

{essays in history}

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Making Women's Histories: Beyond National Perspectives

**making
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Beyond National Perspectives

Edited by Pamela S. Nadell & Kate Haulman

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Reviewed Work(s)

Making Women's Histories: Beyond National Perspectives. By Pamela S. Nadell and Kate Haulman, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 2013). Pp. 278. Cloth, \$75.00. Paper, \$24.00.

Through the work of Joan Wallach Scott in the 1980s, gender emerged as a useful category of analysis for many historians, in North America and across the world more broadly. Scott's seminal essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" appeared in the *American Historical Review* in 1986 and, with its publication, the discipline of history was forever changed.^[1] Almost thirty years later, however, historians still grapple with how to approach women's and gender history, especially their global developments and intersections with different social, political, and economic currents.

Pamela Nadell and Kate Haulman have assembled some of America's most prominent scholars of women's and gender history and have asked them to reflect on the intellectual and political production of those histories over the past three decades as well as to offer ideas of how scholars might approach future studies within these thematic subfields. The collection's ten chapters are divided into two sections: "Imagining New Histories: Late-Twentieth-Century Trajectories," which examines the historical trends of the fairly recent past, and "Engendering National and Nationalist Projects," a section that explores transnational approaches to women's and gender history and offers historians' thoughts on how to move their analyses into a more globalized context. Nadell and Haulman emphasize that such an evolution within the fields of women's and gender history is inevitable as the profession "has grown increasingly critical of the limitations of the national and is trying to imagine the writing of history in transnational and intellectual global contexts" (2).

Following its emphasis on a more transnational approach to women's and gender history, the collection argues that, within these subfields, certain themes resound across time and space. Those writing women's histories, across the eras and around the world, have addressed similar

questions and advanced parallel objectives. Above all, these writings, by both professional and amateur historians, have, according to Nadell and Haulman, “[sustained] the truism that all history is politics” (3).

Throughout the collection, the editors’ assertion that “all history is politics” is continually apparent. Many of the essays are self-referential. For example, in their contributions, both Kathy Peiss and Barbara Alpern Engel discuss their experiences as graduate students at a time when women’s and gender history were beginning to gain scholarly attention. Such a level of self-referentiality reveals the collection’s ability to create a dialogue between women’s history, its origins, and its development across national divides.

Yet while *Making Women's Histories* successfully underscores history’s inherent political dimension, presents broad overviews of the current state of women’s and gender history, and offers plausible and insightful suggestions for ways that these fields can extend beyond the national to render more temporal and regional diversity, the theoretical framing of the essays themselves is problematic. Pamela Nadell and Kate Haulman do not unpack the distinctions between women’s history and gender history. It is unclear if the authors are defining these terms in the same way, noting if they have common origins, or describing how these terms have evolved across time and space. The absence of this discussion leaves many of the nationally based chapters disconnected from one another and it is not entirely clear how they fit into the collection’s advocacy for a more transnational framework when they themselves do not follow such a model.

Additionally, the absence of a concrete definition of gender in the introduction is equally troublesome. Although gender is an analytic with no essential referent, the evolution of the term and its continually contested meanings seem to warrant a definition—especially since it would better frame the individual essays. While the essays acknowledge Joan Scott’s contributions to the field and her definition of gender as “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and a primary way of signifying relationships of power,” they fail to address why such a definition is, by itself, an inadequate way of conceptualizing gender and how scholarly definitions of gender have evolved since the mid-1980s.^[2] Scott’s definition of gender has two negative consequences: it is a binary

construction of male and female that limits the possibilities of alternative constructions of gender (e.g. competing ideals of femininity or masculinity) and makes the definition of femininity and masculinity appear to be natural categories that are not subject to change.

Highlighting these distinctions would allow Nadell and Haulman to paint a more complete picture of the work in gender history post-Scott and allow for a better understanding of how the field may evolve in the future.

Nonetheless, Nadell and Haulman have assembled an impressive collection that gives a comprehensive overview of the current state of the field and offers a convincing argument for a more transnational approach within these thematic subfields. Through these ten essays, the reader observes that women's history is always at the heart of political projects and that everything, to some extent, is gendered. Nadell and Haulman have shown how women's and gender history have evolved since the 1980s and, despite the path breaking work that historians of women's and gender history have done within national contexts, warrant continued scrutiny and critical reflection in the years to come, especially through a more globalized lens.

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[1] Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053-1075.

[2] Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," 1067.



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