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Introduction

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AHR Forum
**Revisiting “Gender:
A Useful Category of Historical Analysis”**

Introduction

Over the last four decades, feminist scholars have contributed immeasurably to our understanding of the past, deepening our sense of what history means, widening the purview of what history can be, and redefining the very categories of historical analysis. No one has contributed more in this last sense than Joan W. Scott. Her article “Gender: A Useful Category of History Analysis,” which appeared in the December 1986 issue of the *American Historical Review*, presented a sophisticated argument, using poststructuralist and psychoanalytical theories for how we should think of “gender,” and warning us against the fixed or essentialist views that the term has often implied.

Over the years, Scott’s article has become canonical, one of the most oft-cited in all of contemporary historical literature, a staple on readings lists and syllabi, and a model for scholars wishing to reshape our analytical discourse. As Joanne Meyerowitz notes in her contribution to this Forum, since JSTOR began putting journal articles online, “Gender” has consistently attracted the most traffic among *AHR* articles. It has been accessed more than 38,000 times; more than 25,000 copies have been printed. We like to think that all of the articles in this journal have an impact on historical thinking, but there are few which have had this kind of reach and influence for both students and scholars alike.

In view of its importance and impact, we decided to commission five essays from historians with different chronological and geographical orientations to reflect on the influence of Scott’s article in their fields. If nothing else, the essays in this Forum demonstrate not only the importance of her contribution, but also the ways in which its impact has been felt differently and to different degrees in various fields. Joanne Meyerowitz looks at Scott’s piece in the context of U.S. history in “A History of ‘Gender.’” Heidi Tinsman approaches it from the field of Latin American history in “A Paradigm of Our Own: Joan Scott in Latin American History.” A response from the perspective of Eastern European history is provided by Maria Bucur in “An Archipelago of Stories: Gender History in Eastern Europe.” A consideration from a European historian of the Middle Ages, Dyan Elliot, is offered in “The Three Ages

of Joan Scott.” And Wang Zheng and Gail Hershatter give us an Asian perspective in “Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis.” The Forum concludes with “Unanswered Questions” by Joan Scott, in which she reflects upon her original piece, its genesis and reception, responds to some of the points raised by the participants in this Forum, and offers some further comments on the “usefulness” of gender as a category of historical analysis.