

## **Women's History: a study in continuity and change**

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**ABSTRACT** In this response to Bridget Hill's viewpoint published in *Women's History Review*, 2, pp. 5-22, Judith Bennett argues that her position is more subtle and more nuanced than Hill's critique would suggest. Bennett defends the historiographical importance of re-assessing the place of continuity in women's history; she emphasizes the legitimate place of generalization in women's history; and she argues that patriarchy is a critical subject of investigation for feminist historians.

I have read Bridget Hill's essay on 'Women's history: a study in change, continuity or standing still?' with great interest, and despite her often harsh criticism of my own work, I welcome the dialogue that her essay opens.[1] As she has set up the contrast between her perspective and mine, we represent in perhaps acute forms the dual origins of women's history as it re-established itself in the 1960s and 1970s. In her emphasis on the importance of economic change in women's history, Hill reflects the critical influence of left and socialist ideologies in the development of feminism and women's history. In my own emphasis on patriarchal continuities in women's history, I reflect radical feminist theories which, while not uninfluenced by left and socialist thought, nevertheless have focussed more exclusively on gender relations and women's oppression. Needless to say, both feminism and women's history have developed far beyond this original dualism, and our field is now much enriched by (among others) black feminist thought, psychoanalytic feminism, postmodernism, studies of difference and equality, postcolonialism, and queer theory.[2] Yet Hill's essay suggests that at a basic level, we are still tussling over the old battles of the 1960s and 1970s: what matters more, sex oppression or class oppression?

Of course, what really matters is oppression in its many forms - by gender and class, to be sure, but also by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, world region, age, and the many other ways in which Western cultures have constructed privileged norms and unprivileged deviations. These oppressions

matter not only in the lived experiences of women and men today but also in our analyses of the past.[3] We must learn to juggle many differences in our studies of past societies, and we must learn, as Elsa Barkley Brown has recently argued so effectively, to write about these differences in new ways that show both relationality and equivalency.[4] These are critical new challenges that face women's history, and I wish to foreground them here, before turning to the other important challenges that shape the disagreements between Hill and me.

As I understand Hill's essay, it contains three main criticisms of my suggestion that the history of women has displayed much more continuity than historians have yet been prepared to admit. She objects to this thesis on historiographic grounds; she objects to the generalization entailed in tracing continuities across centuries, locales, and classes; and she objects to the historical study of patriarchy *per se*. I would like to deal with each of these criticisms in turn, but I must begin by emphasizing that Hill's essay presents an incomplete view of my own arguments about both continuity in women's history and the need to historicize patriarchy. Two facets of my position are absent from her presentation. First, Hill criticizes me for failing in 'History that stands still' to consider the circumstances of rural women who were, after all, the vast majority of women in pre-industrial Europe.[5] This criticism overlooks both the context of that essay and my own published work. 'History that stands still' was a review essay, and none of the books under review dealt with rural women. Nevertheless, I did address in this review the possibility that we might find "economic equality in the countryside outside medieval towns", and in rejecting this possibility, I briefly alluded to my own book (which, of course, I could not review) on *Women in the Medieval English Countryside*. [6] To judge from Hill's own footnotes, she has either not read this book or has chosen to ignore it. In any case, I wish to emphasize that it is only Hill's incomplete treatment of my research and writing that allows her to suggest that I have "summarily dismissed" women's work in the countryside.[7] Quite the opposite is true.

Second, Hill ignores a critical component of my argument about continuity in women's history. In an article published early in 1992, I systematically defended my position by carefully analyzing four indicators of women's work in England c. 1200-1700: the family economy; occupational segregation; guilds; and wage-work. Since Hill had this new article in hand before completing her critique, it is unfortunate that she decided to argue with my old work rather than to engage with my current work. 'Medieval women, modern women: across the great divide' sets out in considerable detail my observations about continuities in patterns of women's work, but I shall not repeat myself here. Instead, I urge readers of this exchange to read this article and to judge my position on that basis.[8]

Hill's first set of criticisms addresses the historiographical significance of my argument that historians have under-appreciated continuities in

women's history. Hill is primarily concerned that this argument unfairly amalgamates the work of earlier historians, and in this regard, she has provided us with a useful summary of the divergent historical viewpoints of Dorothy George, Ivy Pinchbeck, and Alice Clark. Unfortunately, she does not examine closely the work of earlier medievalists such as Eileen Power, Annie Abram, and Marian Dale, nor does she consider current historians such as Caroline Barron and Susan Cahn who speak unhesitatingly of a medieval "golden age" or "paradise" for women.[9] I have no wish to 'lump' historians of any generation into a single category, but the full historiography of women's work in the European past shows incontrovertibly that the idea of change-for-the-worse has a strong and powerful sway over the field. Hill's own book on *Women, Work, and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-century England* is a good example; she concludes in this study that "there seems little doubt that women lost out as far as opportunities for work are concerned".[10]

Two other historiographical concerns run more subtly through Hill's essay. Hill implies that historians like me cavalierly ignore the testimony of women in earlier times who thought that the conditions of their lives were worsening.[11] As a medievalist studying ordinary women through the restricted sources extant for that time, I seldom have the opportunity to assess the words of women themselves. When I do, I take such testimony seriously, but not at face value. Experience is neither unmediated nor pure; we understand what happens to us (and hence, arguably, even *experience* such happenings) through the lenses of our own histories, ideologies, and cultures. How women in the past interpreted their experiences is interesting and telling, but it is not necessarily the final word. Joan Scott has recently given us a postmodernist twist on the evidence of experience, but even without the insights of postmodernism, historians have long treated first-hand evaluations with skepticism and care.[12]

Hill also argues that my interpretations threaten to disempower women's history within the profession at large. Hill fears that if we emphasize continuity in women's history we will de-legitimize women as historical subjects. This is a fair concern, especially since some early opponents of women's history argued that women's lives were so unchanging that women have no history. But my arguments about continuity in the history of women are very different from the old view of women as "a static factor in social developments, a factor which, remaining itself essentially the same, might be expected to exercise a constant and unvarying influence on Society".[13] Women have certainly not been a static factor in history, for as the research of the last century has shown again and again, women's lives have been very diverse, and women's lives have changed over time. Instead of advocating an absurd notion of women as static and unvarying, I have argued that - despite these diversities and these changes in experiences - the *overall status* of women has not changed

nearly as much as we might like to imagine. As I put it in my analysis of women's work across the medieval/early modern divide, "Women's work certainly changed over these centuries, but it was not transformed".[14] Indeed, as Hill herself acknowledges at one point, I do not assert that there has been no change in women's lives; I have instead suggested that the pace of change, the motors of change, and the realities of change differ for women and men.[15]

Moreover, are we to react to this now old and hackneyed charge that "women have no history" by being afraid to talk about continuity as well as change? History, after all, is not just about change; it is about continuity too.[16] And if women's history has a larger measure of continuity than the histories of some other groups, that is intriguing but certainly not de-historicizing. Hill says that "some would say change and the reasons for change is [*sic*] what history is all about", and as I understand her argument, she would include herself in this camp. If so, I disagree with her. An exclusive emphasis in historical writing on change reflects the partial perspectives caused by focussing on élites and their politics; this is one of the fundamental critiques of traditional history associated with the *Annales* school (with their proposed distinction between *événements*, *conjunctures*, and *structures*). If we merely match the periodization of history written with a focus on men (and/or élites), we will write a colonized history. Hence, when Hill objects to the argument that feminist historians should "abandon traditional periodisation of history and invent their own", she might be locking women's history into a march of change-over-time that is more suited to the history of privileged men than it is to the history of ordinary women. In other words, in response to Hill's question, "Does this thesis leave any room for history?" I would have to answer "Yes, indeed, it makes room, for a better and diversified history that encompasses more people".[17]

In suggesting that my interpretations harm the professional placement of women's history, Hill also asserts that a focus on historicizing patriarchy will remove women's history from the mainstream of history and exacerbate the problem of its ghettoization within the larger discipline. No one will deny that the history of women still needs to be better integrated into older historical fields, but there are many strategies to achieve this objective. Louise Tilly argues that historians of women must address the central issues of social history; Joan Scott argues that we must use gender as a 'signifier of power' to bring feminist scholarship into all sectors of history (including political history); I argue that we must develop our own historical traditions so that we can meet other historical fields on equal terms.[18] None of these strategies alone is the right one; all of them (and doubtless others as well) will help us reach our goal.[19] In other words, we need to mount a multi-pronged attack against the biases of traditional history; the historical

study of patriarchy is, I would argue, a critical element of this complex strategy.

Hill's second main criticism concerns generalization; both implicitly and explicitly, she argues throughout the article that I (and anyone who would seek to historicize patriarchy) treat women as a "homogeneous mass".[20] There is, however, a critical inconsistency in Hill's position on this score. Although she maligns me for generalizing too readily, she praises Alice Clark for the "scope and vision" of her work "without [whose] generalization much of the present work on particular industries, towns, and localities would never have got started".[21] I submit that in this instance what was good for history in 1919 is good for history in 1993 as well; we need broad overviews – such as Clark's assertion of a decline in women's work with the advent of industrial capitalism and such as my assertion of extraordinary continuities in women's work across the centuries – to stimulate further research. As historians, we work always on two levels; we seek to understand the particularities of past lives, but we also quite rightly seek to place those lives in broader context. At this second level of work, generalization might be risky, but it is also (as Hill herself admits) both proper and useful.[22]

Yet how should this generalization occur? Since 1919, we have learned a great deal about differences among women, and we have slowly come to appreciate that these differences are not mere divergences from a white, middle-class, heterosexual, female norm. The differences that matter (e.g. race, class, sexual orientation, world region) are differences signified by vast imbalances of power, and we must not replicate these power imbalances in our own writing of history.[23] How, then, do we generalize without also re-colonizing the less powerful? Elsa Barkley Brown has suggested that we begin to write history less as if it were a classical music score and more like jazz, more like "various voices in a piece of music [that] may go their own ways but still be held together by their relationship to each other".[24] This is easier said than done, but we must try.

Nevertheless, as we study the relationality inherent to differences among women, we must not forget the relationality inherent to differences between women and men. And while jazz might be appropriate to the former, perhaps a classical composition – containing a single but complex theme – remains best for the latter.[25] Some women have more capital or status than some men; some women wield more political power than some men; some women enjoy racial or sexual privileges denied to some men. But within each group of men and women – whether the group is structured by commonalties of race, class, sexuality, or whatever – women as a group are disempowered compared to *men of their group*. Peasant women in the middle ages held much less land in their villages than did men; African-American women under slavery were subject to more violence and sexual harassment than were African-American men; lesbian households

today are much poorer than the households of gay men. We might argue about whether this disempowerment of women *vis-à-vis* comparable men has always been the case, but certainly it has *usually* been the case. Indeed, it has been the case so usually and so often that it is, I would argue, a continuous problem worthy of hard historical study and worthy of careful historical generalization.[26] In so doing, I might be highlighting a difference between women and men, but I am not thereby obscuring differences among women. Indeed, differences among women are (as I argued in 'Feminism and history') "absolutely crucial to our understanding of historical patriarchy".[27]

In her third objection to my work, Hill attacks my advocacy of the feminist project to historicize patriarchy. As Hill tells it, our disagreement amounts to a simple dichotomy; she thinks economic changes have transformed women's lives in the past, and I think (in her view) that patriarchal forces have kept women in unvarying subordination and oppression. This dichotomy rests, however, on a simplistic rendering of my arguments (and the work of others who have built on these arguments).[28] First, Hill suggests that my perspective ignores "everything except gender" and seeks to create a "hierarchy" in which gender is ranked above race and class.[29] Second, she suggests that my focus on historicizing patriarchy places all blame on men and all virtue on women. Third, she suggests that my viewpoint completely ignores economic forces. And fourth, she suggests that my focus on patriarchal continuity treats women's experiences as static and unchanging.

I object to all of these characterizations (as well as to others too minor and numerous to mention), and I ask that readers consult my article on 'Feminism and history' to reach their own conclusions on what I argue there about the historicizing of patriarchy. You will find that I discuss in that article a need for better consideration of the diversity of women's experiences - consideration that not only encompasses differences beyond those of "race, class and gender" but also avoids ranking any characteristic above another.[30] You will find that I consider at length how women have co-operated and colluded in our own oppression and how "[w]omen's agency *per se* is a part of the strength of patriarchy". You will find that I advocate looking at how patriarchal structures have interacted with economic systems, even going so far as to suggest that "we might someday be able to distinguish analytically, say, 'feudal patriarchy' from 'capitalist patriarchy' from 'socialist patriarchy'". And you will find that I explicitly reject the idea that patriarchy is a static force, arguing instead that "patriarchy clearly has existed in many forms and varieties, and its history will, in fact, be a history of many different historical patriarchies".[31]

Perhaps more telling than Hill's specific misreadings of my argument in 'Feminism and history' is the vehemence of her objection to the project of historicizing patriarchy.[32] Why does it provoke such mis-representations

from a distinguished scholar? Why can't it be tolerated as yet another approach to women's history? Why must it be attacked again and again with the same old hoary arguments?[33] I might just be cantankerous, but when I encounter such strong reactions to a feminist project (and Hill is certainly not alone in the intensity of her reactions), I think, "Well, I really might be on to something". Patriarchy seems to be a lightning rod, a concept that attracts so much fear and loathing that it cannot, for some people, be treated in a rational and moderate fashion. As long as this is the case, we will treat the historical study of patriarchy as taboo, we will fail to understand its workings, and we will be subject to its power. In other words, the power of patriarchal forces in our lives today rests, in part, on our failure to historicize it. As long as we are afraid to name patriarchy and to study its workings (afraid because it seems to blame men, or suggests more continuity than we would like, or deemphasizes the traditional power of economic change in history), we will not understand critical aspects of the subordination of women in the past, present, and future. And as long as we do not fully understand the subordination of women in the past, present, and future, the lives of both women and men will continue to be twisted by the perverse power of patriarchal institutions.[34]

I do not think that I will convince Bridget Hill by my arguments here, but I hope I have clarified for readers my own position. History is always imperfect, always unfinished, always unended. Recognizing the inevitable fallibility of our common work as historians, I hope that this exchange between Bridget Hill and me, although perhaps more discordant than harmonious, takes all of us on to new and better studies of women in past times. We will do this best, I think, if we recognize that our feminist colleagues are seldom "wrong" or "a-historical" or "insidious" or inspired by "contempt" for the past; they are merely, like all of us, articulating ideas that are always, at best, just partial truths.[35]

### *Acknowledgments*

I would like to thank Cynthia Herrup and Nancy Hewitt for careful readings of an early draft of this reply. Needless to say, the opinions expressed here are my own, not theirs.

### **Notes**

- [1] B. Hill (1993) Women's history: a study in change, continuity or standing still?, *Women's History Review*, 2, pp. 5-22 (hereafter cited by author alone). Although I shall focus in this response on Hill's specific remarks about my own work, I do not mean to suggest thereby either that Hill's essay was directed against me alone or that I agree with Hill's criticisms of other historians. Yet as her essay seems to be directed largely against some of my arguments (what she

at one point labels “the Bennett thesis”), it seems fair to respond specifically to these critiques.

- [2] Of course, feminism in the 1960s and 1970s was also influenced by other ideologies, especially (in the USA) liberalism. Queer theory, as a very recent and largely US-based phenomenon, might not yet be widely known elsewhere. For an introduction to some of the work pursued under this rubric, see the special issue of *Differences: a journal of feminist cultural studies* edited by Teresa de Lauretis, 3(2), 1991.
- [3] It is, I believe, dangerously easy for historians working in pre-industrial or pre-modern societies to conclude that although we need to be sensitive to issues of class and gender, we can ignore other factors – such as race. We should beware of such easy dismissals. For a useful corrective on this score, see Tessie Liu (1991) Teaching the differences among women from a historical perspective, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 14, pp. 265-276. Needless to say, all of these modern forms of oppression must be historically situated and historically understood. For example, I am not suggesting that theories derived from modern race relations in the West can be readily applied to the European middle ages, but I am suggesting that historians need to consider more fully the influence of race in medieval society.
- [4] Elsa Barkley Brown (1991) Polyrhythms and improvisation: lessons for women’s history, *History Workshop Journal*, 31, pp. 85-90 and (1992) ‘What has happened here’: the politics of difference in women’s history and feminist politics, *Feminist Studies*, 18, pp. 295-312.
- [5] Hill, p. 12.
- [6] Quote from J. M. Bennett (1988) ‘History that stands still’: women’s work in the European past, *Feminist Studies*, 14, p. 279. J. M. Bennett (1987) *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: gender and household in Brigstock before the plague* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- [7] Hill, p. 12. It is difficult to gauge the extent of Hill’s charge of a summary dismissal. On the one hand, she suggests in this paragraph that she is writing about all of my work, about my “thesis of continuity”. On the other hand, she treats only my first discussion of this possibility, i.e. my review essay on ‘History that stands still’. In any case, I think that most readers would conclude from Hill’s remarks that I have ignored rural women not only in this review essay but throughout my work; this would be an erroneous conclusion.
- [8] J. M. Bennett (1992) Medieval women, modern women: across the great divide, in D. Aers (Ed.) *Culture and History, 1350-1600: essays on English communities, identities and writing*, pp. 147-175 (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf). An abridged version of this essay is forthcoming in A. L. Shapiro (Ed.) *Feminists (Re)vision History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press).
- [9] E. Power (1926) The position of women, in C. G. Crump & E. F. Jacob (Eds) *The Legacy of the Middle Ages*, pp. 403-433 (New York: Oxford University Press). A. Abram (1916) Women traders in medieval London, *Economic Journal*, 26, pp. 276-285. M. K. Dale (1933) The London silkwomen of the fifteenth century, *Economic History Review*, 1st series, 4, pp. 324-335. C. Barron (1989) The

- 'golden age' of women in medieval London, *Medieval Women in Southern England* (Reading: Reading Medieval Studies, 15), pp. 35-58. S. Cahn (1987) *Industry of Devotion: the transformation of women's work in England, 1500-1660* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- [10] B. Hill (1989) *Women, Work, and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-century England*, p. 263 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).
- [11] Hill, pp. 5-6, 11.
- [12] J.W. Scott (1991) The evidence of experience, *Critical Inquiry*, 17, pp. 773-797.
- [13] Hill, quoted Alice Clar objecting to this view, p. 13.
- [14] Bennett, 'Medieval women, modern women', p. 164. My point here might best be appreciated by considering the origins of the title for my original review essay about continuity. I borrowed the notion of "history that stands still" from Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's inaugural lecture at the Collège de France. In that lecture, Le Roy Ladurie - looking primarily at the demographic and agricultural history of France between 1300 and 1700 - argued that despite much change and much fluctuation, "For all the apparent movement, things had really stayed much the same". He added later that "Virtual stability does not mean immobility". See E. Le Roy Ladurie (1978) *History that stands still, The Mind and Method of the Historian*, esp. pp. 21-22 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- [15] Hill, pp. 18-19.
- [16] 'Continuity' is an important theme in historical writing of all types; indeed, it is often paired with 'change' to create what is probably the most popular dyad in historical titles. In the library catalogue at my university, for example, I found this dyad in two journals (*Continuity and Change* and *Change and Continuity in Africa*) and in more than 50 books published in the last 30 years alone.
- [17] Quotes from Hill, pp. 13, 5, 17. For an early discussion of traditional periodization and women's history, see J. Kelly (1976) The social relation of the sexes: methodological implications of women's history, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1, pp. 809-823.
- [18] L. Tilly (1989) Gender, women's history and social history, *Social Science History*, 13, pp. 439-462 (see also comments by Gay Gullickson and me and a response by Tilly on pp. 463-480 of the same issue). J. W. Scott (1988) *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press). J. Bennett (1989) Feminism and history, *Gender and History*, 1, pp. 251-272.
- [19] In this regard I would like to correct two misrepresentations contained in Hill's statement (p. 18), "To insist that only those historians of women who keep patriarchal oppression central to their work are of any worth is, as Lyndal Roper has said, 'a recipe for conservatism, a holding on to the moral certainties of a past historical moment'". First, I have never argued that only historians who study patriarchy are "of any worth". I think I am now more tolerant of different approaches than when I wrote 'Feminism and history', but even then I stated quite clearly my hope that historians not "quit studying the historical intersection of race, class, gender, and other related factors, or cut short their

search for the meanings of gender, or curtail their efforts to deal with general historical questions". Bennett, 'Feminism and history', p. 259. Second, Roper does not necessarily agree with my arguments, but in the section quoted by Hill she was talking about feminism in general, not feminist history, not my own particular take on it, and certainly not the notion that women's historians must study only patriarchy. Roper wrote, "Implicitly, feminists now are exhorted to maintain feminist conviction, as if by an effort of will the women's movement can be kept alive. But this can also be a recipe for a politics of conservatism, a holding on to the moral certainties of a past historical moment". As I read Roper, her comments are not directly relevant to Hill's point. See Roper's contribution to a discussion about 'What Should Women's History Be Doing?' *Newsletter of the Conference Group on Women's History*, 21 (1990), p. 25.

[20] Hill, p. 7.

[21] Hill, p.10.

[22] Let me add two further points about Hill's discussion of generalization in history. First, when Hill (p. 7) cites Wiesner as stating that "generalizations which lump all women together are very dangerous", she does not provide the full context. In the same paragraph, Wiesner goes on to conclude that "More often, however, no matter how much variation there was among women, the fact that they were women was the most important determinant of what work they would do". M. Wiesner (1986) *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, p. 35 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press). (Hill mis-represents Wiesner's work a second time on p. 13 where she mis-identifies Wiesner as Wiesen and attributes to her a quotation that actually belongs to Teresa McBride.) Second, Hill also rather inconsistently argues that behind my work lies "the assumption that comparisons are bad" (p. 11). Obviously, in order to generalize, I have had to compare; indeed, comparison is at that very heart of my argument about continuity in women's history. In fact, Hill later maligns me for comparing the conclusions of Merry Wiesner and Martha Howell since, in her view, they are not "discussing the same thing" (p. 12). This is a specious objection; as the titles of their books suggest, Wiesner and Howell both formulated from their specific studies general conclusions about the history of *women's work* in *European cities* during the *medieval/modern transition*; these general conclusions can quite properly be compared and contrasted. Hill's cavil suggests that Wiesner and Howell do not generalize their findings (which, of course, they do) and then asserts that my comparison of their generalizations is illegitimate (which, of course, it is not).

[23] Two essays I have found to be particularly useful in this regard are: R. R. Pierson (1991) Experience, difference, dominance and voice in the writing of Canadian women's history, in K. Offen, R. R. Pierson & J. Rendall (Eds) *Writing Women's History*, pp. 79-106 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), and C. T. Mohanty (1991) Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses, in C. T. Mohanty, A. Russo & L. Torres (Eds) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, pp. 51-80 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

[24] Lawrence Levine as quoted in Barkley Brown, 'Polyrhythms', p. 85.

- [25] Barkley Brown has characterized classical music as requiring “silence – of the audience, of all the instruments not singled out as performers in this section, even of any alternative visions than the composer’s”. I do not want to indulge in an argument about musical metaphors with Barkley Brown, but the classical compositions I envision are different from her characterizations – they are more various and more accommodating of alternatives, but they are nevertheless composed around a central theme. I think that we must learn to talk about differences between women and men (differences that are, I would argue, characterized by patriarchal domination) while nevertheless remaining attuned to the diverse meanings and relationalities of differences among women.
- [26] I wish to emphasize that in generalizing about the oppression of women, I am not disagreeing with Barkley Brown’s statement in ‘Polyrhythms’ that “all women do not have the same gender” (p. 88). A woman’s gender – what it *means* to be a woman – has varied enormously across time, place, social stratum, sexuality, and even personality. This is, of course, the point made so forcefully in Denise Riley (1988) *Am I that Name? Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History* (London: Macmillan). I agree with Barkley Brown and Riley about these important differences among women and these important different meanings of ‘women’, but I also see a common ground in the positioning of all these female genders against male genders. In this sense, there is a very important difference between generalization and totalization.
- [27] Bennett, ‘Feminism and history’, p. 266.
- [28] Hill’s essay includes, of course, a long critique of an essay by Honeyman & Goodman which she considers to be an ‘echo’ of my own work (p. 14). I do not know these authors, and I am not, of course, responsible for their findings (which both build on and also reject my own work). In any case, although I think that Hill’s explication of their argument is not entirely fair, I will not deal here with that essay and Hill’s comments on it.
- [29] Hill, pp. 13, 18.
- [30] As I understand Hill’s argument on this score, she conflates two discrete issues: (1) whether factors such as race, class, and gender should be ranked analytically and (2) whether the study of patriarchal oppression should be central to women’s history. I reject the former and embrace the latter. I would like to emphasize that my advocacy of historicizing patriarchy does not mean, as Hill claims, that I believe that class and race are of “secondary importance ... among factors making any crucial difference to women’s work role” (p. 13, a charge repeated on p. 17).
- [31] For specific points and quotes, see Bennett, ‘Feminism and history’, pp. 257-258, 263, 261.
- [32] See, for example, Hill’s characterization of a focus on patriarchy as “harping on about [men] as the sole offenders” (p. 19).
- [33] For example, Hill cites Sheila Rowbotham’s objections to the study of patriarchy made in 1979, i.e. a very long time ago in terms of the development of feminist theory. Rowbotham’s concerns were immediately answered by Sally Alexander & Barbara Taylor in a response not cited by Hill. See their (1979) In defence of

patriarchy, reprinted in R Samuel (Ed.) *People's History and Socialist Theory*, pp. 370-373 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).

- [34] In contrast to Hill, I think that this project can be undertaken not only with subtlety and complexity but also without ignoring economic forces. Some of the best theorizing about patriarchy to date has been done by S. Walby (1990) *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell). See also G. Lerner (1986) *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- [35] Hill, pp. 5, 7. J. Hall (1989) 'Partial truths', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14, pp. 902-911.