

## Rezensionen

Judith Bennett, **History Matters. Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism**, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2006, 224 S., EUR 20,90, ISBN 978-0-812-220-049.

In her provocative new book "History Matters" Judith Bennett provides an insightful and highly stimulating account of the last three decades of women's and gender history in a U. S.-American context but with a focus on European history. The changing shape of the relationship between feminism and history serves as Bennett's primary plotline: from a close and unquestioned alliance between the two in the 1970s through decades of weakening ties between feminists and historians to a deepening rift in more current times when women's and gender history has become depoliticized and feminists activities and theorist have become uninterested in history. The main villain in Bennett's story is what she describes as an increasing presentism that has soured the relationship between feminism and history and now haunts feminist scholarship in all fields, including history where the study of the pre-modern past threatens to become altogether passé among students and, more alarmingly still, among feminist colleagues.

The book's eight chapters (counting the introduction and conclusion) offer hard evidence for this trend, perceptive analysis of its main causes and ideas for at least a partial reversal. Bennett draws on previously published material but incorporates it into broader and newly formulated observations about the state and fate of feminist history writing. Chapter two explores why women's and gender history, in its rhetoric and analysis, has moved away from the 1970s focus on "women's oppression" and "patriarchy", a process Bennett links to the field's institutional establishment or, less positively put, "mainstreaming" and "co-optation", as well as to conceptual developments, such as a growing attentiveness to differences among women and the ascendancy of cultural analysis and gender history. Chapter three investigates the reasons behind and manifestations of the disappearance of historical depths from feminist scholarship and theory, with particularly unsettling pieces of information about the field of women's and gender history itself. For example, Bennett notes the dramatic decline of articles on the period before 1500 in the major English language journals (7 out of 295 between 2001 and 2004), or the rapid vanishing of pre-modern panels from key feminist venues like the "Berkshire

Conference on the History of Women” which has tilted further towards the modern period than the “AHA Conference”.

In the following chapters, Bennett makes a compelling case that feminist history and theory must reclaim the distant past as a site of theorizing and strategizing in order to maintain their interpretive force and long-term relevance to feminist politics. She also offers specific suggestions for how this can be done. Thus chapter four develops the concept of a “patriarchal equilibrium” by which Bennett means the persistence of women’s disadvantaged status vis-à-vis men across time and space even as the specific forms of disadvantaged position have been changing. She argues that the study of such historically contingent continuities once again needs to become central to feminist history writing to revive a productive partnership between history and feminism.

Chapter five illustrates these more abstract points in the context of women’s work. A look at the *longue durée*, for instance, reveals that the gap between men’s and women’s wages has remained within the same and relatively narrow range from the Late Middle Ages all the way into the 21<sup>st</sup> century female workers, with women earning between one-half and three-quarters of what men earn. This centuries-old pattern, Bennett points out, raises serious questions about the validity of labor histories that posit radical transformations – be it for better or worse – of women’s work with the advent of capitalism. Likewise, it makes plain the limitations of feminist political strategies that are formulated around short-term gains in women’s wages and do not address the bigger picture of resilience.

The last chapters reflect on the feminist gains of a deeper engagement with pre-modern materials in yet two other arenas: lesbian sexualities (chapter 6) and also the feminist classroom (chapter 7). Bennett’s exploration of the analytical limits and possibilities of a category she calls ‘lesbian-like’ for studying continuities in women’s lives across the pre-modern/modern divide that has organized sexuality studies after Foucault is certainly provocative. And so is Bennett’s pedagogical suggestion that ‘teaching difference’ to students requires not only attention to race, class, gender, and, more recently, sexuality, religion and world region, but also exposure to the alterity of the distant past or to temporal difference.

“History Matters” is written with refreshing clarity and passion. It forcefully conveys the powerful obstacles that have come to stand in the way of recognizing the significance of temporal depth to the future of feminist scholarship, as well as the considerable costs of such oversight. Not everyone will agree with or follow her prescription of foregrounding the study of the “patriarchal equilibrium.” Yet Bennett’s attempt to revitalize a 1970s concept of patriarchy while remaining attentive to the epistemological developments of the last decades promises to spark interesting discussions among feminist historians of various methodological orientations and fields.

Bennett’s insistence on the importance of the distant past is likely to resonate most strongly and immediately among pre-modern scholars. To travel to a distant time rather than a distant place in order to gather one’s feminist insights is a familiar intellectual

move for this group. So is the experience of periodically having to persuade modern scholars with whom one otherwise shares a primary political commitments to feminism that temporal diversity no less vital to rigorous intellectual inquiry and effective political strategizing than other forms of diversity. A rich resource of arguments and analysis, "History Matters" provides tools for understanding the gradual disappearance of pre-modern scholarship from our modernist colleagues' radars and helps explain the importance of what it is that pre-modernists do to a broader feminist audience within the field of history and beyond. I, for one, will recommend it especially warmly to feminist colleagues who work on modern materials.

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Angelika Epple, **Empfindsame Geschichtsschreibung. Eine Geschlechtergeschichte der Historiographie zwischen Aufklärung und Historismus**, Köln/Weimar: Böhlau 2003, 444 S., EUR 44,90, ISBN 3-412-15702-3.

Several interesting studies have recently been devoted to the history of women historians, providing a new and rapidly growing body of evidence on women's presence in the European historiographic tradition. To mention just a few recent contributions: Kate Lowe and Charlotte Woodford have studied the chronicles written by early modern nuns in Italy and Germany, while Faith Beasley has analyzed 17<sup>th</sup>-century memoirs by French women. Also on the French case, but for a later period, we now have a broad-ranging collection of essays, "Histoires d'historiennes", edited by Nicole Pellegrin. An outstanding volume on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century women medievalists, edited by Jane Chance, offers a detailed prosopography of women scholars in this area, while a comparative perspective on several European countries has been provided by a special issue of the journal "History of Historiography", aptly called "History Women". We have certainly learnt much about women historians since Natalie Zemon Davis opened this field of study, in 1980, with her path-breaking essay "Gender and Genre: Women as Historical Writers". Thanks to Mary Spongberg, Barbara Caine and Anne Curthoys, we now have at hand even a "Companion to Women's Historical Writing", a volume meant as a guide for further research in this area, with entries referring not only to individual women historians, but also to historical subgenres, national historical traditions, etc., all seen in a gender perspective. Though the "Companion" covers mostly the Anglophone countries and has some glaring gaps (Germany is absent, for instance), it is nevertheless a useful resource for this fast expanding sector of women's and gender history.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nicole Pellegrin ed., *Histoires d'historiennes*, Saint-Etienne 2006; Jane Chance ed., *Women Medievalists and the Academy*, Madison, WISC. 2005; *Storia della storiografia/History of Historiography*, 46 (2004), *History Women*, special issue ed. by Maureen O'Dowd and Ilaria Porciani; Natalie