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Contextualising Late-Nineteenth-Century Feminism: Problems and Comparisons

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Résumé de l'article

Puisque le mouvement féministe avait déjà traversé les frontières des pays occidentaux à la fin du XIXe siècle, on aurait dû être en mesure de mener des analyses comparatives sur le féminisme depuis longtemps. Les études historiques sur ce sujet réalisées depuis 1970 ont généralement été limitées aux cadres nationaux et régionaux. L'esprit de clocher et le repli sur soi qui en résultèrent furent produits par les spécialistes de l'histoire des femmes qui examinèrent le passé en se fondant sur les préoccupations du moment, en alternant appartenance et rejet. L'emprise anglo-américaine sur le sujet ne se concentre que sur le monde occidental et laisse presque complètement de côté l'expérience féministe au Canada. Les avantages de l'analyse comparative en histoire des femmes à l'échelle internationale ne sont pas limités aux mérites de la représentativité et de la perspective d'ensemble. Plutôt, les principales thématiques causales et chronologiques de l'expérience anglo-américaine peuvent servir de problématique si elles sont judicieusement utilisées et réorientées. De manière plus significative, l'étude comparative du mouvement féminin permet de reconnaître que le féminisme est apparu presque simultanément dans tous les pays occidentaux, en réponse aux transformations des rôles et des cultures des sexes.

Contextualising Late-Nineteenth-Century Feminism: Problems and Comparisons

JUDITH ALLEN

Résumé

Histories of feminism since the 1970s have generally observed national and regional boundaries. In view of the international character of women's movements in western countries since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the neglect of comparative approaches has been unfortunate. The outcome is parochialism and inwardness, as feminist historians evaluate feminists of the past according to current preoccupations, in a cycle of identification and repudiation. An Anglo-American hegemony in the field is identified as is the consequent and pervasive "Northern Hemispherism" it ordains (notwithstanding an almost invariable omission of Canadian feminist experience). Advantages of comparative, international approaches to the history of feminism are not confined to the virtues of representativeness and comprehensiveness. Rather, major causal and chronological schema generalised from Anglo-American experience stand to be problematised and revised in more useful directions. Most significantly, comparative studies of feminism permit due recognition of the fact that feminism emerged relatively contiguously across western countries in response to relatively common international characteristics of transformations in sexual patternings and sexual cultures.

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Puisque le mouvement féministe avait déjà traversé les frontières des pays occidentaux à la fin du XIX^e^ siècle, on aurait dû être en mesure de mener des analyses comparatives sur le féminisme depuis longtemps. Les études historiques sur ce sujet réalisées depuis 1970 ont généralement été limitées aux cadres nationaux et régionaux. L'esprit de clocher et le repli sur soi qui en résultèrent furent produits par les spécialistes de l'histoire des femmes qui examinèrent le passé en se fondant sur les préoccupations du moment, en alternant appartenance et rejet. L'emprise anglo-américaine sur le sujet ne se concentre que sur le monde occidental et laisse presque complètement de côté l'expérience féministe au Canada. Les avantages de l'analyse comparative en histoire des femmes à l'échelle internationale ne sont pas limités aux mérites de la représentativité et de la perspective d'ensemble. Plutôt, les principales thématiques causales et chronologiques de l'expérience anglo-américaine peuvent servir de problématique si elles sont judicieusement utilisées et réorientées. De manière plus significative, l'étude comparative du mouvement féminin permet de reconnaître que le féminisme est apparu presque simultanément dans tous les pays occidentaux, en réponse aux transformations des rôles et des cultures des sexes.

Issues of classification, periodisation, and characterisation currently preoccupy historians of feminism. Much is at stake in these preoccupations. Historical accounts of aspects of women's movements made little use of the category "feminism" before the

1970s.[1] The historians for whom the category feminism first became significantly problematic and subject to serious analysis were feminists researching women's history during the 1970s. Inspired by the Women's Liberation Movement, they initially welcomed the possibility of a long tradition of feminist thought and activism in their research on late-nineteenth-century women's suffragists and campaigners for women's rights.

Reserve, even dismay, followed. Feminist forebears seemed more concerned with sexual purity than sexual expression. Current feminist issues, such as abortion on demand, free contraception, equal pay, and publicly funded childcare, seemed absent from their agenda. Instead they spoke of ennobling the status of mothers, of the need to protect and nurture women and children and to provide sex-separated institutions, such as prisons and hospitals. Rose Scott (1847-1925), one of Australia's key earlier feminists, opposed mixed sex surf-bathing and the admission of men as spectators to women's swimming carnivals. Perhaps worst of all, many of these women supported temperance and seemed, like Scott, unrepentently bourgeois in social position and belief.[2]

Historians reacted variously to this seeming lack of continuity. Some promptly dismissed the history of feminism, concluding that the suffragists were not really effective feminists at all. Rather, by Anne Summers's criteria, they had "female consciousness."[3] Others accepted the suspicions of Marxist historians that these women were merely agents of bourgeois hegemony. It was the history of working-class women that henceforth should be the priority of feminist historians.[4] Still others concluded that the marked differences between feminists of the 1870s and those of the 1970s signalled precisely the historicity of feminism. This implied the need to place our understanding of feminism within the historical context of the time. Hence, the suffragists were dubbed "first wave feminists" as distinct from the "second wave feminists" of the current movement.[5]

Of course, the metaphor of two waves prescribes a trough between them. Historians generally represented "first wave feminism" as ending in the 1920s. A gap of over forty years transpired before a "second wave" arose in the 1960s. If this approach to periodising the history of feminism retains a currency, it does so amidst two kinds of critique.

1. Despite titles like J. A. Banks and O. Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England* (Liverpool, 1964), C. Rover, *Love, Morals and the Feminists* (London, 1970), it would be generous if inaccurate to hail such works as serious historical analyses of feminism.
2. J. A. Allen, "'Our Deeply Degraded Sex' and 'The Animal in Man': Rose Scott, Feminism and Sexuality 1890-1925," *Australian Feminist Studies* 7/8 (Summer 1988): 84-85.
3. A. Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonisation of Women in Australia* (Ringwood, Victoria, 1975), 469-70.
4. R. W. Connell and T. H. Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History* (Melbourne, 1980), 203-4; S. Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1974), 245-47.
5. E. Sarah, "Towards a reassessment of feminist history," *Women's Studies International Forum* 5:6 (1982): 520; and C. L. Bacchi, "First Wave Feminism: History's Judgement," in *Australian Women: Feminist Perspectives*, eds. N. Grieve and P. Grimshaw (Melbourne, 1981), 156-67.

One criticism is that the study of feminist texts shows that feminism has been a constant element of western philosophical, cultural, and political discourses since at least the seventeenth century. This continuity would include the supposed "trough" period between the two waves — the interwar and immediate postwar decades, marked by the work of Virginia Woolf, Muriel Heagney, Jessie Street, Bessie Rischbieth, Mary Ritter Beard, Leta Hollingworth, Margaret Mead, Simone de Beauvoir, and Viola Klein among others. Dale Spender argued the case for continuity in her book on this so-called trough period, *There's Always Been a Women's Movement This Century* (1983).[6]

On a different level, American historian Nancy Cott argued in her 1987 text *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, that the implications of the wave metaphor are misleading. Far from dying out in the 1920s, feminism was born and developed precisely from the 1914-1918 war years. If there was a death, it was the "old" women's movement (or in United States usage "the woman movement"), a philosophical vestige of the nineteenth century. Cott urges a continuity between feminism of the 1920s and that of the present day. It is a unity detached from its forebears. Thus the designation "feminist" can be applied only anachronistically to late nineteenth century activists. This kind of "exclusive" characterisation of feminism in modern history is in turn beginning to be reviewed, questioned, defended and redefended from a number of vantage points.[7]

My monograph study of Rose Scott and Australian feminism has been researched and written across these interesting historiographical movements, first of rejection of earlier feminists, then of careful contextualising of their work, and now lately a new phase of repudiation.[8] Arguably these historiographical shifts have owed more to debates in feminist theory and politics since 1970 than to attributes inherent in the relevant historical evidence. Although such obvious engagement between past and present has produced a rich and vigorous body of work, it has not escaped from a certain inward self-referentialism and parochialism. These attributes need to be challenged to attempt to formulate a future agenda for the historical study of feminism.

A major issue to be addressed by historians of feminism is the dominance of local, regional, and/or national studies to the detriment of a comparative or international focus.

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6. For a discussion of such interwar and postwar feminist work, see D. Spender, *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them* (London, 1982); R. Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, 1982) and K. White, "Bessie Rischbieth, Jessie Street and the End of First Wave Feminism in Australia" in *Worth Her Salt*, eds. M. Bevege *et al.* (Sydney, 1982). See also D. Spender, *There's Always Been a Women's Movement This Century* (London, 1983).
7. N. F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, 1987), 3-4. See also N. Hewett, [Review of Cott], *Feminist Studies* 15:1 (Autumn 1989): 561-3; K. Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs* 14:1 (Autumn 1988): 119-57; E. C. DuBois, "Comment on Karen Offen's 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Approach'"; K. Offen, "Reply to DuBois"; N. F. Cott, "Comment on Karen Offen's 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Approach,'" and K. Offen, "Reply to Cott," *Signs* 15:1 (Autumn 1989): 195-209.
8. J. A. Allen, *Rose Scott: Vision and Revision in Australian Feminism 1880-1925* (Melbourne, forthcoming).

Such an emphasis has legitimised a parochialism that is most striking in the bulk of the recent work done in the United States and England. This is unfortunate for the history of feminism, because the causal and chronological schemas generated by local or national studies may have no relationship to those of western feminism generally. It is now time to see feminism in a broader, international context. This does not require the abandonment of our local and specific roots, but encourages a review of those roots from a different perspective.

IDENTIFICATION AND REPUDIATION

Feminists of the 1970s explicitly denied a continuity with earlier movements. For authors such as Millett, Firestone, Rowbotham, Mitchell, and Summers, the women's suffrage pioneers were irrelevant because their concerns were not those which were central in the 1970s. On the whole, historical activists did not attack marriage, monogamy, "the family," motherhood, housewifery, sexual repression, and bourgeois morality. Suspicions that the criteria by which past feminists were evaluated were in fact libertarian and Marxist were confirmed by the few who received approval. In their advocacy of "free love," feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Fanny Wright, and Emma Goldman spoke to modern concerns. The militant methods of the suffragettes in flouting conventional femininity scored some admiration. Pioneers of birth control received an approval tempered by regret that they failed to secure the right to abortion. In general, however, past feminists were repudiated because they concerned themselves with issues considered irrelevant by those active in the 1970s.[9]

While broadly sharing the same preoccupations and standards of judgement as other "second wave" feminists, feminist *historians* recognized that those before them operated within a different socio-historic context. Differences in time and place, they argued, had to be central in assessing the objectives, methods, and achievements of those pioneers. In opposition to those who judged the suffragists naive in their belief that mere legal rights, such as the vote, could appreciably alter women's situation, Ellen DuBois showed how this belief was far from naive in the context of late-nineteenth-century culture. The redefining of "woman" as "citizen," with permanent access to public life through the right to vote, was, in her view, radical and subversive. The fierce resistance to this initiative in the seventy-two years between the Seneca Falls Women's Convention and the Nineteenth Amendment of 1920 demonstrated just how critical the issue of the suffrage was to contemporary United States political culture.[10]

9. See, for instance, K. Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York, 1970); S. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York, 1970); S. Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1973); J. Mitchell, *Woman's Estate* (Harmondsworth, 1971); and A. Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*. See also A. Wexler, "Emma Goldman on Mary Wollstonecraft," *Feminist Studies* 7:1 (Spring 1981): 113-33; M. McKenzie, *Shoulder to Shoulder* (London, 1971); L. Gordon, *Women's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control* (Harmondsworth, 1976); M. P. Bishop, "Vivian Dowding: Birth Control Activist 1892-1911," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, eds. V. Strong-Boag and A. Fellman (Toronto, 1986): 200-07; R. Hall, *Marie Stopes* (London, 1977).

10. E. Dubois, "The Radicalism of the Woman Suffrage Movement: Notes Toward the Reconstruction of Nineteenth Century Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 3:1/2 (Fall 1975): 63-71.

In a comparable contextualising exercise, Linda Gordon explained earlier feminist disinterest in abortion and contraception. Nineteenth-century feminist demands for "voluntary motherhood" and the consequent right of wives to refuse sexual intercourse were profoundly radical, for such positions denied the hydraulic and essentialist notions of men's sexuality that underpinned the doctrine of the husband's right to exercise "conjugal rights." Far from contributing to that destabilisation, support for abortion and contraception would have hindered this feminist attempt to re-negotiate marital sexuality by removing a key ethical basis of the right to say "no" — the risk of unwanted pregnancies in a context in which maternal mortality and morbidity were real hazards and factors in sexual negotiations. To condemn earlier feminists on this score, Gordon argued, was simply ahistorical.[11]

Part of the libertarian sexual politics of the 1970s women's movement was the assertion of the need for lesbian identity, visibility, and sexual expression. Once again, the feminist forebears were found wanting — lesbian rights had no place on their public agenda. This criticism generated careful scrutiny by historians of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century relationships between women, especially in relation to feminism. The work which resulted provided essential insights, for they explored a homosocial world where women's most important relationships were with other women, in an age before the invention of the disparaging sexological category, "lesbian." This perspective provided a new and insightful look at such subjects as women's temperance, social purity, settlement, and trade union and suffrage activists.[12]

By the end of the 1970s, the optimistic libertarianism of the women's movement was giving way to deep scepticism as to the lasting benefits for women of the so-called "sexual revolution." It had bequeathed a culture in which, for women, the contraceptive pill was virtually compulsory, despite the increasingly dire medical side effects. Monogamy was disparaged and open relationships praised, while possessiveness and sexual jealousy were taboo. Yet amidst bruising negotiations between the sexes, a double standard of sexual morality seemed to persist. What feminists called the sexual objectification of women proliferated in advertising, cinema, rock music, and a hugely expanded sex industry devoted to recreational sexual entertainment for men. The researches of historians like Ellen Kay Trimberger revealed that, technological specificities aside, this "down-side" for women of sexual revolutions had happened before — notably among

11. L. Gordon, "Why Nineteenth Century Feminists Did Not Support 'Birth Control' and Twentieth Century Feminists Do," in *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, eds. B. Thorne and M. Yalom (New York, 1982), 40-53.

12. See C. Smith Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," *Signs* 1:1 (Autumn 1975): 1-29; N. F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977); B. Wiesen-Cook, "'Woman Alone Stir My Imagination': Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition," *Signs* 4:4 (Summer 1979): 718-39; L. Fadermann, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women 1750 to the Present* (New York, 1981); M. Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (London, 1985); B. Caine, *Destined to be Wives: The Sisters of Beatrice Webb* (London, 1986); S. Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1939*; and S. K. Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914* (Princeton, 1987).

the socialist-libertarian-feminist-bohemian radicals in New York's Greenwich Village in the 1910s and 1920s.[13] Other feminist historians, disillusioned with the sexual culture of the present, began to regard earlier feminists' sexual politics more sympathetically. Nancy Cott examined ways in which nineteenth-century feminists used prevailing discourses of women's "passionlessness" to deliver women from heterosexual demands. Rather than any longer dismissing earlier feminist advocates of celibacy and spinsterhood as repressed or, in the Australian vernacular "wowserish," feminist historians began to accord such advocacies a central, even axiomatic, place in readings of the history of feminism.[14]

Feminist engagements with psychoanalytic theory added another dimension to the revision of earlier judgements and strengthened the identification with late-nineteenth-century feminists. Following the publications of Mitchell (1974) and Chodorow (1978), feminist theorists and historians began rereading the founding case studies of psychoanalysis, especially women-dominated cases of hysteria, such as those of Anna O. and Dora. These indicated that all was not well in late-Victorian heterosexuality and sexual subjectivity, a conclusion supported by other glimpses into contemporary sexual culture provided by such works as *My Secret Life* and the diaries of Arthur J. Munby and his servant, Hannah Cullwick.[15] Once one saw hysteria as an individualised repudiation of the submissions inherent in accommodation to expected modes of femininity, nineteenth-century feminist sexual thought, with its stress on the psychological dangers of submission, became suddenly comprehensible to late-twentieth-century feminist scholars.

This insight gave rise to serious analyses of late-nineteenth-century feminist campaigns against men's abuse of alcohol, with its attendant consequences in violence and poverty for dependent women and children. Feminist historians insisted that careful consideration be given to the fact that women's temperance constituted the largest political mobilisation of women in modern history. However strongly modern scholars may wish to repudiate the strategies of temperance and prohibition, especially with the wisdom of hindsight as to their futility, the threats and dangers which rendered such activity important to earlier generations of women have enormous significance for the history of feminism. This is further confirmed by cultural history analysis of the sexual

13. E. K. Trimberger, "Feminism, Men and Modern Love: Greenwich Village 1900-1925," in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. A. Snitow *et al.* (London, 1984), 169-89.

14. N. F. Cott, "'Passionlessness': An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology 1790-1850," *Signs* 4:1 (Winter 1978): 219-36.

15. See D. Hunter, "Hysteria, Psychoanalysis and Feminism: The Case of Anna O," *Feminist Studies* 9:3 (Fall 1983): 465-87; M. Ramas, "Freud's Dora's, Dora's Hysteria" in *In Dora's Case: Freud - Hysteria - Feminism*, eds. C. Bernheimer and C. Kahane (London, 1985), 149-80; S. Marcus, *The Other Victorians* (London, 1966); D. Hudson, *Munby: Man of Two Worlds* (London, 1974); L. Stanley, ed., *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick: Victorian Maid Servant* (London, 1984); L. Davidoff, "Class and Gender in Victorian England," in *Sex and Class in Women's History*, eds. J. Newton *et al.* (London, 1983), 17-71; and J. Swindells, "Liberating the Subject? Autobiography and 'Women's History': A Reading of the Diaries of Hannah Cullwick," in *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, ed. Personal Narratives Group (Bloomington, 1989), 24-38.

culture of the public house, especially the figure of the barmaid, recently and shrewdly analysed by Peter Bailey.[16]

The move to contextualise late-nineteenth-century feminism has also generated studies of related issues, such as prostitution, white slavery, incest, the age of consent, seduction, domestic violence, child sexual abuse, and provision for unmarried mothers.[17] In part this focus reflects the current feminist preoccupation with men's sexual exploitation and violence towards women. However, there is also much evidence that, for women dubbed "first wave feminists," these were indeed the most pressing issues and the reason for working for women's suffrage as a means by which they might be redressed. Certainly this was Rose Scott's position.

In view of the existence of the long tradition of feminist criticism of the impact of male sexuality on women and girls, the broader history and present circumstances of feminism needed to be recast. Since feminism had been shown as always responsive to its specific sexual context, the character of feminism since the 1960s began to appear, if not aberrant, then certainly very particular. Its libertarian sexual politics, its androgynous aspirations, its stress on the prospects for sex equality, on the similarities or near samenesses of men and women, the minimal place it accorded sexual difference — all these features marked it as distinct. Some feminist historians became convinced that these characteristics of postwar feminism were the outcome of massive transformations in cultural discourses pertaining to sex and sexuality that could be identified as having resonance from the years of the 1914-1918 war onwards. Psychoanalysis and sexology were key players in this transformation during the interwar years and, from the 1940s until their later formulation by Robert Stoller in the 1960s, these were augmented by new sociological theories of sex roles and the acquisition of culturally constructed gender

16. P. Bunkle, "The Origins of the Women's Movement in New Zealand: The Women's Christian Temperance Union 1885-1895," in *Women in New Zealand Society*, eds. P. Bunkle and B. Hughes (Wellington, 1980), 52-76; W. Mitchinson, "The Woman's Christian Temperance Union: A Study in Organisation," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 4:2 (1981): 143-56; and P. Bailey, "Parasexuality and Glamour: The Victorian Barmaid as Cultural Prototype," *Gender and History* 2:2 (Summer 1990): 148-72.

17. See C. Bauer and L. Ritt, " 'A Husband Is A Beating Animal': Frances Power Cobbe Confronts the Wife-Abuse Problem in Victorian England," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 6:2 (1983): 99-118; E.H. Pleck, "Feminist Responses to 'Crimes Against Women' 1868-1896," *Signs* 8:3 (Spring 1983): 451-70; D. Tyler, "The case of Irene Tuckerman: Understanding sexual violence and the protection of women and girls, Victoria 1890-1925," *History of Education Review* 1:2 (1986): 52-67; J.A. Allen, "Rose Scott's Vision: Feminism and Masculinity 1880-1925," in *Crossing Boundaries: Feminisms and the Critique of Knowledges*, eds. B. Caine *et.al.* (Sydney, 1988), 157-65; K. Daniels, "Prostitution in Tasmania in the Transition from Penal Settlement to 'Civilized' Society," in *So Much Hard Work: Women and Prostitution in Australian History*, ed. K. Daniels (Melbourne, 1984), 13-72; C. MacDonald, "Crime and Punishment in New Zealand 1840-1913: A Gendered History," *The New Zealand Journal of History* 23:1 (April 1989): 5-21; A. Levesque, "Prescribers and Rebels: Attitudes to European Women's Sexuality in New Zealand 1860-1916," in *Women in History: Essays on European Women in New Zealand*, eds. B. Brookes *et.al.* (Wellington, 1986), 1-12; and L. Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The History and Politics of Family Violence: Boston 1890-1962* (London, 1988).

identities. Anthropological field work in so-called primitive or nondeveloped cultures disclosed the plasticity of supposedly inherent sex differences and the cultural arrangements predicated upon them. The clear possible message was this: what had been culturally made could be unmade.[18]

Debates over the genesis, meanings, and ethics of sexual difference have proliferated within feminist theory since 1980. They are ongoing and increasingly inflected by engagement with the work of antihumanist, poststructuralist, and postmodernist theorists. Such debates interconnect with contemporary concerns such as censorship, pornography, poverty, race, class, ethnicity, and aboriginality. It remains to be seen whether feminism — as a category, as a unifying theory, and as politics — will continue into the next century despite some charges of its being a totalising, essentialising, humanist discourse positing a founding subject with a unified continuous history.[19] What is interesting for the purposes of any historiographical analysis of the history of western feminism is the emergence of a new trajectory in the classifying, periodising, and characterising of the history of feminism, also dating from about 1980. Its most authoritative formulation is offered in Cott's *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*.

Cott offers a definition of feminism which excludes Rose Scott, Susan B. Anthony, Nellie McClung, and Josephine Butler. They do not qualify as "true" feminists because of the sexual politics discourses they espoused. Furthermore, these individuals cannot really be feminists because their efforts predated the 1880s, when the French term "feminism," coined in the 1880s, had been exported to other countries and acquired currency and meaning. Only then, she argues, can feminism be said to have truly existed. According to Cott, the birth of feminism occurred in the United States between 1912 and 1914.[20]

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18. See M. Jackson, "Sexology and the Construction of Male Sexuality (Havelock Ellis)," in *The Sexuality Papers*, eds. L. Coveney *et.al.* (London, 1984), 45-68; S. Jeffreys, "Sex Reform and Anti-Feminism in the 1920s," in *The Sexual Dynamics of History*, eds. The London Feminist History Group (London, 1983), 177-202; M. Holtzman, "The Pursuit of Married Love: Women's Attitudes Toward Sexuality and Marriage in Great Britain 1918-39," *The Journal of Social History* 16:2 (Winter 1982): 39-52; J.A. Allen, "Men, Crime and Criminology: Re-casting the Questions," *International Journal of the Sociology of Law* 17:2 (February 1989): 19-39; M. Gatens, "A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction," in *Beyond Marxism?*, eds. J.A. Allen and P. Patton (Sydney, 1983), 143-62; and R. Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, 1982).

19. M. Gatens, "Woman and Her Double(s): Sex, Gender and Ethics," *Australian Feminist Studies* 10 (Summer 1989): 33-48; E. Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney, 1989); R. Pringle, *Secretaries Talk: Sexuality, Work, and Power* (Sydney, 1989); I. Diamond and L. Quinby, "American Feminism and the Language of Control," in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Power and Resistance*, eds. I. Diamond and L. Quinby (Boston, 1988), 193-206; J. Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Feminism, Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Domination* (New York, 1988); and I. Balbus, "Disciplining Women: Michel Foucault and the Power of Feminist Discourse," in *Feminism as Critique*, eds. S. Benhabib and D. Cornell (Cambridge, 1986), 110-28.

20. N. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 13-14.

Following this restrictive definition, the first true feminists were the urbane, educated rebels living independently in eastern American cities such as New York. They eschewed duty to others in favour of self-development and pleasure. Socialism, free love, non-monogamy, unmarried motherhood, lesbianism, bisexuality, abortion, contraception — all were espoused by the "true" feminist. She whole-heartedly supported the actions of the militant suffragettes, unlike Rose Scott and Millicent Fawcett and many other suffrage workers.[21] Like her late-1980s United States counterparts she was aware of the complexities conferred by race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference, region, and age. Although sensitive to these differences, she took a different view of sexual differences. Of these she was skeptical. Her project was to challenge all of their boundaries and constraints — in fact to destabilise them.[22]

If Cott's classification, periodisation, and characterisation of feminism and feminists of the 1920s sound suspiciously modern and contemporary, this is not only acknowledged by Cott, it is intrinsic to her argument. She represents feminism as a unity, bearing a continuous character from the 1920s until the present.[23] In this way, Cott exiles from a place in the specific history of feminism the dilemmas over the significance to be accorded to sexual differences, especially with regard to sexuality, which so preoccupied women's suffrage activists working from 1870 until 1920. Women campaigning to challenge hydraulic constructions of men's sexuality — their demand for prostitutes, for sexual access to young girls, and for the exercise of conjugal rights heedless of the consequences — are effectively relocated in Cott's schema as, by default, prefeminist, part of the "old" woman movement superceded by the "new" feminism.

This reformulation of the history of feminism implies a major revision or disowning by Cott of her earlier work on nineteenth-century women, especially *The Bonds of Womanhood* (1977) and "Passionlessness" (1979). In these works she set the ethic of sisterhood and women's disquiet about existing forms of heterosexuality into their own discursive context, underscoring their powerful input into the formation of what she then recognised as nineteenth-century feminism.[24] Now she contends that their contribution was not to a *feminist* movement, but to the nineteenth-century "woman movement." The latter, as it turns out, had assumptions, objectives, and strategies incompatible with the aspirations of modern feminism.[25]

Even though Cott's text is the most explicit exploration of the current repudiation of the late-nineteenth-century woman that she and others so carefully contextualised as "feminist" in the 1970s, she is not alone. Through her studies of the campaigns against the English Contagious Diseases Acts (1864-69) in the 1970s, Judith Walkowitz made an inspired case for the sexual politics radicalism of Josephine Butler and her followers.[26]

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21. A. Prentice *et.al.*, *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto, 1988), 170 and 192; J.A. Allen, *Rose Scott*, Chap. 5; and B. Caine, "Millicent Fawcett - A Liberal Feminist?" in *Crossing Boundaries*, eds. B. Caine *et.al.*, 56-79.
22. N.F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 35-39.
23. Ibid., 5.
24. N.F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 197-206; and " 'Passionlessness'," 232.
25. N.F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 37.
26. J.R. Walkowitz and D.J. Walkowitz, " ' We Are Not Beasts of the Fields': Prostitution

More recently, she has examined the successors to Butler's abolitionists, the social purity movement of the 1880s, and criticised their stress on "male vice and female virtue." The demonising of men's sexuality and the representation of women and girls as sexually victimised and endangered led to a repressive sexual politics that, in her view, neglected the important issue of women's sexual pleasure. The paradoxical outcome was a heightening of sexual antagonism and the extension of control over the sexuality of young, working-class women in the name of protection.[27]

Most revealingly, Walkowitz drew analogies between the feminist sexual politics of the 1880s and those of a century later, particularly concerning the division in the contemporary American women's movement over the issue of pornography. The anti-pornography feminists were likened to the prudish and repressive "old" social purity advocates of the 1880s — a characterisation which left little doubt as to Walkowitz's concept of the politically "correct" line. Contemporary feminists were exhorted here to learn the lessons of history.[28]

The same concern, to focus on the importance of women's sexual pleasure, can be found in the newer work of Gordon and DuBois. In their essay "Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield," they differed from Cott in retaining the designation "feminist" for nineteenth-century women's activists. Like Cott and Walkowitz, they characterised nineteenth-century feminists as "conservative" in their stress on the danger of sexuality, especially as epitomised in prostitution, at the expense of the importance of sexual pleasure for women. Despite the difficulties encountered, it was the sexually libertarian women of Greenwich Village of the 1910s and 1920s who Gordon and DuBois hailed as providing a radical and progressive sexual tradition for feminism. In this reading the various nineteenth-century women's movements focused on sexual danger, while their twentieth-century counterpart prosecuted sexual pleasure — therefore foreshadowing Cott's treatment of nineteenth-century activists as not being "true" feminists.[29]

There can be little doubt that the feminism of the war and interwar years, often limited to urban centres and to bohemian, left-wing cultural mileux, was specific and distinct from earlier forms. Cott and others have explored the character of the former in considerable detail. None the less, work in a variety of geographical contexts indicates clearly that the sharp chronological break and the substantive divergence in purpose identified by Cott — between the nineteenth-century woman movement on the one hand

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and the Poor in Plymouth and Southhampton Under the Contagious Diseases Act," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, eds. M. Hartman and L. Banner (New York, 1974): 192-225; "The Making of An Outcast Group: Prostitutes and Working Women in Nineteenth Century Plymouth and Southhampton," in *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, ed. M. Vicinus (Bloomington, 1977), 92-93; *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge, 1980).

27. J.R. Walkowitz, "Male Vice and Female Virtue: Feminism and The Politics of Prostitution in Late Nineteenth Century England," in *Desire*, eds. A Snitow *et.al.*, 43-61.
28. Ibid., 57.
29. L. Gordon and E.C. DuBois, " 'Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield': Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth Century Feminist Sexual Thought," *Feminist Studies* 9:1 (Spring 1983): 7-26.

and twentieth-century feminism on the other — is overdrawn. This conclusion is strengthened if one looks at the range of concerns of early-twentieth-century feminists, many of whom exhibit strong continuities with the concerns and campaigns of late-nineteenth-century women.

Writing recently from the perspective of French women's history, for example, Karen Offen has been critical of the main trends in the historical study of feminism, especially in the United States. She has urged that particular kinds of comparative study could enrich existing historical understandings of feminism, especially if prevailing approaches were displaced. As alternatives to them, Offen has classified western feminism as either "relational" — with its stress on the women's distinct nature, especially apparent in her nurturing relations with others — or "individualist" — with its minimising of differences based on sex. She has focused on the historical importance of the relational strand as a distinctively *European* contribution to feminist history, an approach which, she claims, has been too readily eclipsed by the individualistic strand, which she has identified as hegemonic in the Anglo-American feminist tradition.

Offen's argument has been criticised by Ellen DuBois for its own reversion to dualism ("relational" vs "individualist") and by Nancy Cott for a "mistaken inclusiveness" as to what should count as feminism. In a neat turn, she has recalled Cott's own exclusivity, a position consistent with my own argument here. Despite Offen's argument for the need for comparative examination, however, her own work — with the exception of a single mention of Argentina — is limited to the northern hemisphere, a factor which greatly constrains her perspective of the enterprise.[30] It is unconvincing in any case to contend, as Offen does, that Anglo-American histories of feminism have underplayed the place of "relations" or "difference" — both preoccupations of earlier feminism. Meanwhile, the work of Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand historians who have given this issue considerable attention are, alas, absent from Offen's historiographical considerations.[31]

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30. K. Offen, "Defining Feminism," 119-57; E.C. DuBois, "Comment on Karen Offen's 'Defining Feminism' "; K. Offen, "Reply to DuBois"; N.F. Cott, "Comment on Karen Offen's 'Defining Feminism' "; and K. Offen "Reply to Cott," 195-209.

31. See for instance on Canadian feminism, V. Strong-Boag, *The Parliament of Women* (Ottawa, 1976); D. Gorham, "Flora McDonald Denison: Canadian Feminist," in *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880-1920s*, ed. L. Kealey (Toronto, 1979), 47-70; C.L. Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English Canadian Suffragists 1877-1918* (Toronto, 1982); and S. Mann Trofimenkoff, "Feminism, Nationalism and the Clerical Offensive," in *Rethinking Canada*, 123-36. On Australian feminism, see D. Scott, "Woman Suffrage: The Movement in Australia," *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 53:4 (December 1967): 299-322; A. Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, especially 347-78; J.A. Allen, "The Feminisms of the Women's Movements in Britain, America and Australia 1850-1920," *Refractory Girl* 17 (December 1979): 17-23 and "Breaking Into the Public Sphere: The Struggle for Women's Citizenship in New South Wales 1890-1920," in *Pursuit of Justice: Australian Women and the Law 1788-1979*, eds. J. Macknolty and H. Radi (Sydney, 1979): 107-17; C. Fernon, "Women's Suffrage in Victoria," *Refractory Girl* 22 (May 1981): 18-24; S.M. Magarey, *Unbridling the Tongues of Women: A Biography of Catherine Helen Spence* (Sydney, 1985); P. John-

To suggest that continuities between the women's movements of these two centuries have been underestimated is not to appeal alternatively to an eternal, unchanging, essential feminism as some scholars have done. On the contrary, the changes were marked and in some respects remarkable. A priority for historians of feminism must be precision — to establish an accurate understanding of the variety of political, cultural, and sexual contexts in which feminism flourished, and the exact routes of exchange and influence between feminist and nonfeminist positions in sexual politics. It may be that what is really being applauded by some recent feminist historians is the embrace of libertarianism and socialism in the 1920s by those situated in a very particuar and transient milieu. The significance of contemporary feminists conferring approval in this way may best be seen as a type of politics of identification. That feminists currently embroiled in debates over equality, difference, diversity, sexuality and, latterly, relationalism and individualism might identify with the libertarian feminists of the 1910s and 1920s is entirely understandable.

Identification may not be, however, the best way to write the history of feminism. From a wide range of feminist analyses, aspirations, and strategies existing at any one time, the moments of historians' identifications always seem to have involved selections from that range — and not necessarily representative selection at that. Moreover, identification and repudiation have gone hand-in-hand in the writing of the history of feminism since the 1970s.

It would be a great pity if the inward-looking quality of some feminist analysis, of which this identification/repudiation dualism is symptomatic, consigned historians of feminism to a pattern of endlessly reinterpreting its past largely in the light of current preoccupations, as is arguably the case in the recent exchange among Offen, DuBois, and Cott. It is now time for historians of feminism to seek a broader context, to recognise parochialism for what it is — a major obstacle and limitation that must be overcome.

PAROCHIALISM VERSUS INTERNATIONALISM

Historians love the particular, the local, the specific. Indeed, theorists of many persuasions have noted with contempt the empirical preferences of historians and their scepticism towards abstract general theories. Many historians happily examine the history of somewhere or something in particular for its own sake, untroubled by larger questions upon which their local study may or may not bear. Organised by nation, by region, by era, and by genre, academic and professional historians generally proceed, confident both of the rationales for the boundaries within which their work is mapped and of the audience to whom they speak.

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son, "Nineteenth-Century Australian Feminism: A Study of *The Dawn*," *Australia 1888 Bulletin* 13 (1984): 71-81; and M. Lake, "The politics of respectability: identifying the masculinist context," *Historical Studies* 22 (April 1986): 116-31. On New Zealand feminism, see P. Grimshaw, *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand* (Auckland, 1972); R. Dalziel, "The Colonial Helpmeet: Women's Role and the Vote in Nineteenth Century New Zealand," and J. Malone, "What's Wrong with Emma? The Feminist Debate in Colonial Auckland," in *Women in History*, 55-86.

As such, the tendency towards parochialism is almost built into the historian's craft. To find evidence of parochialism amongst historians of feminism, then, could hardly mark them as radically distinct from their colleagues. In fact, a commonplace prevails within the history profession that the more particular the focus, the more rich will be the evidence and the more textured and nuanced the scholarship. Conversely, the more general or more distant from the single specific local instance model, the greater the risk of compromising its quality. Comparative historical analysis within the same nation and period can be treated with reserve, while comparison between countries is treated with palpable suspicion. The grounds are obvious enough and readily borne out by published instances — the dangers are superficiality, overgeneralizing that does violence to diversities, frequent inaccuracies, and an over-reliance on secondary sources — hallmarks of the logistical difficulties facing scholars forced to spread efforts thinly in too many places. Richard Evans's text *The Feminists* (1977), which surveyed Britain, Western Europe, the United States, and Australasia in less than one hundred thousand words, exemplified perfectly the dangers and few discernible benefits of historical comparison.[32] Historians of feminism since then have, for the most part, confined their efforts "to feminism in one country" as did Stalin with Soviet socialism.

More historical books and articles have been published about feminism and feminists and about women's history generally, for that matter, in the United States than anywhere else. English feminism is the next most thoroughly researched national variety, although many of its most significant scholars are also citizens of the United States. The reasons for this are demographic, cultural, and political; absolutely and proportionedly many more United States women receive higher education, embark on research, and become historians than in the United Kingdom. The flourishing of women's studies programmes in the United States has been a further impetus to historical research on feminism, again in contrast to the United Kingdom.[33]

Historical studies of feminism have formed a significant and often a founding part of the development of women's history in western countries. None the less, the number of studies so far published on feminism in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, South America, the USSR, and various countries of northern, eastern, and western Europe remains small in relation to the sum of work on the United States and England. However, "size isn't everything."

Understandings of the history of western feminism can easily become synonymous with United States or English feminism just because of the sheer weight of research in those fields. This would not be a serious problem if feminism studied in one representative country could be taken as a marker or model for all likely contiguous feminist movements. Certainly many historians of United States or English feminism have writ-

32. See for instance, T. Gurr *et.al.*, *The Politics of Crime and Conflict: A Comparative History of Four Cities* (Beverly Hills, 1977); and R.J. Evans, *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia* (London, 1977). An important exception here is J. Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism Women in Britain, France and the United States 1780-1860* (London, 1985).

33. M.J. Boxer, "For and About Women: The Theory and Practice of Women's Studies in the United States: Review Essay," *Signs* 7:3 (Autumn 1982), 661-95.

ten as if they assumed their case study was representative. In the absence of comparative study, can such assumptions be valid?

If the question carries its own answer, this is not a plea for the multiplication of diverse national and regional case studies either for their own sake or for the pursuit of some abstract or "in principle" notion of historiographical parity. These are being produced apace and can entail their own version of reinventing the wheel. Researched and written often in innocence and ignorance of comparable or simultaneous developments elsewhere, recent non-United States and non-English histories of feminism and studies of past feminists are in danger of reproducing the same parochialism that arguably already characterises the field.

By the end of the nineteenth century, feminism was much more than a series of discrete and individual movements taking place in different contexts within a number of national boundaries. It was truly an international force in which ideas, personalities, and approaches readily crossed political barriers. Feminists participated in a broad variety of international philanthropic, political, social, and economic organisations. Beyond these, they shared a private network of sisterhood, friendship, and love. All of these contacts led to a fruitful, multidirectional cross-fertilisation and sharing of ideas and experiences. This international quality to the feminist movement affects profoundly the issues of their historical classification, periodisation, and characterisation.

The treatment of one issue, the campaign for and granting of women's suffrage, can usefully demonstrate both the limits inherent in a national approach and the possibilities of a comparative international perspective. Most histories of feminism agree that the suffrage campaign unified and energised a disparate women's movement. The campaign's very success killed the movement that had spawned it, and after 1920 feminism quietly ebbed away. In Cott's revisionist analysis, the story is much the same, but she argues that modern feminism was made *necessary* by the imminent success of the suffrage campaign and made *possible* by the consequent demise of the woman movement after 1920.[34]

In either the conventional account or in Cott's revisionism, the factor which generated change is the impending achievement of the vote. For the history of feminism, it was this, rather than anything that inhered in the period 1914-20, that generated the historical shift. The limitations of either analysis become clear, however, if one sees the United States experience in a comparative perspective. Many countries enfranchised women as early as a quarter-century before the United States did. Did the grant of the vote in New Zealand in 1892, for example, mark the end of feminism, as the traditional account would lead us to expect, or the end of the nineteenth-century woman movement and the advent of modern feminism, as Cott's revision would logically argue? What insights are gained when one adds the experiences of South Australia (which enfranchised women in 1895), Western Australia (1899), New South Wales (1902), or even Finland (1906).[35]

34. N.F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 34, 37.

35. Cott does discuss the impact of German and Scandinavian ideas upon the Greenwich Village feminists (46-47).

By looking at the issue of the suffrage in a number of countries, one can test the validity of traditional and revisionist interpretations, both of which were generated largely by studies of a single country. Such an undertaking has not yet been done, but even the addition of the available Australian evidence would suggest that neither analysis is generally applicable. The gaining of the vote there did not usher in the death of feminism, as the traditionalists would have it. Nor did it result in the end of the nineteenth-century "woman movement" and the birth of modern feminism, as Cott would have us believe.[36]

This is not to argue that local- or nation-based studies are now of doubtful utility for the historian of feminism. My own work has been greatly enriched by having prior United States and English studies available to guide me on questions of timing and definition. They are also essential tools in determining what causal factors have been uniquely local or national, and which transcend those boundaries. The simple point is that, if the historians of feminism outside the United States and England can benefit from the comparisons that the experiences of those two countries can provide, then the reverse is also surely true: United States and English historians of feminism can only understand what is unique and what is shared in the experiences of their women by integrating the story of other nations into their analyses. They have everything to gain and nothing to lose, save their parochialism. The gains for the historian would be immense, for such an approach will permit an escape from the parochially based generalisations which currently prevail.[37]

This integration of a comparative perspective is therefore of importance to all historians of feminism. For the foreseeable future, we can expect that United States and English historians will continue to produce the bulk of the published work on feminism. What needs to be done, if histories of feminism are to escape the current parochialism? A first, crucial step is to cease assuming that what applies in the United States and

36. J.A. Allen, *Rose Scott*, Chap. 4.

37. Australia, the country of Crocodile Dundee, is reputed to be the most misogynist country in the western world, a nation of boarish, beer swilling "ockers" who reduce their women to doormats. By contrast, according to the North American frontier thesis, United States women allegedly enjoy historically grounded respect, high status, and egalitarian relations with their charming and companionate men. Interestingly, historians in both countries often attribute these supposedly opposite statuses of women to the frontier sex imbalance — high masculinity in Australia producing masculinist degradation of women, while in the United States producing reverence and mother-centred communities that readily endorsed Prohibition. The beginnings of comparative international histories of women in frontier contexts is a welcome development which may revise prevailing claims and better situate the significance of the early success of suffragists in allegedly misogynist frontiers like Australia and the protracted struggles for the vote in the Unites States. Canadian work will be very important in testing any causal and chronological revisions. See S. Myres, "Victoria's Daughters: English-Speaking Women on Nineteenth Century Frontiers," and A. Castaneda, "Comparative Frontiers: The Migration of Women to Alta California and New Zealand," in *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives*, eds. L. Schlissel *et.al.* (Albuquerque, 1988), 261-300; and J.A. Allen, "From Women's History to a History of Sexes," in *Australian Studies: A Survey*, ed. J. Walter (Melbourne, 1989), 220-41.

English political contexts is necessarily valid elsewhere. For example, the Women's Christian Temperance Union began in the United States, was promptly exported, and rapidly took hold in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. Temperance activists were central in the formation of women's suffrage societies and were perceived as a potent threat to the liquor interest, which promptly founded anti-suffrage movements. The first nation to enfranchise women, New Zealand, had a women's suffrage movement entirely dominated by temperance women. The same was true in Queensland, Australia, but much less so in other Australian colonies.[38] Upon arriving in Australia from England in 1913 Adela Pankhurst wrote bitterly to Rose Scott condemning her opposition to militant suffragette methods and failure to understand why Australian women won the vote so easily:

> The conditions are entirely different here. There is not the strong vested interests against the enfranchisement of women ... I mean the liquor interest which is stronger than you can imagine, those who are interested in immorality; the sweating employer; and the many commercial concerns that depend on women's labour. We have also great opposition from politicians who fear the effect of the woman's vote. These forces have been united against us for 50 years and the press has constantly helped them.[39]

Though Scott remained unconvinced that these obstacles were any worse than or much different from those she and others had encountered in Australia, women's suffrage campaigners in the United States no doubt would have concurred with Pankhurst. That they also faced more serious obstacles would be their answer to the observation that, considered from the New Zealand and Australian perspective, United States women were franchised rather late in history. Yet despite the power of women's temperance in Australasian feminism, women's enfranchisement was not followed by Prohibition as it was in the United States. This is a causal and contextual problem for any history of United States women's suffrage and feminism, not yet addressed in existing histories.[40]

Another example may help to illuminate the possibilities. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which raised the English age of consent from thirteen to sixteen, tends to be treated by historians of feminism and sexuality as evidence of the repressive agenda of social purity, despite a more sympathetic feminist reading by Sheila Jeffreys.[41] This is another instance where different questions might be asked by historians of English feminism in the light of the campaigns of feminists in other countries.

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38. P. Grimshaw, *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand* (Auckland, 1972).
39. Mitchell Library Manuscripts, Rose Scott Correspondence, Adela Pankhurst to Rose Scott, 13 July 1914, A2273, 1078.
40. Instead, histories of United States feminism tend to assume the logic of the relationship between the enfranchisement of women and Prohibition. This seems much less true of the equivalent Canadian histories despite the comparable experience of Prohibition after the securing of women's suffrage across much of anglophone Canada. Generalisations are avoided in the Canadian case in the light of great regional and provincial variation on the suffrage-Prohibition connection. See, for instance, discussion of the issue in A. Prentice *et.al, Canadian Women*, 184, 187, 202, and 209.
41. See J.R. Walkowitz, "Male Vice and Female Virtue," 48-50; and J. Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800* (London, 1981), 87-89.

Since British dominions commonly copied legislation of the mother country, it is probably news to historians of English feminism that this did not happen with the new age of consent in all the Australian colonies.

In an attempt to combat prostitution, illegitimacy, infanticide, and the chronic poverty of young women, Rose Scott and others like her sought the adoption of the 1885 provision in New South Wales, Australia's most populous colony. It was not to be. Local politicians resisted the measure on the grounds that respectable men would be open to blackmail, that charges might be brought by any domestic servant, and that the liberty of men would be imperilled.[42]

Politicians defending the existing age of fourteen quoted the shocking experiences of men of their acquaintance in London, who feared employing young women in any capacity for fear of feminine vindictiveness.[43] When the Girls' Protection Bill became a chief target of Scott's post-suffrage women's organisation, her parliamentary opponents offered the argument that the age needed to be lower in Australia owing to the subtropical conditions that ripened girls into women sooner than "at home."[44] As one Labor member of Parliament friend of Scott's wrote to her in the 1890s, "We're not iron and we're not ice and it is no use shutting our eyes to the laws of nature."[45] The women reformers had reasoned that politicians could only ignore the demands of women and condone the traffic in young women's bodies so long as women were excluded from the electorate. Yet, it took twenty-five long years of struggle before Rose Scott saw the age of consent raised to sixteen in 1910. Compared with this reform, securing women's suffrage was easy.

In such a context of sexual discourses, the reading of feminist support for a raised age of consent as erotophobic puritanism may be at least problematic. To know that the English age of consent of sixteen could be so long resisted in such a representative British dominion requires a reassessment of the significance of the 1885 enactment and its context. If the comparison has led Australian historians of feminism like myself to ask why the measure was so resisted in Australia, this is only one aspect of the issue. At least as important is the issue of why the measure was so readily enacted in England, even taking account of the "Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon" scandal.[46] Such scandals had their Australian counterparts without equivalent effect.[47] In a representative number of Australian colonies, the raised age of consent was perceived as a feminist demand striking at male sexual freedom.[48] Did the measure's successful enactment in

42. J.A. Allen, *Sex and Secrets: Crimes Involving Australian Women Since 1880* (Melbourne, 1990), 78-80.
43. J.A. Allen, *Rose Scott*, Chap. 3.
44. J.A. Allen, *Sex and Secrets*, 79.
45. Mitchell Library Manuscripts, Rose Scott Collection, Frank Cotton to Rose Scott, 21 January 1892, A2276, 63a.
46. D. Gorham, " 'The Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon' Reconsidered: Child Prostitution and the Idea of Childhood in Late Victorian England," *Victorian Studies* 21:3 (Spring 1978): 353-79.
47. J.A. Allen, *Sex and Secrets*, 22.
48. Ibid., 78.

1885 mean that it was not seen as a feminist demand in England? This is a serious question for historians of English feminism, but its importance emerges only through comparison and rigorous scrutiny of the apparent givens of national contexts.

Activists like Scott were concerned about the systemic degradation of women by men, most especially in the realm of what we nowadays call "sexuality." International comparison of women like her in their period of political work arguably weakens the case for not classifying them as feminist. The evidence resounds with their pursuit of issues and questions that were unmistakably *feminist* and which, if correctly contextualised, remain so even for the modern reader.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between women's suffrage and prohibition, and the contemporary significance of the age of consent are but two areas of enquiry where findings support the more general claim that histories of feminism tend to be deficient and parochial if researched and written without a comparative framework and wholly within national boundaries. No less than feminism today, the western feminism that emerged over a century ago was an international movement responding to relatively common features of the sexual context prevailing in western countries. Historiographical analysis of histories of feminism published since the 1970s justifies the characterisation of that work as emmeshed in a cycle of identification and repudiation.

At least some of the reasons for the persistence of this cycle relate to a prevailing ignorance about the larger international dimensions of the history of western feminism since the late-nineteenth century. Greater familiarity with the history of other northern hemisphere feminisms, especially those of Canada, of northern and eastern Europe, and of the southern hemisphere would force us to rethink and reformulate our current concepts of causation, chronology, and substance which derive from the leading United States and English histories of feminism.

It is desirable that this recasting should take place if we are truly to understand western feminism. Whatever its longer-term prospects might be, the immediate future has feminism in a key strategic place as a politics, as a position of epistemological challenge in the formation of western knowledges, and as a central and increasingly effective player in pubic reformulations of ethics, social justice, and cultural policy.[49] The days when feminism could be tacked on as an outgrowth of, even parasite upon, mainstream liberalism and social democracy, and analysed in the same terms, are long gone. Attempts simply to annex feminism to the history of socialism are equally un-

49. See, for instance, C. Pateman, "The Patriarchal Welfare State," in *Democracy and the Welfare State*, ed. A. Gutmann (Princeton, 1988), 231-60; J.A. Allen, "Does Feminism Need A Theory of 'The State'?" and B. Sullivan, "Sex Equality and the Australian Body Politic," in *Playing the State: Australian Feminist Interventions*, ed. S. Watson (London, 1990), 21-38 and 173-90; E.A. Grosz, "Feminism and the Challenge to Knowledges," *Women's Studies International Forum* 10:5 (1987): 475-80; and A. Edwards, "The Sex/Gender Distinction: Has it Outlived Its Usefulness?" *Australian Feminist Studies* 10 (Summer 1989): 1-12.

persuasive.[50] It is precisely the outcomes of sound historical research, as well as the critical interrogations of political theory of the kind provided by Carole Pateman, that have exposed the paucity of manoeuvres attempting to deny feminism the space befitting a distinct philosophical and political discourse.[51]

An important and comparative international task lies ahead, once the dust clears over the current phase of labelling and periodising and of identification and repudiation within the historiography of feminism. The majority of women in the past did not become feminists. If feminism became increasingly an urban phenomenon peopled by those in the vanguard of changes that were to affect the larger mass of women, then we need a much fuller understanding of the circumstances of that larger mass of women and the transformations they were effecting, to have any real hope of properly contextualising the emergence of feminists from their ranks. The answer will not lie in more and closer analyses of the exceptional women and men who developed feminist discourses, pivotal as these are for understanding aspects of the course of feminism *itself* across the past century. Rather, detailed comparative research is needed on the dramatic changes in sexual patternings in the general population that may have been required for modern feminism to be possible at all. I refer here to demographic changes and their consequences, including the largest and most rapid plummet in average completed family sizes in recorded modern history from an average of seven live offspring per married woman in 1870 to two by 1940; the marked narrowing in age gaps betwen spouses; the vast increase in rates of divorce and conjugal terminations; the dramatic fall first in infant, then maternal, mortality; the contraction of the period of adult female life spent in child bearing and rearing; the massively increased participation of women in higher education and paid work, especially after marriage; and, finally, the extension of longevity increasingly in favour of women.[52]

These sexual patternings are inexplicable by economic and technological factors. Demographers now admit defeat and venture that the negotiations producing these changes reside in the realm of the cultural.[53] However, published work attempting to address this "cultural" element demonstrates that demographers are very far from knowing what this might mean.[54] In fact, most of these momentous changes in population patternings signal altered negotiations between men and women across the past century and a half. They are substantially sexual patternings, the consequence of transformations in sexual cultures pertaining in modern western communities. Feminism was

50. For examples of this manoeuvre, see H. Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Sydney, 1984), Introduction, and N.F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 35.
51. See C. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge, 1988) and *The Disorder of Women* (1990). See also K. Offen, "Defining Feminism," 150.
52. For a preliminary discussion of the implications of these changes for women's history, see J.A. Allen, " 'A Revolution Without Generals': Considering Men and Women in the European 'Fertility' Decline 1870-1939," paper presented at the History Department, Université d'Ottawa, March 1989.
53. See A.J. Coale and S. Cott-Watkins, eds., *The Decline in European Fertility* (Princeton, 1986).
54. J.A. Allen, " 'A Revolution Without Generals.' "

one response which depended on these changes. Few women became feminists, but most voted with their bodies, including with their feet, long before they were granted suffrage.