consciousness of female difference is overwhelmingly clear.


Evidence of protest by women historians existed prior to the 1920s in individual expressions of anger and in concerted efforts to include women in the AHA leadership structure. It was not until the 1920s, however, that widespread evidence of collective action appeared.


Information about Dr. Robinson and the provisions of her bequest was obtained from the University of Wisconsin (Madison) history department. It took years for bequests such as these to generate enough income to pay the salaries the donors stipulated. Only in the 1960s and 1970s, when alumnae pressure and a new concern with increasing the number of women Ph.D.’s drew attention to the existence of these chairs for women, were they fully funded and permanently filled.


Papers of the Berkshire Conference, MC267 (2), 16 March 1931. The influence, however indirect, of labor movement concerns in this period is also evident here.

Papers of the Berkshire Conference, MC267 (3), Minutes, 20–22 May 1938.

It would be interesting to know exactly why Nellie Neilson was chosen as the women’s nominee. She was, of course, an accomplished historian with an excellent reputation. That she was a medievalist also seems important, especially in light of the fact that medieval history attracted many extraordinary women historians. I speculate that there was a relationship between the skills required of medievalists (facility with esoteric languages and epigraphy) and women’s entry into this field. Mastery of these difficult skills were unqualified marks of competence and erudition. To prove one’s self in medieval history might be harder but also more sure for a woman than other more accessible areas of the field (for which scholars had only to read English or a modern foreign language).

Historian William Roy Smith wrote of Nellie Neilson that she had “an uncanny faculty for inspiring her students with a love for mediaeval history, but she also [taught] them how to use manuscript material and enjoy the game.” Cited in Goggin, “Challenging the Historical Establishment,” p. 15.

Louise Phelps Kellogg was an archivist at the Wisconsin State Historical Society. She was the first woman president of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association (the forerunner of the current Organization of American Historians), elected in 1930.

Jacqueline Goggin, of the J. Franklin Jameson Papers at the Library of Congress, is at work on this history of women historians from 1884–1940.

Higham, History, p. 148.


47 The history of this period is told by Alice Rossi and Ann Calderwood, eds., *Academic Women on the Move* (New York: Russell Sage, 1973). See especially the essays by Alice Rossi, Jo Freeman, and Kay Klotzburger.


49 American Historical Association, *Report of the Committee on the Status of Women*, 9 November 1970. See also the annual reports of the Committee on Women Historians in the *Proceedings of the AHA*.


