Women's History – Gender as a Historical Category: Ulrich's *The Age of Homespun*, Bray's *Technology of Gender*, & Scott's *Gender and the Politics of History*. *By Xaq Frohlich.*

Ulrich's *The Age of the Homespun* and Bray's *Technology and Gender* share several common themes: 1) creating a space for gender (and specifically women) in working-class history, 2) studying the interrelations of gender, technology (textiles), and social economies, and 3) an examination of gender with an awareness of "Otherness" – Ulrich doing so through the American colonizing process of eradicating Native Americans, and Bray doing so implicitly through her confrontation with western assumptions of the "Orient." While both authors explicitly dawn a social historian's cloak with the intent to write women *back* into the historical movements that they study, each unravels the three themes, however, starting with a different unit of analysis. Ulrich studies the social structures of early colonial New England and women's –at first glance— seemingly invisible place within its history. Bray, instead, examines the rising and falling economic position of women in the Chinese textile industry, searching for its social dimensions.

"The Age of the Homespun," Ulrich tells us, is a history of the "unseen workings of ordinary life," overlooked by 19th century political narratives, involving the central economic importance of the woman weaver of homespun linens in colonial America. The non-importance of women's work was not the result of a lack of appreciation, but rather the existence of separate spheres, where women's work did not take on the economic significance of men's. Initially the house production of homespun represents the pragmatism and opportunism of the American frontier. This, Ulrich explains, is why American women's homespun is viewed more positively than in Britain, where the dense populations and subsequent industrialization and standardization of textiles devalues women's work. In this context, the antagonisms between Native Americans and the settlers becomes a shaping element in the colonial understanding of homespun. Ulrich's argument here, though creative and insightful, is somewhat heavy handed: "Nineteenth-century Americans knew that their sheep grazed on Indian graves" (p. 18). While an indirect correlation between the violent struggle of the colonists and "savage" and the social construction of homespun is compelling, her evidence for a more overt relationship remains wanting. Bray's very careful study of the artistry of spinning homespun helps to establish the craftsmanship the women's work. Progressively homespun becomes less a necessity and more of a supplement embedded in notions of domesticity. Thus homespun is not devalued in 19th century America, but rather valued in the separate sphere of femininity.

Bray approaches the study of Chinese "domesticity" and weaving in part to problematize the Western idea of the inherent cultural repression of Chinese woman (see p. 270). Bray's description of market shifts in silk and cotton textile industries reveal that it is the commercialization of the cloth industry that "demystify[ies] the skills and devalue[s] the role of the [women] producers" (p. 176). Bray considers efforts to study Chinese women through kinship models contribute to diminishing the women's agency in the markets and their shifts. Similarly, western structural models that employ a separation of the home from workplace ignore the integrative aspect of Chinese society. Thus "men till, women weave" is not simply a separation of gender roles, but also registers the moral agency and merit of "woman's work." This merit was both social and

economic (taxation). Bray's description of the diminishing economic presence of women in weaving (as a result, among other things, of the introduction and ascent of cotton), is followed by an analysis of how women's social status is impugned in that economic decline. Clothing, and by extension weaving, has social significance (through marriage, funerals, etc.). Chinese male intellectuals therefore viewed the loss of weaving jobs by women to men unfavorably. Bray provides two interpretations of this: the first operating within the framework of the market economy - the "worthlessness of girls" who cannot contribute to the economy, and the second from a moralist's perspective – the weakening of socially embedded mores as women's work changes. The first helps explain how women increasingly become valued in their reproductive capacity (as commodities) as they are devalued in the productive capacity. The second addresses the reality that Chinese woman continued to work in other non-weaving arenas, but that work was not recognized as appropriate and valuable for women to do. Bray's discussion of the translator's dilemma of "womanly work" and "women's work" (p. 255-256), while useful heuristically in discussing nuanced social aspects of Chinese culture, doesn't escape the potential of being just another western interpolation onto the Chinese language.