Introduction to Women’s/Gender History

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28/10/2016
Origins of women’s history

• feminist consciousness, women’s movements
• UK: New Social History, Marxist feminism – dual system capitalism-patriarchy, sexual division of labor
• USA: cultural history – women’s lives and life cycles, separate sphere/women’s culture (Smith-Rosenberg, Cott)
Women’s to Gender History

Criticism of women’s history approach:

• Tendency to assume a universal women’s experience, ignoring differences among women: black women’s critique, post-colonial critique

• Cultural / Linguistic turn: sources are representations

• Isolated and marginalized production of history of women
Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis”, *The American Historical Review*, 91/5, December 1986

Joan Scott, Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis

- Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and
- Gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power
Gender as constitutive element of social relationships involves:

- Culturally available symbols that evoke multiple (and often contradictory) representations
- Normative concepts that set forth interpretations of these symbols, that attempt to limit and contain their metaphorical possibilities
- Politics, social institutions and organizations
- Subjective identity
• History of masculinities, sexualities

• Post-colonial critique – interrelations of gender, race, class, nation, religion
Tensions between cultural and social history approaches

• Textuality vs. social and political structures and power relations
• Experience -> identity -> politics vs. floating meanings; agency
- Gender and empire
- Gender and citizenship
- Gender and nation
- Body/sexuality
- Transnational turn
How to do and teach women’s/gender history

• Finding women in the archives

• Women’s history and history of gender in school education
Recommended readings

- Sonya O. Rose, *What is Gender History?*, Polity Press, 2010
- Bonnie G. Smith (ed.), *Women’s History in Global Perspective*, 2005

Thank you for your attention!
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