

# What is Gender History? by Sonya O. Rose

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010  
(ISBN: 978-0-7456-4615-2). 157pp.

Katie Close (University of Glasgow)

For those unfamiliar with the diverse field of gender history, Sonya O. Rose's introductory volume presents a concise yet thorough overview of this often overlooked area of historical scholarship. *What is Gender History?* is the tenth volume in the Polity Press series 'What is History?', designed to introduce undergraduate students to the distinct theoretical and epistemological debates of various history sub-disciplines. This short book aims to demonstrate 'what gender historians do' (p.vi) through detailing the emergence of gender history, the contributions of gender historians to the field and the analytical and theoretical tools used by gender historians to reconstruct historical knowledge. *What is Gender History?* guides students through the ways of thinking and knowing about women and men that engage gender historians and attempts convince its readers that 'gender both has a history and is historically significant' (p.1).

Invoking a breadth of topics and historical periods, this book is divided into six well-developed chapters that cover important areas of concern to both historians and gender scholars. By structuring the chapters thematically instead of chronologically, Rose avoids a dry, linear account of gender history and instead provides a structure which is both engaging, logical and allows for interdisciplinary links and external influences to be encompassed. Beginning with an overview of how gender history developed into a distinct sub-discipline, it follows with discussions of bodies and sexuality, gender and

race/class, masculinities and the contribution of gender historians to central historical topics and themes, including war and revolution.

The concluding chapter, ‘Assessing “Turns” and New Directions’, succinctly draws together the previous discussions while providing an overview of current controversies and approaches in gender history including the ‘theory wars’ in which deconstructionism, post-structuralism and linguistics challenged traditional historical theories of social context, structure and agency in re-situating knowledge, power and language in historical scholarship.

Rose makes use of a wide range of sources, drawing on notable works in the field as well as lesser known articles and publications. Her sources, however, are predominantly Western gender historians focused on British and American history. While acknowledged by Rose herself as a limitation, a broadening of the non-Western context of gender history would have further enhanced the scope of this book.

One of the strengths of the book is undoubtedly the ‘Suggestions for Further Reading’ section which includes a list of articles, books and edited collections related to each chapter, in addition to those referenced in the main body of the book. For students wishing to delve further into gender history or research a particular topic, the suggested reading list provides an invaluable resource of up-to-date publications which only further marks this book as an exemplary introduction to the field.

Gender studies is a highly controversial discipline in which sex, gender, masculinity, femininity and sexuality are never static but open to challenge and re-negotiation. Rose addresses these issues and their implications for gender history in a succinct manner, threading throughout her book relevant key debates, including the gendering of the family and the relationship between the biological body and practices of gender, and theoretical approaches without ever losing any of the depth and fluidity of gender scholarship. Particularly

refreshing is chapter two, 'Bodies and Sexuality in Gender History', which tackles gender and sexuality in tandem, a rarity in most academic disciplines despite being persistently conflated in contemporary culture. Rose relates Judith Butler's theory of performativity which constructs sex as a 'cultural achievement with bodily (material) consequences' (p.20) to ways of 'knowing' history that view sex as natural. The engagement with gender and feminist scholarship from outside the historical field makes the main theories and modes of thinking about gender history easily accessible and understandable to non-historians from a gender studies/feminist background. Rose provides a prism of ways, methods and theories of engaging with gender history that allows the reader to see how gender is contested and how gender analysis can provide alternative narratives to traditional historical scholarship.

In chapter five, 'Gender and Historical Knowledge', Rose develops this theme of alternative narratives through an insightful overview of key texts dealing with the traditional spheres of history – politics, war, citizenship and nation. It is slightly disappointing, however, that the topic of nation and gender seems underdeveloped and fragmented. Although there is a small mention of women's bodies as a site of warfare (Egyptian women and British soldiers p.92) and the role of '[g]endered familial imagery' (p.90) in constructing the nation, there is no mention of the work of Yuval-Davis, who was instrumental in identifying women's bodies as the territory of the nation and mothers as cultural reproducers of nationhood, nor explicit development of these issues as historical topics. Including history scholars working on gender, nation and culture in Russia and Poland, such as Elizabeth Woods, Maria Bogucka and Katherine Jolluck, for example, would have provided an excellent focus for issues of gender and nation to be further explored while also expanding the narrow focus of European gender history to include eastern contexts.

The strength of this book is the ease with which Rose undertakes challenging concepts and developments in the field and relays them in an engaging and clear manner to the reader. In the final chapter, the major controversies of gender history, including the ‘theory wars’, are explained. The influence of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Joan Scott on contemporary historical scholarship is used to demonstrate how language, experience and social context have divided gender historians, yet also helped to forge bridges between competing theoretical schools. Rose reminds the reader that ‘[h]istory is always subject to revision and contestation’ (p.103) which underlines the central tenet of this work. *What is Gender History?* provides a condensed yet comprehensive overview of how gender historians can open up history to re-interpretation. Rose demonstrates how gender can provide a lens through which to de-construct and re-interpret historical knowledge, challenging the historical roles and realities of women and men and offering space to investigate previously unexplored aspects of the historical world; making visible what was once invisible. This book should be on the reading list for every budding historian, not only those interested in gender history, as it forces the reader to ask ‘what is history, who writes history and how is history used?’: essential questions for every historical sub-discipline.