

## Week5 Gender

Ulrich's book is unconventional in several senses. First, each chapter deals with various objects that have only loose apparent connection among them: Indian basket, spinning wheels, cupboard, chimneypiece, tablecloth, etc. She locates the object first, and then traces the story surrounding the object. Why did she choose to do so, instead of narrating chronological story of New England focusing on people (women, of course) selected from different classes and races? One reason I could think of is that by doing so she was able to incorporate the categories class, race, and gender more smoothly in her account.

Second, and in relation to the first, Ulrich does not suggest her clear argument in the beginning of each chapter, followed by the logical enumeration of supporting evidences. Instead, she leads the reader as if Sherlock Homes tells Dr. Watson how he traced all the tiny clues and finally reconstructed the most plausible story of what happened on the day of murder. Here, the object in each chapter is suggested as the most tangible physical clue for the historian-detective. This writing strategy enables her to keep readers constantly sensitive to the hidden and forgotten connection behind the conventional interpretation of the objects.

Third, Ulrich does not take the object for granted as a clue that was left or saved coincidentally but fortunately, just as a first-year graduate student like myself would happily do for his/her archive paper boxes (Thanks for surviving!). She questions the very existence of those objects. Why did it survive and why is it being remembered? Who collected and saved those items and for what purposes? Attempting to answer those questions, Ulrich shows us that those objects contributed to the 19<sup>th</sup> century making of a long-lasting American myth of *the Age of Homespun*. By idealizing the rural life and the labor in it, the myth obscures the messy, greedy, or bloody reality of commerce, politics, war, and above all, the female labor. Ulrich teaches me that history can be constructed by forgetting as much as by remembrance.

While addressing the similar issue of women's labor, Francesca Bray suggests a new historiography of technology and gender. Bray begins on the assumption that technology makes not only material worlds but also social worlds. She is not satisfied with showing merely that Chinese women did a significant role in production of textiles,

which itself can be a historical argument. She is more concerned about how the women's role in production contributed to the making of female identity in the home as well as in the state and how the changing patterns of commercialization and specialization of textile production shaped the increasing emphasis on women's role as reproducers rather than producers. Although her chapters are more conventionally structured than those of Ulrich, Bray's arguments are no less illuminating on the gender and labor.

The common theme of the two authors is that, even though women's labor took place mostly inside their home, its practice and outcome reflected and even constituted much more wider political, economic, or military context of their times. In short, gender matters in history, in its most general sense, not just for the sake of women's history. Now I would like to ask a question, which is very naïve but very insoluble for me. Since the 1960s, historians have realized that class matters in history, that gender is another indispensable historical category, and also that race cannot be left out in writing history. Would this diversification of categories contribute to the more synthetic history? Or would it only lead to several fragmentary sub-histories?