

Reflection: Male historians explain things to me: Masculinity, expertise, and the academy

Charlotte Lydia Riley

When I think about male historians explaining things to me, one moment stands out. I was giving a paper at a seminar, at which I had been invited to speak. I finished my paper and we opened the floor to questions: queries, suggestions, have-you-looked-at, do-you-think. It was pleasant, and I started to wonder why I had been nervous. Then a man asked me a question, a factual question about a date, or a name, or something (it really wasn't important) and I wasn't sure about the answer. I said I didn't know. A man in the audience did know the answer, and he supplied it: I thanked him.

The man in the audience knew the answer to the next question, too, and after my own response, he helpfully added an explanatory comment. After the following question, he didn't wait for me to speak. Turning around in his chair, he addressed the questioner directly, and explained the answer (the wrong answer) before I had opened my mouth. Once I had wrestled control of my own Q & A session back from the floor, the next man began his question by explaining that I had made a silly claim in my paper. When I interjected that I had not actually said this, and quoted the relevant part of the paper back to him, he conceded that I was right. He then proceeded to explain to me, at some length, what he *would* have said *if* I had said what he said I had said – even though, as he conceded, I had not. (It was at this point that I started to laugh.)

There is a moment when a male historian begins to explain your own research to you when you have a choice: do you try to interject, or do you let it wash over you? The first is tempting, but exhausting, and often pointless in any case. The fixed smile of the female historian who is suffering an explanation from a male historian of something she knows well is a common sight at conference drinks receptions. Male historians might choose to explain a basic aspect of your research to you ('if you are interested in class, perhaps you should read E. P. Thompson') or they might choose to explain why you are wrong about something ('Your archival sources might seem to show this, but surely that isn't quite correct') or they might want to explain why the very basis of your

research is in fact flawed ('But were there, really, any influential women in the Labour Party at all?').

When I read Rebecca Solnit's 2008 essay 'Men Explain Things to Me', then, I was primed to understand it. The piece was reprinted in 2012 with a new introduction, in which Solnit placed her work within the context of 'the battle for women to be treated like human beings with rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of involvement in cultural and political arenas'.¹

Solnit framed her original essay around going to a party, at which a man reacted to her saying she had written a book on Eadweard Muybridge by telling her at length about the *very important* book on Muybridge that had come out that year. Of course, this book turns out to be Solnit's own, although her female friend has to interject to say 'that's her book' several times before the man acknowledges and then believes her.

This essay took a little part of the world by storm, not least because it led to the birth of the term 'mansplaining'. A lot of men do not like the term 'mansplaining'. Not all men, they point out, do this. (Two sentences ago, I was careful to type 'a lot'.) Mansplaining as a term is blurry, as all conceptual terms are, and it has been misappropriated, as all conceptual terms are eventually. We often think of it merely as a synonym for explaining, perhaps with a little too much force or enthusiasm. But this is to chip away at the specificity of the term.

Mansplaining describes the specific moment when a man assumes ignorance of a topic by a woman who is actually at least as knowledgeable, if not more knowledgeable, about the topic. In Solnit's words, 'men explain things to me, and other women, whether or not they know what they're talking about'. Whether most men know what they are talking about or not, the point is that *most* men assume themselves to be more knowledgeable about *most* topics than *most* women, even topics in which the woman might be reasonably expected to have as much or more expertise than the male speaker. In Solnit's case, the subject of her own book. Hers is the quintessential mansplaining experience: not just having men explain things to you, but having men explain your own ideas back to you, glossed with the confident patina of male authority. (If you point out that they are repeating your ideas, they will mostly just assume that *you* have copied *them*.)

As Solnit writes, in the essay:

Every woman knows what I'm talking about. It's the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world. It trains us in self-doubt and limitation just as it exercises men's unsupported overconfidence.²

Re-reading this essay, I was reminded of Carolyn Steedman, narrating another story of talking at a party about a book:

I read a woman's book, meet such a woman at a party (a woman, now, like me) and think quite deliberately as we talk: we are divided. A hundred years ago I'd have been cleaning your shoes. I know this and you don't.³

These two parties and these two books point up different experiences. First, the experience of not having your expertise taken seriously, because you are a woman, and a man has therefore assumed that your expertise cannot possibly compare to his. Second, the experience of feeling out of place, of knowing that it is only an accident of social mobility that has ended up with you in this room talking about your expertise, and the constant, gripping anxiety that you might one day be found out. And so, women from working class backgrounds suffer from two related maladies. Men explain things to us, even things that we know well, even things in which we are experts, without embarrassment and without holding back. And our own instinct is to let these men explain these things, because deep down we are anxious that maybe, really, they do know more than us, and that we might soon be exposed as frauds.

Once you start to watch out for it, as a woman, you notice men explaining all sorts of different things to you. Doctors explain how you feel pain, and how much; taxi drivers explain the way to your own house; men that you meet at parties explain how universities work, despite not having stepped onto a campus in twenty years. And so male historians explain things to me, all the time, without even realising that they are doing it, or that their faces have assumed – as Solnit describes – ‘that smug look I know so well in a man holding forth, eyes fixed on the fuzzy far horizon of his own authority’.⁴

As a woman from a working-class background, it would be easy here to list the places and the events at which I have had things explained to me by male historians (conferences, workshops, classrooms, archives, restaurants, bars). It would be easy to think of specific topics where male historians really enjoy holding forth: some predictable, some unusual, some surprisingly brave. (The time a man explained to me that my definition of second-wave feminism was wrong, and that he knew this because he ‘took a class once’, in a conversation about the class that I *teach* about second-wave feminism, remains a particular favourite.)

I am a contemporary British historian who works on the Labour Party, among other things, and so it is not only male historians who like to explain things to me. Political scientists, economists, sociologists, politicians, journalists, the man on the street, or on Twitter, who votes Labour, or doesn't. My experience of mansplaining is truly interdisciplinary. (Perhaps there

is a grant I could apply for.) But as a historian by training, it is the male historians who are the biggest irritant. There are men, of course, in every field whose propensity for this behaviour (and, indeed, other unsavoury behaviours) is shared among women like a currency of belonging. I'm not going to name names here. This is about structures, not individuals.

The two identities available to a female historian, when male historians explain things, are the ingénue or the harridan. If you let male historians hold forth, they will never respect you as an expert. If you try to challenge them, they will continue to think that they hold more expertise than you, and also resent you for the interruption. If you draw attention to the gendered dynamic which allows them to do this explaining – and especially if you ever utter the word ‘mansplaining’ – you will be labelled ‘intimidating’ or ‘difficult’ or ‘scary’, even by men who are very senior to you, even by men who hold power over your career. Siri Hustvedt has written about the way that women are taught to be nice, and the penalties paid by women who refuse this niceness, including in academic settings. The woman she writes about who is described as ‘really mean’ attracts this label because she tries three times to ask a question at an academic paper without interruption by men; when she eventually makes a ‘forceful, aggressive critique’ in order to be heard, she is punished for allowing her expertise to override her niceness.⁵ Letting male historians explain things to you is part of the emotional labour of being *nice*.

Of course, male historians do not limit themselves to explaining only historical topics. One of the things that male historians have explained to me, repeatedly, is how hard it is to be a male historian. Or rather: they have elaborated the different ways in which it is hard for each of them to be a male historian. (It should be pointed out that I have never asked about this. Perhaps I have a sympathetic face.)

This has usually come down to some perceived outsider status; male historians enjoy exploring the ways in which they do not fit into the academy. Sometimes they like to defend other men; I rarely share with male historians tales of male historians explaining things to me, because it means sitting through an explanation of why this might have occurred. This almost always comes down to some version of outsider status: the male historian is insecure! He is shy! He has, himself, been treated poorly in the past by other men! He is intimidated by me, or by women generally! Or perhaps the male historian will empathise by telling me a moment that *he* had something explained to *him*; this, of course, is not so much explanation as exoneration (‘Silly woman, did you think this was about gender? Let me show you how you are mistaken.’)

Of course, the academy is an ivory tower, a closed shop, and it can be a very hostile space for anyone who does not fit into the traditional

framework of what it means to be an academic. Despite its liberal image and its notions of itself as a tolerant and diverse space, gender, class, race and sexual orientation can all be barriers to an academic career and to feeling accepted and included within academia's hallowed walls. But what should be noted – indeed, what has been noted, by every female historian that I have spoken to about this – is the enthusiasm with which white male historians like to talk about, elaborate, analyse, and bemoan their own outsider status. This usually and most conspicuously comes down to social class, or rather a notion of social class that they cling to, regardless of their current tastes, economies, or politics. In some cases, it revolves entirely around their relationship to Oxbridge or Ivy League institutions. But if Ginger Rogers had to do everything that Fred Astaire did, but backwards and in high heels, I sometimes feel like snapping that yes, we are all outsiders, but some of us are outsiders with a 15 per cent pay gap.⁶

This performance of outsider status also often serves to excuse questionable behaviour on the part of these men, who use their blurring of professional lines as further evidence that they are not traditional academics (although, in reality, nothing could be more traditional in academia than questionable behaviour by powerful men). One of the things that numerous male historians have explained to me is the terrible effect that professionalisation has had on the academy, forgetting (or perhaps remembering) that it is professionalisation that enables women to do things like take maternity leave, or raise a complaint about sexual harassment with HR.

Despite this, male historians also enjoy explaining what excellent allies they are to female historians. Male historians have often explained to me what wonderful feminists they are; how important feminism is; how terrible it is, of course, that there is still such gender inequality within the academy; how much we need to work to overcome this. This explanation is, often, the limit to their solidarity. An important part of male academic feminism is the ability to explain to women why, in any *particular* case under discussion, the problem is not gender. They accept that there are many problems in this world faced distinctly and specifically by women: they are self-professed feminists, after all! But this *specific* issue is not about gender: we, the women, are mistaken.

Sometimes they cannot let this issue go: they send us emails, after our discussion, to reiterate once again just how mistaken we are. The edited collection with only one token female contributor looks bad, of course: but all the women said no, or don't work on the topic, or just aren't senior enough to be taken seriously. The state-of-the-field panel had a female chair, and anyway women aren't as interested in these Big Questions, and they did *want* to take female contributions from the audience but women speak so quietly. Whether it is about our treatment by students, the reception of our work within our

field, or the expectation of the performance of emotional labour with students or colleagues, male historians love to explain the many and varied factors in these topics that mean that gender is – surprise! – not relevant.

And, of course, male historians like to explain what history actually is. When E. H. Carr asked and answered this question, he did so by crafting a discipline populated entirely by men: ‘The historian is of *his* own age, and is bound to it by the conditions of human existence ... the use of language forbids *him* to be neutral.’⁷ Carr was himself of his own age, and male historians now concede that female historians exist, at least theoretically. But their citation practices often do not. Male historians explain their fields and their topics, often, through reference to other men; they are less willing, or able, to do so by citing women. As Sara Ahmed has written, citation is both a scholarly and a political act: ‘Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before,’ and citations can thus sustain or undermine structures and ‘institutions of patriarchal whiteness’.⁸ And when male historians choose to explain topics, or concepts, or whole fields, through reference only to other (white) men, that exclusion is an intensely political act. Adrienne Rich wrote about the moment of ‘psychic disequilibrium’ that comes when someone with authority ‘describes the world and you are not in it’.⁹ This psychic disequilibrium has been experienced by many women, who have found their work written out in the explanations of male historians.

This can be especially cutting when male historians explain the ways in which their own work is ground-breaking and original: the gaps that they identify in the field are, often, merely the spaces where women’s work goes unseen. Lucy Robinson has written about the difficulty of being a feminist historian who is committed to kindness and collaboration, but working in a wider discipline that does not value these things, which leads to the jarring experience of listening to other historians describing a ‘hole’ in the existing research that is, in fact, the space in which you know your own work sits.¹⁰ Many a female historian has been surprised to hear a male historian explaining his invention of a field, in which she has been working for some time, perhaps her whole career.

There is no conclusion, really, to an essay of this nature (perhaps I should have asked a male historian to explain how he would finish it). As Ahmed has written, there is the danger that ‘to give the problem a name can be experienced as *magnifying the problem*’; as she points out, ‘you can become a problem by naming a problem’.¹¹ But she also urges us to continue to name these problems: to insist that change is necessary. The ‘exhaustion of having to keep struggling to transform disciplines’ is real, but worthwhile.¹² As Solnit argued in her original essay, ‘Most women fight wars on two fronts, one for whatever the putative topic is and one simply for the right

to speak, to have ideas, to be acknowledged to be in possession of facts and truths, to have value, to be a human being.’¹³ Male historians will never stop explaining things. Female historians might, one day, stop listening.

Notes

Ben Mechen and Jack Saunders listened to me talk about this piece at length without ever protesting that not ALL male historians. Chris Cook offered helpful, precise suggestions, and general enthusiastic support, while resisting the urge to explain anything at all. This essay is for Emily Baughan, Anna Bocking-Welch, Tehila Sasson, and Eve Colpus, with whom I have sat, open-mouthed, as men explain things to us: I hope to continue dissecting this behaviour and laughing at these men with you for many years to come.

- 1 Rebecca Solnit, ‘Men Explain Things to Me’, *Guernica*, 20 August 2012, www.guernicamag.com/rebecca-solnit-men-explain-things-to-me/ (accessed 29 August 2019).
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Carolyn Steedman, *A Landscape for a Good Woman* (London: Virago, 1996), 2.
- 4 Solnit, ‘Men Explain Things to Me’.
- 5 Siri Hustvedt, ‘Knausgaard Writes like a Woman’, *Literary Hub*, 10 December 2015, <https://lithub.com/knausgaard-writes-like-a-woman/> (accessed 29 August 2019).
- 6 Clara Guiberg, ‘Big University Gender Pay Gap Revealed’, *BBC News*, 29 March 2019, www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-47723950 (accessed 29 August 2019). This pay gap is considerably worse for women of colour.
- 7 E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Penguin, 1990), 24–25 (emphasis added).
- 8 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 17.
- 9 Adrienne Rich, ‘Invisibility in Academe’, in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985* (London: Virago, 1987), 199.
- 10 In her piece, Robinson thanks Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite for reminding the room of her work – ‘she footnoted me in her question’ – which highlights the work done by informal networks of feminist solidarity in resisting the explanations of male historians. Lucy Robinson, ‘Referencing Sisterhood: Ego, Guilt and Being Kind’, *Now That’s What I Call History*, 21 September 2018, <https://proflrobinson.com/2018/09/21/referencing-sisterhood-ego-guilt-and-being-kind/#more-1764> (accessed 29 August 2019).
- 11 Sara Ahmed, ‘Introduction: Sexism – A Problem with a Name’, *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, 86 (2015), 8–9.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 13 Solnit, ‘Men Explain Things to Me’.

