



# Women & Gender History

Week Seven Lectures



# Olwen Hufton on Women & Gender History

- From the 1960s, Women's History grew rapidly, especially in the USA, where it suddenly earned many positions throughout the academy.
- Many of the American scholars of Women's history were part of the 1960s civil rights movement (a movement which also saw the expansion of African American history, Chicano history, etc). Many of these scholars were quite modest in their goals. They followed Simone de Beauvoir, who stated that “without a past, no individual could have dignity.” Many of these scholars were simply trying to recover some of the neglected histories of women.
  - For those who wanted to develop a sub-field of 'Women's History', they needed to collect the data first.
- Quite a lot of scholars sought merely to recount traditionally known historical events from the perspectives of female actors. Natalie Zemon Davis, one of the most famous practitioners of “Women's History” and “Gender History” did this in her 1979 *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*.

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- Often scholars would not even seek out new evidence, but merely “re-read” existing records utilized by traditional historians to find women's voices. This is referred to as “Reading Against the Archival Grain” - and it has been used by many kinds of historians to locate voices and perspectives of underprivileged individuals
  - In this way, a lot of "Women's History" practitioners at this point were simply a specific kind of "social historian". But rather than focusing on social structures broadly, which they felt privileged male perspectives, they only focused on Women
- By the 1980s, scholars began to use terminology such as “Gender History” to reflect what was previously only called “Women's history”. This field, of which “Women's History” is a part, is often more interdisciplinary, drawing from Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, and Visual Culture to describe processes of acculturation and “Gendering”. One must speak also about men if one is to understand women. Furthermore, there is nothing inevitable that puts women into certain societal positions, these are historical, contingent (yet structured) developments.
- Literary studies and deconstructionist thought began to enter Women/Gender History.

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- The growing interest in deconstruction of gender roles, structures, and expectations led scholars to look to new sorts of resources (just like the social historians) and, crucially, read them differently. Natalie Zemon Davis, in her 1983 *The Return of Martin Guerre*, read documents from the sixteenth century trial in order to reconstruct and deconstruct gender roles in this part of France. This is a microhistory, but it revealed broader trends in the history of women worldwide. It also inspired a generation of Gender Historians.
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- So what has been achieved with the development of women's history? First, the history of 50% of the population is becoming more legible, leading to greater identity and historical recognition. Second, general historians of the non-Women's History or Gender History branches are taking more seriously alternative perspectives of historical events. No historian of the English Industrial Revolution today would dare write a history of the time period without taking seriously the fact that women and men might have interacted with these processes differently.