

PREFACE TO *FEMINIST TARİHİN PEŞİNDE*

[IN PURSUIT OF FEMINIST HISTORY]

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These essays were written over the course of more than 25 years. They represent my continuing engagement with the important themes of feminist theory: gender, difference, experience, history. It is my belief that these themes exceed the Western contexts in which they may have first been articulated. When posed as questions, as matters to be interrogated, *gender*, *differences*, *experience*, and *history* have universal applicability.

Gender asks about the relationship posited between male and female, men and women, masculine and feminine. It assumes that the meanings ascribed to physical difference vary within and among cultures, nations, and societies. There is no biological determination of the roles and characteristics assigned to male and female; these are the mutable products of history. It is our job as historians to explore the contexts in which these meanings are articulated, the interests they are made to serve, and the ways in which alternative views are marginalized and suppressed. Another way of saying this is that gender and power are intertwined: normative rules about gender not only establish hierarchies within families (by prescribing their form and the relationships between husband and wife, parents and children), but they also serve as legitimating models for other forms of social and political intercourse.

There are several ways to approach the interconnections between gender and power. One is simply to describe the relationship in terms of its normative rules, ascribing them to, say, patriarchy or capitalism (or both). This leaves aside the question of how the very concepts of 'women' and 'men,' are being defined and instead focuses on the changing experiences of men and women, taken to be fixed biologically-defined categories. Another way, the one I emphasize in these articles, is to ask how meaning is being ascribed to the differences of the sexes, by whom, under what circumstances, and with what effects. This approach assumes that norms are not easily imposed or maintained, but in need of constant reinforcement. It is the operation of the norms themselves that demands investigation. How and by whom are gender norms articulated? What are the debates and conflicts that go into the process? How and under what circumstances do some views prevail over others? How does gender become a way of patrolling the boundaries of sexual difference? By whom? How does gender become a way of signifying power more

generally? What power? In what interests? How and under what circumstances has gender changed?

Differences asks not only about sexual difference—and the anxiety attached to its representations—but also about the many varieties of sexuality, sexual practice, and sexual identity that exceed a simple male/female opposition. These varieties at once refuse and trouble normative stipulations about acceptable and unacceptable behavior. The question is where do they come from? One place I look for answers is to psychoanalytic theory, not for diagnostic labels, but for understanding the operations of fantasy and the complexities of identification in the constitution of our psyches. Beyond sex and sexuality, but often in association with them, *differences* also opens the question of hierarchy: how do ascriptions of difference and the traits associated with it legitimize economic, social, political, and other forms of discrimination? How has difference enabled the perception of friends and enemies? the drawing of the lines of nation and race? the “clashes” of civilizations? What do we learn about specific events when we ask how difference is operating to construct their representation? What kinds of differences are explicitly named, what are implicit in these representations? How, for example, does race figure implicitly in certain discussions of gender, or gender figure implicitly in explicit discussions of race? Attention to difference, not as a received fact of social existence, but as an historically specific representation that serves specific ends, enables us to write histories that are critical in the Foucauldian sense—they serve to denaturalize things otherwise taken for granted, like the shape of our bodies, our geographic origins, or the color of our skin.

Experience is, again, a set of questions about the relationship between perception and representation. What counts as experience and how does it structure our understanding of what happens to us? In the essay that address these issues in this volume, I argue that it is a mistake to take experience as a causal explanation, to assume that people react to certain situations on the basis of their transparent, unmediated “experience.” We have to ask instead how, when, and under what conditions some aspects of one’s life are taken to be more important or more determining than others. Is claiming working class identity the simple product of economic exploitation, or is it also the result of a conceptual shift? What is the nature of that shift? How did it occur? How does the political “massification” of women (in Denise Riley’s terms) produce a feminist movement? What leads women to decry as “oppressive” their positions as wives, mothers, or low-skilled workers? How do we account for the timing of the emergence of movements of resistance that point to “experience” as the motive for their actions? Are ethnic minorities “naturally” inclined to protest their mistreatment, or is their mistreatment singled out

as something to protest? By whom? In what contexts? Here the question of language joins analyses by social historians; my point is that without understanding how experience is conceptualized—how, that is, aspects of life are selectively emphasized—we assume a causality that underestimates the complexity of political mobilization as well as of the influence of “culture.”

History is the discipline that enables us to call into question ideas that claim to be timeless and so opens the possibility for thinking about change. By showing that things haven’t always been this way, we suggest that they needn’t remain so. Looking at the past makes it possible to think differently about the present and the future. This is, at least, the project of what I and others call “critical history,” or what Foucault called “the history of the present.” In this approach (which I detail in the first essay) the point is neither to simply recount what happened in the past (as if a totally objective recounting were possible), nor to take the past as the necessary foreshadowing of the present (assuming that how we live now is the inevitable outcome of the direction of “history” and not the result of struggle and conflict). By providing a history for categories otherwise taken to be natural or a matter of common sense, we call into question the structures of power they sustain. This kind of history makes visible contests around the very meanings of terms such as ‘women,’ ‘men,’ ‘human,’ ‘race,’ ‘sex,’ ‘nation,’ ‘ethnicity,’ ‘nature.’ It not only details the triumph of some formulations over others, but it gives credence, space, and visibility to the alternatives that were presented and ruled out of order. In this way, we can break the hold of seemingly intractable definitions of what must be, replacing them with the possibility of imagining how things might be otherwise.

Feminist theory is an emancipatory project, but for me not in the sense of providing a fixed blue print for a liberated future. Instead, it offers a way of critically analyzing the categories with which we think, locating them in the histories which have produced and changed them. Such an approach lets us reflect on the language we use and the multiple meanings it may have. We become attuned to discord and disagreement, to the places where conflict emerges and so creates openings for intervention. Having studied history in this critical way, we are then in a position to help make history.