NOT MERELY COMPLEMENTARY, BUT VITAL: WHY THE STUDY OF WOMEN AND GENDER IS IMPERATIVE FOR HISTORIANS

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The importance of studying psychology, sociology, or other "soft" sciences is rarely questioned in American universities, but I frequently hear people asking why there should be a Women and Gender Studies program. It is shocking that an interdisciplinary field, which incorporates numerous aspects of the liberal arts, is so vehemently questioned. Is it because most people do not recognize that historically all fields were taught from a masculine perspective. It may also be that people do not see a program identified as "men’s studies" designated for the male counterpart and fail to recognize that current nomenclature tends to call these programs "Women and Gender Studies" or "Gender Studies" to intentionally include the excluded?

I could spend our precious time talking about the numerous problems in the world that could at least be partially solved by mandatory Gender Studies classes, like sexual assaults occurring every two minutes or comprehending the true reasons for structural inequalities. Instead, I am going to focus on the beauty that can be found in the Women’s Movement, beyond the poignant writings of Gloria Steinem or the always convicting yet exquisite writings of bell hooks. I will briefly discuss the inspiring stories that can be found in the study of women’s history and in their artistic and intellectual development. Just as it is essential to tell history from the perspective of minorities, such as African-Americans, it is vital to examine the roles of women in American and World History. By leaving women out of history you are, at best, telling half of the story. Telling these
forgotten, sometimes hidden anecdotal gems is transformative and necessary for personal and societal growth. Furthermore, the telling of these stories, both past and present, is integral to the empowering experience of most Women and Gender Study courses.

During the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln spoke of a "new birth of freedom," and while America's war for unity and the ending of slavery was a noble cause, it pales in comparison to the Women's Movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Around the world, women stood up for themselves. Almost simultaneously, Europe, Canada, China, Japan, and the United States all had Women's Rights Movements. By the start of the twentieth century, women throughout Europe and the United States were enrolled in universities and becoming medical doctors, lawyers, and college professors. Women could vote in New Zealand by 1893, and by the 1920s in the United Kingdom and the United States. Art and commerce expanded, similar to other times in history when oppressed people gained freedom. While the Roaring Twenties had numerous flaws, some grace must be given to that decade. The dancing, literary explosion, and new artistic visions in architecture and sculpture performed by both men and women are all signs of at least partial success after a hard and meteoric push for equality. During this same time, numerous art forms blossomed in varying degrees. All point to the "new birth of freedom" as women started to secure more rights at the beginning of the twentieth century and blacks were gaining some freedoms, fleeing Jim Crow and joining the "Great Migration" to the northern cities.

Was it a coincidence that the plethora of emerging art forms happened at this time of expanded freedoms and gender roles? I do not believe so and recent studies corroborate this belief. Beauty and

1 Elizabeth Otto and Vanessa Rocco, eds. The New Woman International: Representations in Photography and Film from the 1870s through the 1960s, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 1-5.
2 The New York Times recently published several articles about gender and income inequality hindering the growth of the U.S. economy. See the following articles by
culture are the evidence of the expansion and birth of new freedoms for over fifty percent of the population in numerous nations. This freedom created a seemingly unparalleled excitement and exhilaration, but tragedies occurred when both the Labor Movement and Women’s Movement incurred the wrath of traditional forces. It was not a golden age of peace, but even through the tragedies of brutal suppression and the Great War, hope still carried on. Although we have come a long way since the First-wave of Feminism, that era is the birth of the world that we see today. The beauty, hope, freedom, and tragedy of this time is more interesting, and at times more unbelievable, than any novel ever conceived. History can be told by giving voices to the voiceless and in this manner the study of women’s history is not only vital in Women and Gender Studies, but also to the growth of society as a whole. Fully knowing and understanding the past can help us understand the present and strategize for a better future.

I admit that as a historian in training I may be a little biased, but history is a great field of study. Although historians typically focus on one particular society, era, or region, they are still wide-open in their disciplinary approach. History can help us understand people and societies, how our society evolved into its present state and, consequently, how we can change it. It is easier to make a better society if we understand where we came from originally. History also helps give humanity its identity and is essential for good citizenship, as it empowers people to be able to work together to create a better society. Consequently, historians are equipped to ask fundamental

Paul Krugman and Neil Irwin:
questions about purpose, the nature of communities and competition, and conflicting visions of reality and society. Training as a historian also gives vital life skills, historians can quickly assess evidence and disperse information, these are fundamental skillsets that make people better equipped for the life challenges they will face. What other field of study encompasses these life skills effectively? Women and Gender Courses cover these skillsets, while also providing insights into the field of history by utilizing Feminist Theories in new and exciting interpretive models. Historians who study the Progressive Era benefit greatly if they understand intersectionality. How can historians effectively interpret primary documents without understanding standpoint theory? In this manner, Feminist Theory is essential to a historian’s pursuit of truth. Consequently, Women and Gender Studies is not merely complementary, but vital to historians.
Bibliography

