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Teaching Gender in the World History Classroom

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Author's note: This column explores teaching gender in a world history course. I was inspired to reflect on how to teach about gender after an email correspondence with Robert B. Bain of the School of Education at the University of Michigan on the gender lessons I presented at the 2002 National Council for the Social Studies annual conference in Phoenix, Arizona. Bob's questions prompted me to expand a unit plan into a more descriptive and analytical picture of teaching.

Rationale

Gender is a required topic in Advanced Placement World History and is included in many college-level world history textbooks, but how many world history teachers have had formal training in gender studies? I hope this article will inspire more world history teachers to include gender as a regular feature of analysis in the world history course.

In the past, many world history teachers approached the analysis of gender structures with a focus mainly on 'what did the women do?' Or, perhaps, the teacher occasionally pointed out how interactions between cultures changed what Peter Stearns identifies as the "established ideas about men and women, and their roles." The approach suggested here is to help students see the connections among gender roles, social structures, and political structures during several of the time periods in a world history course. Then, the teacher can guide students toward looking at continuities and changes in the roles for men and women over two or more of the time periods.

The new AP World History Course Curriculum motivated me to rethink how I was teaching about gender. Previously, I taught about women as an addition to the

"regular" topics and questions. I was dissatisfied with the "special highlights" approach, because some students, mostly male, would bemoan any special women history topics that "didn't have anything to do with them." I also wanted my female and male students to remember that men and women, girls and boys, made up the populations of the global past just as both genders do today.

I began to question historians I know, such as Robyn Muncy at the University of Maryland, College Park, and Judith Tucker at Georgetown University, about new approaches to writing about gender in history. Muncy's study of gender in American history and Tucker's work on analyzing women's historical roles in the Muslim world helped tremendously. I found the information in Tucker's work important for new "facts" I now include in teaching about the Ottoman Empire, but I don't always have the same kind of information about the relative amount of economic power and legal rights in all of the political systems we study. Perhaps, as I have time to learn more about the relative economic and legal position of women in other places, I will be able to use more of her work on gender. Peter Stearns' book, *Gender in World History*, was written partially with the AP World History course in mind, so it was invaluable in broadening my view of men and women's roles in different societies over time. However, most of its focus is on Europe and East Asia, and I was looking for more of an integrated global approach. Muncy's work was the most helpful in its explanations of how American historians use the terms "masculine" and "feminine" to analyze American political, social, and economic systems. I wouldn't have time in my world history course to examine all societies' definitions of masculinity and femininity, but Muncy's ideas made me think more about why I thought gender was an important category for analysis.

Over the past ten years, I have often found that my world history students feel bewildered by all of the different types of political, social, and economic systems in the past. Mostly, my students found the past a "foreign country." Ross Dunn encourages world history teachers to help students overcome the tendency "to perceive historical phenomena as exotic and remote." He suggests that we characterize people in the past as "historical actors in a situation as human beings, not characters playing appointed roles in a culture drama." By using gender as a regular category of analysis, I predicted that my students could relate to the essential human condition of male and female, and social ideas of masculine and feminine. From the work of John D. French and Daniel James on Latin American women in the early twentieth century, I learned that gender can be "understood as a relationship rather than a thing, it is viewed as a verb rather than a noun." I realized that I should allow students to discover on their own how past societies defined masculine and feminine by seeing the relative value given to males and females. From the literature, I concluded that I needed to integrate gender as another category like the traditional ones of "political, social, economic" in teaching world history.

Additional discussions with Bob Bain and my teaching colleagues prompted me to go back to thinking about the students and to reflect on what interests teenagers in learning about people in the past. It seems trite to say that teenagers spend much of their waking time interpreting their world through the lens of "how does it benefit or hurt me, and what kind of choices do I have?" However, I have found that some of my most successful lessons encouraged students to take on some of the human agency or choices that people in the past had.

Furthermore, I had noticed many students' difficulties with seeing the connection between local and global patterns, but had no reliable answer to the problem. Integrating gender as a regular category of analysis seemed a possible solution. Students could develop the habit of considering how all societies had definitions of gender roles while at the same time, students could learn about specific, local patterns of gender roles. For example, students could learn to recognize global patterns of patriarchy while analyzing the shifts in power both men and women had at different levels of a particular society over specific periods of time. Students in a world history course could then be able to shift more easily from global to local patterns, and local to global patterns, using gender for analyzing change and continuity in societies over time.

Suggested Approach to Teaching Gender

'Gender' is a term that may need to be defined for students. It may be helpful to use the definitions Michel and Muncy give for 'gender' as a term to represent the "meanings attached to sexual differences between men and women." World history teachers can show students that gender structures are related to the definitions of masculinity and femininity within societies. I recommend that when teachers explain the political systems of empires, kingdoms, colonies, or revolutionary governments, many different personalities and types of people be included in the explanation so that the gender roles of real people can be seen. For example, the Incan Empire's political structure included the male lords of conquered territories serving as local officials and the daughters of the conquered rulers serving in the Inca's royal household or religious centers. Their mit'a labor system drew upon most levels of the non-royal population but divided the tasks by gender. By highlighting what men and women were expected to do within a specific political system in a particular time period, students can then discuss the definitions for masculinity and femininity within and across societies.

One approach to using gender as a category of analysis would be to require students to imagine themselves as either the son or daughter of a representative type or important person from the time period or event. I decided to use the 21st century teenage consumerist approach to life and ask my students to imagine they had the choice to be someone in the past. I also wanted to reinforce the connection between gender systems and the social systems that I introduced as part of our classroom

analysis of any empire, society, or group. The approach I designed was to show students primary source examples of both men and women in each political system we study.

Then, I decided to evaluate students' understanding of the role of gender in each political system we study through the use of Socratic Seminars. In the seminar setting, I could hear what every student understood about the global and local patterns of political, social, and gender structures we had discussed in class. Moreover, I also wanted to encourage students to hear each other's ideas. (Many students shared with me how much they like the Seminars for giving them the chance to hear students who don't normally participate in lecture-discussions). I score students' participation in the Seminars, so I've learned to give everyone a way to make one comment and ask one question by offering students something somewhat controversial to which they can react. I try to find dramatic primary sources they haven't seen yet and discussion questions that interest them. For the Socratic Seminars on gender, I gave my students lists of the social and political hierarchies in paired political systems for each of the different time periods of the AP World History course and asked them to decide who they might prefer to be: the males in one society or the females in another? We do a Seminar for each of the time periods: Foundations (Before 600 C.E.), 600-1450, 1450-1750, 1750-1914, and 1914 to the present. By the third seminar, students are quick to participate by asking questions of the sources and challenging each others' choices of gender and class status. They can also easily make connections back to previous seminars as ways to comment on the choices of their peers. I plan two days of Socratic Seminars, with the first day restricted to one gender in one society and the next day restricted to discussion about the other gender in a different society that existed about the same time. For example, on the first day for the 600 - 1450 time period, the students had to choose whether to be the son of various social and political groups in the Aztec empire. (The girls were incensed that they couldn't be females.) And, on the second day, the students had to choose to be the daughter of various social and political groups in the Incan empire. (The boys tried to show equal displeasure by the restriction to the females in Incan society, though they didn't seem as bothered.)

One problem that arose is that many of my students imagined that the sons or daughters of merchants had the greatest chance at personal freedom of movement. Because of the quick pace of the course, it was hard to have time to correct that impression or to challenge students projecting their value of freedom on people in the past. Perhaps that's a problem that my world history-teaching colleagues can help solve.

In the seminars, students instinctively saw that not all individuals were treated solely on the basis of their gender; people in the past were also affected by their standing in the social hierarchy. Some students also quickly concluded that, despite the pervasiveness of patriarchy in many parts of the world, it was not preferable to be male in all societies. Some male elites, they noticed, were susceptible to being assassinated or being asked to serve as military commanders, and some "restricted" elite females had

privileges that other women in the society might not. They also noticed from the sixteenth-century *Codex Mendoza* that the community standards for male and female punishments were different. I found it interesting that in every one of my five classes, a male student, always one from an East Asian, Latin American, or West African heritage, said, "Well, the punishments for boys was harsher to train them to endure pain for when they become soldiers." The seminar approach gave students an open forum to imagine themselves in the past. They also reported that they learned more from asking questions about gender roles from the primary sources.

Conclusion

I continue to include gender as a regular category of analysis in my world history course. The high school juniors in my classes seem to be able to analyze changes in gender roles across cultures and time more easily than analyzing changes in political or economic systems. Students readily make connections to economic class and the effect of belief systems on the definitions of masculinity and femininity. I invite world history teachers to comment on this approach to including gender in their world history courses.

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References and Further Reading

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