The development of women's history in the past twenty years has not only helped to bring new subject matter to history, but has forced us to deal with the concepts and values underlying the organization of historical studies and of all intellectual fields. It has forced us to question not only why certain content was previously omitted, ignored, and trivialized, but also to consider who decides what is to be included. In short, we have begun first to question and then to challenge the conceptual framework for the organization of traditional knowledge. We challenge it because of its omissions: it leaves out the

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I am grateful also for the comments and suggestions made by Professor Nellie Y. McKay, Afro-American Studies Department, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and by Professor Nell Painter, Princeton University. Over the years, I have learned much from discussion of my ideas on "differences" with my colleagues Florencia Mallon, Steve Stern and Steven Feierman, who helped me to sharpen my thinking in the light of their expertise in Latin-American and African history. Finally, the concepts on which this article is based were tested and applied in an undergraduate lecture course "Sex, Gender, Class and Race in Comparative Historical Perspective," which I have twice given at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The interest and enthusiasm of my students for this conceptual framework encouraged me to write this article.

I am indebted to the participants of the Conference on Graduate Training in U.S. Women's History, held at Wingspread, Racine, Wisc., October 21-23, 1988, who shared their course syllabi and experiences in attempts to reconstruct Women's History and U.S. History survey courses along nonracist, nonsexist lines.
experiences, activities, and ideas of half or more of humankind. We challenge it because it is elitist: it leaves out not only all women, but most men, those of non-white races, those of various ethnicities, and, until quite recently, those of lower classes. In so doing, it defines all the groups omitted as less significant than the groups included. Patently, this is untrue and therefore it is unacceptable. We challenge it because what traditional history teaches us denies our own experience of reality. We live in a world in which nothing happens without the active participation of men and women and yet we are constantly being told of a past world in which men are presumed to act and women presumed to be acted upon. Women's history, even in its short development, has proven this judgement to be false, for the past as well as the present. Women are and always have been active participants in the shaping of events. One of the basic errors of patriarchal thought has been to make claims of universality for descriptions of the activities of a small elite group of upper-class white males. Traditional historians have described the activities of this group and called it the history of all of humankind. They have subsumed all women under the term "men" and have ignored the actual differences that exist among people by asserting that the small group whose activities they describe can stand for the rest of us. It obviously cannot. In rejecting this anthropocentric distortion of the past, we have opened the way to other insights and challenges.

Historians of women have long ago come to see that "women" cannot be treated as a unified category any more than "men-as-a-group" can. Women differ by class, race, ethnic and regional affiliation, religion, and any number of other categories. Thus, historians of women have stressed the need for using such categories as tools for analysis. When men discovered how to turn "difference" into dominance they laid the ideological foundation for all systems of hierarchy, inequality, and exploitation. They found a way of justifying such systems and of keeping them functioning with the cooperation of the dominated. This "invention of hierarchy" can be traced and defined historically: it occurs everywhere in the world under similar circumstances, although not at the same time. It occurs when the development of militarism due to the technological innovations of the Bronze Age coincides with the economic shifts occasioned by the agricultural revolution. Small groups of men, usually military leaders, usurp power in their domain, usually following some conquest of foreigners, and consolidate such
power by ideological and institutional means. These means always rest upon the discovery that “difference” can justify dominance. For Western civilization, these events occur in the Ancient Near East in the third and second millennia B.C. and take the form of state formation. 6

States formed through the consolidation of early military conquests by tribal chiefs or kings become legitimized by the creation of myths of origin which confer divine or semi-divine power upon their rulers, and by the formation of laws, which set up rules increasing hierarchy and regulating dominance. Everywhere, the first step toward turning “difference into dominance” is the institution of patriarchal privileges of men over women.

A small group of men dominate resources and allocate them to the women they have acquired as sexual property and to their children, to other less powerful men, and to a newly created underclass of slaves. The texture of power relationships thus created balances privileges and obligations for each group in such a way as to make the whole arrangement acceptable and to continue it in the interest of the dominant male group. Women and their children, in an age of rampant militarism and constant warfare and in an age of high infant and maternal mortality, needed protection in order for the tribe as a whole to survive. Such reasoning led women in the first place to accept and cooperate with the “patriarchal bargain”—in exchange for their sexual and reproductive services to one man, they will be guaranteed protection and resources for themselves and their children. Slavery, which develops at a time when men first acquire sufficient resources to keep captives alive instead of killing them, initially starts with a similar bargain. Slave women and later men accept that bargain the moment they accept the gift of their life after military conquest in exchange for their enslavement. 7

It is no accident that everywhere the first slaves known are women of foreign tribes. Often such tribes are racially and visibly different from their conquerors, which makes it easier for the conquerors to designate them permanently as an underclass. But where such racial differences do not exist, it is possible to create them by “marking” the slaves—with a brand, a peculiar way of cutting the hair, a special way of dressing or other means. Always, what is accentuated is “difference.” The slave is different from the master and because he is different he can be designated as inferior. Because he or more likely she is designated as inferior she can be exploited, commodified, and designated as in some way sub-human. The institutionalization of militarism as a way of life presupposes hierarchical thinking—some people who dominate have the right to dominate because they are superior; the dominated must accept being dominated because they are inferior.

How can one tell who is to be dominant and who is to be dominated? By force, first of all—the victors dominate; the conquered are dominated. But rule by force alone is untenable in the long run. Even the fiercest warriors could not long enslave other warriors unless they had several conquerors watching each conquered warrior day and night. Dominance is only possible if it can be justified and accepted both by the dominant and the dominated and by the large majority of people who are neither. And, historically, what makes dominance acceptable, is putting a negative mark on difference. This group or that group is different from us; they are our “Other.” And because they are our “Other” we can rule them. It is upon such ideological foundations that class dominance was made acceptable even to people who did not directly benefit from it. At the time of the formation of the archaic states non-slaveholding men accepted the bargain of being dominated and exploited in regard to resources by more powerful men of their own group because they were simultaneously offered the chance to dominate and control the resources of others, the “different” others, namely the women and children of their own class. Even to men who did not themselves hold slaves, the existence of an underclass raises their own sense of status and made them accept their own relative inequality as a fair arrangement.

Once the system of dominance and hierarchy is institutionalized in custom, law, and practice, it is seen as natural and just and people no longer question it, unless historical circumstances change very dramatically. For the dominated, the benefits the original bargain conferred upon them are lost, once slavery becomes hereditary—it is then simply exploitation based on arbitrary power.

What I have briefly outlined here is a pattern of development which took many hundreds of years to consolidate. What is important is that this analysis shows, in its simplest and rudimentary form, the connectedness of various forms of difference—turned—into—dominance. It shows that sex, class, and race dominance are interrelated and inseparable, from the start. The difference between men and women was
first, most easily notable difference and therefore dominance by men could first be acted out on that terrain. But class and race dominance (in the form of the enslavement of conquered foreign people) developed almost immediately upon this first human "discovery" of how to use power so as to benefit people unequally. The function of all designations of "Otherness" or deviance is to keep hierarchy in place for the benefit of the dominant. I am not here trying to set up priorities of oppression. Which system of oppression came first and which second is insignificant, if we understand that we are dealing with one, inseparable system with different manifestations.

But we do need richer, more complex, and more relational definitions of terms with which we usually work, such as "class" and "race." In Marxist terms "class" is defined, as a group "who play the same part in the mechanism of production" or, alternatively, "men's relationship to the means of production." The Weberian definition is "people who have life chances in common, as determined by their power to dispose of goods and skills for the sake of income." No matter what the definition, class has been so defined that women are subsumed under the category "men." Males and females are considered as belonging to the same class, without definite distinctions between them. But "class" never describes a single set of locations, relations, and experiences. "Class" is genderic, that is it is expressed and institutionalized in terms that are always different for men and women. For men, "class" describes their relationship to the means of production and their power over resources and women and children. For women, "class" describes their relationship to the means of production as mediated through the man to whom they render sexual and reproductive services and/or the man on whom they are dependent in their family of origin. In the case of women who enjoy economic independence, "class" still describes not only their relationship to the means of production, but their control (or lack thereof) over their reproductive capacity and their sexuality.

The concept "race" will similarly have to be expanded and redefined. The definition of "race" as a mark of difference and, thereby, inferiority antedates the formation of Western civilization, as I have shown. From its inception, "race" as a defining term was created genderically, that is, it was applied in a different way to men and women. Men of oppressed races were primarily exploited as workers; women were always exploited as workers, as providers of sexual services, and as reproducers. Dominant elites, once they had institutionalized slavery, acquired the unpaid labor of enslaved men and women, but they also acquired the sexual and reproductive services of slave women as a commodity. That is, the children of slave women became an actual commodity to be worked, sold, and traded; the unrewarded sexual services of slave women to their master enhanced the master's status among his peers, as in the form of harems; slave women's sexual services were and could be commodified in the form of prostitution.

The binary gendered opposition (male/female) which is so firmly rooted in our culture and cultural product as well as in our language and thought, makes it difficult for us to see the complexity of other structural relationships in society. We have thought of classifications such as "class" and "race" as being vertical boxes into which to sort people in history, but it has been difficult for us to conceptualize the overlapping boundaries of the two concepts. When we think not in terms which compare two separate oppressive systems which may show some overlap, but in terms of one system with several, fully integrated aspects which depend for their existence upon the other, a truer relationship can be visualized. We can then discuss not "priorities" of oppression or primacies (is a black woman more oppressed because of her sex or of her race?) but we can show the inter-relatedness of both aspects of oppression and their interdependency. Once we do that, a richer description, more closely related to actual relationships, can be drawn.

The system of male dominance over resources and women, called patriarchy, depends for its existence on creating categories of "deviants" or "Others." Such groups, variously constituted in different times and places, are always defined as being "different" from the hegemonic group and assumed to be inferior. It is upon this assumption of the inferiority of presumed "deviant" groups that hierarchy is instilled and maintained. Hierarchy is institutionalized in the state and its laws, in military, economic, educational, and religious institutions, in ideology and the hegemonic cultural product created by the dominant elite. The system which has historically appeared in different forms, such as ancient slavery, feudalism, capitalism, industrialism, depends, for its continuance on its ability to split the dominated majority into various groups and to mystify the process by which this is done. The function of various forms of oppression, which are usually treated as
separate and distinct, but which in fact are aspects of the same system, is to accomplish this division by offering different groups of the oppressed various advantages over other groups and thus pit them one against the other. Racism, antisemitism, various forms of ethnic prejudice, sexism, classism, and homophobia are all means to this end. If we see these various forms of creating “deviance” and “Otherness” as aspects of one and the same system of dominance, we can demystify the process by which the system constructs a reality which constantly sustains and reinforces it.

Let me illustrate this by a concrete example. In the antebellum South lower-class white males, whose long-range economic interests were actually opposed to the economic interests of the planter class, derived psychological and status benefits from racism. They had control over the sexuality and reproduction of women of their own class and enjoyed sexual privileges over Black women. This combination of sexual and status privileges made them cooperative with the planter’s hegemonic system, despite the fact that they were deprived of educational opportunities, had limited access to political power and had to subordinate their economic interest to that of the planters.¹³

White and Black women of all classes in the antebellum South were also denied political and legal rights and access to education. Although neither group controlled their sexuality nor their reproduction, the differences between them were substantial. White women, regardless of class, owed sexual and reproductive services to the men to whom they were married. Black women, in addition to the labor extracted from them, owed sexual and reproductive services to their white masters and to the Black men their white masters had selected for them. Since the white master of Black women could as well be a white woman, it is clear that racism was for Black women and men the decisive factor which structured them into society and controlled their lives. Conversely, white women could offset whatever economic and social disadvantages they suffered by sexism by the racist advantages they had over both Black men and women. Practically speaking, this meant that white women benefitted from racism economically, insofar as they owned slaves; that they could relieve themselves of child-rearing (and at times even childbearing) responsibilities by using the enforced services of their female slaves; that they were relieved of doing unpaid domestic labor by using slave labor. In addition white men and women of all classes derived a sense of higher status from the racist system which decisively affected their consciousness.

Another way of saying this is that dominant elite, white, upper-class men benefited from all aspects of their dominance—economic and educational privilege, sexual and reproductive control, and higher status. Women of their own class benefited sufficiently from racism and economic privilege so as to mask for them the disadvantages and discrimination they experienced because of sexism. Whites of the lower classes benefited sufficiently from racism and (in the case of males) from sexism so that they supported the system, even in face of obvious economic and political disadvantages. For those dominated and oppressed by racism, classism and sexism, all aspects of the oppressive system work to make their emancipation more difficult.

The fact that in the case of antebellum slavery the dominant elite understood the importance of all aspects of the oppressive system to the continuance of their privileges is shown in the increasing severity with which laws against educating slaves were enforced in that period and in the continuous existence of unequal laws in regard to sexual crimes. From the middle of the 18th century on, sexual crimes of Black men against white women were punished by death, while sexual crimes of white men against Black women were not only not considered crimes but were considered white male rights. The denial to African-American men not only of sexual privilege over women of their own race, but of their ability to protect women of their families from the attacks of white men was a further means of dehumanizing them, defining them as “Other” and forcing them to accept lower-status self-definitions.¹⁴ Racism never succeeded in actually making Black men internalize such self-definitions; yet dominant whites never gave up the attempt to impose them on slaves and later on freedmen.

That African-American men were well aware of the intended effect of this strategy can be seen in the Reconstruction period when they first claimed male privilege over their women as a symbol of their “manhood.” Black women were to render domestic and nurturant services to their own families only (a goal many of them understandably supported); black men were to be breadwinners; black men were to be able to protect their women from sexual assault by whites.¹⁵ One of the
marks of the failure of Reconstruction and of the continuing existence of the racist system was precisely that these goals were not realizable in the 19th-century South.

The importance of sexism as a means of enforcing racism can also be seen in the way racist double standards were used in the post-Civil War period to keep freedmen and later all southern Blacks in subordinate status despite the end of slavery. The rise of violence against black males and the sharp increase in lynchings, always excused as being "in defense of white womanhood," served to intimidate the free black community in the post-Reconstruction period and again at the turn of the century, when Blacks in the South were virtually disfranchised. It was African-American women in their clubs, and especially Ida B. Wells, who first uncovered the workings of this sexist-racist double standard and who exposed the falsity of the charge that white women needed protection from black men. Similarly, the history of the U.S. trade union movement abounds with evidence of the ways employers were able to exploit ethnic and racial differences among their work force in order to retard or prevent unionization, sometimes for decades. Racially or ethnically defined status privileges often induced white workers to act against their best economic self-interest, as did lower-class whites in the antebellum South.

The inter-relatedness of distinctions based on race, class, ethnicity, and sex is not so clearly demonstrable in contemporary industrial society as it is in the society of the antebellum South. Gender relations have undergone considerable change, and some of the more obvious male sexual privileges have altered under the impact of women's political struggle and economic changes. Men no longer have property rights in women and children; women have, at least on a formal level, equal access to education and are entitled to equality of political representation, even if they do not actually enjoy it in practice. Large numbers of women, except for the poor, now have access to economic resources directly, that is, not mediated through a man, although this does not hold for married women who are full-time homemakers. The control of women's reproductive resources is no longer exerted by individual men but instead by male-dominated institutions such as the courts, the state, the churches, and the medical professional establishment.

Still, in contemporary U.S.A, white males of elite groups continue to control the major corporations, the legal and political establishment, the news media, the academic establishment (despite some inroads made by women), the trade union movement, the churches. The economic dependency of women (and, with it, the basic inequality in access to and control of resources) continues. It is secured through the definition of heterosexuality as the norm; through gender-indoctrination; the continued existence of women's unpaid domestic labor and child-rearing services; the gender-based wage discrimination against women and their concentration in low-paid, temporary or dead-end service jobs. Male dominance and privilege are further expressed through the definition of professionalism to fit the male model and through the denial to women of professional career patterns suited to their life cycles. It also is manifested in sexual harassment on the job as a means of keeping women out of better jobs. Male control of women's sexuality and reproduction is now exerted through the politicization of issues of reproductive choice, the continuing growth of the pornography establishment, the sex industry and of prostitution, which, as it has been for millennia, is predominantly an occupation of lower-class women. The ever growing phenomenon of violence against women and children is another distorted and perverted form of male dominance.

All whites derive tangible benefits from racism, but such benefits vary by class and sex so that upper-class males benefit more from racism than do lower-class people of both sexes and upper-class women. Racism, by splitting people from one another, helps to prevent alliances of lower-class people which might effectively challenge the system. Racism gives the illusion of superiority to lower-class whites, which convinces them to support the dominant elites, often against their true economic interests.

The benefits to upper-and middle-class women of the race/class system are so tangible that it is easy for them to overlook and disregard its oppressive aspects, even to themselves. The gains made by women over a century of struggle have benefited upper-class women disproportionately. This group has control over its own property; it reaps the economic benefits of racism and classism and shares them with upper-class men. Women of this group share, even if on a lower level, the benefits of education and of opportunities for professional careers. Class and race privileges allow such women to fulfill their domestic and
child-rearing services by substituting another woman for themselves. Their economic independence allows them to define sexual relations in their own interest and to secure divorces without great economic loss. In short, it is their class privilege which helps them offset any disadvantages arising from their subordinate status as women.

The women less privileged economically are more vulnerable since they are in a worse bargaining position. For many middle- and lower-class women, gaining some economic independence by working means assuming the burden of a double working day. Such women are usually not in a position to support themselves and their children in case of divorce, which means they are unable to bargain for better conditions within their marriages or to make other choices. This is the large group of women of whom it can be said that they are "one man away from poverty." This is also the group of white women most committed against feminism since their security and economic opportunities seem to them entirely to rest on the maintenance of their marriages and the good will of the men with whom they are affiliated. Such women have a direct economic investment in maintaining their "respectability" against people of other races or ethnicities or against the most dangerous "Other"—non-respectable women. Black women of this economic group do not necessarily expect black men to support them and their children; thus, their attitude toward a feminism of their own definition is more positive than that of white women of the same economic class.'

In modern industrial society, the majority of the poor are women and children. The "feminization of poverty" is the modern expression of the multifaceted system of patriarchal dominance. Women become poor because they are abandoned by men; because they are oppressed by being in a lower class or a nonwhite race; because they are members of a "deviant" group (lesbians, drug users, handicapped, "immoral," single mothers) or because they are old. Modern society has created new adaptations for the old definitions of "Otherness," but the function of defining "Otherness" as deviance has not changed. It helps to raise the status of dominant males to define themselves against despised outgroups; such raised status perceptions secure the collaboration of middle- and lower-class people in the system that robs them of equity and justice.

Historians who understand the inter-relatedness of the various aspects of the system of patriarchal dominance are in a better position to interpret the history of women than are those who continue to regard class, race, and gender dominance as separate though intersecting and overlapping systems. The intellectual construct of separate systems inevitably marginalizes the subordination of women.

Race, class, and gender oppression are inseparable; the construct, reinforce, and support one another. The form which class first took historically was genderic and racist. The form racism first took was genderic and classist. The form the state first took was patriarchal. These are the starting points for re-conceptualization.

Above all, historians and teachers must consciously attempt to step outside of the vertical boxes of patriarchal thinking. We are not going to have an integrated history by being additive, nor by structuring a history of "upstairs and downstairs," "private and public," "production and reproduction." We will need to re-think the ways we organize what we teach in order to do justice to "differences" by making them central to our thinking. Just what does that mean concretely?

It means first of all, as I have shown in my example of antebellum history, that we should always vary our generalizations by creating an interactive contextual model which considers the ways in which factors of race, class, ethnicity, and sex are expressed in regard to men and women of the groups under discussion. It means also that we must use new strategies to organize the content of our teaching so as to make these issues visible.

If we teach a U.S. survey following a traditional textbook, the text will barely mention women. If we then simply "add" women, we have improved on this outline but not by much. The women we have added will either be women much like the men we talk about or they will look inferior by comparison with the men. To make women central to our conceptual framework, we must assume that what they do and think is equally important with what the men do and think. If we make such an assumption, we will ask about every unit we teach: what were the women doing while the men were doing what we are teaching? and, going an analytical step further, how did the women interpret what they were doing? This immediately changes the whole unit: we are now talking not only of a world populated by male actors and evaluated according to male standards, but we are talking of a world populated by male and female actors and evaluated by male and female standards.

Now let us see what happens when we make "difference" central to
our analysis. We can, of course, be additive, and I would guess that in most cases people who want to do justice to the varieties of ethnic and racial experiences are now teaching in that way: it was like this for European immigrants to the colonies, and it was like that for Native Americans, and like that for African-Americans—the old salad bowl approach. But what if we told the story of settlement not from the moment Columbus "discovered America," a statement and organization which immediately tell the students that what happened on American soil before that time was insignificant and that the arrival of this particular group of Spaniards is of more significance than earlier arrivals or the lives and activities of native peoples? We might start, instead, with the earliest records of Native Americans on this continent, with the way they lived and thought and acted, with their social organization—which was, in many cases, not patriarchal—with their religions, their economies, their values. We might then talk about the various groups of invaders consecutively, and we would be giving students a totally different perspective on the significance of the arrival of the little Spanish flotilla, which made its discovery only because of a navigational error. Following such an approach—which, by the way, already exists in some texts—we might then tell the story of the various decisive events in U.S. history with an equally-handed view. We would want to present not only different points of view—in each case drawing as much as possible on primary sources of the relevant groups—but we would want to represent accurately the power relations existing between the various groups as they interacted in the same place and time. Some teachers have already experimented with organizing women's history survey courses by starting with native American women and then moving, not from East to West, as traditional historiography does, but from West to East. Since settlement in the West actually antedates the development of English settlement in the East, this method has distinct advantages. It also builds a comparative approach into the very structure of the course.

All re-conceptualization must start with a new conceptual framework. We must have our goal firmly in mind and approach our task by finding new analytic questions. If we do this, the integration of new materials will not have to come at the expense of omitting something else of importance. Rather, the question will arise: why is this important and not that? It is not an easy task, and it will challenge the best of our collective minds and energies. But it is a worthwhile enterprise from every point of view. What we are trying to do is to create a holistic history in which men and women, in the various aspects of their lives, interact in various ways, reflecting the differences among them. The textured richness of such a reconstruction of the past depends on our ability to embrace difference, hear many languages, and see interdependencies rather than separation. Learning from female language and modes of perception, we will need to be relational, existential, and aware of our own involvement even as we use the male mode to categorize, order and analyze. The point is that the two modes always have been coexisting and complementary. We must adapt our own craft to that reality by ourselves becoming conscious and accepting of it.