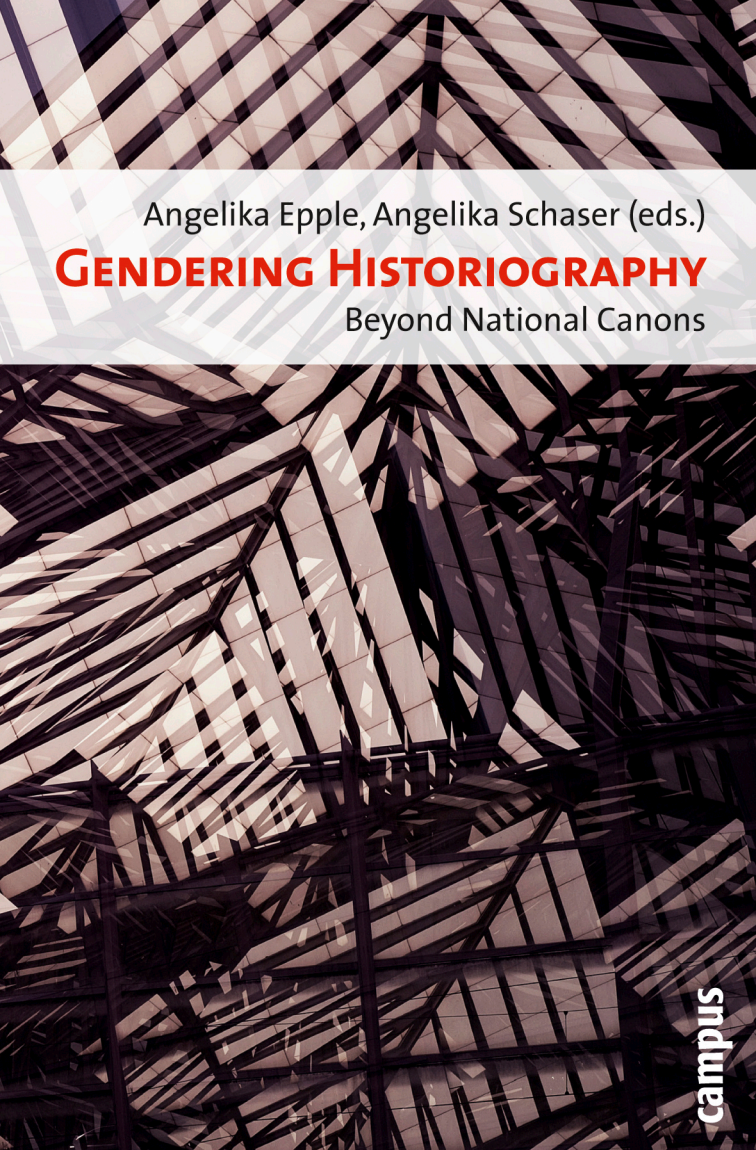

Angelika Epple, Angelika Schaser (eds.)

Gendering Historiography

Beyond National Canons

campus

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Multiple Histories? Changing Perspectives on Modern Historiography

Angelika Epple and Angelika Schaser

"I like men who have a future and women who have a past."
Lord Henry Wotton in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, chapter 15 (1891 edition – online).

When Dorian Gray expressed the wish that his recently painted portrait might grow old in his stead, he did more than merely sell his soul to the diabolical Sir Henry. From that time onward he also ceased to mature. He had tied himself to a permanent present, with neither past nor future. Oscar Wilde's protagonists question the natural order of human transience and, at the same time, also rearrange the dominant gender order of Victorian society. Men were characterized as having a future, but solely as a result of past experience. Women, in contrast, were denied a past—even in the somewhat dubious sense hinted at by Lord Henry. Of course, the former, revolutionary, aspect of Oscar Wilde's novel had its limits, but the author took up a fundamental element of both the gender order and historiography: the gendered attributes of the three tenses, past, present and future. The professionalization of historiography in Europe and the US during the past 200 years has meant ignoring the fact that women have a past. As a result, women were also long disqualified from writing so-called professional history. Those who wrote history nonetheless were left out of the traditional historiographic canon. The comparison may seem extreme, but it is apt nevertheless: the exclusion of female historians, their work and themes from the history of our discipline resembles a metaphorical death. For women, writing history was often tantamount to social suicide—the fate of Sibyl Vane and Dorian Gray.

The marginalization of female historians and their histories also deeply affected the traditional canon written by male historians, which was based on exclusionary practices and covered almost exclusively male gendered subjects (Smith 1995; Smith 1998; Puff 2003; Epple 2004; Epple 2007). These practices of exclusion make historiography part of the modern project, Regina Wecker argues. Following Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "modernity and ambivalence" (Bauman 1991), Wecker shows that only the exclusion of histo-

rical multiplicity makes of modernity a uniform, certain and determined development (Wecker 2007, 51). Gender history, in contrast, questions historical uniformity, certainty and determination. It has come to represent a real troublemaker for historiography as a whole. As a result, historiography has rarely been gendered. It is high time for a change of perspective.

The present volume brings together gender history and the history of historiography. This encounter provokes manifold concerns: It questions the traditional canon of historiography and examines its gendered basis. It writes excluded histories back into the history of historiography, thus adding new perspectives to the traditional canon. It also inquires into the structuring function of gender within academic *and* popular historiography and questions the truth strategies that officially separate these fields. Moreover, it also raises theoretical questions that take us back to the very beginnings of gender history. Since the emergence of gender history some thirty years ago (Davis 1976; Scott 1986), one of its chief tasks has been to deconstruct the master narrative of general history (Schaser 2007) as well as most of its key terms. Gender history gives women's contribution to history its full due by changing the key terms that define what "history" is (Mak 2007, 132) and—as Joan Scott already pointed out in 1988—what counts as "general history". The label "general history" caused such uneasiness because in fact it referred only to political and national history. Under the guise of studying "high" politics, international affairs, anonymous structures and social developments, it quite often centered on the history of a specific male group in society—certainly without analyzing the masculinities of its members. From the perspective of "general history", women's or gender history seemed to be far less important and at best "supplementary". Thus for gender historians, the only way out of the theoretical dilemma and misleading alternative of "general" versus "supplementary" history seemed to be the deconstruction of all master narratives that make general or universal claims.

Gender historians have been in good company. Since the linguistic turn of the late 1960s and 1970s, historians sensitive to developments in theory have increasingly criticized master narratives of all kinds. A generation later, the linguistic turn with its central focus on "culture as discourse" has been broadly absorbed and altered. Currently, we are witnessing a new shift in focus from "culture as discourse" to "culture as practice." It is from this observation that Gabrielle Spiegel derives a recuperation of the historical actor as an intentional (if not wholly self-conscious) agent (Spiegel 2007, 3–4). And it is also proceeding from this observation that Joan Scott inveighed

against the latest attempts to insist "that human subjects act in full command of their intentions, that words literally mean what they say, and that 'nature' or 'experience' are transparent categories outside the reach of politics, philosophy or theory" (Scott 2007, 22). Be it "culture as discourse" or "culture as practice"—the role played by gender history is also at stake here. In recent years different approaches such as postcolonial or subaltern studies, global history, transnational history, cultural history and the "new political" history as well as gender history have tried to overcome the conventional postulates of positivist history. They questioned the inscribed hierarchy of center and margin. But do the new approaches really resolve the dubious alternative of supplementary and general history? Do they actually do more than simply add on to national history? How are we to overcome more than one hundred years of national historiography?

Despite the impressive contributions of the postmodern plurality of historical approaches to historiography, the effects on "general" national and political historiography with their strong orientation towards state action in the fields of politics, the economy and society have not exactly been overwhelming. This also applies to the gender hierarchy implicit in this historiography, which even borrowings from cultural history and gender history have failed to change (Hagemann and Quataert 2007; Opitz 2008). Through its choice of subjects and methods, historical research in general has contributed discreetly thus far to stabilizing the gender order and the narrative patterns of national history. Many historians have shown that even in the countries where women's and gender history has gained a foothold in institutions, "we still face the historiographical inheritance which is afflicted by the idea of gender-neutral and universal truth" (Grever 1997, 399).

In order to dismantle these powerful premises, Karin Hausen recommended the non-unity of history as a program, and called for a critical discussion of what the fiction of a unitary history has accomplished and what it has distorted (Hausen 1998). Other historians such as Lynn Hunt (1998) and Claudia Opitz (2008) have called for a complete reconstruction of history in order to escape the gender order of historiography, which is constantly stabilizing itself and trying to reestablish equilibrium. In their view, gender history offers the best preconditions for this, since it has consistently historicized the category of "gender". In so doing, it has not only clearly emancipated itself from the older women's history, but also created the prerequisites for a new form of master-narrative.