Politics and Professionalism: Women Historians in the 1980s

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Those of you who think keynote speakers are chosen for their knowledge, wisdom, or fame should be disabused of those beliefs, at least in my case. I was asked to give this talk because I ventured an opinion about the subject that should be addressed in this year's keynote address during a meeting of the program committee over a year ago. At that time the American Historical Association's Committee on Women Historians (CWH) was preparing its update of the 1971 Rose Report on the Status of Women in the Historical Profession and the figures gave little reason for optimism either about what we had gained in the decade of the 1970s or about what lay ahead in the contracting economy of the 1980s. In addition, I was then chairing the Committee on the Status of Women at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and I was painfully aware of the stubborn resistance of departments and deans to the recognition, promotion, and tenuring of women faculty members. Over and over again I watched the power of shared male biases perpetuate inequality even as federal affirmative action plans cleaned up procedures and forced at least formal accountability to "good faith" efforts. So, when the program committee turned to the question of the keynote, I urged that we think in terms of subject matter, not personalities, and I said (probably in an impassioned voice) that we needed someone to address the question of political action by women such as us in the face of economic retrenchment and cultural backlash. My outburst produced thoughtful silence, then approbation, then the assignment. I agreed to consider doing it and eventually decided I could.

That was months ago and the developments since November make it seem even longer. It's not that the direction wasn't apparent before the election; it was. It's just that conservative forces have since captured the power to fulfill our gloomiest predictions. The Reagan budget cuts have hastened the pace of economic retrenchment; they threaten to cripple what small support NEH provided for research on women and to eliminate some of the alternative employment available for historians in museums and archives, and as editors of historical papers. Key senators are drafting a Family Protection Act that would, among other things, reward women for not working, cease enforcement of Title IX, and end federal funding for any school materials that "would tend to denigrate, diminish, or deny the role differences between the sexes as they have been historically understood in the U.S." The designated Surgeon General is a long-time foe of abortion, and the Attorney General's office is being staffed with assistants whose careers have been dedicated to the abolition of affirmative action. The only high-ranking woman in the administration gives no cause for celebration. She supports the military expansion that has eaten up education and social service budgets; she has fashioned a cynical justification for U.S. endorsement of brutal Third World dictatorships; and her delegation most recently sided with corporate interests over those of women and children on the question of infant formula. Jeane Kirkpatrick is not someone I want to represent feminine accomplishment, even if she was, until 1980, on the editorial board of Signs.

Probably the most devastating effect of the political triumph of antifeminist forces will be their ability to weaken, if not overturn, federal affirmative action policies. Affirmative action provided an important lever for women during the 1970s, and many of us thought it represented irreversible progress. In 1972, at the meetings of the American Council on Education, Bernice Sandler delivered a pointed reply to a critic of government intervention in the academy. Her comment was called "Affirmative Action on Campus: Like It or Not, Uncle Sam is Here to Stay." The confidence of that prediction now seems uncertain, if not entirely unwarranted.

In fact, our general confidence in uninterrupted progress has been shaken. It's not that we blithely believed in progress. Indeed, the significance of much of the women's history written in the past ten years has been to challenge the notion that women's situation has steadily improved. Joan Kelly's formulation—that there was no renaissance for women, at least during the Renaissance—is deservedly most famous. But the work of Marylin Arthur on Greece and Rome, JoAnn McNamara and Suzanne Wemple on...
the Middle Ages, and others on modern Europe and America in the 1920s also documents the challenge to Whig history.  

If many of our scholarly monographs denied that change was always progress, our political action was nonetheless inspired by a commitment to progressive reform. Theoretical writings and organizational strategies were premised on an Enlightenment faith that victories once gained could never be reversed and that the direction of change was both positive and forward. The success of our movements—of feminists in the society at large as well as within professional associations—lay in no small part in the belief that we were improving not only our own lot, but that of future generations of women. As historians we were embarked on nothing less than a transformation of both the structure of the profession and the conceptual basis of historical inquiry. Such optimism may be a necessary motive for sustained political action (and we need to think hard about the consequences of its loss for feminist movements in the 1980s), but it did not prepare us to deal with the extent of devastation we may now be facing.

Indeed our situation today seems to call for a view of history more cyclical than linear: for the circumstances of the 1980s bring to mind the 1920s and '30s. Then, after the triumph of winning the vote, women faced a well-organized antifeminist movement which struck at the cultural and political bases of female solidarity. "By the 1920s and '30s," writes Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "the community of self-defined, autonomous women had become the subject of derision and ridicule, denigrated alternatively as lesbian, remarkable women, who were simply omitted from the historical existence of each, however, did not guarantee their continuing presence. Their place has been restored only recently by a new wave of feminist historians, many of whom were surprised to discover the material they had produced. Women had been historical actors in the early 1900s:

We of the pre-war generation used to pride ourselves sentimentally on being the "lost generation," used to think that because war cut across the stable path on which our feet were set we were an unfortunate generation. But as I look back upon the records, I find myself wondering whether our generation was not the only generation of women which ever really found itself. We came late enough to escape the self-consciousness and bellicose of the pioneers, to take education and training for granted. We came early enough to take equally for granted professional positions in which we could make full use of our training. This was our double glory. Positions were everywhere open to us; it never occurred to us at that time that we were taken only because men were not available.... The millennium had come; it did not occur to us that life could be different. Within a decade shades of the prison house began to close, not upon the growing boy, but upon the emancipated girls."

The application of Wordsworth's "prison house" metaphor is apt because it captures the repressive political aspect of the anti-feminist current. It suggests that external forces had as much to do with the eclipse of the women's movement as did internal weakness. And it conveys an image of ideas confined and restrained, hidden from public view—locked up, but not wiped out.

The experience of feminists in the 1920s ought to prepare us for the worst in the '80s. We are on the verge not simply of a setback or a brief interruption, but of a major defeat with long-term consequences. As the structural bases of our strength are being undercut, antifeminists, the government, and the media also have begun to appropriate the means of communication. Denying us a public voice first, they will then try to claim that our voice has silenced itself. We have to entertain the possibility of Marjorie Nicolson's "prison house" not only because it is a real possibility, but in order to fashion strategies that will either avoid it or limit the extent of the devastation.

That is really the subject of my talk today. I want to provoke an assessment of political strategies for the 1980s, not by offering you any—that requires a long, collective effort with hours of discussion and debate. Instead I want to take a more modest course, examining some aspects of the historical contexts in which women historians have worked, thought, and organized politically. My view is even more narrow, for it focuses on women historians at colleges and universities. Although I am aware that I neglect increasingly large constituencies of professional historians outside the academy, I think I have chosen the best course. The history of academic women historians is a well-documented and, for me, familiar case which, like most cases, offers insight that can be applied elsewhere.

I have divided my discussion into three parts. The first deals with the position of women in the academic job market; the second, with women's political action; and the third, with women's understanding of their situation. Each of these is an area our political strategy must address; each presents problems that are at once distinct and intertwined.

II

The academic job market is a sex-segregated labor market. This essential feature has remained unchanged despite great fluctuations in the numbers and proportions of women in academic employment and despite the recent entry of women into fields and...
institutions from which they were once excluded. From the 1890s through the 1920s representation of women on university and college faculties rose steadily to a high of 32.5 percent in 1930. Yet the women were concentrated overwhelmingly in the women's colleges and normal schools. In 1909, for example, women constituted 75 percent of the faculty at women's colleges. In 1911, they were 65 percent of the normal school faculties. In the same period they represented 12 percent of the faculties at coeducational colleges and universities. 8 In the coeducational institutions women were found almost exclusively in the departments of physical education and home economics, often even when they had advanced degrees in another field.

The women historians who, in 1929, formed what later became the Berkshire Conference were fully aware of the sex-segregation that characterized their employment. They discussed the possibility of an exchange professorship to overcome the drawbacks faced by women teaching history in colleges. We realize that the limited number of positions open to women means that women are likely to remain in the same institutions throughout their teaching careers. They thus miss the refreshment and stimulus coming from variety of experience that men are very likely to get through accepting posts in different places.9

Florence Porter Robinson attacked the problem somewhat differently by leaving her estate to establish a chair for a woman in the History Department at the University of Wisconsin. The Robinson-Edwards chair was named for Florence Robinson's father because, she noted in the will, he believed in expanding professional opportunities for women, and for her close friend Martha Edwards, of Madison. (The chair will be held beginning in September by Gerda Lerner.) Florence Robinson received her Ph.D. in history from Wisconsin in 1925 (her dissertation was on the reform movements of the 1830s and '40s). 10 Thereafter she taught home economics at Beloit College. Wisconsin did not fill the chair for years after Dr. Robinson's death in 1946, in part because the bequest was too small to pay even a woman professor's salary, in part because no one felt pressure to fill it. But when the department began its search in 1976, it was not a sign that sex-segregation had finally been overcome.

During the 1940s and '50s an occasional woman entered a hitherto all-male department, usually in expanding midwestern universities, but it was not until the 1960s that dramatic changes began to occur. In 1961, the representation of women on faculties of colleges and universities had dipped to its lowest point in thirty years. Then the postwar baby boom swelled the population of college students and the demand for Ph.D.'s far exceeded the supply. Women were encouraged to get Ph.D.'s in the '60s and they were hired in the '70s. From the 1930s to 1973, women constituted 13 percent of history Ph.D.'s; between 1974 and 1980, the pool of available female history Ph.D.'s doubled to 26 percent. In 1969, women formed scarcely 10 percent of all historians hired; during the 1970s that figure rose to 25 percent (where it remained in 1980).11

The pattern of hiring showed the decline of horizontal segregation but not the emergence of an integrated job market. Instead a pattern of vertical segregation became increasingly apparent. (Economists define vertical sex-segregation as a situation in which men and women are hired in the same occupation, but are clustered disproportionately at different ends of the hierarchy. One sex is concentrated in the lowest ranks of power, status, and salary; the other in the highest.) 12 Among historians, women are heavily concentrated at small and low-prestige institutions and they are scarcely represented in the high-status, powerful places. In the ten leading graduate departments of history, for example (which train most history Ph.D.'s and set the lines of policy and the standards of excellence for the nation), the total number of women full professors has increased from two (272 men) in 1968-69 to five (289 men) in 1979-80. Six of the departments still have no women full professors, although (and this gives but small comfort) all but one have at least one associate professor. Women received and still receive salaries lower than men with comparable credentials. (One study shows a $2,500 discrepancy for those with over ten years of experience.) And women are grouped disproportionately at the lowest ranks of the academic ladder, even at the women's colleges. Of the ten coeducational liberal arts colleges surveyed by the AHA only three had women full professors in 1979-80. Four of the remaining seven had women associate professors, and only two of the schools had women assistant professors. There were a total of twelve women at those three ranks as compared to eighty-eight men. Women, on the other hand, accounted for nearly half of the adjunct and part-time faculty. Of the eight history departments at women's colleges responding to the same AHA inquiry, two had no women full professors and four had no women at the associate professorial level. (Those with a woman full professor tended not to have any women associate professors.) There were a total of thirteen women at these two tenured ranks as compared to forty-four men. In contrast, women were nearly half of all assistant professors and more than half of visiting professors, instructors, adjuncts, and part-time teachers.13

A report by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) in 1976 indicated that nationally women were some 25 percent of all faculty members, but only 8 percent of full professors, 16 percent of associate professors, 28 percent of assistant professors, and 49 percent of all instructors. This represented virtually no change from the situation in 1970-71, and the authors concluded that since 1970 the situation of women on the campuses can best be described as change without progress.14 Surveys by the AHA and the National Research Council (NRC) carry the data through 1979 and give specific figures for history. In 1979 women represented 10 percent of the tenured history faculty across the nation, 21 percent of those in tenure-track positions, and 35 percent of those in non-tenure-track positions. Looked at in terms of the distribution of available men and women, 28 percent of female history Ph.D.'s as compared to only 9 percent of males were in non-tenure-track positions—the dead-end jobs that accommodate fluctuations in demand without upsetting the hierarchical structure of employment.15

Fifteen percent of women history Ph.D.'s, as compared to 9 percent of men, are in tenure-track positions, figures which on the face of it suggest improved possibilities for women.16 Indeed the pool of available women history Ph.D.'s has steadily increased and women have swelled the ranks of assistant professors (giving rise in some quarters to totally unfounded claims that women have displaced white males in the job market). There are proportion-
ately and numerically more women teaching history at the assistant professorial level than ever before. This has led optimists to conclude that it is only a matter of time until women move up the tenure ladder and the faculties of history departments become truly integrated by sex. Holding a job as an assistant professor is no guarantee of tenure, however, for several reasons. First, in all periods, differential promotion rates have favored men over women and thus perpetuated vertical segregation. In 1951, a woman historian described her many years of experience in a women's college:

In my years in the History Department here, young men, whether or not they have families, have repeatedly been given better initial rank and salary than women of comparable and even better qualifications. The assumption on the part of those making the offer is that most of the desirable masculine candidates, having more opportunities, will not accept the terms a woman would. A parallel assumption, I think, plays a part in the more rapid advancement of men. 17

Statistics from the 1979 NRC survey document the continuation of this situation. Among the recent 1975-78 cohort of history Ph.D.'s, over 27 percent of men, but only 9 percent of women, had reached or passed the rank of associate professor. 18 Second, in the 1980s, retrenchment will increasingly close off the possibility of tenure for all but a very few assistant professors, as university administrators seek to cut costs by instituting the policy of the “revolving door”—not promoting assistant professors and replacing the few retiring senior professors with temporary faculty members if they replace them at all. That the number of these retirements will be small is indicated by the figures on the age distribution of faculty members. In 1978, 73 percent of all faculty members were under fifty. With retirement now at age seventy, the number of replacement positions which will open in the next twenty years will be very few. In a major assessment of the future of graduate education, Princeton President William Bowen wrote, "At no time over this period [1980s-90s] do we expect the total demand for Ph.D.'s in academia to come close to matching the corresponding supply of Ph.D.'s." 19 There will be little opportunity for anyone—male or female—to move up through the ranks to associate and full professorships: hence there is little chance of improving significantly the representation of women at those ranks.

Some have suggested that these economic and demographic conditions affect men and women equally, and it is true that unemployment is a painful problem for both sexes. An NRC report in 1977 indicated, however, that women history Ph.D.'s experienced much higher rates of unemployment than did their male counterparts (the figures were 10 percent for women as opposed to 2 percent for men), which suggests that females are disproportionately feeling the pain. 20 But beyond that, I think retrenchment can perpetuate what might be called a “culture of isolation or marginality” for women already in history departments. When there is only one woman in a department (as is the case in many institutions), she is subject to tremendous pressures to prove her personal and scholarly worth. It takes a critical density of at least two or three women to diminish the extra burden that women bear of serving on committees, and counseling and advising students; to provide models of a variety of female behaviors and personality types; and to support one another in social and political matters especially as they relate to women. It is extremely difficult even for the most self-confident and outspoken woman to take unpopular stands when she has to stand alone in her department. The pressure, in fact, is for silence, an emphasis on individual achievement, and denial that being a woman matters at all—factors which ultimately reinforce the social and intellectual dimensions of sex-segregation.

The academic job market in history—as in most fields—is feminized at the bottom, and the bottom ranks pose little threat to the upper reaches, which are predominantly male. (In 1979, men were over 90 percent of all tenured historians, and tenured historians under age forty were 86 percent males. Looked at in terms of the pool of available Ph.D.'s, the figures are still skewed: half of all women, but over 77 percent of all men, are tenured. 21 During the early '70s the entry of women did seem to pose a challenge, and affirmative action was the lever with which vertical segregation began to be assaulted. If unlimited expansion had continued, we might have achieved integration (although the historical record offers few examples of that ever happening in any occupation). But the job market began to close down in the mid-'70s and affirmative action will probably not be enforced by the present government. How effective it can be in a climate of contraction is an open question anyway. Even those charged with enforcing it admit that “the whole affirmative action process was designed for a hiring climate,” with little or no serious attention to the question of contraction. 22

As contraction worsens in the 1980s the structure of our occupation remains vertically segregated by sex. Men predominate in the tenured, upper reaches of the hierarchy; women disproportionately fill the lowest ranks—of assistant professors and even more of non-tenure-track, part-time employees—who serve (as women have historically served) as a source of cheap labor and a dispensable, temporary labor supply. What I have said about women historians generally applies even more strongly to minority women historians, who face the twin obstacles of race and sex.

There were undeniably inroads made for and by women during the 1970s. Women have attained tenure; some universities have reviewed salaries and corrected gross inequities; departments have hired more women, a few of whom have achieved well-publicized “star” billing. A sprinkling of women at the top, however, does not constitute an integrated job market. An attempt to transform the segregated structure of the academic labor market was barely under way in the 1970s when the economic downturn began. The projections are that the contraction will continue through the 1990s, after which time (if our civilization manages to escape nuclear destruction) the demand for Ph.D.'s will once again exceed the supply. 23 Can we achieve in a period of contraction what was hardly begun in the days of expansion? If so, how? If not, what should be our goals? Those, it seems to me, are the central questions posed by this review of women's employment. The questions should not be answered, however, without surveying the two other topics I mentioned: political action and individual “mentalité.”

III

The few inroads made during the 1970s came not only from the pressures of the 1972 amendments and executive orders applying the Civil Rights Act to sex discrimination and higher education,
but also from the organized political action of women themselves. Indeed, it can be argued that without political action there would have been little sustained effort to equalize conditions for women. It should be argued further that political action is an indispensable factor in the creation and maintenance of an integrated profession. The gains made were not determined simply by the fact that large numbers of women entered the academic labor force (though that was a necessary precondition), but by enormous pressure exerted by women mobilized in the caucuses and committees of professional associations and inspired by the growth nationally of the feminist movement.

I do not want to review in detail the past decade of the women's movement. Instead, I want to make two points. First, although the rebirth of the feminist movement seemed a sudden and spontaneous phenomenon, it built on long-established women's networks which, like the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, had fostered a culture of female professionals. Second, the contemporary movement was stimulated, if not called into existence, by government policies aimed at providing womanpower for economic expansion. It flourished in a climate which at least rhetorically extolled the virtue and possibility of equality.

Let me deal with each of these points in turn.

Throughout the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, the Berkshire Conference was a group of at most twenty-five women who, operating on an annual budget of some twelve dollars, met for a weekend each spring and corresponded with one another during the year. Although they defined their purpose as "social contact" and insisted they were not a "pressure group," in fact they were an interest group and they did try to exert pressure.24 The group was founded in 1928 after a discussion among women historians returning on the train from the AHA annual meeting, who wished that "we scattered women historians could get together oftener to exchange ideas." The point was, according to Louise Loomis's recollection, "to give us a greater sense of comradeship [she had originally written "fellowship" and crossed it out] in our craft."25 From the first meeting the women discussed ways of improving the situation of women historians. Their members sometimes vented anger and indignation at the treatment they received. One, for example, responded to a questionnaire about an exchange professorship for women this way, after marking her paper "confidential" at the top:

"Probably the best college teachers and the most brilliant women scholars would never be chosen by their Heads of Department: since usually outstanding scholarship or exceptional teaching . . . creates a kind of vicious jealousy in the Head of the Department and his special favorites."26

The project for the exchange professorship was the first of a number of efforts, but it founders as the depression worsened. The women turned, in 1938, to "the professional outlook for women," examining the comparable hiring patterns, rank, and salary scales for women and men. Emily Hickman, of the New Jersey College for Women, seems to have been the most outspoken and imaginative of the leaders. At one meeting she "suggested that the AAUW . . . be asked to make] a statistical survey of the possibilities in academic life for women." She also thought that "biographies of eminent women" should be published "with a view of disproving rumors that none is suitable for a [college] presidency."27 And she turned the group's attention to the question of the representation of women on the Council of the AHA.

For three years the Berkshire Conference worked on the matter. In 1939 they wrote in a nomination for the Council and in 1940 sent a letter urging members to nominate Louise Fargo Brown (of Vassar) for the Council, Caroline Ware (of American University) for the Nominating Committee, and Emily Hickman for the Program Committee.28 When the effort failed, a representative wrote to the AHA asking that Miss Hickman be added to the next Program Committee. Curtis Nettles, the 1941 chairman, replied that it was too late to add her to his group, but he assured the women of his good intentions:

"I have been discussing many of the problems of the program with Professor Bessie Louise Pierce. Originally, I had hoped that she would serve as an ex officio member. . . . Although she has been helpful and generous in the extreme, I realize now that her duties as chairman of the committee on local arrangements have precluded her taking a full part in the work of the program committee."29

There was a woman on the committee in 1942, though she was not a member of the Berkshire Conference. But the 1942 program chairman did try to placate the women who had been badgering the committee. The theme of the meetings that year was to be "Civilization in Crisis," and the chairman asked for help in setting up a session on the impact of crises on the status of women. Dorothy Ganfield Fowler (of Hunter College), then Secretary of the Berks, sent back the names of two eminent women with several possible paper topics they could do. The Program Committee chairman was "disappointed" in her reply and "gathered" (though I cannot see on what basis) that both
papers would offer “descriptive treatments only, and that there is no one who could handle for the great critical periods a more interpretive approach.”

Despite defeats, the agitation continued throughout the 1940s. In 1948 the women decided to press for more women speakers on the AHA program and they discussed ways to help with the problems faced by their younger female colleagues. The minutes for 1948 noted that “it was suggested that the older, more established women actively help with the problems and that accurate, up-to-date records of the individuals be kept” (presumably for purposes of employment). That surely is documentation of an “old-girl network,” although the women creating it would have been horrified at the term.

The Berkshire Conference (despite its tiny size and lack of official status) managed regularly to call attention to women’s interests in the AHA; it offered a way of understanding women’s situation that challenged the predominant practice within the Association; and, perhaps most important, it perpetuated a culture of female association (drawn from experiences in the women’s colleges) in a situation (the national organization) which otherwise marginalized and isolated women historians. In addition, of course, it provided in the 1970s what some of its leaders had originally hoped for: “It might happen,” one of them had written, “that such a group could become the nucleus for some more specific professional activity.”

Under the very different conditions of economic expansion and official commitment to equality in the 1960s, such professional activity mushroomed. In 1961, at the behest of Esther Peterson, head of the Women’s Bureau in the Department of Labor, President Kennedy established a Commission on the Status of Women. Its report in 1963 documented the fact that American women were denied equal rights and opportunities and recommended the creation of fifty state commissions. In 1964, when the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was established under the Civil Rights Act, sex discrimination was included in its jurisdiction (although it had been added by a hostile legislator to discredit Title VII of the Act). In 1966, delegates to the third meeting of the National Conference of State Commissions on the Status of Women voted down a resolution which urged the EEOC to enforce the prohibition against sex discrimination as seriously as it did that against race discrimination. The women who had offered the defeated resolution whispered angrily among themselves, according to Jo Freeman’s account; then they met and formed the National Organization for Women. The simultaneous development of a more radical feminist movement among young women in SDS and the civil rights movement also took place in the climate of officially endorsed equality.

At the same time, colleges, graduate schools, and foundations began to encourage women to get Ph.D.’s by offering fellowships and a great deal of verbal support. “It is apparent,” commented one author, “that women constitute a major untapped source for colleges and universities in need of good teachers and researchers.” Barnaby Keeney, an historian and President of Brown University, could write confidently and in apparent good faith in 1962:

Keeney went on to say that this was not so because there were “prejudices against women in the learned professions,” but he felt they would overcome if women pursued higher degrees and academic callings.

In fact, the literature of the early 1960s tended to minimize obstacles in the path of highly motivated, qualified women. Ben Euwema’s 1964 foreword to Jessie Bernard’s Academic Women argued that “in the long run the place of academic women is secure.” And Bernard herself attributed the depopulation of female faculty in academia to women’s choice: the “flight to maternity” in the 1950s. A doctoral dissertation about “Women on College and University Faculties” (written in 1965, but published only in 1977, as presses sought to capitalize on the demand for books about women) pointed to a paradoxical situation: despite a favorable educational, cultural, and political climate, not enough women had Ph.D.’s to meet the demand for them as college teachers. The author acknowledged that discrimination might have played some role in discouraging women from getting Ph.D.’s in the previous decades, but she found discrimination a vague concept and, anyway, difficult to measure. If women simply recognized the opportunity and took advantage of it, they would necessarily win places on academic faculties. “It follows,” she concluded, “that women must make themselves accessible for collegiate positions” by acquiring the doctorate.

If an aspiring Ph.D. candidate found discrimination difficult to measure, women in the late 1960s and early 70’s increasingly did not. The discrepancy between the promise of equality and the experience of inequality led, as it had with the founders of NOW, to anger, an articulation of grievances, and collective action. The women’s movement developed in dialectical relationship to the officially sanctioned rhetorical and legal commitment to equality. Not content with token gains and aware of enormous obstacles, women demanded a full-scale transformation of the structures of employment and education. The women’s professional caucuses and the women’s studies movement were the means by which the double transformation was attempted.

By 1971, caucuses of professional women had blossomed in most disciplines, including history. The Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession (CCWHP), founded in 1969, coordinated its efforts with those of the Berkshire Conference. Their demands and resolutions pushed the AHA to appoint the ad hoc investigatory committee which produced the Rose Report in 1970, and then a permanent standing Committee on Women Historians (CWH). A parallel process occurred in the Organization of American Historians (OAH). The combined efforts of CCWHP and the women’s committees have had impressive results in both organizations. The concentration of women (in the AHA last year we constituted some 30 percent of all new members) and their correspondingly high levels of political activity have a mutually reinforcing effect; together these have vastly increased the representation of women at sessions of the annual
meetings and on all committees. (In some cases representation has gone from zero in 1969 to 30 percent in 1979.)

In the OAH, the victory has been far more complete. Joan Hoff Wilson, a founder of CCWHP and a key strategist in many campaigns, including the ERA boycott, is the OAH's new Executive Secretary, and Gerda Lerner is its President. (Gerda Lerner's election is a fitting culmination to a decade of women's activism which she often led. In the papers of the Berkshire Conference, she is mentioned in a 1971 letter as the only possibility for a presidential position since, as was not the case with some others, one could count on her sense of "obligation to other women.""

In both the OAH and the AHA, women have achieved a level of integration that does not correspond to their position in individual history departments or in the job market as a whole. Most of the gains women have made hardly amount to structural transformation because they are offices and positions which are usually annually renewed. Happily for those of us who have had to serve on them, there is no tenure on AHA and OAH committees. Consequently, representation for women in the professional associations depends on the continuing efforts of women's organizations. Although the process is exhausting, the leverage attained has been important not only for the active members, but for women historians generally. For it is within the associations that there exists a chance to keep alive an official professional endorsement of equality and affirmative action at a time when the federal government and those who articulate public opinion seem to be turning against both the ideal and the means for achieving it.

The most recent example of this use of professional associations is the issuing by the AHA of Guidelines on Hiring Women Historians in Academia. The guidelines, prepared by the CWH with the Professional Division, carry the Council's endorsement. They have been sent out to every department of history in the country. Their purpose is to achieve equity for women historians, and they include tables and charts to make departments more aware of their records in hiring, tenuring, and promoting women. There are also recommendations about how to increase a department's rating on an "equity scale." The official sanction of the AHA for equity will enhance the claims of women and the actions of men who support them and will surely make it more difficult for opponents of affirmative action to implement their policies. The guidelines are a powerful tool not only for our efforts to integrate the job market, but, probably more importantly, for our efforts to maintain the integrity of the goals of equity in the face of mounting political and cultural pressures to repress them.

The history of the women's movement during the past two decades (and of radical movements in other periods) suggests that although they do not entirely disappear under adverse circumstances, opposition movements draw most membership and have greatest impact when they operate in a context which acknowledges the plausibility of their ideals and goals. This is not to say that the gains made were determined by the demographic, economic, and ideological climate of the 1960s. Rather they were won in the context of that climate, but only through the efforts of opposition movements which forced concessions from unwilling powerholders in government, the academy, and the professional associations. The process of forcing concessions involved an insistence on a feminist interpretation and articulation of the meaning of the 1960s commitment to equality and social justice.

For historians, writing women's history was as important an aspect of the process of interpretation and articulation as was political action. This was early recognized by members of the Berkshire Conference, who began these women's history conferences in 1973, shortly after the organization had joined forces with CCWHP to increase women's representation within the AHA and the OAH. Research about women in the past added to the growing body of women's studies knowledge. This interdisciplinary corpus of information and interpretation began to provide the substantive foundation, the understanding and insight, and the tentative theoretical formulations required for debates about contemporary policy. It also sensitized the culture to the legitimacy of feminist concerns and forced serious consideration of them. That seriousness is illustrated by the fact that women's studies programs continue to appear (most recently at Princeton and Brown universities) despite the decline in militant student and faculty pressure for them. The justification for these programs, endorsed by faculty and administrators who once dismissed them as passing fads, is that they represent an important and legitimate scholarly enterprise, the fruits of whose research belong in college and university curricula. Women's studies programs, of course, also provide a meeting place on campuses for women who would otherwise be alone in their departments. They inevitably become centers not only for intellectual exchange but for political action, because they create a critical mass of women who share ideas, grievances, and friendships with one another. On university and college campuses, women's studies programs provide what the women's caucuses do within the national associations: an alternative to the "culture of marginality or isolation" to which I referred earlier.

A critical density of women in some form is essential for the development of political movements. During the 1930s, the Berkshire Conference was founded by women historians at women's colleges. Although no national women's movement informed their behavior, the founding mothers of the Berks knew the value for women's interests of association, since they experienced it within their own departments and colleges and they tried to develop comparable solidarity within the AHA. During the 1960s, the national women's movement defined for the increasing numbers of women historians the importance of acting together, and they did so first where the critical density existed: in professional associations. In fact, some women found the solidarity they experienced at national meetings enough to sustain them during the rest of the year. Others returned to their campuses to establish women's studies programs in an effort to create locally and across departmental boundaries what they had already experienced on a national level.

Although (unlike the situation of the 1930s) women now tend to be isolated within history departments, there has been created a culture of female association within the AHA and OAH and, on campuses, in women's studies programs. The burgeoning of women's caucuses, women's history, and women's studies programs followed the expansion of the job market and the entry into it of unprecedented numbers of women. None of these develop-

*Ed. note: The guidelines are reprinted below, pp. 33-34.
ments depends, however, on continued expansion. Their very existence draws together the critical density of active women who can fight back, who can keep alive demands for equality and a feminist interpretation in the face of contraction and attempts at repression—as the Berkshire Conference managed to do in a different way for a generation with far fewer adherents than we have now.

The questions for our strategy are how to maintain the culture of female association—which is both political and intellectual—and how to continue to attract women to it, in a period when individualism and antifeminism threaten to draw them away.43

IV

Individual women’s understanding of their situation seems to have varied over time, with structural and political conditions. Frank Stricker refers to the “privatized individualism” evident among young women in the 1920s which dismayed “older feminists who had been animated by a broader idea of social service” and women’s suffrage. “We’re not out to benefit society,” one of these women stated, “we’re out for Mary’s job and Luella’s art, and Barbara’s independence and the rest of our individual careers and desires.” Stricker rightly attributes some of this attitude to media emphasis on individual choices by women and to the decline of the women’s suffrage. “We’re not out to benefit society,” one of these women stated, “we’re out for Mary’s job and Luella’s art, and Barbara’s independence and the rest of our individual careers and desires.” Stricker rightly attributes some of this attitude to media emphasis on individual choices by women and to the decline of the women’s suffrage. “We’re not out to benefit society,” one of these women stated, “we’re out for Mary’s job and Luella’s art, and Barbara’s independence and the rest of our individual careers and desires.” Stricker rightly attributes some of this attitude to media emphasis on individual choices by women and to the decline of the women’s suffrage. “We’re not out to benefit society,” one of these women stated, “we’re out for Mary’s job and Luella’s art, and Barbara’s independence and the rest of our individual careers and desires.”

I think you can see the mentality I am trying to evoke. It denies that there are structural obstacles, even while it documents their existence. The women felt that success depended only on their personal ingenuity, self-discipline, and cleverness. In addition, one of the keys to success was a rejection of feminism (the critique that does insist that obstacles are structural and experienced by women as a group) and of any sense of sorority. The rejection of feminism and of identification with other women was thus the necessary reaction to the feminist movement’s neglect of the personal side of things and especially of self-fulfillment.44

There I think he opts for a personal/psychological explanation when he should first consider a structural one. In periods of economic contraction and competition for restricted numbers of places, success tends to be attributed narrowly and exclusively to individual achievement. Only the best will be chosen, it is said, and appeals to discrimination are dismissed as excuses for individual shortcomings.

Whether consciously or not, some women incorporate these attitudes, substituting analyses of personal behavior for an understanding of economic and social structures. Thus the authors of a 1953 study of Radcliffe Ph.D.’s ended their book by suggesting the best way for women to overcome obstacles in their paths:7

The solution . . . is for women to do work of such high quality that no question of “competition” arises. It would take a very prejudiced anti-feminist to refuse to employ, on the ground of sex, a woman who has demonstrated ability and achievement clearly superior to that of the men available.45

“Clearly superior” seems an objective criterion, although we know that often it is not. Indeed, ironically, endorsement of that principle contradicted what many of the women responding to the survey said. For them, demonstrating clear superiority would have ultimately undercut their professional success. They were accepted, they felt, only when they underplayed their best and most competitive qualities. Here are excerpts from some of the responses, by women who felt they had achieved professional success:

The men do the talking, and would make all the decisions if they could. A woman must find ways to make herself heard—not difficult but requires ingenuity. A woman interested and eager for accomplishment frequently overworks. Professional societies ignore the woman member. Please let me explain that I am not a feminist.46

Male jealousy of female efficiency—I had to learn the hard way to “hide my mind.”47

I think I am more acceptable in my present work if I do not attempt to press forward as strenuously as a man would, but such matters are subtle, and it is hard to separate trying to keep my head in general from trying not to be a strident female.48

... A woman has to work harder and better than a man . . . . Once she has established her ability (with tact and subtlety) almost any man is happy to have her go on working hard. . . . The worst obstacle to a woman’s success is other women. One neurotic or aggressive, chip-on-shoulder feminist can scare an originally open-minded employer away from any further experiments with the sex and sour all men who have to deal with her.49

I have not been conscious of obstacles in my professional work as a result of being a woman. Since we all make our own limitations, I suspect that the individual is often as responsible for closing doors as are the members of the profession. If one’s goal is to be good in the chosen profession and if all energies are bent in that direction, one is likely to be accepted as a person seriously attempting to contribute to the field. No doubt there are social arrangements, like clubs and stag dinners, that if they have any value could be stated as barriers. I have always felt that the best way is to look upon such matters as were non-essential to professional contributions as often means of saving very precious time and a good many evenings. . . . I always found enough things that I could do in my own profession to lead me to forget all about any that couldn’t be done. The result was that there never seemed to be any that couldn’t be done.50

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If examples of the individualistic mentality can always be found, however, they nonetheless do seem to multiply when the market for jobs is tight, when competition for a diminishing number of positions intensifies, and when large numbers of women are the sole females in history departments.

There are other signs as well. The media are turning attention increasingly away from the economic and social inequities women experience to reports about women’s decisions and choices, as if these existed entirely independently of social and economic struc-

30 Women’s Studies Quarterly 9:3 (Fall 1981)
The New York Times recently misreported the results of a study of the impact of coeducation on women undergraduates. While the study emphasized structural problems young women face in school and in the job market and portrayed them as intent on having both careers and families, the Times depicted them as preferring family to career and choosing more traditional domestic values. 

In addition, excellence is once again being stressed as the only standard for professional advancement. In the Princeton report I referred to earlier, William Bowen suggested that outstanding individuals be encouraged to continue graduate work to ensure generational continuity in scholarly fields. The danger is that the Radcliffe study’s demand that women be “clearly superior” to men will be reasserted. Why should women have to be superior to men, when they need only to be equal? In addition, pristine standards of excellence sometimes have implicit male and conservative biases, depending on who makes the evaluations. The comments of the women in the Radcliffe study should alert us to the fact that excellence and exemplary professional behavior can be defined by some as antithetical to feminism, women’s history, or a concern with equity for women.

Organized antifeminists have encouraged the expression of hostility to women’s movements, and some women are finding that they have to play down or deny membership in women’s groups to be taken seriously or to get a job. The pressures are subtle, but evident. They are Marjorie Nicolson’s “shades of the prison house.” Perhaps most disturbing are what seem to me to be increasingly frequent rejections of women’s associations by women graduate students. The most pointed comment came from a woman in American history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

“Outside the book exhibit at the Berkshire Conference, Vassar College Center. Photograph by Teddie Burnett.

“I don’t need other women,” she said when she refused an invitation to attend a meeting of women graduate students. “If I’m good enough, I can succeed on my own.”

How are we to reply to statements of this kind? My own response, “Let me know if you still believe that in ten years,” was motivated by anger and disappointment. Our collective reply ought to be informed by an appreciation of the pressures that promote such ideas and by a challenge to the conditions that create them.

It is now time to end. I trust this analysis will provoke discussion. I know it will also provoke disagreement and debate. But I hope it ultimately leads to a useful strategy for continued political action by women historians during the 1980s. “Shades of the prison house” may be visible on the horizon, but it is not inevitable that they will block out the light.

My final words are not my own, but those of other members of the Berkshire Conference. First, there is a letter written in 1952 by one of the founders of the Berks, Louise Loomis, describing her recollections of more than twenty years of active membership. It illustrates the satisfactions of the cooperative, political culture of female professional historians:

My memories of our meetings after the first run together, with little to distinguish one from another, and mostly of such small personal incidents as anyone might recall. I always went, I know, expecting to have an excellent time and I always did. Sometimes there were serious things to talk of: a member might be facing a difficult problem which she was glad to discuss with a few understanding friends. But for the most part we simply enjoyed ourselves, as I imagine you do now.

Second, there is a 1971 letter written during the campaign to get the nominating committee of the AHA to increase the representation of women. It illustrates the toll of political action:

“Like you . . . I feel overwhelmed by the pace of the fall’s activities. Scarcely a day goes by that I do not receive some request, often a demanding one, for information, cooperation, and what-have-you in regard to our campaign. In addition [I have scholarly papers of my own to prepare]. I sometimes feel my head is spinning and I long to get back . . . to the book I want to write.”

Finally, there is a sentence from the first draft of a letter written in 1971 to members of the Berkshire Conference asking them to support the same AHA campaign. It was inexplicably left out of the final version of the letter. I offer it to you now as a summation of the past and a program for the future:

In unity, women historians have a greater strength than the AHA has acknowledged.

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