

European Gender Structures in a Global Perspective

by

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For many historians, this conference is already extremely large in its scope—ranging over five centuries and across all of Europe, which in the case of the conference actually means all of Europe and not just England, France and Italy. I would like in these opening remarks to do something even broader: to place issues involving gender, power, and authority in Europe during these centuries, especially those issues that set out categories of less favored and more favored, within a *global* context. I will focus on what I see as the four most important issues:

1. The development of large centralized state, first as hereditary monarchies and then as “democracies”
2. Global movements of people and goods
3. The development of gendered racial ideas
4. New ideas about gender itself

The development of large centralized state, first as hereditary monarchies and then as “democracies”

In many parts of the world, including Europe of course, but also Japan, Central America, the Andean region, India, and West Africa, large centralized states were established in this period, ruled by hereditary monarchies. In these states, individual women often gained great power, either ruling in their own name as queens or empresses, or, more commonly, ruling in fact during the minority of a son or when their husbands were incapacitated. Ideas about how the right to rule should be handed down varied considerably throughout the world, and in a few places, such as the Andean region under the Inca, women inherited their right to rule independently of the male ruler. In some areas, such as many parts of Europe, daughters could inherit territories if there were no sons, and in others, such as parts of Africa, combinations of brothers and sisters ruled jointly. Among the elites, then, a woman's class and family standing could to some degree outweigh the restrictions created by gender.

In general, however, the creation of states out of earlier, less formal structures of government heightened gender distinctions rather than lessening them. Rulers generally relied on

an educated elite of bureaucrats and government officials to run their larger territories, and such individuals were almost always men, trained in schools or special training programs that were closed to women, such as the universities of Paris or Timbuktu. Rulers also relied on large armies to conquer new territories and prevent rebellions in areas already conquered, another avenue of influence that was closed – with very few exceptions – to women. To cement alliances with these new territories they often took women as wives for themselves or their officials, generally choosing women from the most prominent families as a symbol of the extent of their conquest. Thus women were forced to travel hundreds of miles from their homes to join the household of ruler or official for whom they might be one wife or concubine among many. In non-Christian parts of the world, polygyny was often a mark of the increasing social stratification in larger states, for the number of wives and concubines a man could support was a mark of rank and wealth. In Christian areas, serial polygyny accomplished much of the same purpose, as did the increasingly official position of royal (and sometimes noble) mistresses. Louis XIV or Louis XV may not have had a harem, but they were monogamous only in the very narrow sense of that word, and their ability to choose mistresses from among noble families was as much a mark of their power as their requiring the men from those families to be at Versailles. (The latter policy, by the way, that is, requiring nobles to live in the capital to reduce their independent power, was also used by the Tokugawa shoguns of Japan.)

Gender distinctions were heightened even further when subjects became citizens with the “democratic” political revolutions in North America, France, and Latin America in the 18th and 19th centuries. Educated people debated new ideas about justice, equality, and freedom, and discussed what qualities would be required for citizenship in states in which citizens had an actual voice in making political decisions. Women as well as men were involved in these discussions in cities ranging from Paris (France) to San Juan (Puerto Rico) to Caracas (Venezuela), hosting meetings in their homes where political grievances were aired and plans for reforms mapped out. Less elite women were also important actors in these movements. In France, poor women marched from Paris to the king’s palace at Versailles demanding that the king sign a new Constitution, signed petitions and formed clubs calling for further political changes, and, along with men, carried weapons in armed protest marches through the streets of Paris. In what became the United States, women raised money for the war, refused to buy British goods, and took oaths not to marry men who were loyalists. In the Latin American movements for

independence, women served as spies, carried weapons and supplies, and cared for the wounded in field hospitals; a few dressed as men in order to engage in combat.

Despite these efforts, the new constitutional states that emerged all limited citizenship rights to men, and began to include the word “male” when passing laws regarding political rights. In France, women’s political clubs were banned and women were barred from political meetings; voting rights were restricted to men. After the establishment of the United States under the Constitution, voting rights were restricted to white men with a certain amount of property. Gradually during the nineteenth century almost all white men gained the right to vote, and then after the Civil War black men – at least in theory – did as well, leaving women along with children, criminals, and the mentally ill among the disenfranchised. In Latin America, the constitutions of the new states did not allow women to vote, hold political office, be a witness in court, or be a guardian over minors (including their own children).

These gender restrictions could also be found in countries that broadened political rights more slowly rather than through a revolution. In Japan, the Meiji Constitution of 1889 forbade women from voting, attending political meetings, or joining political parties. In Great Britain, property requirements for male voters were lessened throughout the nineteenth century so that almost all men could vote, though no woman could. In all of these areas, civil law codes were enacted which further heightened gender distinctions. According to these codes, married women – which included the vast majority of adult women – were generally not allowed to sign contracts, buy or sell, maintain bank accounts, or keep their own wages; in some areas, such as Japan and Britain, they were denied existence as legal persons.

Thus as we look at the legal categories of less favored and more favored, marriage worked in contradictory ways for women, both giving them authority in the household and denying them authority outside of it.

Though there were a few voices to the contrary, the exclusion of women from active citizenship was generally supported by the men who were the strongest advocates of political rights for men. Thomas Jefferson, for example, commented: “Were our state a pure democracy, there would still be excluded from our deliberation women, who, to prevent the deprivation of morals and ambiguity of issues, should not mix promiscuously in gatherings of men.”¹ The revolutionaries in France – with a few exceptions – were just as horrified as their monarchist

¹ Thomas Jefferson, ‘Letter to Samuel Kerchival (1816)’, in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904, 10:46.

counterparts at the actions of women during the revolution, and argued that women's exclusion from political rights and limitation to domestic issues were not matters set by tradition or custom, but by unchangeable Nature. One French official noted: "Is it to men that nature has confided domestic cares? Has she given us breasts to feed our children?"² In his opinion, and that of most of his co-revolutionaries, women's political actions would not only create problems in the household as women neglected their husbands and children, but lead to an overturning of the entire order of society. Lopping off the head of a monarch paled by comparison, and was in any case a matter among individuals destined "by Nature" to be active members of the body politic.

Global movements of people and goods

Gender structures in the early modern centuries were powerfully shaped by new large-scale population movements and commercial contacts. The contact between cultures in the era before 1300 which had worked to change gender structures had often been carried out through the transmission of ideas and construction of institutions by individuals or small groups of people; the spread of neo-Confucianism and Islam are both examples of this. Beginning in the late fifteenth century, international contacts often involved the movement of large numbers of people over vast distances, such as Europeans traveling to the Americas and later to Asia and Australia to conquer and settle, or Africans being taken as slaves to the Americas or to parts of Africa far from their homelands. In all of these movements, the gender balance between men and women was never equal, so that traditional patterns of marriage and family life were disrupted and new patterns, including new legal structure, were formed.

The vast majority of merchants, conquerors, slaves, and settlers who traveled great distances were men. Though there were attempts to keep groups apart, this proved impossible, and in many parts of the world a mestizo culture emerged in which not only ethnicity, but also religions, family patterns, cultural traditions, and languages blended. Women acted as intermediaries between local and foreign cultures, sometimes gaining great advantages for themselves and their children though their contact with dominant foreigners, though also sometimes suffering greatly as their contact with foreigners began when they were sold or given as gifts by their families, or taken forcibly.

² Jean Chaumette, quoted in Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1996, 48

The migration of large numbers of men also had an influence on gender structures in the areas they left. Two thirds of the slaves carried across the Atlantic from Africa were male, with female slaves more likely to become part of the trans-Saharan trade or stay in West Africa. This reinforced polygyny, because slave women could join households as secondary wives, thus increasing the wealth and power of their owner/husbands through their work and children. (They were often favored as wives over free women as they were far from their birth families who could thus not interfere in a husband's decisions.) In parts of Europe, male migration also led to a sexual imbalance among certain social groups. Because Christianity and Judaism did not allow polygyny, solutions were more difficult than in Africa; some women entered convents, some paid higher and higher dowries to attract husbands, and some simply remained unmarried, becoming an intellectual and economic problem in a culture that regarded marriage as the proper path for all women.

The goods that were carried in international trading networks also shaped gender structures. Consumer goods such as sugar and coffee required vast amounts of heavy labor, leading to the development of plantation economies in tropical areas with largely male slave work-forces. These slaves wore clothing made from cloth that was often produced in European households, where traditional gender divisions of labor were broken down because of the demands of the international marketplace, so that men, women, and children all spun and wove. The new consumer goods - foodstuffs, clothing, household furnishings - were purchased by middle- and upper-class Europeans and their descendents in North America and Australia, with women's role in such households gradually becoming more oriented toward consumption rather than production. Class status was signified by the amount and quality of goods in one's home, all of which required purchase, cleaning, care, and upkeep, which became the work – though unpaid – of the women of a household, aided perhaps by a servant or two.³ Legal structures of property ownership were slow to recognize this new reality.

The development of gendered racial ideas

Over the last decade, historians have paid great attention to the ways in which both the discourse and the reality of colonialism were both gendered and sexualized. It is hard to understand how this could have been overlooked for so long, for the evidence is clear and

³ See, most recently, Maxine Berg, 'In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 182, 2004, 85-142.

frequent in standard sources. In a number of woodcuts and engravings from the 16th and 17th centuries, for example, America was depicted as a naked woman in a feather headdress. In his description of the discovery of the South American country of Guiana, Sir Walter Raleigh, the English explorer, described the land as ‘a country that hath yet her maidenhead [that is, still a virgin]...It hath never been entered by any armie of strength...’⁴

Not only was colonial territory itself (particularly the ‘New World’) described or portrayed in sexualized metaphors, but the stories of colonization that captured people’s imaginations – and in some cases still do – were those involving love and/or sex between individuals of different groups. One of these was the story of Thomas Inkle, an English trader, and Yarico, a young Indian woman, which was told in at least sixty different versions in ten European languages during the 18th century. According to the story, Inkle was rescued by Yarico after he was shipwrecked; the two became lovers, and he promised to take her back to England and marry her. When she hailed a passing ship, they sailed to Barbados, where he sold her into slavery. The account was first told in a single paragraph in *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (1657) by the English gentleman Richard Ligon, who reported that he heard it directly from Yarico, now a slave in the house in which he was staying; he describes her as ‘of excellent shape and colour. . . with small breasts, with the nipples of a porphyry colour.’ The story was retold in 1711 by Richard Steele in an essay in *The Spectator*, a very widely read periodical, who fleshed it out considerably; he transformed Yarico into a princess (a detail he may have taken from the related story of Pocahontas) and made her pregnant with Inkle’s child at the time he sold her, which caused him to demand more for her. Steele used the story primarily to argue that women were more constant in love than men, but in its later incarnations – as poetry, essays, several plays performed in Paris and Philadelphia, and even a comic opera (in which it was given a happy ending) – it was often used to criticize the slave trade, with Yarico sometimes changed into an African, or referred to as both Native American and African in the same text.⁵

Steele and later authors do not go into the details that Ligon does about Yorico’s breasts, but they generally make it clear that she was naked or nearly naked. European accounts of exploration and travel almost always discuss the scanty clothing of indigenous peoples, which

⁴ Walter Raleigh, cited in Louise Montrose, ‘The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery,’ *Representations* 33, Winter 1991, 27.

⁵ Many of the texts that retell the Inkle and Yarico story have been collected in Frank Felsenstein, ed., *English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race and Slavery in the New World*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

was viewed as a sign of their uncontrolled sexuality. Hot climate – which we would probably view as the main influence on clothing choice – was itself regarded as leading to greater sexual drive and lower inhibitions. By the 18th century, leading European thinkers such as Adam Smith and David Hume divided the world into three climatic/sexual zones: torrid, temperate, and frigid. (Words that still retain their double climatic/sexual meaning.) They – and many other European writers and statesmen – worried about the effects of tropical climates on the morals as well as the health of soldiers and officials, and devised various schemes to keep Europeans sent to imperial posts from fully ‘going native,’ adopting indigenous dress, mores and who knew what else. They also linked this climatic/sexual schema with the advancement of civilization; in the torrid zones, heat made people indolent and lethargic as well as lascivious, whereas a temperate climate (like Britain) encouraged productivity and discipline along with sexual restraint and respect for women. These ideas were not only held by Europeans who actively participated in colonialism, but also by those who read or heard about them.

The aspect of ‘going native’ that most concerned colonial authorities was, not surprisingly, engaging in sexual relations with indigenous people, and the colonial powers all regulated such encounters. In some cases, such as the earliest Spanish and Portuguese colonies, sexual relations and even marriage between Europeans and indigenous peoples were encouraged as a means of making alliances, cementing colonial power, and increasing the population; rape and enforced sexual services of indigenous women were also a common part of conquest. Because initially almost all Europeans in colonial areas were men, such relations did not upset notions of superiority. Once more women began to immigrate, official encouragement and even toleration of mixed marriages generally ceased, though informal relations ranging from prostitution through concubinage, continued.

Attitudes toward sexual relations between certain types of individuals, and the policies and practices that resulted from those attitudes, were shaped by notions of difference that were increasingly described as ‘race’ a category that came to be regarded as inherited through the blood, so that the children of parents from different cultures were regarded as ‘mixed-blood’ or *mestizo*.

Particularly in areas where there was substantial immigration of persons from different continents, such as Europeans and Africans in Central and South America, or Europeans and Asians in southern Africa, elaborate racial hierarchies developed which state and church

authorities tried to codify and rigidify.⁶ In North America, a binary system of racial classification developed in which ‘one drop of [black] blood’ made one black. In Latin America, the complex system of socio-racial categories termed *castas* led to an assignment of race based largely on outer appearance, though in theory based on the mix of African, European, and Native American blood in one’s veins. Racial hierarchies also developed in the parts of Africa and Asia that became colonies during the 19th century, with ‘scientific’ ideas about racial differences refueling earlier theories about blood. These codes set out certain groups as ‘less favored’ and others as ‘more favored’ in terms of inheritance rights, property ownership, access to education, entrance into religious institutions, marriage, and a host of other matters.

Whatever the national, religious, class, or racial boundaries regarded as significant in a particular area, they were maintained by regulating sexual activity. This was done through laws prohibiting inter-group marriage or sexual contacts, which until the 20th century meant attempting to prohibit all relationships between women of a higher status and men of a lower, and defining the unions between men of a higher status and women of a lower, or between men and women of the lowest status, as less than true marriage, so that their children were not fully legitimate. This also applied to class hierarchies in societies such as China where there were not clear racial hierarchies; class boundaries were maintained by strict prohibition of any union between a higher-class woman and lower-class man, and the definition of most relationships between a higher-class man and lower-class woman as concubinage or prostitution.

Boundaries between less-favored and more-favored groups were maintained even more effectively through the creation and maintenance of traditions and other types of internalized mechanisms of control. If children are taught very early who is unthinkable in terms of a marriage partner, and unattractive in terms of a sexual partner, the maintenance of boundaries will not depend on laws or force alone. This is something that nearly all human societies have recognized, for the maintenance of all types of hierarchies depends on those in power marrying people, which that society defines as ‘like themselves.’ If they do not, the distinction between elites and non-elites literally disappears, whether those elites are defined in racial, class, ethnic, or religious terms.

Colonial societies sometimes allowed elite men to marry or (more often) to have non-marital sexual relationships with non-elite women, placing various types of restrictions on the

⁶ See my *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice*, London, Routledge, 2000.

children of those unions. The reverse was much rarer, for the sexual activities of elite women were those most closely monitored in colonial, and, in fact, in nearly all societies. Thus socially-defined categories of difference such as race and class are not only sexual ones, but also gendered. The story of Inkle and Yarico would have been told much differently if their races had been reversed; instead of a noble symbol of love and loyalty, she would have been degraded and dissolute, the type of woman the West Indian planter Edward Long warned about in 1772 with his comment ‘the lower class of women in England are remarkably fond of the blacks.’

Long’s brief comment manages to bring together sex, gender, race, and class, and he was far from alone in his thinking. A number of historians have pointed out the various ways in which these conceptual categories were linked in the period of colonialism and imperialism, not only in colonial areas but also in Europe and in places that became independent, such as the United States and Latin America. Indigenous peoples were often feminized, described or portrayed visually as weak and passive in contrast to the virile and masculine conquerors, or they were hypersexualized, regarded as animalistic and voracious. (Or sometimes both.) Racial hierarchies became linked with those of sexual virtue, especially for women, with white women representing purity and non-white women lasciviousness. Dispelling such stereotypes was extremely difficult and took great effort; African-American women in the early twentieth-century United States, for example, took great care to hide the sexual and sensual aspects of their lives and emphasize respectability in what the historian Darlene Clark Hine has called a ‘culture of dissemblance.’⁷

In the colonial world, both sexual and racial categories were viewed as permanent moral classifications supported by unchanging religious teachings. They were not viewed as socially constructed, but as undergirded by an even more fundamental boundary, that between ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural.’ Thus same-sex relations were defined as a ‘crime against nature,’ and often tried in church courts. This link between natural and godly began to lessen in intensity during the 18th century, but the importance of nature in setting boundaries only intensified.

New Ideas about Gender Differences

Greater contact between cultures, along with other developments in this era, changed the ways people thought about gender, particularly for those who thought of themselves as at the top of racial hierarchies, such as Japanese or people of European background. Concern with the

⁷ Darlene Clark Hine, ‘Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,’ *Signs*, Summer 1989, 912-920.

sources of differences between the ‘races’ was accompanied by concerns about why and how the sexes were different, and new ideas emerged which grounded female inferiority not in a divine plan or the order of the universe, but in the female body, in the same way that the ‘inferiority’ of certain races came to be regarded as grounded in their bodies. In the 19th century, new fields of knowledge such as psychology and anthropology often gave professionals and officials new languages to describe and discuss gender distinctions both in Europe and its colonies.

Some historians, most prominently Thomas Laqueur, argue that in the 18th and 19th centuries, people in Europe and North America increasingly saw the two sexes as totally different from one another rather than viewing women as simply inferior men, as the Aristotelian tradition had maintained.⁸ They term this the ‘two-sex’ as opposed to the ‘one-sex’ model, and note that every aspect of human life came to be regarded as shaped by gender. This occurred at the same time that physicians and scientists began exploring the reasons for differences among humans, and, not surprisingly, shaped the results of their experiments and measurements. Male brains were discovered to be larger than female, male bones to be stronger. When it was pointed out that female brains were actually larger in proportion to body size, female brains were determined to be more child-like, for children’s brains are proportionately larger still.

Such measurements were also applied to ethnic and racial differences, and it was ‘proven’ that various groups had smaller brains or other markers of inferiority. Emile Durckheim, often referred to as the ‘father of sociology,’ linked racial and gender measurements by noting that ‘although the average cranium of Parisian men ranks among the greatest known crania, the average of Parisian women ranks among the smallest observed, even below the crania of the Chinese, and hardly above those of the women of New Caledonia.’⁹ Such dichotomous crania were, in Durckheim’s view, a sign of French superiority, for they marked the greatest gender distinctions.

Other historians disagree with Laqueur’s chronology, pointing out that ideas about gender polarities also go back to the ancient Greeks in the West, and are part of the intellectual structures of many other cultures, such as Daoism and Confucianism in China and a number of indigenous North American peoples. In some of these, polarities did not lead to hierarchy, but to a strong

⁸ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1990.

⁹ Emile Durckheim, quoted in Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1996, 97

emphasis on gender complementarity; in more of them it did, as positive qualities such as reason, bravery, creativity and loyalty were associated with men. This was why education and artistic training in many cultures was limited to men, and female artists, scientists, and intellectuals were often praised as having somehow transcended their sex. (The first woman was admitted as a full member of the Royal Society of London, the leading European scientific society, only in 1945). Learned women were also often criticized for having lost their female honor by contact with male realms, however. An eighteenth-century shogun in Japan commented, 'To cultivate women's skills would be harmful,' and a common Chinese saying noted 'She who is unskilled in arts and literature is a virtuous woman.'

Both gender and race also intersected with other hierarchies in many cultures, such as that of age. In some societies, including many in North America and Asia, age brought an improvement in status for individuals of both sexes; among the Iroquois in eastern North America, for example, older women chose tribal leaders and older men acted as advisors. In other areas, such as many parts of Africa, older women in particular were regarded with ambivalence, sometimes able to participate in men's rituals forbidden to younger women, but also feared as having special connections to the spirit world as shamans or witches. In Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries older women, particularly those who were widowed or single, came to be regarded with great suspicion; this combined with religious ideas and social pressures to cause an upsurge in witchcraft accusations, with perhaps 100,000 people, most of them women, executed for witchcraft.

Accusations of witchcraft were only one way in which cultures could respond to perceptions of disorder and instability, but they point out that these responses were rarely gender neutral. The dramatic changes occurring in these centuries – the discovery of unknown continents, drastic population decline and then expansion, conquest, the shattering of religious institutions, revolutions and civil wars – led many cultures to feel as if their worlds were being turned upside down, and that all traditions and hierarchies were threatened. Thus the hierarchy that was closest to home, indeed, was *in* the home, needed strengthening and enforcement at all costs, and so many areas tightened restrictions on women.

Although queens and a few other women gained a public role in some circumstances by their links to ruling dynasties, for many other women this was a period of withdrawal. In China, Japan, and much of the Islamic world, women were physically secluded, with special parts of houses constructed for them – termed *harim* (which means 'forbidden area') or *zenana* – and their

contacts with the outside world were sharply limited. If they left their houses, they were to be secluded behind the curtains of a chair or behind a veil. Seclusion and veiling was a mark of class status as well as religious or cultural norms, and appears to have begun among the upper classes, although it gradually was adopted even by quite poor families whenever possible. As the Ottoman Turks expanded their empire, they adopted Islamic practices, and women in urban areas were increasingly veiled and secluded, which also occurred in the Mughal Empire of India and in Africa with the spread of Muslim orthodoxy. White women in North America and Europe were not secluded, but in the 19th century they were encouraged to make the home the center of their lives, a ‘haven in the heartless world’ of industrialism and business.

The seclusion or domestication of women was such a prominent theme in advice literature, moral and political treatises, sermons, and law codes that historians often used to describe this as a period during which the public sphere of politics and work became increasingly male, while the private sphere of home and family became increasingly female. This gendered public/private dichotomy is often viewed as having reached its height in the 19th century. More recent scholarship has suggested that this dichotomy may have not been as sharp as it once seemed. Some women in the 19th century maintained power and authority through traditional means – though there were ‘democratic’ revolutions in a few places, in most parts of the world, hereditary rulership continued. Other women came to assert new avenues to power. Women’s exclusion from formal political rights in areas where political and nationalist revolutions established democratic governments sparked an international movement for women’s rights which often used the notion of women’s responsibility for home and family as the very reason that women should have an equal voice with men.

Neither traditional nor new avenues to power, authority, or rights ended women’s less favored legal status anywhere in the world in the 19th century, however. Over the last ten years or so, the great theme in women’s and gender history has been difference – not the differences between genders, but within them. Differences created by race, class, geography, age, marital status, and all the other things that made some women (and men) more favored in all kinds of ways. As I think about what I have said here, however, and as I look at the situation of women in the world today, I think we still need to keep reminding ourselves (and our younger students) that systems in which differences *between* genders are minimized are very fragile. They have only been around a very short time, and have never been a global phenomenon – so they can be ignored, bypassed, or even destroyed much easier than we might think