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- American Historical Review
- Perspectives on History
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Teaching Women's History: Accuracy, Objectivity, and Critical Thinking

Katharine Hajar, November 2012

In her 2010 bestseller, Sarah Palin wrote that American women gained the right to vote at the federal level with the Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution in some year after 1929.¹ As any U.S. women's historian will tell you, it was actually the Nineteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1920. Such factual errors can easily be corrected, but they reflect larger historical misunderstandings that seem to increasingly prevail in public discourses about the past. Many such misunderstandings reveal themselves in American college and university history classrooms. While the issues that I identify in this essay are not always specific to teaching women's history, I find that they emerge more sharply in women's history courses because of students' preconceptions about women's nature and place in society. Such challenges and the opportunities that they present are the subject of this essay.²

My own strategies for teaching women's history have developed in the context of larger concerns about the sometimes belligerent and often irrational model of civic engagement currently promoted by the infotainment industry. Ultimately, my efforts to help students understand women's history are grounded in basic—and what might even be called conservative—historical methods.

In teaching, popular beliefs that are based on factual errors and misinterpreted

evidence pose a significant challenge, particularly because they are often part of a broader set of politically expedient present-day renderings of the past. Many students need more than correct information; they require analytical tools in order to understand women's history as the contingent product of specific historical circumstances, rather than a simple extrapolation backwards from the present. Teaching the histories of women should, of course, make clear women's centrality to a variety of broad historical developments.

Many undergraduates enter women's history classes (even upper division ones) with little experience in thinking about women historically. Students often assume that their own experiences and observations represent the experiences of women in the past. Some insist that women's social roles and behaviors are always biologically determined; others believe that feminism is destructive to the social order and that feminists past and present should be reviled and feared. Indeed, the image of the man-hating, militant feminist—a stand-by since the 19th century—persists with great vigor. Some students perceive women's history as an interesting but relatively unimportant adjunct to "real" history, and tend to see women primarily as stoic supporters of great men and protectors of their households and children.

Some students may feel marginalized—even under attack—within the classroom because their political, personal, or religious views seem to put them at odds with their professor or classmates. Others may resist ideas that appear to challenge their sense of self and the belief systems of their communities. Such perceptions present a critical challenge as well as an opportunity to expose students to a discursive model of history that emphasizes reasoned debate and a rich understanding of historical context, rather than simply reinforcing and reifying personal points of view. Teaching women's history from a rational historicist perspective can help us move our students gently away from their inclination to judge historical actors as simply right or wrong.

In spite of the various challenges facing instructors of women's history, there are reasons to be hopeful. Most undergraduates are in the process of discovering who they are, and many are ready, even eager, to begin thinking for themselves. The greatest opportunity in teaching women's history lies in our students' natural inclinations towards growth and their desire for personal autonomy and understanding. What follows in this essay are some practical suggestions for helping students learn to deeply understand and appreciate women's history.

A clear focus on understanding rather than merely judging historical actors is a crucial first step. Undergraduates may have trouble maintaining an objective perspective in discussions of historical topics that have contemporary resonance, and students from all points on the political spectrum can be resistant to new information or ideas that contradict their conceptions of the world. For instance, some students view issues such as abortion in presentist terms centered on debates about morality, while others understand concepts like socialism only through the lens of election-year political rhetoric.

With proper guidance and the use of appropriate historical readings, such students can come to understand that these issues are intimately connected to important historical changes in women's social, legal, economic, and political status. Leslie J. Reagan's *When Abortion Was a Crime*, for instance, remains a powerful and accessible text for helping students understand abortion through evidence-based discussions of medical, legal, and political history, while also providing an example of sound historical methods. Good scholarship like this helps students understand the subject matter historically, while also schooling them in the discipline of history.³

Political and media figures in the present day often reduce concepts like patriarchy, Marxism, and misogyny to buzzwords that obscure rather than illuminate. Thus, in the classroom, it may be necessary to stop and offer clear definitions of such terms and make explicit their historical origins and their value in understanding how power operates. Once students understand these terms as tools for identifying and describing historical experiences and developments, rather than simply epithets. Students can then apply them to their analysis of both primary and secondary sources.

Familiarizing students with a range of historical and historiographical perspectives helps them to understand that notions about women's rights and roles are not timeless and universal, but are always the product of particular historical circumstances. Maintaining clear focus on specific legal, social, and political realities of women's worlds allows students to complicate their understanding of the various ways that gender identities have been (and still can be) constructed and refashioned.

In a U.S. context, for example, students might consider the writings of Gloria Steinem alongside those of Phyllis Schlafly and women of color such as Elaine Brown and Gloria Anzaldúa. Then, classroom discussions and written assignments can focus productively on understanding the rich array of women's perspectives, and the reasons for and significance of women's public and private activities. Illuminating a range of voices and perspectives can help highlight the fallacy of assuming that there is a single, universal "women's history."

Still, an approach that includes many voices may tempt students to find in the sources only that information that confirms their own preconceptions. For instance, 19th-century women's assertions of their authority as mothers in the public sphere may seem to support essentialist arguments about women's nature. Students veering in this direction need, again, a more fully developed understanding of historical context. They may find it easy to grasp women's claims to power as mothers in 19th-century social reform movements, but will need guidance to understand the important fact that most women had few other plausible claims to power, if any, at that time.

Some of the most important teaching happens at those points where students have difficulty understanding perspectives that differ from their own. Students can learn the difference between analysis and opinion by developing the ability to construct plausible arguments that are based on the careful analysis of reliable evidence. Thomas Haskell's insights about objectivity in historical study have been invaluable to me in helping students understand that our aim is not to question their personal beliefs, but to help them detach those beliefs from a well informed and careful analysis of sound historical evidence.⁴

Explaining Haskell's argument—that objectivity and neutrality are not the same thing—can help students separate their personal beliefs from their analysis of historical evidence, without giving up or compromising beliefs they hold dear. Having students take sides in debates based on the arguments and experiences of historical actors can help them understand that they don't have to agree with the perspectives of all historical actors in order to understand the reasons for and results of their actions.

While it would be unrealistic to hope that every last student will become a well informed, rational and independent critical thinker, an important first step is to encourage discourses in the classroom that emphasize rational thought, allow multiple points of view to coexist, and give students a more expansive understanding of women's ideas and experiences.

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Notes

1. Sarah Palin, *America by Heart: Reflections on Family, Faith, and Flag* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 145. Alarming ignorance about women and women's bodies persists. On August 19, 2012, at the time that this essay was in the final editing stages, a Missouri candidate for U.S. Senate told an interviewer that, "from what I understand from doctors," in cases of "legitimate rape," women's bodies have natural defense mechanisms to prevent pregnancy. See "Senate Candidate Provokes Ire With 'Legitimate Rape' Comment." *New York Times*, August 19, 2012.

2. This essay is the product of my own experiences, and it also distills many conversations with colleagues and friends who teach histories of women. My thanks to the many historians who offered their own experiences as evidence and helped me think through various problems related to teaching women's history in U.S. colleges and universities.

3. Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997). This book is [available online for free](#) thanks to the University of California Press and the California Digital Library project.

4. See Thomas Haskell, "Objectivity is not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*," *History and Theory*, 29:2 (May 1990), 129-157.

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