Emerging from feminist inquiries in the 1960s and 1970s, women’s history has become one of the most prolific and creative fields in U.S. history. Before the mid-1980s, scholars treated it as a branch of social history, whose goal was to illuminate the experiences of ordinary women and the sources of their oppression as women. Early historians in the field emphasized the rise and fall of Victorian domesticity, with its attention to women’s “separate sphere” in the home. Scholars sought particularly to understand women’s organizing efforts on their own behalf—notably, through the suffrage movement—and their entry into public life. Those stories pointed, rather heroically, toward the feminist movement of the 1960s, from which the field itself had emerged.

In the past quarter century, most of the preceding assumptions have been seriously challenged or discarded. This transformation began with the appearance of two key articles. Joan Scott’s “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” published in 1986, helped introduce historians of women to what is widely known as the “cultural turn.” Scott showed how historians could draw on insights from anthropology, postcolonial studies, and other emerging fields to illuminate the ways in which gender categories shaped knowledge, identities, and power relations. In an essay published two years later, Linda Kerber raised questions about the metaphor of separate spheres. Among its many limitations, she suggested, was that it “helped historians avoid thinking about race” by keeping their focus on the alleged sphere of white middle-class women.

At the time Kerber wrote, scholars were already beginning to grasp the multiplicity of women’s experiences. Rural women were receiving new attention, as in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s brilliant reconstruction of a midwife’s life and work on the Maine frontier. Historians such as Jacqueline Jones were publishing groundbreaking work on African-American women. Through scholarship on Native American, Asian American, Latina, and other women of color, also, it became clear that gender and race were not independent categories. Some women of color described race, not gender, as the most powerful defining factor in their experience. They rejected the idea that women’s oppression as women should be their paramount concern.

Both the rise of gender history and the new emphasis on differences among women have reshaped—even fragmented—historians’ understanding of women as historical subjects. Such insights have fueled a tremendous burst of scholarly creativity over the past two decades, accompanied by a (generally) cheerful sense of chaos. Women’s history is no longer solely a branch of social history. It treats, among other things, electoral politics, economics, intellectual life, and popular culture. At the same time, gender history offers a set of lenses through which scholars in all subfields need to peer. Historians of law, technology, and foreign relations—to name just a few—now routinely recognize gender as a category of analysis. Important findings are coming from researchers who do not consider themselves historians of women at all. It is hardly possible, today, to identify any single, central conversation that is taking place among historians of women and gender. To paraphrase Walt Whitman, the field “contradicts itself; it contains multitudes.”

The real triumph of women’s history, then, can be found elsewhere in this volume: almost every author, whether writing on a specific period or a major theme in American history, incorporates findings in women’s and gender history. Nonetheless, women’s and gender history continues to thrive, though in certain ways the field no longer belongs distinctly to itself. One recent bibliography, focusing solely on the history of women, lists more than a thousand books and articles. This chapter faces, then, the daunting task of surveying that field while also noting broader trends in gender history, with at least a nod to the emerging fields of queer history and the history of masculinity. Clearly, what follows will be suggestive rather than comprehensive.

I explore in this chapter four broad areas in which historians have reshaped the field since 1990: scholarship on gender, race, and empire; on women’s economic roles; on sexuality, public space, and consumer culture; and on citizenship, politics, and the state. These have no claim to being the most important areas, much less the only areas, of recent work. Each overlaps with the others and with additional fields, such as the history of gender and religion, barely touched on here. The areas covered here do, however, illustrate some of the most dramatic ways in which earlier assumptions have been overturned.
GENDER, RACE, AND EMPIRE

One of the most important findings of recent decades is that women’s oppression as women cannot be untangled from other forms of oppression, especially on the basis of race. The two have been mutually constituted. Historians of slavery were among the first to powerfully show how race and gender are intertwined categories. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans changed their views of sexual difference from a one-sex model, in which the female body was seen as an inverted form of the male body, to a two-sex model that viewed women as inherently different beings. This dualistic ideology developed alongside the equally new notion that “black” and “white” were fixed and opposite categories, with these definitions of gender and race informing each other.

Kathleen Brown, for example, shows how the colony of Virginia gradually passed laws that marked racial difference through women’s bodies. In 1643 the colony began to levy a tax on “negro women” held as servants or slaves, holding them equivalent to men as field laborers. By 1668, the tax was extended to include African-American wives and daughters. Meanwhile, in 1662, another law classified all children as “bond or free . . . according to the condition of the mother.” Since, under English law, a child ordinarily followed the condition of the father, this law made the sexual exploitation of black women a central feature of slavery. The same law doubled the fine for any “Christian” convicted of fornicating with a “negro man or woman,” showing how religious and racial definitions intertwined. Black women’s enslavement defined their children as slaves for life.

Sharon Block explores racialized legal patterns in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, again demonstrating the interplay of race and gender. Block finds that courts defined consent not so much by evidence of a woman’s wishes (to the extent that they acknowledged that she had a rational will) but by hierarchies of power within and beyond the household, including gender, age, economic status, and particularly race. In 95 percent of prosecuted cases, victims were white women, while the vast majority of men sentenced to death for rape were African American. The resulting “racialization of rape” was reinforced “every time a black man was convicted of rape and a white man was not.” A sexualized set of racial prejudices emerged that profoundly shaped future law and racial violence in the United States.

Historians are still untangling the complicated skeins of race, class, gender, and legal status. In a study of sexual contacts between white women and black men in the nineteenth century, Martha Hodes finds that, remarkably, whites often tolerated such contacts during slavery days but became far more hostile and punitive after Emancipation. Other historians have pursued related questions in the twentieth century. Lisa Lindquist Dorr, for example, shows that responses to alleged sexual crime by African-American men were shaped by gender and class. This was true even in Jim Crow Virginia, where it might be assumed that a black man accused of rape had little or no chance of acquittal. Studying 271 cases of alleged black-on-white rape, Dorr finds wildly varied results: 17 alleged perpetrators were lynched, but in another 35 cases all charges were dismissed, with the perceived character of the white female victim playing a significant role in the outcome. The work of historians such as Block, Hodes, and Dorr, taken together, suggests that more work needs to be done on the intersections of gender and race.

Nowhere has scholarly conversation been richer than in studies of the slave family. Such work was originally stimulated by fierce debates over the 1965 Moynihan Report, which justified government programs for the African-American family by pathologizing it as matriarchal. For a generation, historians refuted that slur by arguing that slave families were “normal”: they fit the white patriarchal model of a stable, nuclear family with a strong husband and father. Historians of women have, in the past twenty years, substantially complicated this thesis. Surveying the domestic arrangements of slaves in Virginia, Brenda Stevenson finds not only “monogamous marriages and co-residential nuclear families” but also, among other arrangements, “matrifocality, polygamy, single parents, abroad spouses, [and] one-, two-, and three-generation households.” As Ann Paton Malone reports, most historians now reject both the “myth of matriarchy” and the claim that slave families were homogeneous. “The real strength of the slave family,” Malone writes, “was its multiplicity of forms, its tolerance for a variety of families and households, its adaptability, and its acceptance of all types of families and households as functional and contributing.” As such work shows, claims about the historical “norm” for American families must henceforth take diversity strongly into account.

Scholars of frontiers and empire building have also shown how race and gender are intertwined. As with slavery, an important component of imperial conquest has been white men’s appropriation of the bodies of women of color. In the imperial imagination, territorial and sexual domination have often been linked. Historians have documented not only figurative desire of native women, but also sexual liaisons that ranged from consensual interracial marriage to brutal rape. In North Carolina, Kirsten Fischer shows that European colonists justified theft of native lands by claiming that Indian women were “drudges” for their men and preferred white men as partners. The same patterns held true in other sites of empire building. Amy Greenberg finds that in the Mexican-American War, Anglo men coveted the “beautiful and available women” of Mexico and Central America as the “greatest of all natural resources.”

White women have also had important racial identities, though that has not always been obvious to historians. Elizabeth Jameson, writing about the American West, observes that “in practice, it has often been as hard to decentize white women as to decent the story of westward expansion.” Frontiers and zones of conquest are particularly useful places to study gender and racial privilege. In a pattern that repeated itself in many places and eras, the arrival of Anglo women transformed interethic and interracial
marriage into a marker of low class status and disrespectability, causing it to become less frequent. Reporting on Arizona mining towns in the late nineteenth century, for example, Linda Gordon notes that Anglo women’s advent “challenged Anglo men’s patriarchal colonial privilege to marry and make ‘white’ their Mexican wives.” It was Anglo women who “fully spliced class status to whiteness.”

As Anglo women redefined relationships of gender, race, and class, their presence increased the vulnerability and dependency of women of color. In the Southwest, Anglo intrusion forced many Mexican-American women into poverty and domestic service, where they labored under the direction of Anglo female employers. Under such circumstances, women of color faced difficult choices. Some worked as negotiators across cultural boundaries; Theda Perdue and Micheline Pesantubbee have uncovered, for instance, the roles of Cherokee and Choctaw women as decision makers and intermediaries. Other women withdrew, insofar as possible, from interactions with the conquerors and worked to sustain and strengthen their own communities.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, white women shaped race relations not only by their presence but also through conscious efforts to “civilize” women of color. Believing white women should take a special role in such work, they embarked on what Peggy Pascoe describes as a racialized quest for “female moral authority.” This search for public power, with its central emphasis on cultivating Anglo-style domesticity, was especially prominent in the trans-Mississippi West, and it also extended beyond U.S. borders. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, many single and married female missionaries served in China, India, and other “heathen lands.” American women—Protestant and Catholic, white and black—supported this work in enormous numbers, building missionary societies into the largest grassroots women’s movement of the era.

Historians such as Thomas Winter have begun to explore how ideals of manhood also shaped mission and uplift activities, like those of the Young Men’s Christian Association. Conceptions of masculinity also played an obvious role in empire building overseas. To date, much work has focused on the era between the 1890s and the 1920s, when, as Glenda Gilmore, Gail Bederman, and others have shown, appeals to “Anglo-Saxon manhood” helped construct the political frameworks for both segregation at home and imperialism abroad. Kristin Hoganson’s influential book *Fighting for American Manhood* demonstrates that widespread fears of male weakness helped fuel America’s entry into the Spanish-American War.

In the twentieth century, imperial projects often took more secular and state-directed forms. Doctors and social workers of the 1920s and 1930s, for example, justified Puerto Ricans’ exclusion from full citizenship by pointing to prostitution and allegedly immoral sexual relations on the island. “Puerto Rican difference,” Laura Briggs writes, “has been produced and located in women’s sexuality and reproduction.” Naoko Shibusawa and other scholars have carried this story into other parts of the world where the United States asserted its power. Meanwhile, Robert Dean offers a sophisticated reading of the class and gender compulsions that drove elite cold war policy makers—in Dean’s phrase, an “imperial brotherhood”—to persist in escalating the Vietnam War.

### Women’s Economic Roles

Recent studies of gender and labor also complicate our view of women as historical subjects. In some ways, industrialization and the rise of modern capitalism helped free women from patriarchal legal structures; at the same time, these processes introduced new forms of domination. Nowhere is this clearer than in a rich body of recent scholarship on marriage law, which figured centrally in the construction of citizenship, property rights, and public policy. Lawmakers and courts long viewed the husband and father as the family’s unitary sovereign; upon marriage, a woman endured “coupure,” or legal death. The first married women’s property acts in the United States, enacted between the 1830s and the 1850s, were largely designed to protect men from creditors. During the same years, a widow’s traditional right to a “dower third” of her husband’s estate was eroded by new rulings that gave creditors access to all assets. While historians such as Nancy Cott emphasize women’s gains in this period, Henrik Hartog argues that the erosion of dower rights, along with the abandonment of other laws that spelled out husbands’ obligations, made wives and widows more vulnerable. Norma Basch finds a similar complexity in nineteenth-century debates over the rising incidence of divorce. Did liberal divorce laws liberate women? Or did they allow husbands to act irresponsibly and abandon faithful wives?

Amy Dru Stanley shows how such questions emerged, in part, in the context of slavery’s demise. She explores interrelated ideas about several types of contracts—especially marriage and labor contracts—in the postbellum era of “free labor.” Americans argued in these decades over “the limits of commodity exchange,” Stanley writes, as they debated marriage and labor law. These conversations “revealed deep ambiguities concerning self-ownership in a free market society as well as relations of dependence and dominion both at work and at home.” Stanley finds that prostitution—the selling of sex—remained the one type of contract that was almost universally condemned, as Americans “valoriz[ed] sex rather than labor as the essence of selfhood.”

As such work shows, historians are raising complex questions about how women’s labor—productive and reproductive, paid and unpaid—has shaped class identities. As early as 1981, Mary Ryan observed that the definition of “middle class” in the United States centered on the family, and that women’s work in the household fueled the success of “self-made” men. In an influential study of women’s labor in the early republic, Jeanne Boydston argued that a wife’s economic role often determined whether a family was working class or middle class. If a woman could devote her energies to
managing household resources, rather than to wage labor outside the home, the family could accumulate property. Such work was, however, largely invisible to men, and middle-class women came to be classified as "not working." Women's reproductive labor (or lack thereof) also played a profound role in shaping a family's class status, especially in urban areas. A couple with two children could invest more resources in their education and training; in an industrial economy, those children had better odds for upward mobility. Fertility and family limitation, then, must be treated as central aspects of women's work.

Emerging from the field of women's history, such insights are reshaping how other historians of the United States think about industrialization and class formation. In the meantime, they have undercut historians' earlier assumption that nineteenth-century women inhabited a separate sphere in the private home. "Surveying the terrain of antebellum America today," reports Catherine Kelly, "we no longer see separate spheres, but the broad and sweeping transformation of the household economy. . . . It is no longer possible to imagine that women's work, whether performed in factory or household, whether paid or unpaid, was isolated from the social and economic processes that transformed men's work."

As they negotiated their place in the industrial economy, working-class women faced distinct challenges. Women's paid labor has often occurred within the home, as married women took in laundry or boarders or engaged in low-wage, subcontracted "homework," completed within the household and paid by the piece. This phenomenon began in the nineteenth-century shoemaking and garment trades and has, as Eileen Boris has shown, reemerged with a vengeance since the 1970s.

But it is clear that, despite their frequent segregation in the labor market and the hostility they faced from male labor unions, working-class women played central roles in labor activism and state building. Nancy Gabin demonstrates this point in her study of women in the United Auto Workers, while Dorothy Cobble and Karen Sacks, among others, find that wage-earning women in the post–World War II era developed distinctive forms of working-class feminism, focused on community building, economic self-help, and activism on such issues as pay inequity and sexual harassment. Latina women played an important role in these developments, and other immigrant women also took up the cause. Xiaolan Bao, for example, finds that in the 1980s female Chinese garment workers in New York City organized strikes and negotiations around the issue of daycare. As family breadwinners, these women gained considerable authority in their households in relation to male kin, but the dual pressures of work and family left them, like millions of wage-earning women, frustrated and exhausted. Much labor activism in recent decades, like these garment workers' strike, has been female-led and driven by working-class feminist concerns.

Men have also had gendered identities in the workplace, as well as at home. In 1991, Ava Baron proposed that historians rethink class and gender as distinct categories, questioning "a whole series of conceptual dualisms—
capitalism/patriarchy, public/private, production/reproduction, men's work/women's work—which assume that class issues are integral to the first term of each pair and gender is important only to the second." Scholars like Mary Blewett have responded to this challenge, focusing attention on working-class masculinity. But in analyzing the gendered history of labor, much remains to be done.

**Sexuality, Public Space, and Consumer Culture**

In 1629, a court in Virginia made an unusual decision about a colonist known as both Thomas and Thomasine Hall. At the behest of colonial officials, an employer, and a neighbor, Hall's genitals had been examined several times, but no one could agree on Hall's sex. Hall was therefore proclaimed to be both "a man and a woeman" and instructed to wear men's clothing, but with an apron and a woman's "Coye and Crossecloth" on his head. More than two centuries later, in the 1850s, the U.S. surgeon general encountered intersex individuals when he visited pueblos in the Southwest. At Acoma, one traditional healer declared that "he had nursed several infants whose mothers had died, and that he had given them plenty of milk from his breasts"; at the same time, he said, he "had a large penis and his testicles were grandes como huevos—as large as eggs." Such evidence of intersexuality—an emerging area of historical research—blurs the boundary between male and female, undermining not only the notion of "separate spheres" but even the idea of distinct sexes. It also shows that sexual identities have rarely been a private matter; instead, they have been publicly performed and defined.

As they explore such sites of gendered discourse and conflict, scholars have focused on struggles over public space. In an imaginative study of enslaved women, Stephanie Camp uses Edward Said's term "rival geography" to describe how they, like other peoples who resisted colonial oppression, created "alternative ways of knowing and using plantation and southern space that conflicted with planters' ideals and demands." Camp finds that women, in comparison with men, more often employed their cabins and nearby locations to carry out short-term negotiations over their conditions of servitude. They also constructed alternative spaces, such as illegal celebrations, where the body became "an important site not only of suffering but also . . . of enjoyment and resistance."

Despite creative work such as Camp's, the bulk of scholarship on gender and public space has focused on the city. In Sex among the Rabbles, Clare Lyons traces distinctive patterns of urban sexuality in Philadelphia as early as the pre-Revolutionary years, including marked female independence, casual sexual relationships, a thriving erotic print culture, and commercial sex. Patricia Clise Cohen and Amy Gilman Srobenick explore public discourses surrounding sex, crime, and commerce in New York City by
studying the murders of sex worker Helen Jewett in 1836 and the “Beautiful Cigar Girl” Mary Rogers in 1841. By the post–Civil War period, Sarah Deutsch shows how women reshaped Boston’s public spaces, asserting a place for themselves in streets and polling places and developing kitchen bars and other semipublic ventures. In a study of Davenport, Iowa, in the 1880s, Sharon Wood offers a rich account of women’s public activities, driven especially by their entry into paid employment.

Private businesses had a strong interest in making commercialized public sphere safe and accessible for middle-class women. Amy Richter documents the rise of “public domesticity,” as railroads created Pullman cars and waiting rooms that seemed safe and homelike. “Originally considered a moral haven from the competitive world of business,” Richter writes, “the private sphere came to connote comfort, convenience, and social respectability.” Following this story into the legal realm, Barbara Welke reveals how wide acceptance of women’s railroad travel gradually altered court awards to compensate for injuries and emotional distress from railroad accidents, as well as creating the context in which African-American plaintiffs—overwhelmingly women—sued for equal access to the protection of “ladies’ cars.”

Historians have paid a great deal of attention to gender, leisure, and consumer culture. Though few dispute the power of advertisers to serve corporate purposes and reinforce gender norms, some, including Tera Hunter, Vicki Ruiz, Kathy Peiss, and Susan Douglas, see women’s appropriations of consumer culture as also serving their own ends. These include entry into public spaces like dance halls, which posed sexual dangers but permitted greater freedom than the workplace or home. Historians of the Progressive Era have shown, for example, that ready-made fashions, popular novels, movies, and magazines such as True Confessions helped wage-earning women build a working-class feminist sensibility.

While some historians are exploring conflicts over public space, others have studied different realms of sexual behavior. Some have challenged the idea that Victorian women internalized the idea of female “passionlessness.” Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz documents the persistence of an early “vernacular sexual culture” in the nineteenth century, as well as new scientific ideas that celebrated “the naturalness of the body’s sexual appetites.” Other historians have uncovered a lively conversation among nineteenth-century sex reformers, who sought to promote birth control. In the 1870s and 1880s, the supposed heyday of antivice crusader Anthony Comstock, Andrea Tone documents a flourishing commercial birth control industry that served a national market of mail-order customers. Much more needs to be known about how nineteenth-century couples purchased and used cervical caps, condoms, and “douching powders.” But recent research decisively disproves the assumption that sexual abstinence was the primary method of fertility control.

The fields of queer theory and queer history, which hardly existed in 1990, have played a central role in reshaping the history of sexuality. George Chauncey’s pathbreaking book Gay New York, perhaps the most influential work in this field, uncovers an exuberant urban gay world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chauncey finds that sexual identities were flexible—homosexual activity did not necessarily mark a person as having a fixed homosexual identity—and that commercial venues such as cabarets, boardwalks, dance halls, and bathhouses became convenient sites for sexual encounters. Relationships between middle-class “queers” and working-class “faries” often crossed class lines. Chauncey finds that World War II and the cold war ushered in new heterosexual norms; gradually, after the end of Prohibition, gay New Yorkers were stigmatized and forced into the closet by prosecution and violence.

**Citizenship, Politics, and the State**

As earlier sections of this chapter illustrate, historians have focused considerable attention lately on gender and the law. They have also investigated women’s role in politics, in ways that range far beyond the field’s early emphasis on the suffrage movement. As Americans embarked on their experiment in self-government, citizens of the new republic needed to assert their “civic virtue,” which most political leaders defined as male. Joanne Freeman, among others, has shown that an aggressive code of masculine honor lay at the heart of political culture. Nonetheless, women claimed an early role as republican mothers who would educate their sons for citizenship. Historians such as Catherine Allgor find that, as far back as the Revolutionary era, elite, well-connected women wielded political influence through skillful adaptations of “private” space. By the early 1800s, some women claimed a more direct role as “female politicians,” engaging in partisan debate. Rosemarie Zagarri identifies a backlash by the 1820s and 1830s: the rise of universal white male suffrage and mass-based political parties, she argues, worked to exclude women who had asserted political claims. In these same years, however, republican womanhood clearly offered a basis for women’s broader public role.

These decades witnessed the rise of a dizzying number of women’s reform organizations. In a meticulously researched study of Boston and New York between 1797 and 1840, Anne Boylan describes women’s participation in diverse public projects, ranging from the Abyssinian Benevolent Daughters of Esther to the Society for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females. With the rising influence of evangelical Protestantism, women gradually combined republican motherhood with powerful claims to Christian womanly action. Boylan also finds that Catholic and Jewish women in the two cities engaged in public activism earlier than historians had once believed. Catherine Brekus, meanwhile, focuses on female preaching between the mid-eighteenth century and 1845, finding an array of women who offered public spiritual testimony. She argues that such speakers, unlike the far smaller number of women’s rights advocates, were “active participants in the public sphere, but they never challenged
the political structures that enforced their inequality in family, church, and state.

The rise of mass-based political parties offered new opportunities for women, while also reflecting contested ideals of manhood. A self-conscious middle-class began, in the antebellum years, to reject patriarchal models of household order, which were grounded in a vigorous defense of white men’s prerogatives as citizens and heads of households. They promoted, instead, an ideal of piety, self-discipline, and domesticity for both sexes. The leading political parties squared off over these competing ideals: Democrats tended to defend patriarchal family models (including slavery), while Whigs, and later Republicans, promoted domesticity. In Amy Greenberg’s apt formulation, Jacksonian Democrats “aggressive manhood” stood in opposition to a “restrained manhood” rooted in temperance, self-control, and recognition of female influence, including a limited political role for women.

The rise of the Republican Party, a political agent of domesticity and bourgeois values, intensified the gendered basis of party politics. Race was, again, a central factor. Stephanie McCurry finds that in the secession crisis, elite South Carolinians warned other men of threats to patriarchy: if Republicans could interfere with slavery, they could invade the home and transform the nature of marriage, perhaps even liberating women. “The legitimacy of [white] male authority over women within the household,” writes McCurry, “was the cornerstone of the slavery edifice.” At the same time, abolitionists denounced slavery for making family life impossible for the enslaved, giving white men tyrannical power over their households, and destroying the sexual purity of both black and white Americans.

The story of women’s partisan activities now extends from the antebellum period all the way through 1920, when the achievement of full voting rights reshaped women’s place in the electoral arena. My own work, for example, traces women’s partisan activism in the post–Civil War era and its relationship to competing Republican and Democratic models of gender behavior. Throughout the nineteenth century, new upstart parties proved particularly receptive to women’s involvement. Michael Pierson finds women playing prominent roles in the antislavery Liberty Party of the 1840s. Bruce Dorsey, describing the gendered contours of public activism in Philadelphia, shows that male domesticity and women’s political activism lent themselves easily to a range of causes, including nativism and the American (or “Know Nothing”) Party of the 1830s. After the Civil War, the same relative openness to women’s participation characterized the Prohibitionist and Populist Parties.

The crucible of the Civil War transformed women’s political goals. A number of studies have focused on the war itself as a catalyst for change, while in the Reconstruction era, historians such as Carole Faulkner describe cooperative projects launched by black and white women. Along with these have come a plethora of state and regional studies of the suffrage movement and allied causes, most of which bridge the traditional divide between the so-called Gilded Age (circa 1877–1900) and the Progressive Era (circa 1900–1920). These include work by Marjorie Spruill Wheeler on the South, Rebecca Mead on the West, and Gayle Gulliet on California. Their findings suggest that we need to rethink the origins of women’s modern political activism, which had roots well before the arrival of familiar social settlements like Hull House.

Though prosperous African Americans were not middle class in the same sense as white women, they shared many of the same values and commitments in the post–Civil War decades. As Evelyn Higginbotham has written, black women who sought to make cross-racial alliances engaged in a “politics of respectability” that operated as a “bridge discourse.” One of the most influential studies in this field is Glenda Gilmore’s Gender and Jim Crow, which emphasizes the key political roles of African-American women in the era of segregation and men’s disfranchisement. “By embracing a constellation of Victorian middle-class values,” Gilmore writes, “—temperance, thrift, hard work, piety, learning—African Americans believed that they could carve out space for dignified and successful lives and that their examples would mean something.” Lisa Materson extends this insight beyond the South. She finds that politically engaged African-American women in Chicago, between the 1870s and the 1930s, not only addressed local issues but also used their voting power on behalf of their children, pressuring national legislators to fight disfranchisement and lynching.

For historians of the twentieth century, one of the most energetic areas of research has been the gendered basis of government welfare policies. In her groundbreaking book Pitted but Not Entitled, Linda Gordon showed how public officials retained many of the gendered assumptions held by their predecessors in private charities: both groups conducted home visits to make sure that the conduct of women who received state aid was “respectable.” Such restrictions were rarely placed on workmen’s compensation and other forms of aid to men, which were viewed as outright entitlements. Jennifer Mittelstadt, exploring similar issues between the New Deal of the 1930s and the Great Society of the 1960s, also finds that policy makers lacked a basic understanding of the causes of women’s poverty. As a result, they repeatedly passed laws that proved ineffective or detrimental.

A number of studies, including those by Premilla Nadasen, Annalise Orleck, and Rhonda Williams, have examined the influence of government welfare policies on African-American and working-class women, and vice versa. In general, historians of the welfare rights movement find that federal programs worked, but only when women at the grassroots “forced responsiveness,” in Williams’s phrase, to meet their needs. RickieSolinger illustrates some of the formidable obstacles faced by black women in the early cold war era. In her study of illegal abortions before Roe v. Wade, she finds that social workers and government agencies encouraged pregnant, unmarried white women to give up babies for adoption, but since no “market” existed for African-American babies, single black women were expected to keep and raise their children. White single motherhood was thus
largely invisible to the public eye, while black single motherhood became stigmatized and defined as a political problem.

In the past few years, historians have built on such insights to ask sweeping questions about the gendered basis of citizenship and government. Alice Kessler-Harris's *In Pursuit of Equity* documents the stubborn persistence, throughout the twentieth century, of policies designed to shore up the legal, economic, and cultural authority of male breadwinners. By contrast, Linda Kerber explores women's exemption from such citizens' responsibilities as taxation, jury service, and military conscription. "Rights and obligations are reciprocal elements of citizenship," Kerber observes; women's exclusion from certain obligations, such as military service, diminishes their claim to equal political rights. In *The Straight State*, Margot Canaday carries such inquiries in a different direction, showing how, from the early twentieth century through the cold war, the category "homosexual" became recognized by lawmakers and the general public. She demonstrates how U.S. military, immigration, and social welfare policies created new categories of deviance and a definition of citizenship as heterosexual.

Canaday's story ends with the emergence of the gay rights movement; it thus echoes, in some ways, the earlier story of Reconstruction, when lawmakers first put the word "male" in the Constitution (in the Fourteenth Amendment), at the very moment when an independent women's rights movement arose. On each occasion, the identification of a new interest group precipitated its formal, political exclusion by lawmakers; in both cases, exclusion itself seems to have helped generate a movement for equal rights. This observation perhaps confirms Linda Kerber's insight about how articulating goals may be the most essential step in working to achieve them. She writes, second wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s "were as much the namers of change as the makers of change"; what they named was "hypocrisy."

The history of second wave feminism remains a lively field of research. Sara Evans's *Tidal Wave*, perhaps the most important recent history of modern feminism, recovers in rich detail the diverse perspectives of women in the movement, especially women of color. Evans emphasizes the achievements of liberal feminists, with their concrete policy goals, over radical feminists who, in her view, misdirected their political energies in matters of personal lifestyle. Other historians, though, are busy critiquing the limits of liberal feminists' achievement, noting how many of their goals—such as equal pay in the workplace and access to safe contraception and abortion—have stalled in subsequent decades. The extent of what we still do not know about the second wave is suggested by the fact that a new generation of historians is just beginning to trace how feminism arose and evolved in places as diverse as Seattle, Denver, Minneapolis, Dayton, and Durham, North Carolina.

Most historians of modern feminism depict it as the watershed moment in U.S. women's history. Evans, for example, argues that second wave feminists presented "a far more radical challenge" to male power than earlier movements for women's rights had been able to do. Before 1920, Evans argues, women supposedly focused all their attention on the "single, symbolic issue" of voting rights. For Ruth Rosen, in another recent history, second wave feminism was the moment when *The World Split Open*. Equally revealing is the title of Gail Collins's popular account of the second wave, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*.

Recent scholarship glaringly undermines this simplistic view of events before the 1960s. It is clear now that if a first wave did exist, its origins lay further back, in the 1790s, when Americans read and debated the work of Mary Wollstonecraft and property-owning New Jersey women briefly won the vote. Yet the climate for women's rights activism in this era differed substantially from that of the antebellum decades of antislavery and women's rights conventions, much less the era of imperialism and Jim Crow. It is hard to think of any nuanced way to narrate women's political struggles over thirteen decades as a single "wave." By focusing on suffrage, the wave theory ignores major transformations in women's lives, before and after 1920. And while suffrage was, indeed, an important goal from the 1840s onward, activism was hardly limited to that one issue; instead, women advanced an array of legal, intellectual, economic, religious, political, and other claims.

A keener understanding of racial, class, religious, and other forms of diversity among women disproves the wave theory even more dramatically, calling into question what counts as a gain or loss in any given era. During the era of imperialism and Jim Crow, for example, white women managed to advance women's rights through racialized claims that included women of color; at the same time, some of their work built new legal protections for working-class women. Who achieved progress, and at what cost? Consider the conflicting experiences of African-American women in 1848, when the Seneca Falls convention supposedly launched the first wave. In that year, thousands of desperate Irish women were fleeing a horrific famine and taking up low-wage work in New England textile mills. Northern Mexican women, their nation defeated in a humiliating war, were facing colonization by the United States through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Millions of African-American women lived in slavery, while Native women (including the Seneca for whom the Falls were named) were coping with the aftermath of conquest: ravaging diseases, land loss, and economic marginalization.

As a way of periodizing U.S. women's history, the "first wave, second wave" model is no longer tenable. As yet, however, there has been little conversation on whether or how to replace it. Some creative attempts have been made; Sandra VanBurkleo, for example, divides U.S. constitutional culture into three successive "settlements"—decided during the Revolution, the Civil War, and the era of civil rights—and explores how each legal framework was contested, afterward, by both advocates and opponents of women's rights. Such analyses may provide the basis for a new
understanding of the relationship between the changing nature of women's rights advocacy, in various political contexts, and the goals and the achievements of twentieth-century feminism. The work of the past twenty years makes that task a challenge; even more formidable is the idea of constructing any overarching narrative of U.S. women's and gender history or calculating gains and losses for diverse groups of women in particular eras.

These are important tasks for the future. In the meantime, historians of women and gender are moving beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, recognizing that the tenacious, commanding narrative of America's national development still shapes—and perhaps warps—our understanding of women's history. Bonnie Anderson and Margaret McFadden, among others, have explored transatlantic connections among women's rights advocates before the Civil War. Historians of the Progressive Era are comparing gendered welfare policies in various countries and reconstructing conversations among women reformers in the United States and Europe. As this chapter goes to press, several historians are working on books that will place the women's suffrage and feminist movements in global perspective. These developments suggest that, while the field of women's and gender history may no longer own itself, its horizons will continue to expand.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Note: In earlier editions of The New American History, Linda Gordon elegantly recounted the rise of U.S. women's history, and Estelle Freedman surveyed work on sexuality and family history. Both these articles remain valuable, and readers are encouraged to consult them.


