COMMENT

GENDER AS A POSTMODERN CATEGORY OF PARALYSIS

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Synopsis—It is not the purpose of this article to discuss the linguistic technicalities of the current debate in the United States over poststructural literary criticism, semiotics, new historicism, new cultural history, or cultural and symbolic anthropology. Rather, I focus on aspects of poststructuralism that I think may negatively affect the progress made by scholars in women's history over the last quarter century. My concern is with the possible motivations for, and the practical implications of, the “linguistic turn” in terms of feminist politics, public policy, and the writing and teaching of women's history in the United States and in countries where historical scholarship on women is only beginning to develop.

After spending the better part of two academic years out of the United States, I became aware of a potential threat facing women's history in the United States: the overreliance on an American brand of so-called “postmodern” theory originally derived from France. For the past few years, some women's historians in the United States have been touting a range of linguistic theories often known collectively as “poststructuralism.” Like all postmodern theories, poststructuralism casts into doubt stable meanings and sees language as so slippery that it compromises historians' ability to identify facts and chronological narratives and misleadingly uses gender as a category of analysis to reduce the experiences of women struggling to define themselves in particular historical contexts to mere subjective stories.

This kind of poststructuralism is already beginning to isolate women's history from both the women's movement that helps give rise to the field, and from history teachers trying to integrate material on women into their classes because it denies retrievable historical “reality,” substituting instead the “linguistic turn,” meaning interpretation based exclusively on textual analysis. Sadly, as I learned during 1992–1993 (which I spent teaching at the University of Warsaw and University College Dublin), the emphasis on poststructuralism also isolates U.S. scholars in women's history from their counterparts abroad. It distances them from scholars in Western Europe who are ignoring poststructuralism or subjecting it to rigorous questioning and from women in Eastern Europe and third-world countries who are only beginning to write about their past and who see much of this theory as irrelevant or even counter-productive.

The potentially paralyzing consequences of poststructuralism upon the writing of women's history in the United States arose innocuously enough in the mid-1980s as many scholars in women's history sought to find concepts in French postmodernist theory that would enhance the emphasis already being placed on gender. Unfortunately, most be-
gan with Michel Foucault, who, in his work on sexuality, talked extensively about gender, but largely neglected to mention women. Moving on to other male poststructuralists whose theories were equally insensitive or hostile to half the human population, a male-defined definition of gender that erased woman as a category of analysis and as a political agent emerged as a major component of American poststructuralism. From the beginning, therefore, American poststructuralism threatened to sever the field of women's history from its political roots by insisting that "there is no experience outside of the ways that language constructs it" (Rose, 1993, p. 90).

The linguistic trendiness of poststructural terminology among historians of women can be seen in the titles of the sessions at the Ninth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women that took place at Vassar College this summer: "Medicalization, discourse, and representation," or "Consumption, nationalism, and the female body," or "Inscribing and transforming boundaries," and the "Feminization of the American subject." Such titles need to be translated to be understood, and like so many poststructural terms can mean anything or nothing. Their use threatens to undo the success of early practitioners of women's history in the 1970s, who gained the attention of historians in other fields with their straightforward language and chronological narratives.

But obfuscation is not the only, perhaps not even the major, danger of poststructural theory. Too often, poststructuralism has assumed peculiarly ethnocentric characteristics in the United States. Thus, it stresses the scientific, intellectual, and apolitical superiority of gender history over women's history. Gender historians have deemed that women's history is passé because it concentrates too much on identifying "woman" as a discrete category of gender analysis. Poststructural scholars argue that gender history is in line with today's new theories of how science operates because it critiques the Enlightenment tradition and denies the possibility of any objective truth. Within several academic disciplines they also claim that American poststructuralism is more intellectually satisfying because it represents an elite, cutting edge of theoretical interpretation which takes a lot of academic training to understand. And, with confrontational language giving way to linguistic gymnastics, it is far less politically oriented because, by taking women out of the definition of gender, there is no need (or concern) for describing and bettering the plight of real women.

This line of argument is perplexing, because, in point of fact, leading historians of women have been defining gender as the socially conditioned behavior of both sexes and criticizing the male biases of traditional history (and science) in their research since the late 1970s. Gender as a category of analysis did not need to be reinvented using a special linguistic jargon except to be touted as gender history. And it did not, in the hands of earlier practitioners, necessarily need to cut academic analysis off from the realities women face in the world. Instead of promoting women's history into the mainstream, as predicted by some advocates of gender history (Rose & Canning, 1993), poststructuralism leaves most historians in the United States and abroad floundering as they try to organize facts into chronological narrative of their lectures or monographs.

Increasingly, historians of women in other countries are becoming more critical of French postmodernism (of which American poststructuralism and postfeminism appear to be watered-down versions). For example, Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd, two Irish historians of women, noted (1992, p. 2) that "there are signs of a European reaction against" this distinction between women's and gender history and "a recognition" that its origins have more to do with the "way in which women's history has developed in North America," than in any inherent supremacy of the poststructural gender history. They concluded that gender history "may not necessarily be helpful in studying the history of women in other countries where, as in Ireland, much basic research still needs to be done." Likewise, Sonia Kruks has concluded that l'hyperconstructivisme implicite du postmodernisme... risque de transformer la subjectivité elle-même en pure fiction et de détruire jusqu'à la catégorie de femmes. ... Car, a moins d'admettre que les 'femmes historiques réelles' vivent et meurent, qu'elles décident et agissent et qu'elles peuvent être plus ou moins opprimées
ou libre, nous risquons devenir nos propres fossouyeuses [the excessive constructionism implicit in postmodernism \ldots threatens to transform female subjectivity into pure fiction and to destroy even the category of woman. \ldots Because unless it is admitted that an "historical female reality" lives and dies, that women decide and act and that they can be more or less oppressed or free, we risk becoming our own grave diggers.] (Kruks, 1993, p. 21).

It must be remembered that U.S. historians of women now have the luxury of becoming poststructuralists because a pioneer generation beginning in the late 1960s produced a number of descriptive and interpretive narratives. This is a luxury historians of women in many countries do not enjoy.

Three characteristics of postmodern theory that make it more difficult (and I would argue more dangerous) for historians of women to adopt than for those scholars in such disciplines as film criticism, semiotics, or literature, which are more tightly tied to textual analysis. First, postmodern theory is hostile to the basic concept of linear time and of cause and effect so characteristic of history as a discipline. Second, postmodern theories are politically paralyzing. And last, their misogynist and very specific historical origins among post-World War II Parisian intellectuals require excessive intellectual modification and machinations to include women. Let me explain.

Postmodernism cannot under any circumstances be considered "history-friendly." For postmodernists, "history has no reality" because "it [history] assumes a material world, an external reality unappropriated by the cultural and aesthetic" (Rosenau, 1992, pp. 63-66). Most historians, as teachers and writers, traditionally organize facts into some kind of chronological narrative rather than fit them into a theoretical framework. Since the Second World War, with few exceptions—such as economic and labor history—the discipline of history generally in the United States has not been distinguished by its adherence to macro-models or theoretical debates but, rather, by its empiricism. For postmodernists, this traditional history falsely assumes the existence of a real, material world and on linear change over time based on causality. All that can be described using poststructuralist methodology is the moment of observation that has no past, present, or future. Therefore, historical agency—real people having individual or collective political impact on real events—is both impossible and irrelevant. The validity of memory, another essential ingredient of traditional history (and particularly women's history), is denied by postmodernists who contend that memory is a most suspect representation of the past. As a sophisticated linguistic technique, postmodernism is very useful for purely textual analysis, but it creates a difficult, if not impossible task for women in other countries (and American women from ethnic and racial groups) who are just beginning to research and write about their own past from scattered and scarce sources that do not always lend themselves to textual analysis. Moreover, as French feminist Christine Delphy has pointed out, poststructural linguistic theories were not designed to recognize the existence of socioeconomic hierarchies that give meaning to gender differences. When this pitfall is not recognized, it can lead poststructuralists to describe gender relations in a socioeconomic void, denying or masking the fact that gender analysis is, after all, about the power of men over women (Delphy, 1993). By highlighting linguistic signs of difference among women, poststructuralism also destroys any collective concept of women needed to organize and sustain a feminist movement.

In a word, postmodernism depoliticizes gender. Political scientists Kathleen B. Jones and Anna G. Jónasdóttir (1988) have warned that poststructuralism prides itself on asserting that neither feminism nor female culture constitutes a coherent philosophy or ideology. At international conferences, female scholars from abroad often express concern about the apolitical nature of postmodernism, especially in the recently liberated countries, such as Poland, where women constituted such an important component of Solidarity in the 1980s. For example, I heard Polish women at the Teaching Women's Studies Conferences this past May in Łódź say that they could not afford to abandon politics for linguistics, especially when their rights were being curtailed by the democratically elected parties in their parliament.

Somer Brodribb, a Canadian feminist and political theorist has described the endless massaging of linguistic possibilities in texts as
an intellectual form of “masturbation” that results in an “endless deferral of sense” (1992, p. 8). It also results in the deferral of writing basic narrative history about women (and minorities), at the very moment when many of these groups are finding their voices and speaking out with a collective identity. By erasing “woman” as an independent category of analysis and replacing it with gender, poststructuralism also defers the growth of feminism within academic circles. Thus, it makes women’s history vulnerable to men who seem intent on dominating or deconstructing the field by too often equating gender with the study of masculinity. Drawing on the movie in which Dustin Hoffman dressed up as a woman and became a better friend of a real woman than a real woman, sociologist Kathleen Barry has called this phenomenon the “Tootsie syndrome.” Men become better and more authentic representations of women than real women, better mothers than real women, better feminists than real women, and ultimately, better women than real women (Barry, 1989). As a result, male post-structuralists (and their female followers) are helping to fuel the backlash against feminism in the United States.

It is not surprising that poststructuralism has lent itself to backlash, because some of the French intellectuals who were the “fathers” of postmodernism exhibited such misogyny that at times they seemed to claim that only men could speak for women. Brodribb (1992) has written on the subtlety of this French brand of misogyny, which dissociated women from any factual context, thus almost annihilating their images and their political viability.

If, indeed, postmodernism is ahistorical and misogynist, as well as politically paralyzing, why has it been taken up by historians of gender in the United States and given such attention in academic journals? A number of reasons come to mind. First there is the impulse among some historians in the 1980s and 1990s to impose the fragmentation of the present on the past. A related reason can be referred to as the “delayed disillusionment syndrome” among American academic leftists—not unlike that experienced earlier by French and German intellectuals after World War II. Already familiar with both German critical theory and French postmodernism, older marxist-leninist academics in the United States seemed particularly susceptible to the nihilism present in such theories (be it through re-reading Nietzsche or Foucault and Derrida) during the 1980s.

If some older historians succumbed to the bewildering fragmentation of American life and general disillusionment with politics in an age of conservatism, what attracted the younger ones? Another reason has to do with the fact that postfeminists among historians of women in the United States do, by and large (but by no means exclusively), represent a younger generation of scholars. Most new or revisionist theories in any discipline usually start out as correctives of old ones by a new generation. In women's history in the United States, I am calling the group of women who began to revive and revitalize women's history in the early 1970s—the pioneer generation of historians of women (Hoff, 1989). It was a historical accident that this pioneer generation of historians of women (in which I include myself) also constitutes the same generation that participated in the formation of the Second Women's Movement in the United States.

That these two historical experiences are represented in one or two age cohorts in the United States is an historical accident, not a plot or conspiracy on the part of women of my generation and older. But it does give us a formidable collective memory that is threatening to younger scholars. It is not without significance that in asserting their professional identity and right to career advancement in a tighter and more demanding marketplace, many of them chose a methodology and theory that rejected both our experiences and memories of those experiences. Such generational conflict within history and other disciplines is common, although this is the first time it has occurred primarily among women who are historians of women because until the last 25 years, there weren’t enough of them to constitute a separate subfield. In the process, a debate over women’s or feminist history versus gender history has emerged that is not completely unique to North America because similar ones arose in other English-speaking countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, England, and even India. This controversy over women’s history versus gender history has as-
sumed complicated ethnocentric political overtones in the United States—often confounding to those outside the country.

This is not the first time that theories from Europe have disrupted certain American academic disciplines. In fact, this has happened so often since World War II that it is often said European theories come to the United States to die—meaning that they are not adopted across the Atlantic until they are on their way out abroad. Although I believe that deconstruction will remain a useful methodology for textual analysis, I think that its claims to destroy history or to resolve or remove all past contractions and dichotomies from history are being exaggerated at the moment.

One of the original goals actually achieved by early practitioners of writing women's history in the 1960s and 1970s was to write so as to encourage the integration of the new material into general history classes and to provide facts and figures that would be useful in the struggle for women's rights in the United States. Until recently, that goal was being met. But both the connection with rank and file historians and with the women's movement is profoundly threatened by the current wave of poststructuralism that could paralyze the field of women's history without contributing outside of elite academic circles to a broader understanding or appreciation of the needs and contributions of half the world's population.

ENDNOTES


2. Somer Brodribb, Nothing matters: A feminist critique of postmodernism (North Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press Pty Ltd, 1992; Canning, 1993), pp. 7–8, 20. In this essay I am using the terms postmodern and poststructural interchangeably. Deconstructionism I view primarily as the methodology employed by postmodernism and poststructuralism. I simply don't know what to make of the terms postfeminist or postfeminism, because a more accurate term would be poststructural feminist and poststructural feminism. This distinction would convey a difference between kinetic, activist feminism and the more contemplative, linguistic approach of poststructural feminism. In the United States the term postfeminism is most often used by neoconservatives and antifeminists in an attempt to indicate that feminism is dead. This attack is usually accompanied by a barrage of New Age psychobabble.

REFERENCES

Barry, Kathleen L. (1989). Tootsie syndrome, or we have met the enemy and they are us. Women's Studies International Forum, 12, 487–493.


