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Research in urban history: recent Ph.D. theses on gender and the city, 1550–2000

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Since the first outcries from feminist historians in the early 1970s against the absence of women as historical subjects, tangible progress has been made towards the inclusion of both female and male identities and experiences in historical research. The definition of gender as a 'category of analysis' brought about a small revolution in historical research, especially in social, economic and, more recently, cultural history.[1] Traditional narratives about the marginal economic role of women or their limited participation in the public sphere have subsequently been re-evaluated and new hypotheses about people's gendered experiences have emerged. This growing interest in the formation and influence of gender identities is also increasingly discernible in urban history, where gender analysis has proven to be of particular relevance in understanding men's and women's use of urban space and, vice versa, the ways that the urban environment shaped the construction of people's gendered identities.

Initial research on the relationship between gender and urban history tended to focus on women's history and often on capital cities, following the methodological trend established in the 1960s by 'history from below'.[2] Studies showed that men's and women's history differed and that women's experience of the city often followed a different temporal and socio-economic pattern from that of men. However, recent studies show that gender analysis goes further than a simple binary opposition between men and women.[3] We have reached a new stage in research on gender and urban history: as well as re-interpreting traditional narratives on men and women's historical relations, doctoral researchers have also re-evaluated gender theories by challenging their relevance in new and alternative urban settings, including market towns and medium-sized cities; there is also, as we shall see, emerging interest in gendered urban history in China and Africa. Over the past decade, three main trends in

[1] See for example J. Scott, 'Gender: a useful category of historical analysis', *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), 1053–76.
[2] For example, T. Henderson, *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London* (London, 1999).
[3] Scott, 'Gender: a useful category of historical analysis', 1064.

urban history have emerged, each going against traditional narratives of women's economic roles, the gendered use of urban space and concepts of migration and integration. Each of these trends has incorporated gender into its analytical framework and they are often interconnected, especially when the notion of urban identity is taken into account.[4] The influence of cultural history in these trends is particularly important: most of the Ph.D.s reviewed in this article either demonstrate the creation of a new identity or sub-culture born from the interactions between people and their urban environment, or examine the adaptation of a specific gendered culture to the city. In addition, doctoral researchers are demonstrating a keen interest in smaller cities and towns, giving us the opportunity to generate larger datasets of urban environments and their populations. The possibilities of comparative historical research are therefore greatly enhanced and it is hoped that more comparative studies will followed along these and other emerging research trends.

Gender and the market towns

The prevalence of research on small towns and secondary cities is particularly visible for England, where theses on the role of men and women in the socio-economic development of market towns have multiplied over recent years. Harriet Martineau wrote in April 1859 in the *Edinburgh Review*, 'We go on talking as if it were still true that every woman is, or ought to be, supported by her father, brother or husband ... we are (probably to a man) unaware of the amount of the business life in England done by women.'[5] A long-term overview of trading practices in provincial England can now be drawn from recent Ph.D.s, which complement the existing studies of Katrina Honeyman and Amy Louise Erickson.[6] Honeyman and Erickson highlighted the importance of women in the industrializing labour market and questioned the relevance of the concept of separate spheres in the English middle class. Traditional economic narratives on women's work and independence in the market economy were left shaken and recent Ph.D. theses continue to undercut various historical assumptions, in particular on the subject of the moral and economic value of women's work to urban growth.

David Pennington, in 'Women in the market place: gender, commerce and social relations in early modern English towns' (University of St

[4] See also M. Neale, 'Research in urban history: recent theses on crime in the city, 1750–1900', *Urban History*, 40 (2013), 567–77, especially his comments on M. Abraham, 'The summary courts and the prosecution of assault in Northampton and Nottingham, 1886–1931', University of Leicester Ph.D. thesis, 2011, and M. Pluskota, 'Prostitution in Nantes and Bristol, 1750–1815: a comparative study', University of Leicester Ph.D. thesis, 2011, both of which examine the relationship between gender and crime in the city.

[5] Quoted in J. Ayto, 'The contribution by women to the social and economic development of the Victorian towns of Hertfordshire', University of Hertfordshire Ph.D. thesis, 2012, 5.

[6] K. Honeyman, *Woman, Gender and Industrialisation in England 1700–1870* (Basingstoke, 2000); A.L. Erickson, 'Coverture and capitalism', *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), 1–16.

Louis, 2007), argues that women eagerly seized the new commercial opportunities offered in provincial market towns. As well as constantly dealing in goods in the town market, women also set up in business and supervised commercial transactions. Studying Cambridge and Oxford University court records, Pennington shows that women, of different civil status, performed various active roles in the market economy of these provincial towns. They responded to the development of a consumer society by working as brokers (hucksters) and second-hand goods traders; other women tended a stall or kept a shop. These occupations gave them a direct influence over their household economy and the market place in general. Pennington notes that 'occupational structure was not as clearly gendered as feminist interpretations of women's work suggest' (p. 5). Indeed, in an attempt to maximize the resources of their household, women willingly entered the market economy with their husband's approval. Though legally the concept of *feme covert* also applied to business transactions, the close-knit community of the market town judged women on both their sexual and economic honesty. Whilst contemporary literature advised that a 'domesticated' wife (p. 17) should stay at home and remain in the private sphere – an ideal reminiscent of the Victorian paragon of the 'angel in the house' – the discrepancy between ideal and practice was already visible in the early modern period. Pennington thus confirms Erickson's findings: women were not necessarily dependent upon men; on the contrary, despite the complexities of their legal status, women became business entrepreneurs and had a significant role to play in the market economy.

Catherine Dack covers a similar theme in 'Urbanization and the middling sorts in Derbyshire market towns: Ashbourne and Wirksworth, 1660–1830' (University of Leicester, 2010). Dack takes a relational approach to illustrate how men and women used the economic opportunities of market towns to their advantage to enter the middle class and consolidate their membership of 'the middling sort'. In consequence, the dynamic middle class who dominated the economy of these small provincial towns had an impact on their sphere of influence and was directly involved in the urban renaissance in both centres. Focusing the research on Ashbourne and Wirksworth, small towns of fewer than 5,000 inhabitants in 1700, was clearly not an easy task. Dack, however, shows how the first-rate functions of the towns (such as banking, superior retailing or education) increased their importance at a provincial level and subsequently brings to light the relatively unknown world of market town middle classes and their culture of enterprise. As Pennington demonstrates for the earlier period, Dack similarly shows how women's initiatives and independence in business ventures (from shopkeepers to more unusual employment such as horse-collar making) should not be overlooked; although some businesses faced bankruptcy, women's appropriation of wealth increased considerably over time in both these towns.

Although small towns have generated much recent attention, larger industrial towns inevitably continue to attract interest. For example, Jennifer Aston's thesis, 'Female business owners in England, 1849–1901' (University of Birmingham, 2012), is mainly based on Birmingham and Leeds archives and continues a long-standing comparative interest in these two industrial behemoths. Aston questions the significance of feminine trades and female business identity in nineteenth-century industrial cities and comes to a conclusion similar to that of the previous studies: women used their position as business owners to enter fully the consumer society and work independently to reach and maintain a middle-class status. Thus, Aston contradicts Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's argument that, after the mid-nineteenth century, middle-class women who openly engaged in business activities faced losing their social status.[7] Women (married women as well as widows and single women) were recognized by their neighbours and peers as owners of influential economic assets, with a preponderant role to play in the urban economy.

Parallel to Aston's work, albeit with a focus on smaller towns again, is Jennifer Ayto's thesis, 'The contribution by women to the social and economic development of the Victorian towns of Hertfordshire' (University of Hertfordshire, 2012). Ayto focuses on the employment of women and the philanthropic role played by middle-class women in Hertford and Hitchin, as well as the relations between men and women in organizing and supervising charitable actions, a very 'visible' share of the public sphere (p. 11). Ayto demonstrates that married women's occupations most likely went under-recorded and concludes that their economic assets must have been larger than assumed by the existing historiography. Besides, women of the middle and upper middle classes were heavily involved in fundraising and missionary actions in their parish and supported schooling initiatives for the lower classes. Names and good deeds of prominent male members of both towns were usually recorded, as opposed to the actions of their wives, and, because of this, women's impact on provincial development has often been overlooked. Ayto's argument thus confirms Robert Shoemaker's argument regarding separate spheres discourse: whilst women were not bound to their home, they were restricted in their public participation and representation in the public sphere.[8] Indeed, Ayto concludes that although elite and middle-class men were officially in charge of local government, women's initiatives were crucial for both town councils' efforts to cope with emerging urban issues.

Our knowledge of middle-class women's economic roles from the early modern period until the beginning of the twentieth century has been greatly improved by these Ph.D.s. Moreover, they have also renewed

[7] L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes, Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London, 1987).
[8] R.B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society 1650–1850* (Harlow, 1998), 307–17.

interest in the socio-economic development of market towns. By analysing their development through a gendered approach, this points towards a re-evaluation of the importance of market towns within the provincial urban hierarchy. Furthermore, these theses reveal an additional pattern in women's urban experiences: far from being relegated to the domestic sphere, middle-class women performed both a philanthropic and an economic role that they publicly shared with men, even if their contribution often went unrecorded or unremarked. This conclusion supports Amanda Vickery's long-established findings that the reality of the permeable boundaries between private and public spheres for women illustrates the impossibility of living a confined domestic life.[9] Historians long ago agreed that working-class women could not submit to a life of domesticity, as they needed to provide for the household as well. Similarly, elite women, because of their social status, had many 'civic duties' to perform in public, giving them a certain influence and, to a certain extent, political agency.[10] The idea of a public sphere closed off to women's involvement has been effectively challenged.[11] Historians assumed that the middle classes were in a position to defend and apply the concept of the 'angel in the house', or that, in the case of employment, the position of women was considered to be secondary and their voice rarely heard. However, this assumption continues to be re-evaluated in the light of the recent conclusions brought by these theses.[12]

Sexual identities and urban space

Moving away from the history of English towns and the economic role of women, recent years have also seen the emergence of interest in the relationship between the urban environment and the definition of one's sexual identity.[13] This is very well demonstrated by Wesley Chenault in his thesis, 'An unspoken past: Atlanta lesbian and gay history, 1940–1970' (University of New Mexico, 2008). By studying Atlanta, Chenault

[9] A. Vickery, 'Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), 383–414; A. August, 'How separate a sphere? Poor women and paid work in late-Victorian London', *Journal of Family History*, 19 (1994), 285–309.

[10] See also the convincing work of R. Carr, 'Gender, national identity and political agency in eighteenth-century Scotland', University of Glasgow Ph.D. thesis, 2008, which follows a political and cultural history perspective to analyse elite women's role in shaping Scottish national politics.

[11] S.J. Morgan, *A Victorian Woman's Place: Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 2007).

[12] C. Hall, *White, Male and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (London, 1992).

[13] M. Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957* (Chicago, 2005); N. Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley, 2003); N. Boyd, *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (New York, 2012); E.A. Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950–1994* (Chicago, 2003).

highlights the lives and experiences of homosexuals in a city with a complex socio-ethnic status. In terms of location, we are also beginning to see the same trend as mentioned previously: the historiographical focus is switching from large capital cities to provincial towns and cities, built with their own sets of characteristics, in an attempt to gain an alternative understanding of the general narratives. In this case, Chenault avoids New York and San Francisco, well known for their homosexual communities, to study Atlanta, which was, in the mid-twentieth century, a conservative city, representing the Deep South and faced with strong racial tensions and discrimination, even after the end of segregation. World War II opened a large employment market in a city which was still strongly connected to the rural world. Rural southerners, both men and women, were attracted by the opportunities that the new economic developments offered, but migrating to the city meant that they had to redefine their identity. This transition from rural traditions to a more modern and independent urban life meant that rural migrants had to adapt, whilst putting their own mark on the urban landscape (i.e. through the general patterns of suburbanization and commuting in a sprawling city). At a more micro scale, Chenault also maps homosexuals' movements and their use of urban space, 'emphasizing the significance of place and mobility' (p. 7) in creating and strengthening networks and, eventually, encouraging the emergence of a new culture. The importance of transport, such as the motor-car, eased the connections between suburbs and centre, as well as surrounding rural and urban areas, and facilitated a faster reconfiguration of new cultural trends. The use of private cars, as well as different types of public transport, allowed the crossing of spatial and, at times, racial barriers. The ease of transportation allowed the building up of more extensive social networks. By focusing on the use of urban space to explain people's experiences during McCarthyism, Chenault successfully demonstrates that, contrary to the historiography which depicts homosexuals as constantly oppressed, the gay and lesbian communities of Atlanta also managed to live thriving lives, to have ties with the church and to be socially integrated into the city.

Douglas Winkler makes a similar argument in 'Lavender sons of Zion: a history of gay men in Salt Lake City, 1950–1979' (University of Utah, 2008). Salt Lake City was also considered a medium-sized city in which both urban and rural elements combined to produce a complex social mix. The Mormons' influence was increasingly felt under McCarthyism and homosexuality became a synonym for a threat to the nation's morality. Winkler associates the gay subculture present in Salt Lake City with the existence of a close-knit community which met in specific places in the city, as Chenault also highlights in Atlanta. Belonging to a community also meant being aware of the specific uses of urban space and the double meaning of certain urban sites: for example, the possibility of 'cruising' in the library corridors was common knowledge from the 1930s until the end

of the 1970s. In Salt Lake City, as in Atlanta, we see how urban behaviour influenced the identity of migrants, but also how, in return, the members of different communities used and changed the urban landscape and its meaning to their own advantage.

To a certain extent, Pablo Ben's thesis, 'Male sexuality, the popular classes and the state: Buenos Aires, 1880–1955' (University of Chicago, 2009), follows a similar approach. He studies the sexual behaviour and cultural identity of newly arrived male migrants in Buenos Aires between 1880 and 1930, and argues that the disproportionate number of men migrating to the capital city led to homosexual behaviours due to the absence of women (or at least of potential wives). The unstable job market in this fast-expanding city also had an impact on labouring men's behaviour: because of the difficulty of finding a stable job, family sociability was not encouraged and men tended to live together rather than trying to build a family. Some men also left their wives in the countryside. According to Ben, the 1930s offered greater economic stability, which meant that family sociability was able to emerge. Consequently, homosexual encounters remained the activity of a smaller and gradually secluded group, whilst plebeian sociability centred again on the family. The sexual behaviour of the young migrants was shaped in the city's male spaces of sociability, where penetrative sex with another man was part of the plebeian definition of masculinity.

This combination of the history of sexuality and gender with urban history is a very promising field. First, it opens up the possibility of studying the uses of urban space by different sexual groups. Secondly, it also paves the way for research into how the planning or building of the urban environment has been influenced by the perceived need for sexual regulation (see, for example, the building and opening of *tippelzones* in the Netherlands, where kerb crawling is allowed and encounters with prostitutes are eased by the facilities in place).[14] The reputation of a city is also affected by the common knowledge of the sexual orientation and behaviour of its residents, which can have a direct impact on tourism and permanent migration. Since the nineteenth century and the increase of social and economic segregation within the urban environment, some districts have become known as red-light districts; others as gay quarters. Far from being a result of the authorities' confinement, these districts became associated with certain sexual behaviours thanks to the agency of the people living there or using these districts for this purpose. Research on these social and urban constructions, paralleled with mapping programmes such as Geographical Information Systems, are most likely to reveal interesting patterns between the use of the urban environment and sexual behaviours.[15]

[14] S. Flight, Y. van Heerwaarden and E. Lugtmeijer, *Evaluatie Tippelzone Theemsweg, Effect extra Beheersmaatregelen* (Amsterdam, 2003).

[15] Chenault uses GIS to map gays' and lesbians' mobility within Atlanta, but this is an application that we see more often used when studying prostitution, as the data

Adapting gender identity to the urban environment

Finally, recent Ph.D.s in gender and urban history have also paid particular attention to the notion of migration and its impact on the construction of social identity in an urban environment. These Ph.D.s have questioned the experiences of rural migrants and how these people, migrating to the city with their own cultural traditions, had to renegotiate their behaviour and expectations with regard to their new urban environment. This naturally relates to gender issues, as migrant men and women cannot always expect to reproduce their former arrangements without adaptation. Xiadong Lin's thesis is extremely useful in this respect for understanding how rural migrants adapted to their new urban environment. In 'Rural men in urban China: masculinities and identity formation of male peasant workers' (University of Birmingham, 2010), Lin studies in-depth the difficulties encountered by rural men migrating alone to the southern city of Shantou in the Guandong province in the post-Mao period. Lin examines the way that these men adapted their rural identity and gender expectations in terms of work and their relationships with women within an urban environment that was mostly hostile to their presence. Indeed, the public/urban representation of rural migrants, fuelled by government policies, considered them as poor, uneducated and potentially dangerous immigrants. Whilst their employment opportunities were usually limited to construction sites, men were increasingly employed in traditionally feminine occupations such as cleaning or domestic service. In these positions, the new urbanites renegotiated their relations with the public sphere by 'masculinizing' these traditionally female roles. For instance, men employed as cleaners, a typical female occupation, have justified their employment by claiming that men are necessary to perform certain tasks linked with this activity such as carrying heavy furniture and cleaning high windows. Their masculinity has subsequently become, and has been praised, as essential in performing duties too dangerous or too heavy for women. Lin shows that such men merged both traditional values and new expectations and adapted to the changing economic and social contexts available in Shantou. Far from being ignorant, as popularly described, these men showed a great capacity to adapt to the urban lifestyle, modern identity and sociability without abandoning their own background: Lin's conclusion goes directly against the elite's assumptions that their low social status was due to their traditional baggage.

The role of the public/urban representation of rural migrants had a direct impact on their social positioning within the city and, therefore, their ability to thrive economically and socially. However, both Lin

is more readily available and standardized, as it relies on police records. See the interesting website of Stanford University: www.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/project.php?id=1017. See also P. Hubbard and T. Sanders, 'Making space for sex work: female street prostitution and the production of urban space', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27 (2003), 75–89.

and Angela Chin, in her Ph.D. thesis entitled 'Bound to emancipate: management of lower-class women in the 1920s and 1930s in urban South China' (University of California, 2006), show how migrants internalized the surrounding discourse and created their own identity from these public representations. Chin argues that both social campaigns in Chinese Guangzhou and in British Hong Kong aimed at controlling lower-class women by restricting their use of the city because of concerns about their gender and sexual behaviour. The women studied by Chin were servants in tea houses, prostitutes, courtesans, blind singers and *mui tsai*, household servants who could be sold as child brides or concubines. Most of these women still had their family in the surrounding rural areas and used to send remittances, with more or less power to negotiate their employment conditions, but the labouring woman was always at the lowest scale of the social order. She also explains how, initially, the identity of the female 'urban citizen' was defined in opposition to the public image of lower-class women labourers: the communist campaigns encouraged the emancipation of women to build a stronger nation on the basis of gender equality. Despite a veil of unity, Chin observes that in the 'emancipating women' campaigns, empowerment was not the aim, but the shaping of proper women's behaviour to become good citizens, stigmatizing the lower classes with rural origins who 'had deviated from the norms of the good womanhood' (p. 2). The nationalist movement of the 1920s envisioned the emancipated women as the new urban model, whilst the British authorities tried to 'emancipate' women by abolishing prostitution and *mui tsai*, by offering them protection and financial support to return to their family. When women started to act freely and work independently, both cities claimed that greater social control was needed and crushed the various attempts at emancipation.

Discrimination against the lower classes and, in particular, rural migrants is not uncommon, but the gender perspective adopted by new researchers leads to a better understanding of the impact of such discriminatory practice on men and women. Gender categorization is important to avoid generalization and reductive class analysis: both men and women had to cope with new urban expectations linked to their gendered roles. Busani Mpofu's Ph.D., 'No place for "undesirables": the urban poor's struggle for survival in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, 1960–2005' (University of Edinburgh, 2010), aims at gendering the urban experience and poverty in Bulawayo, the second city of the country, for the new male and female migrants from the countryside. Indeed, after independence, the country was struck by economic and natural crises and a general lack of employment set in, forcing most migrants into a difficult situation. Bulawayo also suffered from a lack of housing for the newly arrived people and, from the 1960s, government policies against their settlement and restrictions upon their residence were implemented. Mobility and migration to the city by rural inhabitants were subsequently restricted and

controlled. Both colonial and post-colonial urban officials discriminated against the poor, depicting them as unclean, immoral and belonging to the rural areas rather than the modern urban environment. Again we see how the public representation of the lower classes in a city influenced their integration into the urban landscape and forced them to develop their own set of survival strategies. Another layer of discrimination appears when Mpofu analyses female migrants' access to employment and social housing. Both colonial authorities and later African men restricted women's opportunities to integrate and benefit from the urban environment (p. 17). They had little legal protection and the municipality was reluctant to recognize their presence. As in many migration patterns, men were the first to move from the countryside to the city to find work and when single women moved to start working in industries, they were considered as threats to the men's jobs. This discrimination against women appeared also in the sexual violence they faced and the limited resources they could use to defend themselves legally.

Conclusion

The research trends in urban and gender history are clearly promising: new case-studies are emerging, with a shift away from large capital cities towards provincial urban life; while common theoretical approaches and traditional historical interpretations are being re-evaluated to provide a more nuanced understanding of the life of men and women in the urban environment. The theses reviewed here reveal how gender roles and identities have continuously changed and been redefined – this is evident across the broad geographical and temporal sweep adopted here, from the medium-sized early modern English towns to the fast-growing post-colonial cities. Influences from a sub-local to a global level can be perceived in the (re)conception of gendered identity and the urban environment is particularly rich in opportunities to 'mix and match' different cultural values.

One methodological aspect that is particularly striking in the majority of these Ph.D.s is the use of comparative methodology as a basis for research. A comparative approach allows the urban historian to go beyond the problem of the representativeness of a single case-study by identifying commonalities in the urban experience, increasingly across national borders. The impact of each variable over the topic studied is more likely to be apparent when following a comparative approach. From a comparative point of view, then, these Ph.D. theses utilize under-studied case-studies, further revealing the importance of 'the local' in questioning and re-evaluating historical narratives.