

Discussion

Volume 33, numéro 2, spring 2004

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad33_2for10

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

(2004). Discussion. *Acadiensis*, 33(2), 95–104.

victories; they're in our textbooks and they are expressed with pride in our teaching of women's history. It should come as no surprise, then, to sense this resistance among students of both sexes to the challenge posed by presenting the concept of gender as an analytical tool and understanding its influence on mentality, as well as its persistence and pervasiveness within power and social structures.

One method I've adopted in response to this resistance is to use women themselves to illustrate other themes or concepts as a basis for teaching history, rather than advertising or labelling my teaching as women's history. A case in point will clarify my meaning. I'm involved in teaching history within a special first-year undergraduate programme, within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, titled "L'Odyssée humaine" or "The Human Odyssey". The basic idea of this program is to provide an integrated curriculum, coordinated among a number of fields within the humanities, social sciences and sciences: history, geography, philosophy, literature, mathematics, political science and sociology, and a core-course in multidisciplinary studies. If you remember my opening comments regarding the history, mentality and traditions of my own institution, you will better grasp our sense of accomplishment in establishing this multidisciplinary program in the first year of undergraduate studies. The programme is geared towards studying common, key concepts within six chosen "moments" in the human odyssey. One of those concepts is la cité, relating to the rights and values of a given community of citizens at a specific moment in time, and one of the key moments in this human odyssey is modernity. I chose to teach these elements of the programme by asking the question as to whether the rise of women's rights throughout the 20th century provided proof that we were indeed living in a "modern" society: in fact, whether women were (or could be) full and acknowledged members of la cité in our modern society.

I found that this restructuring of the teaching of women's history works well, for a number of reasons. It connects to other fields which are struggling with the same concepts and it presents women's history as a tool for a critical understanding of the past, rather than as a cumulative knowledge base of that past. This approach to teaching women's history is also more demanding and requires a great amount of sharing among colleagues of different fields in order to succeed, as the goal of integrating the teaching of the different fields represented within the programme is fundamental to its success.

PHYLLIS E. LeBLANC

* * * * *

The afternoon's formal presentations sparked a surprisingly wide-ranging discussion that covered a number of key themes:

1. Women were concerned about inclusivity: how to identify this as a priority and how to ensure that it remains on the agenda. Recognizing that gender, even as it is socially constructed, shapes the way we think about ourselves and our world, women wanted to see it embedded as a category of analysis whenever and however scholars seek to understand and explain that world.

2. In shifting from a consideration of the history of women's history in Atlantic Canadian universities to a discussion of the current "state of the art", participants noted a number of significant trends: greater inclusivity in women's history courses to encompass the experiences of non-western women; a shift from exclusively women's studies to the more-inclusive gender studies, allowing for the analysis of the social construction of masculinity as well as femininity; and the greater likelihood that women's experience will be routinely included in a wider range of history courses.

3. As university teachers, and especially those among us whose careers span more than a decade, we are very aware of the changing nature of our audience. Today's students have different attitudes and different expectations than did the students in our classrooms when we first embarked upon this project of teaching women's history. Discussants considered the problem of finding the best methods to connect with both the myths and realities today's students bring to the table.

The organizers of the symposium would like to thank Stephen Dutcher for undertaking the daunting task of taping, transcribing and editing the discussion.

GAIL CAMPBELL

Discussion

BEVERLY LEMIRE, UNB: I want to congratulate our panelists on raising some very pertinent and thought-provoking issues. And with reference to Phyllis's presentation, her question towards the end really got me thinking and I guess I would pose my question to the whole committee or the whole assembly, if you care to think about it, which is: to what degree do institutions appear to recognize the essential nature and essential contribution of women's and gender studies? I think about this with the realization – I believe I'm correct in saying this – that the World Bank now requires, as an essential dimension of all their projects, that gender be centrally integrated into project structures. So if, in fact, that is the case with the World Bank, which, let's face it, is not the most progressive institution in the world (laughter), how can it be that academic institutions, perhaps, don't feel similarly inclined? So I just throw that out there for you to kick around . . .

KATHLEEN BURKE, STU: If I could just ask you about that, my question would be, why has the World Bank made gender essential for their projects? There must be a reason for that (laughter). If we knew what the reason was, maybe we could apply it to universities.

MARGARET CONRAD, UNB: The reason is that their structures aren't gender balanced. That's what's really interesting. Why aren't their boards full of female bankers? We know the answer (laughter).

SHIRLEY TILLOTSON, DAL: Research shows that development with women engaged in the economic life of their community – it works.

BEVERLY LEMIRE, UNB: So that's why they do it. And I guess then the question is why would educational institutions be any different?

KRISTA KESSELRING, DAL: Universities now do up lists of research priorities to present to funding agencies, and many are posted on-line. I've read through some of them, but don't remember seeing many that had women's studies as a priority. Do any of the universities that you represent list women's studies or gender studies as one of their main research priorities?

MARGARET CONRAD, UNB: Or even inclusivity? The attitude is that we may have to have more women but we don't have to have more topics related to women's studies. So they're really just looking for warm female bodies (laughter). They're not looking for the topic to be addressed.

BEVERLY LEMIRE, UNB: But if the SSHRC chairs are preoccupied, as we've seen they are, with the issues of industrial development, it seems to me that there is much that they need to learn in thinking about issues of social and economic development that they haven't addressed. And maybe that's also part of the mandate of people who are engaged in study to make that case.

MARGARET CONRAD, UNB: But we're more likely to be talking to each other instead of being integrated into those high-powered, policy-making bodies. Look at those meetings hosted by organizations such as ACOA. When the news camera's panning over the room, I always do a gender count. It's interesting to see who's invited, who's considered to be on the cutting edge of policy development. It's not us, but it should be us, because we have some very significant things to say about policy issues.

SHIRLEY TILLOTSON, DAL: As I said in my presentation, the spectre that haunts me is labour history. Our department is full to the brim with people who have expertise in labour studies, but we no longer offer the labour history classes because we just couldn't get students into the classroom. So we know that an important topic, of enormous intrinsic interest, can cease to seem relevant to undergraduates. It has happened in living memory, that a topic that was politically important, that was central to our history and that continues to generate fine scholarly research couldn't be made appealing to 18- to 22-year-olds, even by skilled and qualified teachers. And I'm sometimes told, and I don't know whether this is true, that there was a time in universities when professors taught their specialties regardless of whether many students showed up for the classes (laughter). We're told now that designing curriculum that way is not an option, that we need to take student demand more carefully into account. That said, we get big enrollments in the first-year women's studies class – and some courses that discuss gender politics are still drawing a good crowd. . . .

MARGARET CONRAD, UNB: One thing that we should say, though, is that a number of young women come to us and say they're not feminists. They are afraid to say they're feminists even if they are thinking they might be for fear that they will be

labelled in some negative way by their peers. I don't know if the people in this room have had that experience, and whether that attitude is passing away, but the 1990s were really hard on young women in undergraduate universities such as Acadia where I taught. That period was very different from the 1970s when many women just didn't care what you thought of them. They were going to take that women's studies course. When I first started teaching, women's liberation was in the media and everybody wanted to be a bad girl and take the course (laughter). I have nostalgia for that time (laughter), so if there are any bad girls out there who want to take women's history courses, all power to you. Now there are a lot of other courses coming along. The Acadia situation is slightly different in that history was one of the first disciplines to take up women's studies. But then there were other women's studies courses – courses in sociology and English – everybody introduced a women's course and there were more courses to choose from. When I listen to Shirley, I hear a different discourse. She's talking "gender" and a lot of people say, "Well, maybe we should move from women to gender". We didn't talk that way in the 1970s because it was such a political moment for women. I find students look at the word gender and, at Acadia at least, it didn't resonate as something they wanted to do. So people are going back to femininities and masculinities. I do think masculinity has a wonderful literature and we need that. So, inevitably we should change. What I was thinking in looking at Acadia's roster is that nothing's changed very much for women's studies in recent years.

LINDA KEALEY, UNB: One of the problems that I see is that it's often tied to the individual. If the individuals are no longer there, then there is a danger that things will be dropped. It's very nice for my colleagues to send out a message, but they're not hiring to replace in women's history. That's not the priority that they have and I think, personally, I have never been pressured as Shirley has been, that directly, to increase my numbers or do anything like that at Memorial. Lord knows that when I walked into the classroom here last fall I had 62 students in one women's history course and about 40 in the second semester, so I thought the numbers were still very large and flourishing. But I never felt the personal pressure to do something like "Sex and Sewage" (laughter). I am doing a sexuality course next winter; however, that's because I'm interested in developing it myself. I think the institutional cultures differ quite a lot among the universities. I would be loath to say that everything is negative.

MARGARET CONRAD, UNB: But it wasn't long ago that the heads of history departments met at the Canadian Historical Association, and they all stroked their beards and said, "Oh, I think the time is over for hiring specialists in women's history. We may still have to hire women, but the field of women's history is filled and it is time to get on to other things". This would have been in the early '90s, when I was chair of the department. So in that sense, I think one of the reasons that we are not going to be replaced is because women's history is on a continuum with environmental history and a whole lot of other specialized areas that are important. Women may or may not be integrated equally in these new subject areas.

SHEILA ANDREW, STU: One of the things that bothers me about numbers – I have no difficulty in having them swinging off the rafters – but it's mostly women. It is

very difficult to create an environment in which the majority of young men are comfortable speaking. The numbers of young men have not increased – there are still about 10 per cent of the class who are male, but it is difficult for them to express themselves in a majority female situation. I find this a real problem.

PHYLLIS LeBLANC, UdeM: You're right – I kind of wonder why there is a problem. I was rereading Sheva Medjack's article in *Teaching Maritime Studies* and thinking about what was going on – what was said – in 1986, and I was struck by the fact that students don't connect. Your perspective is not the student's perspective. You really have to understand that. I had one course in women's history where the students kept talking, but they'd bring it to their individual, day-to-day experiences and it's scary. It was really scary for me to hear some of the stuff they were coming out with. It just sounded so very traditional. There are no "bad girls" anymore. I was thinking about this since I perceive it as a problem. The interest in women's history and in gender history, to a certain extent, comes from the fact that some students are interested in the problems. Others don't perceive there are problems. When you read the text books, it's all about progress: women won the vote, women did this, in the First World War they acted in this capacity and in the Second World War they did this. I help write the exam at the provincial level and this is what's going on. This is their mindset – all of this is *dépassé*. They have achieved equality in their minds. And I think that's a real problem – when you try to teach women's history and gender history, you're really up against a brick wall.

GAY FANJOY, UNB M.A. student: Do you think it would help if every person taking a course in women's history or in gender history actually had to try to find women in history? In my own research – I'm working with censuses – they don't exist. So you can't say "It's all better now" and so there are no more raging feminist arguments – there are – I mean we still don't exist past our children.

PHYLLIS LeBLANC, UdeM: I'm not saying that there are not ways, and that's why I gave you ideas about what I did in the first year. There are ways, there are strategies – some are better than others, some are simpler than others – and sometimes the simplest is the best. What I deplore is the mindset, and I was wondering where it is coming from. And I think, to a certain extent, it comes from an interpretation of the history that we're presenting to them, which is what we say is positivist. We're still stuck in the notion that we won, we achieved the status of citizens: we're stuck with our own victories to a certain extent.

SHARON MacDONALD, UNB Ph.D. candidate: I think a lot of women don't really become feminists until they've had a certain kind of life experience in which they run up against the real challenges. When you're 20 years old, you have teachers who are women: we didn't. What I went through when I first started at Dalhousie in the '60s, you know, I had to be away from there to realize that the problem I had with the institution and the learning environment was that it didn't speak to me as a human being. I wasn't there. But I think students now get to see only a little bit of that, so, as you say, they don't think they have a problem. Maybe once they're 30 or 35 and they're now a single parent, trying to eke out a living and don't have support for their children, it changes their thinking. And I don't know how you get past that, because

when you're 20, you think you know the world. You're confident that you're not going to face the problems. Somebody else brought that up in conversation earlier when we were talking about women and poverty. You know, if you're a university student you're very lucky. Most university students are going to get an education, so they won't be poor. So I don't know how it is that we connect with a young person. There have got to be some links – maybe they just aren't being taught how to be empathetic. Maybe a lot of students are self-centered at this stage, but they have to be able to connect globally in a way, with a population that they can see is much less fortunate than themselves, rather than feeling terribly deprived because they don't have a car, or whatever. We're living in a very privileged society, by and large, but there are a lot of people who don't have privilege. But the students don't see them.

MARGARET CONRAD, UNB: I think these issues are very different now. In the late 1960s at the University of Toronto, I was asked to leave a class because I was the only woman in it. That wouldn't happen now – I hope. And so we were tough-minded because there were so many obstacles; and like you, I didn't have female professors. Those kinds of injustices are very easy to spot. It's a different world now, and it is better, but there are still some obstacles – differentials in salaries and job opportunities – but they're going to be addressed in a different way than we did which was by openly and angrily confronting all of these fairly obvious injustices.

SHARON MacDONALD, UNB Ph.D. candidate: Are we talking about some of the things that are happening in universities now, in the classrooms? Do those things come up in the classroom so that students recognize . . .

MARGARET CONRAD, UNB: It might not come up at all. And that's the thing . . .

SHIRLEY TILLOTSON, DAL: The value and interest in women's and gender history doesn't have to rely in any way on the notion of women as suffering objects of oppression. Joan Scott talks about the importance of using gender as a category of historical analysis, meaning that we can use gender to see how the co-operative movement or racial integration or any number of topics can be understood in fresh ways by means of gender analysis. And if students learn about something like the English Civil War in a whole new way as a result of that sort of gender analysis, then I think that they are getting the benefit of women's history. I had a colleague who did not describe himself as an historian of women but, nevertheless, did a bang-up job of teaching with a gender analysis and, in his classes, students got the benefit of women's history. There was a criticism of women's history in the 1970s that it was *merely* a political project. I'd hate to see that come true – I think it was and is both an intellectual project and a political one, and that it will survive for that reason.

LINDA EYRE, UNB: I would like to thank the panelists for a very interesting presentation. I'd like anyone to speak to how you see the social construction of knowledge of women's history – how you see the gaps in women's history and how this might help move the study of women's history into the present.

PHYLLIS LeBLANC, UdeM: I'll start. We're a very small department, and when I

arrived we were relatively static – we were covering way too much and nothing very well. We've changed that – now we do very little, but we hope we do it better. So we're a very narrowly focused department. We do Europe, from the Middle Ages (with some on antiquity and the Greeks and the Romans) to contemporary Europe and then we do North America, and that's true for all three campuses. I think we're better able to provide a basis for women's history and then enlarge on it, but it's all ad hoc. If I want to do women's history – I wasn't trained in women's or gender history – I can go right ahead. But if I'm not there, it's not there. The women whom we cover are the women within our own specialties and interests. I'm a Canadianist, so I would do women in the Canadian context, and I also do some Louisiana stuff – it's a bit exotic (laughter). But this is what I do – I wouldn't extend my teaching of women's history into other areas.

LINDA KEALEY, UNB: But I think we've been pushed to include more of the non-European and non-North American movements that have helped to clarify some of these issues. It is a social and intellectual project, but let's be realistic. A lot of it has been pushed by our interest in politics and the inclusion of race, which has been the thing that has motivated quite a lot of recent literature as well as other groups and their agendas. I think this has resulted in expanding the kinds of things we include in our courses – to give a voice to others and to deal with who's covering what, and why, and who speaks for whom. So I think we've been pushed to widen what we do, even if we're not an expert, and I think that's good.

GILLIAN THOMPSON, UNB: And we are always pushing ourselves to widen what we do. I suppose we expand our teaching in two ways: to include the general experience of women in a variety of cultures, and notably those non-Western cultures that are much in the news, and to include other cultures' and our own culture's experience of feminism or feminisms.

MARGARET CONRAD, UNB: Feminism is really taking hold in different ways around the world. If you're looking at feminism and the knowledge that women have another perspective on matters, then you're going to go to India and Japan and various places where it has spread from Europe and North America to some extent (although feminism has its own history in those countries), but it's taken up in different ways, and that's fascinating – those kinds of comparative studies are exciting. When I started university, we were doing comparative revolutions; well, now you can do comparative feminisms, and they're very interesting.

SHEILA ANDREW, STU: I think that what worries me is something that I'd hoped we would address: are the other courses covering this, or are they saying "Sheila can do this"? And this is what I wanted to hear from others, including students: have we, in fact, been ghettoized, or has it spread to other courses where it is being taught by people who haven't been hired as specialists in the women's area? Does anyone know what's going on in the classrooms of the nation?

LEIGH WHALEY, ACADIA: I think I can speak to what goes on at Acadia. We don't do that much women's history in its own right, and we don't have very many

women either. Last year I was the only tenured woman in a department of 13 people. But in the context of other courses, I would say yes, women's history is being taught, especially amongst the newer and younger male members of my department. But there is definitely a gender gap in the history department at Acadia, and much depends on what one of you was saying earlier, the individual person in the department. On the positive side, there are a great many women's voices within the courses being given, but probably the more negative thing is that we don't have many courses on the history of women. And we have a problem at Acadia in proposing new courses on anything. I had to fight very hard to get a third-year half course on the history of ideas about women – it's global, not just European. I had to really defend myself in front of the Faculty of Arts last year to get that through.

VANESSA CHILDS-ROLLS, UCCB: I can speak for probably the youngest Maritime university – the University College of Cape Breton – where I teach perhaps the only women's history course at the entire institution.

CAROL FERGUSON, UNB: I'll speak from the perspective of someone who taught the Canadian women's history course many, many years ago at UNBF. I tried to get it at UNBSJ, but it was not, at that point, well received. I had the support of a very able woman scholar, Ann Condon, at that time in trying to secure support for a women's history course, when I moved from Fredericton to Saint John, but it didn't get on the curriculum in the department. Things have changed there now. But I've taught women's studies here at UNBF, the "Introduction to Women's Studies" core course for a number of years, and, from my perspective teaching that course, I think that it's an enormously exciting time intellectually. I think that's the neat thing about being a teacher – when students come into your classroom you engage them at where you hope to find their level of reality, because no one's levels of reality are ever the same, and try to move them into those ideas and research. And I just don't see how you could possibly be a current scholar in any significant discipline today without engaging in feminist methodology. The foundations of what I was taught early on in my academic training – some of those hard-core concepts – no longer apply in history or in any other discipline, and it has been a feminist methodology that has challenged that – whether it has been within the tradition of women's studies or in other disciplines. So it alarms me if a student is not getting that type of intellectual challenge. They're not being well served if they're not reading the current literature, and it comes to knowledge as contested terrain. I think one has to acknowledge that it is contested terrain and that you have to pick your best spot in it and do the best that you can. Until my Ph.D. training, I was never formally trained in any women's history or women's studies or women's theory – it was, up until then, all by popular reading. Students today don't have that experience. Now, I can refer to the things I encountered in popular culture as footnotes – these are now footnoted ideas or accepted intellectual ideas – and you can accept them or not accept them, but you have to engage them because they are some of the most significant ideas that have come out of the last century in all of the disciplines. And I think students are accepting those things. The thing which I also see in the women's studies class, which is both a challenge and a reward, is that the young female student that I see in the class today has a sense of entitlement which I did not see in students of my generation or even in students 10 or

Teaching Women's History 103

15 years ago. And that's directly the legacy of not only the ideas of a feminist politics, but also the activism of a feminist politics. And so my world is not familiar to them. And that isn't a bad thing in many ways.

LISA CHILTON, UPEI: I was just going to comment on the situation at UPEI. On the one hand, we have one women's history course, and I'm not even sure if it's taught every year. But six of the ten full-time instructors in the department try to integrate it into their courses, and half of these instructors are men. So it's sort of a weird situation.

HEIDI COOMBS, UNB Ph.D. candidate: I have a sad story to tell about graduate school – not UNB. I took an intellectual history course, and in the course outline there were 12 readings, and it was all dead white guys stretching back to the Middle Ages. The professor said that the list was not exclusive, and if there was anything that we would like to see added, then to come and talk to him and he would try to fit it in. So I went to his office, and said to him that it was all male writers and that it might be nice to look at a female writer to see what she had to say in comparison to men – if there was a different perspective. “Well,” said the professor, “the course outline is already done, and . . .” (laughter). At least I tried. That was in September, and the following April, after the course was over, one of my male friends said to me, “Heidi, you know, I don't know if I told you this before, but I went to see our prof just after you met with him, and he said to me in reference to his meeting with you, ‘What is it about women that they always have to be reading all women writers?’” (laughter) I found this out in April, and if I had known about this in September, I would have dropped the course.

SHIRLEY TILLOTSON, DAL: So is this a young dinosaur? (laughter) I'm more worried about the young dinosaurs . . .

HEIDI COOMBS, UNB Ph.D. candidate: No, it was an old dinosaur (laughter). I think he is still teaching, though, because it was only in 1998: it was a big learning experience for me.

MARGARET CONRAD, UNB: I'd like to add a footnote to that. I was down in the cafeteria line-up a couple of weeks ago, and I overheard a conversation among three students. A young man said: “All you have to do to get an A in this class is say nasty things about women”, and he was talking to two women. “The only thing”, he said, “is that the rest of the class will hate you.” I wanted to ask “Who is this professor?” (laughter) But I didn't want to let them know that I had overheard them. So there are still dinosaurs like that around. This was a student's perspective on how to get an A, and it may have been exaggerated, but it was a very interesting conversation.

VANESSA CHILDS-ROLLS, UCCB: So how many women are there who go to graduate school and have these negative experiences and end up with poor grades from these male, anti-feminist professors? Is it something that we should be dealing with?

PHYLLIS LeBLANC, UdeM: I had a great time in grad school (laughter) – the best years of my life. I had a great advisor and a wonderful institution. I went to Ottawa U., but my advisor was from Carleton – Del Muise – but I wasn't doing my thesis focusing exclusively on women although it included women. This thing about young and old dinosaurs is a bit upsetting to me, because at my institution I can't focus on age or sex for defining positions regarding women – at my institution it doesn't fit – and I think it's because women's history is so recent at the institution. The first person to teach an advanced women's history course was not a woman, and it was just a given – someone who was interested in it and who just wanted to teach it within his chosen fields could do so.

MARGARET CONRAD, UNB: Graduate school can be a bad experience in a number of ways. In retrospect, you run up against the problems that you face in the real world, and it's how you deal with them that counts. Like Heidi, I did not get out of the class at the University of Toronto but I probably should have. I didn't realize at the time how detrimental that kind of an attitude could be.

SHIRLEY TILLOTSON, DAL: One of the positive changes that I've noticed over the past ten years is that in my first few years of teaching, some of my colleagues would send me students who were doing women's studies topics because they didn't feel they knew enough about the literature. Now I think they're ashamed to do that. And many of them know enough about the topic now that they don't have to do that.