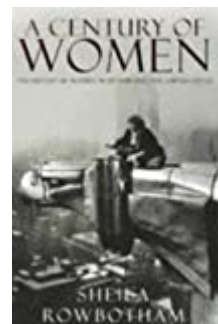


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sheila Rowbotham. *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States.* New York: Viking, 1997. xiv + 752 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-87420-0.



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Despite the “special relationship” between the United States and Britain, historians have tended to study these two societies in isolation. But comparative work can reward scholars with insights into similarities and differences in economic, political, and social structures—as well as in cultural developments. This potential heightens expectations of a survey of twentieth-century women’s history in the U.S. and Britain by Sheila Rowbotham, a historian well-known for her path-breaking feminist history and analysis. (For a recent example of a fruitful comparative history of the United States and Britain, see N. Kirk, *Labour and Society in Britain and the U.S.A.*, 2 vols. [Aldershot, Hants.: Scholar Press, 1994]).

Rowbotham recognizes the danger in simplistic generalizations. She avoids the pitfalls of a “whig” history celebrating the rise of women or an overly heroic view of feminist achievement. Instead, the author stresses diversity in women’s experiences across class, racial, and even political boundaries. While not ignoring feminist activism or the impact of social changes, she emphasizes the complex interactions and shifting definitions of the public and private concerns of women. Thus, she observes of the 1970’s in the United States: “It was a decade of choices. It was also a decade of confusion” (p. 459). Such observations reflect her complex vision.

A Century of Women is a rigorously structured work

built around chronological chapters, divided (except for the last) into separate sections on the United States and Britain. Each section considers, in turn, politics, work, daily life, and sexual relations. Miniature biographies of an extraordinary range of interesting and/or prominent women form an appendix.

Though this strict organization sounds stultifying, the book is quite engaging, due in part to Rowbotham’s effective use of individual examples. She seldom offers an observation without an individual’s story to make it concrete and interesting. A discussion of cinema’s influence in the 1950’s describes a British woman named Patricia Ogden, who cut her hair and dressed in styles imitating a series of movie stars, from Doris Day, to Jane Wyman, to Marilyn Monroe (p. 280). Individual women appear throughout the book, expressing opinions, struggling, or going along with the crowd.

Given her lack of reliance on a tidy story of progress, Rowbotham’s careful organization becomes essential. In stressing contingency and complexity, the author relies on this structure to guide the reader and focus the narrative, which it does effectively. Another strength lies in the book’s use of popular culture. Rowbotham is sensitive to the importance of commercialization and the mass media in shaping perceptions and self-perceptions of women.

The main shortcoming of the book lies in its failure to live up to the potential of comparative history. Though Rowbotham claims a "passion to assess what is similar and what is different" (p. 5), the book presents essentially parallel histories, occasionally mentioning trans-Atlantic influences. Only in the chapter on the first part of the 1990's, when the author abandons the separate treatments of the U.S. and Britain, are such comparisons explicit. Though Rowbotham offers the raw material for useful comparisons, the reader is generally left to draw them on his or her own.

Overall, Rowbotham presents a well-organized, read-

able survey of women's history in both the United States and Britain. In their political activity, work, daily lives, and sexual relationships, women have struggled to fulfill their needs and desires. These efforts have been successful sometimes and frustrated at others, but Rowbotham's book makes them consistently compelling.

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