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Alison Bernstein

The Coming of Age of the Berkshire Conference

Over twelve hundred people attended the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, which took place on August 23-25, 1978, at Mt. Holyoke College. The program included more than eighty different papers, topics, and presentations. Clearly, the Berkshire Conference, which this year celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the original group, has come of age. It has become an acceptable way for historians to make their reputations in the profession, and people are eager to list their participation on their résumés. Since 1973, when the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians orchestrated the first of these gatherings at Douglass College and four hundred persons met to share their research and ideas concerning the history of women, the “Berks” has become the third largest meeting of its kind (after the AHA annual meeting and the OAH conference) in the country. I am both thrilled by the conference’s success and simultaneously uneasy about it. What does coming of age mean given the current state of the historical profession?

The Berks
Then and Now

In many respects, the conference continues to be a far cry from the typically massive professional meetings of historians which dot the academic calendar. First there is the ambience. Instead of holding the event at the New York Hilton during Christmas vacation when the frenzy of shoppers and schoolchildren matches that of the young assistant professors and fresh Ph.D.’s trying to find an interview and a job, the Berks has always chosen to meet on a college campus in the more peaceful summer months. Mt. Holyoke, like Bryn Mawr before it, offered a superb physical plant in which to talk and reflect about ideas. The effort to recreate the kind of supportive environment which many participants experienced in single-sex women’s colleges results in a lack of pretension—and yet the explicit message that what is happening is serious and scholarly. While the atmosphere is casual it also signals a certain respect for tradition, especially the tradition of the woman scholar.

For most of the women attending the conference the change from the routine of their lives was in itself a welcome relief. There were few husbands and children to disrupt a conversation or a train of thought; and they could argue over cocktails about the meaning of the married women’s property acts without having to worry about cooking dinner. In short, we should not underestimate the importance of the setting in distinguishing this conference from other historical meetings.

A feature which set this year’s meeting apart from those which have preceded it was the celebration of its own history. Since the Mount Holyoke Conference was celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Berkshire group itself, organizers deliberately linked current activities and concerns with those which came before. The opening session, ably keynoted by Jane DeHart Mathews, focused on opposition to the ERA. Not surprisingly, the ERA had been one of the early issues which drew the original thirty women together to form the Berks in 1928. In addition, many of those founders attended this conference by special invitation.

Fifty years ago the elite women’s colleges in the East had a monopoly on women historians—that is, at least thirty. Now women historians can be found everywhere. The contributions of regional groups such as the West Coast Association of Women Historians, Women Historians of the Midwest (WHOM), and the New York-based Institute for Research in History to the political activities of the Berks also signify an important shift. A case could be made, however, to show that the small band of women historians who founded the Berks may have had more professional security and power to shape institutions in their day than their current counterparts. As historian Pat Graham has recently concluded, “Although there was no glorious past when women professionals were ever treated equally with men... the opportunities for highly educated women were greater at the end of the nineteenth century than they were in the mid-twentieth century.”

In the 1920s there were fewer women historians than there are today, but, since the academic profession was smaller, they held a higher proportion of the jobs. Nevertheless their existence did not threaten the system and they managed to exert power within their own spheres if not in the profession as a whole. Now with greater numbers, the position of women historians is ironically less secure, primarily because they constitute a greater threat to the established order.

A Step Forward or a Step Back?

The political activities which erupted on the edges of the conference are a case in point. During the past year, a variety of women’s groups and committees have agitated for the AHA to join with the other 170 professional organizations which have boycotted anti-ERA states. Such groups were advised to follow appropriate procedures asking that the AHA’s nine-member Council (six men and three women) approve the motion to boycott. When the Council decided to poll the membership, using an “advisory” ballot, last spring, a majority of those voting (798-709) supported the boycott. In addition, the Committee on Women Historians and the Professional Division of the AHA urged the Council to join the move against states which have not ratified the ERA. None of these formal steps produced the desired results. The Council voted last December to table the motion and has yet to take an affirmative stand on it.

On Wednesday night at the meeting of the Coordinating Council of Women in the Historical Profession (CCWHP), which drew over three hundred people, someone commented that the problems women historians were currently having with the American Historical Association, including the Association’s failure to take a stand and boycott anti-ERA states, sounded very familiar. She could see how older women historians might be having a déjà-vu feeling since the AHA’s inability to recognize women’s concerns had also led to the founding of the Berks.
With this history in mind, Joan Hoff Wilson, president of the CCWHP, introduced a resolution to impose an economic sanction against the AHA in the form of asking women and sympathetic men to withhold their dues until the Council voted to boycott.

The discussion which followed the introduction of Wilson’s resolution revealed the anxieties of women historians about their status. Despite a consensus of members present that the AHA Council had ignored the petitions, the referendum, and the advice of its own subcommittees, a number of the more established women historians worried about the implications of withdrawing from the Association. They first noted that graduate students might suffer more than they from withdrawal from the AHA’s activities. When the older women were reassured that the graduate students who belonged to the AHA did not feel that they would be losing much, the real issue emerged. The women who had struggled for years to gain acceptability within the profession feared that withdrawing at a time when they had come so close to snatching power was a poor tactic. Gerda Lerner spoke most compellingly about the dilemma. Just when she had been put on the ballot for a slot on the AHA Council and could push for reforms from within, the women’s groups were thinking of taking drastic action against the Association by turning their backs on it. Similarly, as Mary Beth Norton pointed out from her new post as chairman of the AHA’s Nominations Committee, the Association seems to be moving to give women more control over nominations. Although these points had merit, those present concluded, nevertheless, that the AHA had insulted the majority of its women members by failing to act on the ERA boycott. Recognizing the power immanent in the fact that 1,000 members could withhold their dues and place them in a communal escrow fund (the equivalent of a rent strike), the group decided to go forward with such a threat if positive action is not taken at the December AHA meeting in San Francisco.

The lesson learned is important. Fifty years ago a walkout of women historians would not have meant much. Now it is a possible political strategy. Fifty years ago women historians formed a separate organization because they felt that they had no place in the AHA. Now some room is being made at the top. Fifty years ago women historians had other sources of professional status and strength so that they felt that they did not even need the AHA to be respectable. Now they are not as sure. Is acceptability in a patriarchal organization such as the AHA a step forward or a step back?

**Heading Toward New Conceptualizations**

Perhaps this point was most graphically made, not by the politics of the conference or by its setting, or even by its sense of history, although all of these reinforced the same concern. The problem found its articulation in the sessions themselves, in the papers, the analyses and the process by which these historians went about sharing their work, their ideas, and their commitments. At the Berks, unlike typical professional meetings, there was ample room for the younger, less seasoned historians to test their ideas and research among peers. The program committee, headed by Sandi Cooper of the College of Staten Island, should be congratulated for including so many unknown scholars, as well as the familiar experts. Also, the diversity of interests and sessions, including a half dozen panels on the history of minority and Third World women (sometimes poorly scheduled opposite each other) demonstrated a sensitivity to the gaps always present when white-male-dominated organizations plan programs. The Berks has also always included more serious analysis of the history of sexuality, the heterosexual biases of family history, and the need to explore new conceptual frameworks for studying lesbianism and homosexuality than most professional conferences, with the exception of recent MLA meetings.

One could not help but be impressed with the range of scholarship represented on many panels. Historians of women have been slowly moving beyond the stage of writing “contributory history,” as Gerda Lerner has called efforts to recapture the roles women play in the male version of history. Of course, it will still be necessary to know how individual women and groups of women functioned and how women were perceived by men, and accordingly there were sessions and papers on women’s organizations like the Girl Scouts and events like beauty pageants. But we are clearly heading toward new conceptualizations of the problem of writing women’s history from a nonpatriarchal perspective.

A key theme emerging from a number of sessions concerned the relationship of women to modernization, the professionalization of certain fields, and the trend toward uniformity in organizational structures and procedures. For example, Jill Mulvay Derr noted that opportunities for Mormon women to exert leadership declined as their activities became more integrated into the organizational hierarchy of the church. The existence of a separately defined and structured Mormon sisterhood during the late nineteenth century at least gave women control over certain economic resources and welfare services, and an independent political identity. In the twentieth century these functions were absorbed into the male-dominated structure. Papers which analyzed the professionalization of medicine, nursing, dentistry, and the law suggested a similar pattern. The status of women deteriorated in these fields as men organized them according to uniform procedures which included formal criteria for admission into the profession. In short, the adoption of modern rules of organization, “professional” tenets, and the establishment of a modern legal system have had sex-differentiated results benefiting men more than women.

**A Little Indigestion Set In**

Unfortunately there was little time or opportunity to examine these concepts in great detail. Often panelists barely managed to get through their prepared remarks; commentators had little chance to engage listeners in discussions because the audience was dashing off to the next scheduled event. Some of the best points
were made in private, after the session, when a single individual would corner an author. Thus, the format of the conference did not encourage the kind of in-depth analyses which will be crucial as historians of women probe more deeply into the infrastructure of patriarchal societies. Although the general quality of the papers and commentary was high, papers and comments presented at the same session sometimes varied enormously both in the breadth of topics covered and in the levels of interpretation. Some presenters had difficulty distinguishing between a dry "show and tell" about their recent research and a paper which illuminated a point in light of that research. Commentators were at a loss to make intelligent remarks about the papers because they knew little about a broad range of highly specialized topics. It was obvious that the program committee sometimes responded to the disparate proposal ideas by combining papers with a highly tenuous common thread. The result was something for everybody—a smorgasbord of delicious tidbits, but no main course. After a while everything began to taste the same and a little indigestion set in. It was too much. The format came to mirror that of other professional conferences; that is, there was little time for reflection or for digging more deeply into a specific topic. It might have been better to have had fewer sessions, fewer papers, and more time for formal analysis.

Proposals for Future Conferences

Let me try and be more precise. Suppose the conference were to be designed around three different formats. The first might vary the typical panel by combining the paper of a more widely known historian with that of a somewhat less experienced researcher. Had they time in advance, they might work together to plan their different emphases. In this way, persons interested in hearing a famed historian would also be introduced to the work of an unknown scholar, and a younger historian would have an opportunity to work with a mentor. In addition, sessions would be more tightly organized.

Another format might consist of a number of panels on key thematic areas so that interested persons could become more intensively involved. For example, suppose the next conference highlighted two topics—Women and the Law and the Feminization of Culture. In addition to the panoply of papers and sessions on other themes, individuals knowledgeable about these particular areas might constitute a working subgroup for three days. On the first day discussions would focus on the current state of the research for the benefit of people who just came to be informed. In subsequent meetings the demarcation between presenters and audience would dissolve as both began to analyze particular aspects of the topic together. It is my impression that one reason audiences rush out of sessions or fail to become engaged in discussions is that they simply do not know the material or the range of issues related to the topic. By having a more intense look at a particular area, experts or budding experts will have a chance to sort themselves out.

Finally, I would propose that future conferences consider more methodological workshops for historians who are researching topics in isolation or who may not be working with persons exploring new techniques or approaches to women's history. There should be a deliberate effort to encourage younger and older women scholars fearful of using quantitative methods to try some exercises in these techniques and overcome their fear of numbers. Similarly, developmental sessions in Marxist perspectives, the new social history, economic history, and methodologies for doing comparative history should be offered.

In making these suggestions, I realize that I may be calling upon the planners to exercise a more directive hand over the proceedings than has been the case in the past—in short, to abandon the something-for-everybody approach. But at this stage in the development of women's history, we have proven that an infinite number of topics for research exist. Now we might have to start making choices (at least in our conference) about the relative importance of different research agendas.

The Legacy of Mary Beard

As I look back over the events I attended, one session stands out in my mind as a good example of a women's history panel. Ann Lane, the editor of a recent anthology of Mary Beard's writings, invited five distinguished women historians to comment on Beard's legacy. They were told either to comment on an aspect of Beard's work or to offer a general critique of Beard's contributions to the study of history. Thus, though the panel was thematically designed, each person could react in a highly subjective manner. From that session emerged a fascinating picture not only of Beard's life and thoughts, but also of the eminent historians gathered to commemorate her. Each panelist, regardless of her particular perspective on Beard's strengths and weaknesses as an historian, agreed that Beard had been her unknown role model.

Especially crucial, however, is the fact that Mary Beard was not perceived as a success in her time—she never came of age. Beard lived and worked on the margins of academia and respectability. Whether she was trying to establish an international women's archive or rewrite the Encyclopedia Britannica, Beard believed in transforming society and culture by not making man and the male model the measure of all things. Interestingly, she saved much of her severest criticism for women professionals and academics who she thought were interested only in playing "female understry" to their male mentors.

Beard's criticisms of the historical establishment forty years ago and her expansive view of female culture continue to haunt me. Her legacy is a reminder that no matter how successful events such as the Berks are, we must always fear that success. It is never enough to come of age. The real test is whether we can precipitate a new age. □

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