

Poststructuralist Gender Historians: Are We Those Names?

Mariana Valverde

Volume 25, 1990

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt25re02>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Valverde, M. (1990). Poststructuralist Gender Historians: Are We Those Names? *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 25, 227–236.

Poststructuralist Gender Historians:

Are We Those Names?

Mariana Valverde

Denise Riley, *'Am I That Name?': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1988).

Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press 1988).

WHAT MANY SOCIAL HISTORIANS are dubbing 'the controversy about discourse theory' is often posed as a single yes-or-no question. It may be more useful, however, to use a review of two key works in this controversy to clarify several related but distinct debates regarding theory, method, and politics which often are lumped together in an indigestible polemical mass. These two books are generally 'on the same side,' politically and theoretically, but tackle different questions and have different concerns. Reading them together suggests that there is more than one debate, and that each of the debates has more than two sides.

An ancient debate being re-enacted through the discussion of discourse and poststructuralism is that which concerns 'fact.' "Just the facts, ma'am" is still a call heard among both liberal and Marxist historians who privilege quantitative data, and believe that one can map social 'facts' and social structures without paying attention to the words and values of human beings. Empiricists — no matter of what political stripe — naturally dismiss all attempts to understand culture and meaning as a frivolous and marginal form of historical research far inferior to their own 'scientific' labours.

Some of Joan Scott's essays are biting attacks on empiricism, particularly as practiced by historians of women. Women's history, however, like labour history, generally has moved beyond simple empiricism. As Riley suggests, the prevailing paradigm among feminist scholars is based not on 'facts,' but on the newer notion of 'experience.' This was the central category in the pioneering work of E.P. Thompson and, as Ellen Trimberger has pointed out, it was imported into feminist

Mariana Valverde, "Poststructuralist Gender Historians: Are We Those Names?" *Labour/Le Travail*, 25 (Spring 1990), 227-236.

history by changing the focus from 'class' to 'gender.'¹ The experience of subordinate social groups was explained, in the Thompsonian framework, as formed by their own actions, not only by the actions and ideologies of those in power. This emphasis on agency was a refreshing breeze in the desert of 1960s structuralist Marxism. Thompson also revived the study of culture, taking it away from intellectual history, and using it in the Marxist-humanist (but still materialist) tradition of Gramsci and Lukacs. Thus, unlike empiricism, the Thompsonian approach does not necessarily clash with discourse analysis. In fact, Thompson's long, detailed analyses of Blake's poetry and Methodist hymns are nothing but discourse analysis. His approach, (and that of feminist historians using the same method to study gender) does clash, however, with poststructuralism, insofar as this philosophical position or method attacks the concepts of 'agency' and 'experience' which were the building blocks of the new, politicized social history. (Scott unfortunately devotes her chapter on Thompson to criticizing the invisibility of gender in *The Making of the English Working Class*, as though gender history was available in 1963, instead of explaining why poststructuralism challenges the Thompsonian framework).

Poststructuralism questions the unity of the subject, be it individual or collective. Furthermore, the fragmented, unstable subject of poststructuralism is not regarded as a rational autonomous unit producing meanings and values, but rather as being constituted in the ebb and flow of conflicting meanings generated by various discourses. Terms such as 'women' or 'workers' are seen as signifiers in the process of being defined by competing discourses, rather than as indicating readymade historical agents. This view of the subject thus poses a major challenge to labour history and women's history. Some poststructuralists have drawn the conclusion that all political action in the name of 'workers' or 'women' is mystification — hence the bad reputation of poststructuralism among socialists and feminists (in English Canada, at least). Nevertheless, others (especially in Britain, and to a lesser extent in the US) have argued that poststructuralism can be useful to the politically committed. Riley, in particular, argues forcefully that one can question the myth of the readymade autonomous subject while still being passionately committed to political action in the name of 'women' or other groups. There may not be any women in the strong sense of 'to be,' she states, but we must act as though there are, so long as we are oppressed through the perhaps false assumption that being 'a woman' is an essential identity. Her conclusion may appear contradictory, but it deserves to be explored and utilized. If the notion of 'women's experience' is as full of theoretical holes as current philosophy would suggest, there is no point in continuing to believe that the empress is wearing clothes (made of 'facts' or of 'experience') just because this belief has been politically useful in the past.

Let us proceed, then, to Scott's book, a collection of somewhat heterogeneous,

¹Ellen Kay Trimmer, "E.P. Thompson: Understanding the Process of History" in T. Skocpol, ed., *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge 1984), 211-43.

previously published essays, some of which have been revised thoroughly. A few essays are devoted first to convincing mainstream historians of the importance of gender in history, and second, to developing a particular view of what 'gender' means. A major essay tackles the question of discourse analysis in the historical research, and a number of concrete case studies (most in 19th-century French history) use the method developed in other chapters. First, then, the question of 'gender.'

When feminists began to make a specific contribution to the discipline of history, the first stage was 'women's history.' As Scott points out in an essay by that title, 'women's history' was often positivist, and assumed one could collect quantities of facts about 'women's experience.' This naivete foundered under a dual attack: one from a poststructuralist direction, on the concept of 'experience' as unproblematically available to historians, and the other (barely mentioned by Scott) from those feminist historians highlighting ethnic, racial, and class conflicts among women. How could one talk about the experience of women when race, ethnicity and class intervened so as to prevent any confident generalizations? Insofar as feminist history has moved away from monolithic and essentialist concepts of gender, it has done so, in my opinion, much more because of the growing political awareness of differences among women than because of any flirtation with the deconstruction of gender. Scott, however, stresses the philosophical, not political, problems of 'women's history.'

Chief among these problems, she argues, is a notion of 'interests' obtained simply by borrowing the Marxist concepts of class interests and class ideology and applying them to men as a group. Indeed, the Marxist model, in which material economic interests are perceived as prime movers given in a structural reality existing prior to any subjective consciousness, has been taken up by feminist theorists who confidently describe 'male ideology' (as if there were only one). Scott remarks that if one questions structuralist ontologies (whether of gender or of class), then one must question the notion of pre-discursive interests as lying hidden in objective reality. Instead, one must investigate the struggles over meaning waged by various social groups to trace the process by which certain meanings came to prevail over others. Both ruling groups and subordinate groups constitute themselves, and their 'interests,' through these discursive battles. Scott's case study of the conflicting images and definitions of the category "ouvrière" in mid-19th century France shows that such battles had a real impact on women's lives, and cannot be dismissed as mere intellectual history.²

Just as 19th-century trade unionists, social investigators, and legislators fought about how to define 'the female workers' — disagreeing, but beginning from the common assumption that the female worker was intrinsically a social problem — so, too, do historians today use competing definitions of 'women' and of 'gender.'

²See Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: the Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago 1988), for an analysis of gender that is similar to Scott's but is closer to structuralist Marxism, especially in her use of 'ideology' rather than 'discourse.'

All the theories of patriarchy available in feminist theory are attempts to locate the essence and origin of gender oppression, and hence the qualities that make female human beings 'women.' Whether they stress private property, kinship, or sexual subordination, all these theories err, in Scott's view, in trying to fix the meaning of gender once and for all.

Scott, however, is not so fond of deconstruction as to draw the relativistic conclusion that all attempts to make 'women' into a group are arbitrary *per se*. Rather than move off into what Riley wittily calls the apolitical realm of "post-women, no-longer-women, who have seen it all, are tired of it, and prefer evanescence," (6) Scott attempts to provide a non-essentialist definition of gender: not a theory of origins or essences, but a consideration of the factors or spheres through which gender is variously constituted. Scott argues, first, that the differences between the sexes are turned into the binary opposition of the two genders through four channels: (1) cultural symbols, (2) normative concepts; (3) politics (understood very broadly, almost synonymously with 'power relations'), and (4) subjective identity. The specific content given to gender difference in each of these four modes, as well as the particular roles played by each of the relationships among them are, then, the proper subject of gender history. But — and this is the second element of Scott's definition — gender is not simply the end-product of certain relations of power-knowledge: as it is constituted, it acts in turn as "a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated." (45) This latter point is explicated in several of the concrete case studies, which show how the organization of class power and the self-legitimation of the bourgeois liberal state relied to some extent on gender difference. For instance, once the discourse of social investigation had managed to establish a seemingly natural distinction between female labour (which was to be limited by women's family responsibilities) and male labour, this gender polarity could be used to anchor other important dichotomies: family vs factory, moral values vs economics, reproduction vs production.

Scott's approach, and especially her second point about the anchoring of social and economic power-relations in gender difference, has much to commend it, as her insightful concrete studies demonstrate. Nevertheless, one wonders if her choice of four elements as constitutive of gender is not somewhat arbitrary. It was unclear to me, for instance, why 'politics' was mentioned, but socioeconomic relations were not. Elsewhere in the text, it seemed that Scott's 'politics' actually subsume a great deal of what Riley and others call 'the social': but then why single out 'politics'? The definition also clearly privileges symbolic and normative elements. Although Scott is at pains to show that such elements have real power over people and are therefore not 'mere words,' it is difficult to say whether Scott's definition finally succeeds in transcending the idealism/materialism dichotomy.

This brings us to the theoretical core of the book, the essay "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History," a revised version of an earlier controversial essay³ arguing in favour of discourse analysis, but rejecting some interpretations

³Joan W. Scott, "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History," *International Labor and Work-*

of it (notably, that of Gareth Stedman Jones). Scott criticizes Stedman Jones' influential call for discourse analysis in working-class history⁴ in order to dispel the fears of historians who, after reading Stedman Jones, concluded that all discourse analysis was idealism by a fancy name. Scott first shows that Stedman Jones does not understand the concept of 'discourse,' thinking it refers to 'words' as opposed to things. In fact the great breakthrough of discourse analysis is to circumvent the words/things dichotomy through understanding social relations as systems of meaning, systems which include the physical arrangement of objects, architectural plans, clothes, and any other entities (be they 'words' or 'things') laden with social meaning. Stedman Jones ends up producing something very close to "conventional intellectual history" (57) rather than a new kind of social history. Scott also points out that Stedman Jones assumes that economic class analysis is necessarily opposed to discourse analysis (a common error, one might add).⁵ Even if many people use the categories of discourse instead of, or in opposition to, those of class, Scott, along with many other feminists and socialists, believe that one can use discourse analysis to unmask class and gender power, while stressing that such power is discursively created. Finally, she takes Stedman Jones to task for his adherence to a structuralist rather than a poststructuralist view of words and their meaning. Whereas his work tends to assume that words (such as 'proletariat' or 'Englishman') have fixed meanings which then organize social relations, Scott emphasizes both in this essay and in her case studies that despite the apparent fixity of meaning, words or other signifiers only have meaning in a negative sense, that is, by reference to their differences from other words or signifiers ('worker' only means something by contrast to 'boss'). Furthermore, categories such as 'workers' or 'citizen' rely for their meaning on previously established gender polarities. In other words, the meaning of the word 'worker' was established not only by a system of differences between correlate terms (worker/boss), as Saussurean semiotics teaches, but also, as Scott's politicized semiotic shows, through a rich network of echoes across many other pairs of social opposites, including breadwinner/dependent and male/female.

Scott's critique of Stedman Jones may help to discredit some of the idealist notions of 'discourse analysis' which labour and feminist historians rightly have criticized. Nevertheless, Scott's case studies, which ought to be the proof of the poststructuralist pudding, have certain limitations which are, in my view, symptomatic of the general limitations of discourse analysis as it has been used by social historians (myself included!).

One of the main problems faced by historians interested in working-class women but also attempting to use discourse analysis is that discourses about such

ing-Class History, 31 (1987), 1-13. The same issue contained three replies, by Bryan Palmer, Anson Rabinbach, and Christine Stansell. The revised essay appearing in the book incorporates many of Christine Stansell's critical comments.

⁴G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge 1983).

⁵See, for instance, Ellen Meiksins Wood's *Retreat from Class* (London 1988).

women are plentiful, but there is seldom a comparable body of textual material produced by the women themselves. Thus, even the most careful analysis of the discourses 'from above' (as found in chapters 5 through 7 of Scott's book) does not shed a great deal of light, at least not direct light, on the subjectivity of the 'objects' of the discourses. One certainly can use such discourse analysis indirectly: for instance, to help explain why unionization was more difficult among certain kinds of women workers than among men; and, after a thorough analysis of the categories of dominant discourses, one could also give better, more historically grounded interpretations of such statements by working-class women (either in words or in organized actions) as have been recovered. Even the oppressed produce discourses: for example, 19th-century working-class leaders often relied on mythical binary oppositions, such as breadwinner/dependent, honest workers/dangerous classes, which could benefit from some deconstruction.

Despite these advantages, however, there are reasons why discourse analysis has been used more to understand ruling than resistance. Insofar as those in positions of power usually generate more, and often more-complex, discursive systems than those engaged in resistance, there is an inherent bias in discourse analysis in favour of what some call 'the sociology of domination.' This problem, not discussed by Scott, does not discredit or make redundant discourse analysis: all other approaches to historical research have their own biases, from triumphalism and voluntarism on the part of institutional labour history, to the objectivist desert devoid of human figures of the political economy approach. In my view, a critical self-awareness of the built-in biases of each approach is necessary, so that explanations and accounts generated by one method or approach can be supplemented or corrected, if need be, by historical analysis produced from other perspectives.

In this, I probably am going in a different and more eclectic direction than Scott, whose rather polemical book tends to sing the praises of discourse analysis without mentioning many of its problems. In particular, something which is guaranteed to annoy pre-poststructuralist feminist historians is the way in which she sometimes pulls Foucault and Derrida out of the methodological hat as offering solutions to the problems of women's history. This is particularly striking in the essay "Women's History," which she closes with a long quote from Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. The quoted passage discusses how the knowledge of sexuality produced by expert discourses is simultaneously power over sexuality. It has some bearing on the lingering essentialism of many feminist approaches to the history of sexuality, but it hardly warrants the grandiose claim made by Scott on Foucault's behalf: "This approach would end such seeming dichotomies as state and family, public and private, work and sexuality." (26) Scott furthermore praises "this [Foucault's] notion of politics," as though Foucault's notion of 'power' had not been criticized by social theorists, because of its vagueness, and by feminists because of its blindness to gender.⁶ Feminist history does have much to learn from

⁶See David C. Hoy, ed., *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (Oxford 1986), for some incisive critiques of

Foucault. But his work, however revolutionary, was not without flaws, and these ought to be acknowledged.

Scott has taken a large risk by plunging fearlessly into theoretical shifting sands which most historians gingerly avoid — or think they are avoiding. As she eloquently demonstrates, the lack of 'theory' is itself a theory: the shifting sands are everywhere. It may be that, in her reaction against both Thompsonian and empiricist traditions, she exaggerates the contribution Foucault and Derrida can make to historical work. It is also true that she does not use the full range of philosophical and literary techniques available in various poststructuralist traditions, borrowing almost everything in her tool kit from Derridean deconstruction.⁷ Nevertheless, those who initiate theoretical debates early rather than wait for dusk, when the owl of Minerva is said to widely spread its wings, often become the targets of criticism by the less original. Scott's work deserves to be carefully read even by those who find some of its more polemical claims hard to swallow.

Denise Riley's book takes up many of the same theoretical banners unfurled by Scott, but its unconventional format might cause it to be neglected by those who believe that the journal article is the divinely-ordained form for propagating historical truth. One particularly obtuse American reviewer has accused Riley of not doing her homework, simply because she does not use many footnotes, when in fact her text is replete with comments on, as well as echoes and ironical acknowledgements of, an extremely broad range of work. The reviewer's visibly-panicked defence of the tradition of compulsive footnoting and deadpan writing favoured by American graduate schools of history includes a blatant *ad feminam* attack:

To use historical resources skillfully requires both immersion and diligence. More than one theorist has remarked to me of this approach (off the record, of course), 'it's just too much damned work'. This being the case, we must be careful to distinguish historical speculation from historical scholarship.⁸

Riley appears to be having fun as she writes (which makes some people believe she must not be working hard), she also crosses disciplines, time-periods, and national boundaries with great ease, and offers some syntheses and tentative generalizations without falling into dogmatism. In fact, she should be credited with resurrecting a rather ancient form — the essay in the philosophy of history — for

Foucault's relativism by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and other social theorists; and see also Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, eds., *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (Boston 1988).

⁷In Britain, the debate is perhaps more advanced, in that there are significant divisions within discourse analysis and poststructuralism, as well as between the pro and con sides. For instance, Chris Weedon argues that Foucault's approach is useful for feminist political purposes but that other schools of poststructuralism are not: see her *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford 1987). In Canada, the debate about theory and discourse, such as it is, seems to be posed as a yes-or-no question, without nuances being distinguished within discourse analysis.

⁸Karen Offen, "The Use and Abuse of History," *Women's Review of Books* (April 1989), 15. The May issue contained several replies pointing out Offen's curiously emotional defence of 'objective scholarship' as she understands it.

postmodern purposes.

The thesis of Riley's essay/book is that the replacement by up-to-date feminist historians of the essentialist concept of 'Woman' by the more modest term 'women' was a step in the right direction, but only a step. The term 'women' can accommodate diversity and even conflicts among women. But, as used by the historians of women also criticized by Scott, its use still assumes that there is a historical subject, 'women,' whose actions and changing condition can be traced by historians. But do 'women' really exist out there, Riley asks? Foucault already showed that, contrary to the claims made by the gay movement about famous homosexuals of the past, there is no such thing as homosexuality such that one could do a history of it: what one can do a history of, he showed, are the shifting discourses through which experts defined same-sex love, and the ways in which 'deviants' themselves accepted or rejected these claims. Riley extends this method to the subject of 'women' — a novel undertaking indeed, for while many would admit that 'homosexuality' was largely a discursive invention dating from about 1800, few people doubt that women have always existed. Nevertheless, as one important feminist already pointed out, when Foucault was still in diapers, "one is not born a woman: one becomes a woman." This famous statement (not referenced by Riley) drew attention to the ways in which femininity, even womanhood itself, is constantly elaborated in and by historically-specific discourses. Riley's task is to get feminist historians to pause long enough in their woman-mapping labours to reflect on the processes by which different historical periods defined who and what was a woman in the first place.

During the 1500s and 1600s, Riley argues, Western Europe witnessed a growing sexualization of women. While medieval Christianity allowed some space for supra-gender mysticism and sainthood, the secularization and rationalization that increased from the Renaissance to the late-18th century, while potentially applicable to women as well as men (as Mary Wollstonecraft pleaded), relied in fact on the dual opposition between reason and nature, male and female. 'Woman' was defined as closer to nature and hence further from reason; nature itself, Riley comments, was "sexualized" — that is, feminized. This culminated in Rousseau's statement that "the male is a male only now and again, the female is always a female," a view of gender also found throughout the 19th century. (37)

Although Riley's claims about whole centuries probably should be taken with a grain of salt, the dual process by which women and nature were both sexualized has also been noted by historians of biology and medicine, as well as by feminist historians of philosophy. Several articles in the important anthology *The Making of the Modern Body*, for instance, analyze in detail how the reproductive biology current in the early 19th century differed from earlier biology in suddenly 'seeing' sex and gender everywhere in nature. Not only were drawings of male and female reproductive physiology made to emphasize gender difference, but even drawings of skeletons now showed what Rousseau had claimed: that femaleness is not skin

deep.⁹ The Christian might leave gender behind as the soul, freed from the body, ascended to Heaven; 19th-century science allowed no such escape.

Her chapter on the 19th century (based on British and some French evidence, a specification not fully acknowledged by Riley) rejects the public/private dichotomy often used by feminist historians to categorize oppression and emancipation. She appears to argue that both traditional and reforming discourses in the 19th century did not in fact 'confine women to the private realm,' but rather identified women with the new sphere of 'the social,' which mediated public politics and private life. As Jacques Donzelot has pointed out (albeit from an anti-feminist viewpoint), the 19th-century emergence of 'social problems' and 'social policy' was linked closely with the identification of women as sources both of salvation and corruption.¹⁰ If women could keep tidy homes and virtuous families, then pauperism would disappear. But if women failed in their social duty (primarily by sexual misconduct, but also by failing to produce cleanliness and thrift), then the working class was doomed, and with it, the civilization of industrialism. Women of the middle and upper classes (particularly in Britain) were defined by identification not with 'the social problem,' but rather with its solution. They became prison- and workhouse-reformers, charity visitors, nurses, and expert social investigators. This middle-class sociological feminism was a politically mixed bag, having room both for archconservatives and for the relatively progressive work of the Fabian women. But Riley's point is that women engaged in social research or in philanthropy were not 'going from private to public' (a cliché comparable to that about the ever-rising bourgeoisie), but rather were engaged in constituting the new sphere of the social and simultaneously grounding it in femininity. The social was a proper sphere for female action, and even today it is regarded as much more feminine than the strictly 'political' sphere of foreign policy and tax reform.

One chapter on woman's suffrage continues the argument made about 'the social'; a final chapter recaps both the historical material and the general argument about 'women.' This last chapter, more rooted in the struggles and debates of the women's movement than Scott's work, presents a kind of compromise solution to the dilemma facing feminists who are fully aware of the arbitrariness and potential essentialism of waving a flag called 'women's experience,' but who are equally skeptical of the apolitical and even anti-feminist implications of 'post-feminism.' Riley recommends that we recognize that 'women' do not exist in ontological, pre-discursive structures, but rather are constantly produced: she gives the example of a person absorbed in a non-gendered pursuit who is suddenly subject to sexual

⁹Thomas Laqueur, "Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology," and Londa Schiebinger, "Skeletons in the Closet: The First Illustrations of the Female Skeleton in Eighteenth-Century Anatomy," respectively in C. Gallagher and T. Laqueur, eds., *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley 1987), 1-42, 42-82.

¹⁰Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* (New York 1979). Riley does not explicitly refer to Donzelot or explain whether she uses the term 'the social' in the same sense as he.

harassment, and is thus turned into 'a woman.' And yet, she argues, precisely because in sexual harassment and other forms of oppression we are indeed treated as though we always are already women, and nothing but women, our political stance cannot claim to be post-feminist without falling into hypocrisy or ivory-tower delusion. Maybe there are no women, but, Riley concludes, we have to act politically as though there were.

Riley's solution, amounting to a feminist rendering of Gramsci's wise advice ("pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will"), should be considered seriously by scholars who are also activists. In these times, when both grand theory and empiricism have been discredited as equally dogmatic, the modest, ironic, politically sensitive, and tension-filled methodological framework provided by Riley might be just what we need.

CALL FOR PAPERS

1991 Marxist Scholars Conference
Temple University, Philadelphia
14-17 March 1991

The 1991 Marxist Scholars Conference, sponsored by the Marxist Educational Press, will take place at a time when Marxists are subjecting to critical examination positions long considered to be basic to Marxist social thought. This conference can make important contributions both to the reaffirmation of fundamental Marxist principles and to the identification of weaknesses in theory, method, and practice. Papers and proposals are welcome from all fields of study. Send one copy of papers or workshop proposals to each of the following persons by 15 October 1990:

Prof. David Schwartz
 Economics Department
 Albright College
 P.O. Box 15234
 Reading, PA 19612

Prof. Harold Schwartz
 Medical School
 Box 91 Mayo
 University of Minnesota
 Minneapolis, MN 55455

Sponsored by the Marxist Educational Press, publisher of the journal *Nature, Society, and Thought* and two series of books, *Studies in Marxism* and *Marxist Dimensions*. For further information on the conference or for a free catalog write to MEP, 215 Ford Hall, University of Minnesota, 224 Church St. S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455 (tel. 612/922-7993).