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To the Future in the Distance: Women and Gender in Political History

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Wendy A. Pojman

«To the Future in the Distance»: Women and Gender in Political History

Abstract

Gender historians have shown themselves to be at the forefront of the advancement of subjects of historical study but have also developed innovative methodological approaches, particularly in the fields of social and cultural history in which interdisciplinary studies have had a meaningful impact. However, the ghettoization of women's and gender history remains a concern, particularly in areas such as political history, and as academic publishers face declining sales figures. This article deals with women in politics and women and gender in political history. Moreover, it shows the possible perspectives and the new topical areas in gender and political studies.

Keywords: Political History, Gender, Women, Historiography.

I have been revising this essay in the aftermath of the presidential elections in the United States. Hillary Rodham Clinton seemed poised to become the first woman president in what commentators have already noted was one of the most tumultuous election seasons in American history. Political scientists are currently undertaking some of the work of trying to understand the upset election of Donald Trump while historians look to the past to make sense of the outcome. As I reflect on women in politics and women and gender in political history, I continue to return to the theme of misogyny, in my own estimation a much under-reported story during the entire campaign season. Numerous questions about women and gender emerged during the elections, but the historical significance of Clinton's bid for the highest office in the land was not often among them. It was at first unclear to me if the media had normalized the idea of a woman president thus making it unremarkable, or if Clinton's long-time feminist activism on the national and international scale simply failed to interest voters enough to make it a focus for reporters. Clearly, the fact that Clinton is a woman was not enough to secure her the female vote; figures show that just over 50% of white women cast their ballots for her, which is much lower than pollsters expected. Perhaps even more remarkable, however, is how Trump's campaign was able to use his own insistence that «nobody respects women more than me» with great success. When some women launched the «pussy grabs back» slogan in response to distasteful remarks Trump made several years ago, his supporters mostly dismissed them as «locker room talk» or celebrated them as a show of undermining «political correctness». All of this has been occurring as women in Europe and the United States face serious legislative and judicial threats

to their reproductive rights. In several European States, the reduction in social services because of austerity measures implemented during the recession disproportionately harms women. And, debates about women in the public sphere rage on, for example in the French «burkini ban» that underscored continued ideological conflicts between secularism and religious traditions fought on the bodies of girls and women.

Although these cases draw from the current political situation, they are all representative of long-standing areas of interest to historians of women and gender in political history. The careers of women leaders, women as voters, gender and the welfare state, and representations of masculinity and femininity in the public sphere are just a few of the areas scholars have been examining since the ancient and traditional field of political history converged with the subfield of women's and gender history, which was largely ushered in by the women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Since then, gender historians have shown themselves to be at the forefront of the advancement of subjects of historical study but have also developed innovative methodological approaches, particularly in the fields of social and cultural history in which interdisciplinary studies have had a meaningful impact. Since 1973, the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women has featured work by new and established scholars of women's history and several important journals, such as the «Journal of Women's History, Gender & History», and «Women's History Review» attest to the high quality of research being published in the field. History journals in all specializations and publications with large reaches, of course, also feature articles on women and gender. However, the ghettoization of women's and gender history remains a concern, particularly in areas such as political history, and as academic publishers face declining sales figures. There are not any journals specifically on women in political history. «The Journal of Women, Politics and Policy» (formerly «Women & Politics»), for example, aims to reach a general social science audience rather than mainly historians. On one hand, women's historians have struggled to carve out a niche in which new ideas and topics of study can flourish. On the other hand, their contributions have sometimes remained outside mainstream scholarship. As is the case in other areas of Academe, such as Women's Studies departments and programs, the original reasons for creating special spaces in which underrepresented voices could be heard need to be protected in the face of cuts. They also need to be reexamined because it is too easy to isolate subjects and approaches rather than integrate them into curriculum and research. At the same time, the field of political and diplomatic history is attracting fewer scholars than before. The «Journal of American History», for example, has reported a decline in the number of submissions on political topics from just over 33% in the 1970s to about 15% currently. Both the isolation of women's history and a reduction in the number of historians working in political history appear to be continuing trends.

1. A reinvigorated field

It could seem then that the state of women and gender in political history is currently stagnating or even faltering. Yet, arguably that is not the case. In fact, the contributions of historians in this field have reinvigorated it and pointed to exciting new directions for

study. Perhaps the defining text of a generation of women's and gender historians, Joan Wallach Scott's 1986 *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis* did more to advance ways of thinking about such terms as men, women and sex than had previous work that took gender relations to be natural or unproblematic¹. Historians had examined relations between men and women but without necessarily devoting careful consideration to the different meanings of social categories and social organization based on gender. Gender itself, Scott argued, required deeper analysis. In her later work, Scott explained that «Gender might always refer to the ways in which relationships between men and women were conceived, but neither the relationships nor the 'men' and "women" were taken to be the same in all instances. The point was to interrogate all the terms and so to historicize them»². Scott and her contemporaries critiqued an approach to women's history that she had described as «to add women and stir». However, as in other fields, in political history, it has been and continues to be necessary to add women. Women's political participation has historically been limited but also narrated as a series of advances and setbacks on the path of access to the rights of citizenship. Because of this, scholars wanted to know more about the few women who held positions of power before the contemporary era and about the so-called women behind the men who governed indirectly. The roles of women in pivotal political events, such as the French Revolution and World War II, burgeoned as scholars investigated the ways in which women's participation directed the course of conflicts even when they were formally excluded from them³. Suffrage, too, emerged into the forefront of historical study as research on the conditions under which voting rights have been extended to women in different places and times revealed hierarchies based on class and race as well as sex⁴. Politics meant also looking at the public sphere and women's access to it as many women and men struggled for the expansion of not only political, but economic and social rights, and integrated women's concerns into such developments as the welfare state⁵. And, histories of women's movements shed light on how the collective identity of women has been challenged over time and across multiple places⁶.

Central to discussions of women's history in general but of gender in political history still more broadly is the question of sexual equality versus difference. Anglo-American scholars have tended to emphasize the long march toward political rights that privilege an Enlightenment framework in which the intellect is given more importance than the body. Conti-

¹ J.W. Scott, *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis*, in «The American Historical Review», 91 (1986), pp.1053-1075.

² J.W. Scott, *Gender: Still a Useful Category of Historical Analysis?*, in «Diogenes», 57 (2010), p. 9.

³ J. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1988; C. Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics*, New York, Routledge, 1986 are just a couple examples.

⁴ E. Griffith, *In Her Own Right: The Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1985; E.C. DuBois, *Woman Suffrage and Women's Rights*, New York, New York University Press, 1998; M. Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The New Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993.

⁵ A fine example is D.J. Guy, *Women Build the Welfare State: Performing Charity and Creating Rights in Argentina, 1880-1955*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2009.

⁶ A nice collection on women's movements is A. Basu (ed.), *Women's Movements in the Global Era: The Power of Local Feminisms*, Boulder, Westview Press, 2016².

mental European scholars have instead put sexual difference as it pertains directly to the female body at the center of their analyses. In a sense, an insistence on the tensions between equality/inequality has demarcated work in both camps. Speaking from a philosophical standpoint, woman has been the historical «other». The white male subject is «neutral». What this means for actual living women, however, is that while struggling for political participation, they have had to prove themselves to be as smart, as strong, and as valuable as their male counterparts, who have been the ones to establish the rules of governance. Women have often adopted masculine characteristics so as not to be associated with feminine weaknesses, for example, in their consistent if not always State-sanctioned participation as wartime combatants. In this perspective, the female body, because it is marked by its reproductive function, is something to be denied, an obstacle to equality. The sexual difference argument instead posits that the female body should be heralded and that femininity should serve as a basis for values that shape the State and its related institutions. The now two decades old but still popular textbook *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* features essays by leading scholars of women's history that show how the equality versus difference paradigm has shaped political history since well before the modern era⁷. Nonetheless it is with the Enlightenment and French Revolution that questions about sex in connection to citizenship and democracy brought masculinity and femininity into the full consideration of political history. It is perhaps not surprising then that the majority of research in the field has tended to be on modern and contemporary history. Historians would do well though to further explore women's political roles in earlier periods beyond those of the few but noteworthy rulers, such as Elizabeth I or Catherine the Great. Knowing more about concepts of masculinity and leadership, especially in ages without widespread citizenship and democracy, would likely offer insights into how perceptions of the sex and the body permeated politics⁸.

2. Masculinity and femininity as crucial «political» categories

A number of research questions have helped scholars to move away from the simple framework of what men were doing versus what women were doing in formal politics in the past. How have masculinity and femininity operated within political history? How are political systems structured as hierarchical and implicated in a larger system of power? In what ways is identity politics insufficient when understanding the State and its related institutions? Included in these questions are ongoing discussions in gender history about agency and crisis and a more recent focus on intersectionality, which should extend methodological approaches and further shape political history in coming years. The August 2016 issue of «Gender & History», which is based on scholarship presented at the 2014 Berkshire Conference, is rich with examples.

⁷ R. Bridenthal, C. Koontz, S. Mosher Stuard, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

⁸ M. DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar: Women Priestesses in Republican Rome*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016 is a recent example of how women crossed public and private divides in the ancient world.

Lynn Thomas, for instance, examines the ways in which social historians, especially historians of women and Africa, have responded to debates about agency versus subjectivity⁹. In her research on the use of skin lighteners by South African women, Thomas was struck by the problem of recognizing how women entered into a complex set of interactions around capitalism, consumerism and education that revealed different ideas about agency. Although her work is not directly political, she recognizes that «moving beyond agency as argument will enable more compelling, less predictable histories and aid in distinguishing agency from political resistance»¹⁰. In her estimation, the use of skin lighteners did not make women hapless victims but it also did not necessarily make them political actors. Studies that interrogate agency and ask when personal choices become the basis for collective action could open new modes of understanding the genesis of such phrases as «the personal is political» and looking at women's roles as consumers in more nuanced ways. It would also be useful to know more about how social movements have become transformative across the interests of different groups of women.

Identity politics alone is not always enough if it is not understood within broader power structures and examined across multiple forms of identity. In the same issue of «Gender & History», Linda Gordon's article engages with recent scholarship from the fields of gender studies and political science to explain how the new buzz word «intersectionality» can be applied to the history of social movements¹¹. Gordon calls into question the common perception that the white middle-class feminists of the 1970s were ignorant of or disinterested in larger movements or multiple forms of oppression. She shows that benefiting from structural inequalities is not equivalent to condoning them but that prejudices cannot simply be separated out from each other. Gordon, Thomas and Hassim all see serious engagement with the way intersectionality «seems to offer the possibility of visibilising the ways in which sexuality, gender, race and class mutually constitute each other in the formation of subjectivities *as well as* in positioning people in the economic hierarchy» and offers a possible way forward from the triple oppression (race, class, gender) model that has led to the problem of becoming «a way in which to identify the most oppressed subject and thus the virtuous subject of political struggle»¹². Finally, in her examination of French men during World War II Mary Louise Roberts challenges the «crisis» approach to studies of masculinity to show that the disruption of wartime reveals the gender systems that are kept in place during periods of stability. Instead of conceptualizing norms of gender that are disturbed because of conflicts such as war, Roberts argues for an understanding of gender as always unstable and therefore transformed rather than damaged in moments of great change. Political historians of revolution and war who also focus on femininity and masculinity would, in fact, benefit from moving away from the language of interruption along a steady narrative and instead take more seriously what is necessary to maintain what appears to be a form of stability but is always already tenuous.

⁹ L. Thomas, *Historicising Agency*, in «Gender & History», 28 (2016), pp. 324-339.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 335.

¹¹ L. Gordon, 'Intersectionality', *Socialist Feminism and Contemporary Activism: Musings by a Second-Wave Socialist Feminist*, in «Gender & History», 28 (2016), pp. 340-357.

¹² S. Hassim, *Critical Thoughts on Keywords in Gender and History: An Introduction*, in «Gender & History», 28 (2016), p. 303.

3. English-language scholarship and modern political history of women in Italy

Gender historians have been engaging with key theoretical concepts but also opening up new topical areas of political history. Even if historical study has advanced far beyond examinations of exceptional women, there is simply still much we do not know about women's roles or how gender operated in many eras in the past. Moreover, the difficulty mentioned above of looking at moments of dramatic change has done us a disservice by limiting our understandings of periods of seeming continuity. The past two decades of English-language scholarship on the modern political history of women in Italy, however, is pointing to some promising directions. Between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, historians such as Victoria De Grazia, Jane Slaughter, Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, Perry Willson, Teresa De Lauretis, Sandra Kemp and Paola Bono showed readers that despite widespread misconceptions to the contrary, Italian women had made an impact on 20th Century Italian politics¹³. They were active fascists, resisted the fascists, and took up arms against the fascists. They organized a forceful feminist movement that ushered in a progressive set of legislative initiatives. To tell their stories, these scholars worked in the archives of local and regional governments, small associations, and drew from personal papers and oral histories to reveal that women in Italy were anything but complacent or passive in politics. They demonstrated how these women broke down stereotypes and sometimes used them to their political advantage. They also highlighted the ways in which ideas about masculinity and femininity shaped public political discourse. Importantly, as these researchers opened new directions for scholarship, they also took very seriously the notion that recognizing the centrality of sexual difference does not always mean remaining trapped in essentialist constructions of gender.

In the past few years, a new generation of scholars working on the political history of women in Italy has built upon the work of these earlier studies and broadened and deepened its reach. Their publications point to ways to better understand the lives and contributions of individual and collective groups of women, challenge traditional periodizations of women's and political history, and place national histories in a transnational or international framework. Historian Jomarie Alano translated and edited the diary/memoir anti-fascist Ada Gobetti kept during the Resistance (1943-1945), making a text well-known to Italian-language historians available to a much larger audience¹⁴. Alano's careful editing and well-crafted introduction has allowed readers to interpret the daily struggles of some of the women and men who aided in the efforts of the Resistance. Gobetti emerges as a heroic figure but also a woman who acted within the constraints of her time as she re-negotiated roles for women. Alano's characterization of Gobetti places her

¹³ Foundational texts include but are not limited to: V. De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992; J. Slaughter, *Women and the Italian Resistance*, Denver, Arden Press, 1997; L. Chiavola Birnbaum, *Liberazione della donna: Feminism in Italy*, Wesleyan, Wesleyan University Press, 1986; T. de Lauretis (ed.), *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990; S. Kemp, P. Bono (eds.), *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, Basil, Blackwell, 1991.

¹⁴ J. Alano (ed.), *Partisan Diary: A Woman's Life in the Italian Resistance*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014.

alongside numerous other women who sought a place in political life because they wanted to infuse politics with humanitarian values and instill in them a positive vision of femininity. Given the tumultuous start of the nation-State of Italy and its fascist departure from the path of an evolving democracy, it is perhaps not surprising that many historians of women in Italy point to the Resistance era as a marker for women's full emergence into modern political history. After all, women's full suffrage was granted only as the war concluded. Molly Tambor's *The Lost Wave* begins with story of the 21 women elected to the Constituent Assembly and traces their legislative work, especially that aimed at improving the working and private lives of women, through the early 1960s¹⁵. Tambor asks that we look at these legislators «as leading toward the achievement of "active citizenship"», by becoming historical agents who had been marginalized. At the same time, Tambor points out that these members of Parliament did not «reinvent the sexual order in Italy, but they did contribute both to improving women's citizenship and legitimating Italy as a democracy»¹⁶. Of particular value in Tambor's work, however, is her emphasis on the flurry of activity undertaken by a group of newly elected citizens in the first decades after World War II. The idea of a «lost wave» of women's activists is central to Tambor's study. She does not claim that the women legislators consciously used a feminist vocabulary of women's difference, but her analysis is rich with the creative ways in which her subjects nevertheless employed these techniques. My work on the Cold War era also challenges a narrative of women's history based on a first wave focused on suffrage and a second wave of feminism¹⁷. Women during the «lost wave» may not have participated in the very visible political forms of public protest associated with the suffrage and feminist movements, but they still struggled on behalf of women's rights. Their struggles, however, unfolded especially, though not exclusively, in the halls of political parties, trade unions, parliament, and international bodies rather than in public squares. It is this last dimension of international politics that has been of particular interest to me in an attempt to understand how groups of women voiced a particular set of concerns at the local and national levels and carried them to larger bodies working transnationally. I have asked the rather straightforward question of what impact did a relatively new political cohort who emphasized women's difference have on directing Cold War policy among international political leaders? My work only goes a short way, however, in beginning to answer what I hope will open up new studies of similar political dimensions in which gender informs approaches to international relations.

4. New topical areas in gender and political history

There is certainly more work to be done to examine women's political participation and the role of gender in transnational and international governmental and non-governmental bodies and related institutions. The entry of greater numbers of women into formal political

¹⁵ M. Tambor, *The Lost Wave: Women and Democracy in Postwar Italy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 180.

¹⁷ W. Pojmann, *Italian Women and International Cold War Politics, 1944-1968*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2013.

structures in the decades after World War II introduced new forms of interaction that were shaped by gender. State actors and other political agents were already operating under hierarchies of power that privileged specific forms of masculinity though. How gender norms came to be codified in politics when women were largely excluded from the halls of decision making deserves greater scrutiny. Nevertheless, the political participation of women forced male leaders to consider the ways in which social exchange generated new questions about where the political is located and how new forms of political speech and organizing might re-direct policy and action. In particular, the blurring of public and private life became more evident as legislators devised provisions for the welfare state but also in consideration of work space as women looked for ways to care for their families outside the confines of the home. Exactly how women positioned themselves in relation to notions about gender needs more attention, especially to understand the limitations of identity politics and how agency operates. Italian women, for example, have certainly been aware of stereotypes of femininity and have sometimes emphasized their own roles of mother, sister or daughter to shape political positions but they have also at times rejected them as constraints on their individuality.

In my observations and speaking in general terms, it seems gender scholars working in the United States and the United Kingdom tend to focus more on acts of transgression and the de-stabilization of categories of gender to try to deconstruct expressions of femininity and masculinity while continental scholars tend to look more at «stable» categories and how women and men have used them to challenge the system from the inside. Both approaches allow for historical re-considerations of the meanings of sexual difference, the efficacy of separating the intellect from the body, and the triumphs and failures of a politics of equal rights. Applying these frameworks to studies of women in politics, for example, should expand discussions of the unevenness of gender representation across different political levels. In the United States, more women hold office at the local level and have reached the highest echelons in business in greater numbers than their European counterparts but they are far underrepresented in Congress. Similar patterns hold in some parts of Europe but overall women have reached higher levels in politics, greater numbers in a few parliaments and political parties, and have had an impact at the level of the European Union¹⁸. How have the structures at different political levels contributed to these patterns though? Is a neo-liberal political framework based on «choice» worth further scrutiny? When do gender-based strategies become exclusive or exclusionary? Employing methodologies that reach beyond the confines of the nation-State and that take seriously divisions based on multiple forms of identity should inform the responses to these sorts of questions. The impact of migration on predominantly European-origin groups deserves more attention by political historians, for example. Scholarship by sociologists and political scientists has been crucial to laying the groundwork, but historians can contribute to understanding patterns and change over time as well as specific historical conditions in different contexts. In my own work on migration and feminism in Italy, I drew on multiple disciplines but relied especially on first-hand materials.

¹⁸ C. Xydias, *Discrepancies in Women's Presence between European National Legislatures and the European Parliament: A Contextual Explanation*, in «Political Research Quarterly», 69 no. 4 (2016), pp. 800-812.

Historians have the advantage of looking to individuals and collective groups for primary sources that corroborate or dispute dominant narratives¹⁹. These are especially necessary when discussing underrepresented groups, such as undocumented women from countries in conflict.

It is also worth pointing out that the study of women and gender in politics is not always rooted in feminism or informed by left-leaning political perspectives. Yes, gender history and the women's movement emerged together and many historians working in the field are indeed themselves women and committed feminists. Scholars do, of course, express their own political viewpoints in their work. A newer generation of researchers, however, would do well to try to create more opportunities for the exchange of ideas that step across the old divisions of the political left and right. This issue of «Ricerche di Storia Politica» reminds us of the history of a journal that has been important in moving in this direction. Opening up dialogue is particularly needed now in academic publishing. Journals should continue to support forums for dialogue and use traditional and newer forms of technology to allow networks of scholarship to develop that themselves cross political barriers. It is important to respect and protect the interests of marginalized voices, but at the same time, closing ourselves off to unpleasant points of view leads to a lack of understanding of the broader picture. Recent studies of social media suggest that users tend to follow only news sources that line up with their own personal political beliefs. If that same tendency permeates academic publishing, additional barriers to comprehension, which is not equivalent to agreement, will continue to separate us.

Individual experience is, however, central to the advancement of work on politics. The LGBTQ community and women of color, for example, have contributed some of the most ground-breaking scholarship in gender studies. It seems obvious that men also pursue research on gender and politics. Nonetheless, it is also evident that they constitute a minority in the field but are still considered to be doing «mainstream» history when they focus on politics. The narrative of political progress may be worth disrupting more often to offer counter-perspectives. Especially in the face of recent political shifts to the far-right and the resurgence of populist parties, it is worth knowing more about how gender operates in instances in which sexual difference may mean upholding inequalities. We should reflect more on the roles of conservative women who hold positions of power in political structures but we should also be aware of their impact even when their presence is less visible in the public domain. Perry Willson's work on fascist women, for example, does much to explain why many young women embraced the messages of proper femininity espoused by the fascists but also shows how women outside the confines of marriage and motherhood were able to enter into and find success in fascist politics²⁰. In a future project I hope to discover more about the appeal of non-leftist politics to the women who participated in the unification of Italy or were active through the years of Futurism to know more about the reconciliation of anti-feminist discourse and the ambitions of State-building. The appeal of virulent masculinity to women should not be underestimated. In fact, the contributors to the edited volume *Right-Wing Women* examine the political participation of women in anti-feminist and rac-

¹⁹ W. Pojmann, *Immigrant Women and Feminism in Italy*, Burlington, Ashgate Publishing, 2005.

²⁰ P. Willson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy*, New York, Routledge, 2002.

ist movements around the world whose voices have offered direct challenges to liberal democratic politics²¹. Yet, it is not only vocal activists who support a conservative shift in approaches to the rights of women and political «others». Scores of quietly conservative middle-class white women voted for Donald Trump despite his abhorrent comments and behaviors. Surely, many of them did so, not just because they viewed him as a political outsider or because they disliked Hillary Clinton, but because they did not consider Trump's remarks or actions out of line with current ways of interacting. These women voters were a neglected segment of the pre-election media coverage but knowing more about the trajectory of their interests will likely interest historians in the future. Many scholars are scrambling to try to understand «what went wrong» and how we arrived in a place in which a declared feminist woman can win the Democratic nomination only to be defeated by a man who openly denigrates women. In the meantime, it is up to historians of gender and politics to continue to interrogate the meanings and implications of collective identity in defining our past and establishing human relationships.

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²¹ P. Bacchetta, M. Power (eds.), *Right-wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists around the World*, New York, Routledge, 2002.