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'WHAT'S IN A NAME?' ON WRITING THE HISTORY OF FEMINISM (2012)

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In my work as a historian, I focus on women's collective activities in the West, especially in the United States and Europe, and especially those activities that are intended to further the interests of women.¹ This presentation is intended to share a small part of that work with you and also to explore my most recent interest, which is to examine the names we use for this kind of collective activity—by women and on behalf of women—and then to question the significance of our naming practices.² In other words, what is at stake in naming a particular form of women's collective action "feminism"? When is it not called "feminism"? What happens when this distinction is parsed too carefully? What does the history of the scope of the term "feminism" tell us about its political successes and shortcomings?

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Do women's historians in the United States claim that all women's groups are "feminist"? If not, what

makes some groups "feminist" and others not? . . . In Western Europe and the Americas, historians typically use the word "feminist" to describe women's collective activities to advance women's condition; but the meaning of "feminism" is neither stable nor fixed. As a historian, I know for example that the word is often assigned to women's collective actions that occurred before the word even existed. But if the word did not yet exist, how do historians decide which activities are to be labeled "feminist"? And if we label some activities "feminist" and not others, are we not constructing—rather than identifying—feminism?

For example, when studying the history of nineteenth-century women's collective activities, if we historians of the twentieth century choose to look at the activities of nineteenth-century women of the privileged classes only—perhaps because they wrote books about their activities and therefore make our research easy for us—and in fact look at only some of their activities (for example, their organizational activity to win voting rights for women—perhaps because it is easy to study organizational records), then we would be defining as "feminist" something

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that is narrow in class interest.³ But since the word "feminist" did not actually exist, and it is therefore we—as historians—and not those women, nor any other women, who actually use the word to label their activities, what would happen to our understanding of the meaning of the word "feminism" if historians used it for another group of women who also worked collectively to advance women's development? For example, if historians used it for Black women who, in the years following their emancipation from slavery, created organizations intended to overcome the indignities of racism? Their efforts were also collective: in their Black women's clubs they organized separately from men, they also focused on advancing women's development, and they challenged standard notions of permissible "womanly" actions both within and beyond the community of Black women and men. Would not this make them "feminists"? What would happen to our understanding of the word "feminism" if we attached it to the efforts of women industrial workers to improve their conditions of work—efforts that directly challenged men who were either their employers or their coworkers (who thought that all working-class organizing should be by and for men)? What would happen to our understanding of the word "feminism" if we attached it to the power exercised by American Indian women in tribal councils? Recent histories, for example, have now identified close personal connections between Seneca Indians and famous voting rights activists, and we now know that Indian women played an important role in shaping the goals of what we have labeled US feminism.⁴

In other words, *history* is not simply *the past*; rather it is the way we construct a narrative of the past. Historians do not simply uncover history; they construct it in the way in which we assign meanings and make sense of the mass of materials that we find from the past. In the practice of women's history in the United States and Western Europe today, the very word "feminist" is hotly debated, and these debates tell us as much about disagreements concerning present-day politics as they do about the past.

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It is interesting for us today to reflect on the broad usage of the term "feminist" in the late nineteenth century and the narrowing of its usage in the early twentieth century, because this history might tell us something about the present. In recent decades in the United States, we have witnessed, first, a recuperation of the word "feminist" (for many whose knowledge of women's history was limited, it seemed like a newly invented word). We then watched as the term became very widely used among all those engaged in an increasingly popular agenda for women's development. But at some point in the 1980s, and increasingly so in the 1990s, we once again witnessed the narrowing of the term's usage. What explains this? Does it prove a lessening of commitment to gender equality? Is it simply a matter of semantics—a desire to change the name but not the commitment to equality? What do people who continue to call themselves "feminists" mean when they apply the term to themselves? What do people who disparage the term intend to disparage? To examine these questions, we should look at feminism's most recent history, from the 1970s to the present.

The recuperation of the word "feminist" for activities on behalf of women's development happened in the West in the 1970s, a full decade at least after the reemergence of a visible and effective movement for women's equality and development. Following the election of the progressive Democrat John Kennedy in 1960, women who had ties to his administration and to members of the Democratic Congress were able to use their influence to advance women's development. They focused on employment and education, and (not surprisingly, given that their influence was based on their ties to government leaders) their strategy was to press for new laws in these areas. And they were successful: a 1963 law insisted that women be paid the same as men when they worked in the same jobs; a 1964 law stated that all employment must be open to women and men alike; and a 1972 law made unequal treatment of women and men in education illegal.

At the same time, a different group of women, younger (many were only students in universities) and

not yet established in professional careers, were also beginning to agitate for women's development. This group's politics, however, were to the left of the Democrats in power. Like the earliest nineteenth-century voting-rights advocates, they came to political consciousness in male-led emancipatory movements. In the 1960s, these were the civil rights movement for equal rights for Black people and the movement against the United States war in Vietnam. And like nineteenth-century voting-rights advocates, they came to an awareness of women's oppression both because of the emancipatory rhetoric of these other movements, but also because they found themselves disparaged—even in these progressive movements—simply because they were women.

At first, these women named themselves—in the language of international, anticolonial struggles—the Women's Liberation Movement. And they organized quite differently from the ways that the women with connections to the Democratic Party leadership had organized—in informal and small groups where consciousness raising was a central activity. Most importantly, they turned their attention to a host of questions that were not likely to be addressed simply by passing laws: questions concerning the private relationships between women and men. "The personal is political" was the slogan that best summed up their politics. Their goal was to point out that the questions that Western governments traditionally refused to address—questions, according to these governments, that were "private" matters (such as violence against women in families)—were the very basis of male power.

It was the women of the Women's Liberation Movement who first reclaimed the term "feminist" for their politics: perhaps because the name "Women's Liberation Movement" was unwieldy; perhaps also because the name identified them with other radical liberatory movements—including the Chinese Cultural Revolution—and they recognized that the majority of US women were unlikely to use those words for themselves; and perhaps, too, because the first books in the renewed practice of women's history had recovered women's earlier struggles and

had named these struggles "feminism."³ By the 1970s, the new women's studies scholarship may have encouraged their desire to connect to a historical tradition that was widely acceptable. (Who, after all, in the 1970s, still thought it was wrong that women had the right to vote alongside men?)

However it happened, though, by the mid-1970s US women advocating women's equality—whether they were closely connected to the liberals in the Democratic Party or were aligned with more left-wing groups, whether they advocated a legal strategy or were organizing in small consciousness-raising groups, or whether they focused on education and work or on sharing housework and child rearing with men—had all come to agree on the term "feminist" for their work. This was the moment in history when use of the term "feminist" was perhaps the most widespread and seemed acceptable to the largest group of advocates for women's equality, even though their views often differed sharply.

Feminism, so broadly accepted, was a term, then, that encompassed many different views about womanhood and many different strategies. Some people identified the differences among feminists by speaking of "liberal feminists," "socialist feminists," "radical feminists," "cultural feminists," "spiritual feminists," "lesbian separatist feminists," "Black feminists," "multicultural feminists," "Christian feminists," "Jewish feminists," and more. In their strategies, some feminists gave priority to sexuality or issues of reproduction; some gave priority to work-related issues; some called for a socialist revolution; some defended capitalism, but noted that reforms were necessary to include women in capitalism's benefits; some stressed the necessity for a new psychology of women if women were to empower themselves; and some stressed that state and economic structures had to change. On the theoretical level, some believed that women had been socialized differently from men and in ways that disempowered them. Some stressed that women were naturally different from and perhaps even superior to men, especially in their capacity for interpersonal relationships.

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The gains for women during this period when feminism was so broadly construed were enormous. Laws intended to equalize work opportunities were not only passed, but were supervised by government administrations to assure that they were implemented. Laws equalized women's access to bank credit and their right to own and control property and earnings. Laws also guaranteed women's equal access to higher education, and for the first time in US history, women entered universities in numbers equal to men. Problems that had never been identified as problems before were now named: the double standard that punished women for sexual behavior that was approved of for men was challenged; rape was identified as a crime of violence by men against women, no longer as deserved behavior for women's sinful ways; wife battering was identified as a crime against women, no longer as a husband's prerogative; women's "double day" as wage worker and home worker was challenged and men learned that they, too, could cook and clean and care for children alongside their wives who now worked as many hours outside the home as men did. It was no longer considered appropriate to represent women as stupid or clumsy or as existing solely to satisfy men's sexual needs on television and in other forms of media. Women writers, women's experiences in history, and women's social issues became respected topics for academic research.

Women who learned to proudly name themselves feminists in the 1970s are quick to point out that all of these successes are partial and that our goals have not yet been met. Worse, there are new problems emerging out of the social revolution of the sexes. For example, with most women now fully employed in the waged workforce, the lack of government assistance for childcare has become a truly acute problem in the United States. Also, nearly three decades of legislation favoring corporate interests over workers' interests has resulted in an absolute decline in the standard of living of very poor Americans—women and men alike. The gains for women, in other words, are increasingly leaving behind poor women. Moreover, the gains for women

in education are happening at the same time that government funds for education have been cut back so that schooling for women and men alike is worsening. In other words, the transformation of women's lives since the mid-1960s has been enormous, but it is neither complete nor all encompassing.

That brings us to the present moment when, as I said above, the use of the term "feminism" in the United States is narrowing once again. Since the 1990s, my undergraduate students in the university have, for the most part, ceased to call themselves feminists. This always surprises me because they have not disavowed feminist views, only the name that is given to these views. For example, when I would ask them if they believe that women and men should be treated equally in the law, they would overwhelmingly answer affirmatively. If I were to ask them if women should have an equal chance to be educated, they would all respond "yes." I could push them for more detail by asking if they believe that women should be limited to only five percent of any class of medical students (as used to be the case before Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 made this illegal), they would cry out against what they considered a grave injustice. They would respond in similar outrage to the suggestion that women should be ineligible for scholarships or even that parents might expect their daughters to leave school for work at age eighteen so that they, the daughters, could pay for their brothers to attend university (as happened with my mother and most of her women friends). If I asked if they wished to prepare themselves for professional careers, they would answer "yes." And I know that they would find it unacceptable if a potential employer told them he only hired men for management-level positions or if the employer had two separate pay scales for the same jobs—one for men, the other for women.

These gains are, of course, what women calling themselves "feminists" struggled to obtain. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were many people who were not feminists, who did not wish women to have equal rights, and who opposed the changes noted above. My students would not agree with these

opponents. So why was their naming different from mine? What do they think that a "feminist" is that they are not?

In questioning them I have found that there are many different answers to this question—sometimes different for each one of my students. Some of them are unaware of the meanings I assign to the term "feminism," and they have little understanding of the history of women's advances. Rather, they reject the distorted version of feminism that has grown increasingly common on television shows and in movies. In these depictions, feminists—or oftentimes simply strong and proud women—are more and more represented as evil (sometimes even murderers), unfeeling, or "losers" who are never able to find personal happiness.⁶ Rarely are feminists presented as just ordinary women, as ordinary as I am, for example. Many of my students are convinced by media representations of what feminism is and have actually come to believe that the caricature is true. Who then can blame them for their desire to distance themselves from these portrayals of mean, crazy, or ridiculous women? Unfortunately, feminists do not control the major corporations who, in turn, control the media.

Others of my students, however, know that feminists are actually pretty ordinary women, as ordinary as I am—and as their mothers are. For them, feminism is old fashioned, appropriate maybe for the 1970s, but not for young women today. They wish to invent something original—different from what their mothers have already invented. For them, feminist struggles against rape and representations of women as sexual objects make us seem as old fashioned as our grandmothers probably seemed to me and my friends. Some of these students are my most radical students, but they have also often associated feminism with racism and prejudice. There is a literature, of course, by antiracists that critiques feminism's historical insensitivity to issues of race that would prove the point. Many of these same students call themselves "womanist," adopting the term Alice Walker invented to convey the special power and perspectives of Black women. But these students are

not always aware of scholarship that also names as "feminist" the activities of Black women and other women of color, both in the nineteenth century and from the 1960s to the present day (for example, histories by Rosalyn Terborg-Penn and Carla Peterson and the anthology *Words of Fire* edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall).⁷ The 2001 anthology of writings from the Women's Liberation Movement, *Dear Sisters*, collected by Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, is especially rich in material documenting the feminist activities of Black radical women in the 1960s and 1970s.⁸ These students are often even unaware that Alice Walker, in describing her "womanist" woman, defined her as a "feminist," seeking to adjoin feminism to a feisty tradition of Black female rebelliousness rather than to oppose it.⁹

Finally, in discussing this issue with my students, I have discovered another reason that they dissociate themselves from feminism—their alienation from politics, of any kind, but especially progressive politics. Even those students who are progressive—and vote that way—disdain political activism. . . .

[. . .]

Does any of this matter? If my students agree with feminist values, does it matter that they disavow the name? Perhaps you might think not: what, after all, is in a name? But I look back on feminism's history and women's history and find that the periods in which our gains were most striking were when we used the word "feminism" most broadly, imbuing it with multiple meanings, and thereby created the largest sense of belonging, a shared aspiration for women's empowerment. During the periods when the meaning and usage of feminism narrowed, we became suspicious of those who spoke for women's equality but argued for different strategies from ours. The result was never more perfect strategies; rather, it was diminished energy. We turned against each other instead of turning against the forces oppressing women.

Over the past several years, I have been discussing this issue with different audiences, particularly in other countries. This question has become an

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important one, especially since the 1985 and 1995 United Nations world conferences on women, in Nairobi and in Beijing respectively. At those conferences, I met women from all over the world who are joined together by the shared desire to better women's condition, although their priorities and strategies may differ. They are struggling right now with just this question. In their countries, also, "feminism" and "feminists" have been disparaged. Feminism is viewed as another form of cultural imperialism whose associations with the capitalist and imperialist West make it virtually useless in the analysis of women's experiences outside of the United States and Europe. It is caricatured as a movement that makes all men the enemy in a sexual and political struggle, forcing women (always) to choose between the struggle for women's equality and national liberation movements or socialism. This is in spite of the fact that feminist history has most often been one of coalition with movements of national liberation, with socialism, with antiracist struggles—and with men as leaders of these movements. . . .

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Again I ask: does it matter how we name ourselves? After all, the struggle for women's equality could continue by a multitude of other names. I'd

like to suggest it does matter. It matters because our history matters. It matters because those who distort our history are not motivated by a concern for women's equality. It matters because, in this increasingly globalized world, women are strengthened by also belonging to a global movement and reflecting their commitment to a global movement in their naming. It matters, in other words, for us to believe ourselves joined in a common vision of women's empowerment.

But for this vision of an international women's movement to be achieved, we must learn these lessons from the history of feminism: that "feminism" has had different meanings to different people in different times and places; that we must allow these different meanings to emerge to address the needs and priorities of women in their context; that feminism can never define sexism as the only oppressive force in women's lives. Since such things as class relations, structural poverty, illiteracy, hunger, racism, ethnocentrism, and imperialism figure prominently in the oppression of women, feminism must be inclusive, flexible, and willing to accept contradiction. But if we learn these lessons, the benefits will be great. However our strategies, our priorities, our views might differ, we shall know that we are joined in support of each other, in support of women, and in support of women's empowerment.

NOTES

1. My reference to the West in this article reflected, specifically, that the lecture was originally presented in China (and thereafter in Korea) where an East/West divide is a common point of reference.
2. On feminism in France, see my *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: SUNY Press, 1984); and Claire Goldberg Moses and Leslie Wahl Rabine, *Feminism, Socialism, and French Romanticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). For feminism in the United States, see Claire Goldberg Moses and Heidi Hartmann, eds., *U.S. Women in Struggle: A Feminist Studies Anthology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995). On the political stakes of "naming" feminisms,

- see especially Claire Goldberg Moses, "Debating the Present/Writing the Past: 'Feminism' in French History and Historiography," *Radical History Review* 52 (Winter 1992): 79-94; and "Made in America: 'French Feminism' in Academia," *Feminist Studies* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 241-74.
3. An example of this construction of history is the anthology, edited by Miriam Schneir, *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (New York: Random House, 1972). For many years, this anthology served to teach students what was the so-called First Wave, and therefore it is an important historical document. I believe it is crucial that students of feminism understand the origin of our

"knowledge" of feminism's history and recognize the limited sources upon which this "knowledge" is based. In Schneir's case, the source was primarily Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Mathilda Gage's *The History of Woman Suffrage*—a source that constructed a history that placed Stanton and Anthony at the center of that history and limited the range of feminist activities and writings to those written by them or presented in their presence. Although most present-day faculty would shun an anthology such as Schneir's as both out of date and racist, I consider it an important historical artifact in and of itself and especially useful as a starting point to discuss the concept of "constructions of historical narratives." Interestingly, Schneir also included a few documents written by famous nineteenth-century European (mostly male) socialists—thereby presenting a narrative of a historical feminism that united socialists with—in the lingo of early twentieth-century socialists—"bourgeois feminists." Given Schneir's leftist background, and that of so many other radical feminist women in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this narrative presented a history that met our then needs, indicating the interplay of present-day politics with historical constructions.

4. In a course I taught for several years before retiring, *Feminist Theories and Women's Movements: Genealogies*, I assign selections from Sally Wagner, *The Untold Story of the Iroquois Influence on Early Feminists: Essays* (Aberdeen, SD: Sky Carrier Press, 1996).
5. In the 1960s—with the renewal of interest in women's equality and civil rights—a number of high quality books on the nineteenth-century movement were published, among which were Eleanor Flexner, *A Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Atheneum, 1968); and Aileen Kraditor, *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890–1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965). Note, however, that neither used the term "feminism" for the movement. Only with the emergence of the women's liberation movement is the link made back
6. Popular culture representations of feminists may always have been ambivalent, but I'm thinking here about a particularly sharp shift that I saw occurring in the late 1980s with films such as *Fatal Attraction*, starring Glenn Close ("liberated woman" and murderer), and *Broadcast News*, with Holly Hunter ("liberated woman," condemned to loneliness).
7. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850–1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); Carla Peterson, "Doers of the Word": *African-American Woman Speakers and Writers in the North, 1830–1880* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995); and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995).
8. Rosalind Baxandall and Linda Gordon, *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
9. See the first of Alice Walker's four-part definition for "womanist": "A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior." Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1983), xi.

to feminism. Several books that connected the women's movement of the nineteenth century to feminism and popularized this relationship as they became widely used in women's studies classrooms were William O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America* (New York: Quadrangle, 1969); and in 1973, two published anthologies, Miriam Schneir's *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*; and Alice Rossi, *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973). Also important was Ellen Carol Dubois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848–1869* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).