

# Nature and Hierarchy: Reflections on Writing the History of Women and Children

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Often in recent years I have been asked to lecture on the history of women and children in Canada. Of late, and probably lamentably late, I have begun to find these requests to treat women and children as part of one subject troubling. I admit to being part of a group who wrote, reviewed, lectured and squabbled this cluster into convention. It did seem like the thing to do at the time, the way writing one book about social credit, the cooperative commonwealth federation and the progressives seemed to make sense to political historians in the fifties, or grouped studies of native peoples, blacks and orientals made sense to imperial historians in the sixties, a gathering together of groups from the margin which had in common — their marginality. But now that a certain amount of time has passed, and on reflection, it is clear that we need a change — not perhaps in the company we keep, but in the analytical frame which has made this particular group seem (to name it exactly as it has seemed to be) natural.

I mean to suggest, as a good many others have already begun to suggest, that we need to change

not the subjects but the analytical and reference system of our enquiries. Is it nature which ties women and children together as subjects? Clearly not. Female and five years old are biological specifications. But then, the same is true of male and forty-five years old. And in fact, we have been studying the 'feminine' and the preschooler, the social ordering of sexual and age differences. These are gender divisions and life cycle stage expectations culturally formed, socially reproduced. They are categories which share with 'masculine' and 'prime of life' meanings made by history, not nature. What distinguishes feminine and preschooler from masculine and prime of life is not naturalness versus artificiality but proximity to power. So long as we see women's concerns bound to children's needs by a particularly female biological imperative, and ask our questions about women's past from inside an ideology which assumes this connection to be continuous and outside history, the social genesis of the nurturing relationship is left unexamined and much that ought to be accounted for by the exercise of

power is explained rather as a social elaboration upon a biological foundation.

In the way in which we use natural to specify the category woman and child we mean not biological but conventional — conventional wisdom. What is conventionally assumed to be the nature of the natural? As Lisa Peattie and Martin Rein have argued, we use 'natural' to place outside explanation as inevitable a considerable range of behaviours:

Some things appear to us to be natural because of appropriateness: surely if you tried to do it differently, you would feel so peculiar or out of place that no one in their right mind would care to; a woman would not want to plan to attend a stag party. Some things appear natural because the system requires them; everything would fall apart if we changed; children should have a mother to care for them. Still other things appear natural in the sense of being the only possibility; people would be incapable of doing it differently: a woman isn't strong enough to do certain jobs.<sup>1</sup>

We do not so much evoke these aspects of the 'natural' as causes as we let them slip by us, failing to label them for the social conventions which they are, or to explain their presence by exploring the systems which made them. Whether we couch the 'natural' in terms of appropriateness, capacity or need, the result is the same, an acceptance by intention or inadvertance that these patterns lie outside the historian's ambit.

Take for example the question of public and private spheres, which in their rendering as 'man of the world' and 'angel of the home' are products of a specific historical process, the rise in industrial capitalism of factory modes of production, the separation of workplace from residence and the attendant partition of domestic from economic, and reproduction from produc-

tion. We have used these categories, specifying the processes which generated them as if this particular configuration of results were inevitable, required for the system to function — as if the description of the process were an explanation of the results. As the work of Barbara Taylor on early nineteenth century British socialist feminists, and of Dolores Hayden on turn of the century American material feminists suggests, many contemporaries did not see industrialisation as inevitably casting women as domestic beings and men as public creatures. Their perceptions were of two interconnected systems in transformation, one ordering gender divisions and sexual hierarchies, the other reordering class relations, both in flux, both responsive to contingency. For them, women's role in an industrial economy was a question rather than a given, an opportunity to intervene and to redraw gender divisions toward equality.<sup>2</sup>

As we have used public and private in the literature of women's history and the history of the family, these Victorian middle-class ideological prescriptions have become mistaken for social formations. An early curiosity deriving from this formulation, the notion that as the economy is outside the home, work was outside the home and hence the non-waged labour performed within the home was not work, does not appear so often in analysis. We are now more impressed by the continuities and interdependencies between production and reproduction so that we take as a starting place rather the assertion that 'women's place is not a separate sphere or domain of existence but a position within social existence generally'.<sup>3</sup> Still the public/private distinction retains a mistaken power in our literature. In analyses of social organization, institutional settings, policy-making and politics we retain the fundamental dichotomy between public and private parsed out so that men by their identification with the public are called political beings, and women by their identification with the private are definitionally apolitical. By labelling women private beings

and assuming that the private is apolitical we continue to 'place women in a marginal relation to the public and the political.'<sup>4</sup> This is a problem which bedevilled the Canadian literature on reform written in the mid-seventies, which continues to cloud our view of both women and children in the 1880-1920 period. We came to characterise those decades as an era of 'maternal feminism,' to see the public actions of women definitionally as an extension of the private, so that we failed to explore the public sources of their political work, neglected to put on our agenda the activities of women whose characterisations of self were not 'maternal.' Here too we are seeing a change. Deborah Gorham worked against this tendency in her study of Flora McDonald Denison. Tom Socknatt, Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster in their investigations of women in the peace movement, pre-communist socialist formations and the Communist party are following the same tack.<sup>5</sup>

The change is important because until we break down the equation between man and public, woman and private — a tendency which has lingered insufficiently questioned in our women's history and which has not been engaged at all in our mainstream political history — we continue 'to treat the political programmes and forms of political understanding generated by men as if they represented a universal position, a position to which women might, however, aspire or which might be supplemented with "women's concerns."<sup>6</sup> We continue to house our discourse on politics and policy-making in a language which definitionally excludes, or at best marginalises, women, leaving us with a construction of the political which is partial and parochial. And, although we have salutary contrary examples in McLaren's analyses of the struggles between sexual partners over birth control choices, in the children's history literature and studies of domestic service on power relationships within households which include non-kin,<sup>7</sup> we have failed to sufficiently address the political nature of the

domestic setting, and left unexamined the ways in which that setting schools male and female children's understanding of the sources and use of power.<sup>8</sup>

Unless we break down this male-public, female-private divide we shall continue to misunderstand men's understanding of politics, leaving obscure the extent to which the private forms, informs, constrains and directs their relation to work and political life. Here the salutary example of a more fruitful approach is Fraser and Cross's study of Baldwin.<sup>9</sup> More commonly in our writing of the history of men of all classes and walks of life, influences from private life have been treated rather more as intrusions whose character is intermittent. We have regarded an actor's success and political adeptness as directly proportional to the extent to which such distractions have been contained.<sup>10</sup> Stoddart and Strong-Boag in a mid-seventies piece in *Atlantis*, and Roberts in an essay of about the same time in *Canada, an historical magazine* pointed out the problems with this pattern of regarding the private as pollutant.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps it was that in each of these cases women were regarded as meddling outside their appropriate (one might say natural) ambit. Certainly the difficulty of reconstructing so venerable a pattern cannot be minimised. Whatever the cause, it is clear that in men's as in women's history and the history of childhood we have noted sexual differences, and sketched the context of their being, without tackling squarely the question of why these gender divisions exist.

Certainly we have not often searched out an explanation in the social initiation into gender, a prerequisite to understanding social being as part of a sex/gender system existing contiguous with the relations of class, race and ethnicity.<sup>12</sup> In Jennifer Brown's work on the families of fur-traders by Moose Factory and Chad Garfield's studies of the frontier between farming and timber-making of Prescott and Russell, we see these issues being confronted. It is to patterns

in commercial organisation, to definitions of cultural community, and same-sex loyalties which Brown turns in order to account for the diversity in the experience of motherhood, fatherhood and childhood in the Northwest.<sup>13</sup> Clearly in the history of the family as in women's history, projects which give prominence to family and kinship systems as they 'both reflect and help to reshape social relations outside the family,' and inculcate a socially ordained system of gender division, are likely to yield more meaningful results than those which insist upon the integrity and autonomy of the 'private.'<sup>14</sup>

Similar to public and private is another pair of words, skilled and unskilled. We find these in the nineteenth and twentieth century sources with clear and systematic gender associations. Yet, in our studies of the transformations in women's and men's work in factory and domestic production, in the professions and in agriculture we have used these words as if they had technical meaning in an engineering sense, in terms of years of training required or level of aptitude demanded. But technology is not gender blind, and discussions of aptitude are reiterations rather than explanations of sexual segregation. To take an example for illustration: in 1936 after the closing of a rayon mill in Sherbrooke, Quebec, Justice W.F.A. Turgeon of the Saskatchewan Court of Appeal was launched upon an inquiry into the textile industry which took him to the principal wool, cotton and knit goods manufacturing centres of Ontario. In his final report, he quotes approvingly from the text of the 1936 World Textile Conference:

The textile industry is further characterised by a high percentage of unskilled and semi-skilled workers. With many important exceptions, of course, textile manufacturing processes require of the labour force chiefly deftness, speed and attention rather than the exercise of muscular strength or the possession of high grade craftsmanship. Partly because of this composition of

its labour force, partly for other reasons. . . the textile industry may be characterised on the whole as a low-wage industry.<sup>15</sup>

Turgeon then notes in summary:

It has been a common feature in all industrial countries that those industries with a large proportion of female workers tend to have lower wages than those in which the preponderant proportion of workers are males.<sup>16</sup>

This is the ILO description of this unskilled work:

. . .the machines are delicate and complex; they work at a high speed and require constant watching. . .the thread is easily broken and irregularities in the working of the machines are a frequent occurrence. These irregularities can only be repaired by hand.

Turgeon amplifies the ILO description by noting that while these jobs do not require great muscular effort (hence the large numbers of women and young persons in factories), they do require 'a constant effort of attention and considerable nervous strain, as well as requiring great dexterity.'<sup>17</sup> What are we to make of this association of muscular strength with skill and of deftness, speed and attention with unskill?

Women's historians dealing with female responses to paid and unpaid work, historians of childhood analysing patterns in schooling and initiation into the labour process, students of men's work and men's participation in labour organisations, have reified the skill-unskill boundary in a way which is analagous to our treatment of the division between public and private. Here the naturalness of the categories inheres not so much in their 'system-requiredness' as in their 'appropriateness' and their reflection of an understanding of 'capacity.' Skill, too, is a

socially constructed category, which as it is a claim to larger earnings and high standing requires for its maintenance political defense. Let us look at two examples, one from quite early in the women's history literature, one comparatively recent, of the ways in which women's location in the world of work has been treated. In the widely read 1975 *Women at Work, Ontario, 1850-1930* women's place in low paid jobs and low prestige professions is said to stem 'from their position as a reserve labour pool,' to be a 'response to the needs of capital' and to persist because 'the pervasive influence of the domestic role prevented women from identifying themselves as working women.'<sup>18</sup> We have two elements here, a notion about the development of capitalism and of, as Wayne Roberts pointed out in a critique written soon after the book was published, 'feminine psychology.'<sup>19</sup> In the development of capital discussion we again have a description of a process insufficient as an explanation of the results, first, because in several of the varieties of women's work studied, domestic service and prostitution, and in a certain sense both teaching and nursing as well, the subordination of women predates capitalism; second because the Marxist analysis of capitalism used in the study provides us with a theory of the different places required by capitalist production. "It explains why a hierarchy of labour is necessary within the waged labour force, but tells us nothing about why women end up at the bottom of this hierarchy."<sup>20</sup> To explain the gender specificity of location within the hierarchy we need something more, a theory about the construction and maintenance of gender hierarchy, a systematic explanation of why women's particular position in the family was reproduced within waged labour, and of why women's subordinate position outside the workplace came to label the work they did in it, so that unskilled work came to be, as it did in the mind of Judge Turgeon, 'the work women do.'

Resort to feminine psychology or domestic ideal does not help us here for these, like skilled/

unskilled, are end products of the social process which needs to be explained. We can throw the question back to the level of training and argue that girls were offering to the market proficiencies they learned at home, that many girls learned these proficiencies at home and therefore these proficiencies were not scarce. We can argue as Jane Gaskell has lately done that commercial courses in the high schools offered wide accessibility to a certain sort of clerical proficiency with the same market effect.<sup>21</sup> But then we have to ask, as Gaskell does, why boys' kin-inculcated proficiencies with wood were valued differently from girls' family-learned adeptness with cloth, why muscular strength was valued differently from deftness, concentration and speed, why apprenticeship in a wide range of well-paid male-defined tasks was successfully maintained outside the public school system under the scrutiny of tradesmen while this range of female-defined tasks was not. Graham Lowe's carefully researched autumn 1982 study of class, job and gender in the Canadian office retains this same deficiency in explanation. Lowe is able to describe precisely clerical job segmentation in the Bank of Nova Scotia and the Mutual Life Insurance Company which featured men in positions at the top of the hierarchy and women in positions at the bottom. But in the end we are left at the beginning, with the recognition, to quote from two of Lowe's concluding sentences, that the reality 'of gender-based inequality is a contentious issue in class theory. Any major advances in our understanding of the class-gender relationship require a creative interplay between theory and data.'<sup>22</sup>

If we accept that premise and posit it as a starting point rather than as a conclusion, what do we do? First, we must be increasingly attentive to the fact that language is culturally constructed, that classifications take on resonances of the historical settings in which they are used and the social phenomena they are summoned to describe, so that they can embody rather than illuminate the past we are attempting to explain.

Second, we must stop shying away from the word 'patriarchy' in the way that we once did from 'capitalism' and begin to try to understand how gender divisions and sexual hierarchies have been formed and transformed, seeking to account for rather than merely redescribe these particular orderings. Third, we need to allow as a possibility that gender/sex hierarchies and class hierarchies function simultaneously, each according to its own logic, often in conflict, so that the exercise of power is acknowledged as a possibility in the private sphere and the nature of political judgement is understood to be informed by gender. In writing the history of the family this means being more attentive to the ways in which the family forms gender identifications but also understanding that at any moment within families the family is experienced by members of different generations in very different ways. We will not, of course, cease writing about the public and the private, or about their respective spaces, behaviours and moralities — but it is encouraging to look forward to a history which sees public and private as different yet the same — as the kneading of bread dough and the baking of loaves — separate stages, but responses to the same yeast, parts of the same process.

## NOTES

1. Lisa Peattie and Martin Rein, *Women's Claims: a study on political economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 2-3.
2. Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (London: Virago, 1983); Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981); Sally Alexander, 'Women, class and sexual difference', *History Workshop* No. 17 Spring 1984.
3. Joan Kelly, 'The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory' in Judith Newton, Mary P. Ryan and Judith R. Walkowitz, eds., *Sex, and Class in Women's History* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 264.
4. Janet Siltanen and Michelle Stanworth, 'The politics of private woman and public man,' in Siltanen and Stanworth, *Woman and the public sphere* (London: Hutchinson, 1984), p. 195.
5. Deborah Gorham, Flora Macdonald Denison' in Linda Kealey, ed., *A Not Unreasonable Claim* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1979); Tom Socknat, 'Canada's Liberal Pacifists and the Great War' *Journal of Canadian Studies* vol. 18 (Winter 1983-84), 30-44; Linda Kealey, 'Canadian Socialism and the Woman Question, 1900-1914,' *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 13 (Spring 1984), 77-100; Joan Sangster, 'Finnish Women in Ontario, 1980-1930, *Polyphony* 3(1981), 46-54; see also Ramsay Cook, 'Francis Marion Benyon and the Crisis of Christian Reformism,' in Carl Berger and Ramsay Cook, eds. *The West and the Nation* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976) and Michelle Lacombe, 'Theosophy and the Canadian Idealist Tradition' *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol 17 (Summer 1983), 100-18.
6. Siltanen and Stanworth, 196.
7. Angus McLaren, 'Birth Control and Abortion in Canada, 1870-1920,' *Canadian Historical Review*, 1978, 319-40; and 'What has this to do with women: birth control and the Canadian left, 1900-1939,' *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 1981, 435-454; Joy Parr, *Labouring Children* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1980); Claudette Lacelle, 'Les domestiques dans les villes canadiennes au XIXe siècle,' *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 1982, 181-207.
8. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); and 'Mothering, male dominance and capitalism' in Zillah Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975); and 'Family structure and feminine personality' in Michelle Roasaldo and Louise Lamphere, *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford University Press, 1974).
9. Michael Cross and Robert L. Fraser, "The waste that lies before me": the public and private worlds of Robert Baldwin *Historical Papers/Communications Historique*, 1983.
10. The clearest example being C.P. Stacey, *A Very Double Life Toronto: Macmillan 1976* and the response by Reginald Whitaker, 'Mackenzie King in the Dominion of the Dead' *Canadian Forum* 55 (Feb 1976) 6-11.
11. Jennifer Stoddart and Veronica Strong-Boag, 'And things were going wrong at home,' *Atlantis* 1 (1975) 38-44; Barbara Roberts, "'They drove him to drink.' . Donald Creighton's Macdonald and his wives" *Canadian Historical Magazine*, 3(2) (1975) 50-64.
12. Kelly, 'Doubled Vision'; Gayle Rubin 'The traffic in woman; notes on the political economy of sex,' in Rayna Reiter, *Toward an anthropology of women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157-210; see also Margaret Stacey, 'The division of labour revisited or overcoming the two Adams' in P. Abrams et al, *Development and Diversity* (London: George Allen and Unwin 1981).
13. Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), and her 'Children of the early fur trades,' Joy Parr ed., *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982.
14. Chodorow, see note 8; and Rosalind Petchesky, 'Dissolving the hyphen' in Eisenstein, *Capitalist Patriarchy* 373-87.
15. Report of the Royal Commission into the Textile Industry, 1938, p. 155-6.
16. R.C. on Textiles, 157.
17. R.C. on Textiles, 150-51.
18. *Women and work in Ontario* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1975), p.5.
19. Wayne Roberts, *Honest Womanhood* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1976).
20. Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, 'Sex and Skill,' *Feminist Review* No. 6, 1980; Heidi Hartmann, 'The unhappy marriage of marxism and feminism' *Capital and Class*, No. 8, 1979.
21. Jane Gaskell, 'Conceptions of skill and the work of women: some historical and political issues,' *Atlantis*, vol. 8, spring 1983 11-25.
22. Graham Lowe, 'Class, Job and Gender in the Canadian Office *Labour/Le Travailleur* (Autumn 1982), p. 37.