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Adrienne Koch, the First Woman in the Berkeley Department of History

By David A. Hollinger

Everyone agreed that she was really, really smart, and that she was an excellent historian. But in the 1950s women were almost never hired in leading history departments, no matter how good they were. Yet Adrienne Koch was able to break the gender barrier at Berkeley in 1958. “There was much opposition” to her appointment, one of her champions in the department later wrote. “If we had a woman in the department,” it was said, “we’d never be able to talk among ourselves with mutual understanding and confidentiality.” But it did happen, and Koch was soon promoted to the rank of Professor. She reluctantly left Berkeley in 1965 to accompany her economist husband, Lawrence Kegan, to Washington, D. C., where she became a professor at the University of Maryland. She remained at Maryland until she died of cancer in 1971, a few weeks prior to what would have been her 59th birthday. By then Koch was sufficiently well known that the *New York Times* published a long obituary with her photograph.

During her seven years among the Berkeley historians Koch was a spectacularly successful teacher, with high-enrollment classes each semester. Students latter recalled that she was noticeably more demanding of women, alerting them that they had to be better than average to succeed in the world beyond the classroom. Koch also published several books that enhanced her reputation as one of the profession’s leading historians of the Revolutionary and Early National eras of American history. She had established her leadership in that field earlier with her *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (1943) and with her most enduring book, *Jefferson & Madison: The Great Collaboration* (1950). But at Berkeley she developed the concept of “an American Enlightenment,” arguing that the intellectuals who designed the American political and constitutional order had crafted a distinctive, national variation on the eighteenth-century movement associated the European *philosophes*. Her most important scholarly works during her Berkeley years were two books, *Power, Morals, and the Founding Fathers: Essays in the Interpretation of the American Enlightenment* (1961) and *The American Enlightenment: The Shaping of the American Experiment and a Free Society* (1965).

Koch was an active participant in national debates about the state of American democracy, contributing opinion pieces and reviews to the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, the *Nation*, and other magazines. She frequently mobilized Jefferson and Madison as ideological resources in contemporary discussions, yet also engaged sympathetically a wide range of twentieth-century thinkers. Her anthology of 1959, *Philosophy for a Time of Crisis*, reprinted selections from Martin Buber, Erich Fromm, Ignacio Silone, Reinhold Niebuhr, Jean-Paul Sartre and other popular voices of that era. Yet she was much more at home with the Cold War liberalism of the 1950s than with the radical left politics that was on the rise at Berkeley during the years immediately prior to her departure. From her later post at Maryland, she wrote with increasing impatience about what in the *New York Times* she once described as “infantile” radicals who in their extreme actions were ignoring what she invariably represented as the balanced wisdom of the country’s founders. She was identified with Sidney Hook, the New York University

philosopher whose student she had been as an undergraduate, and whose criticisms of the New Left made him a political lightning rod during the 1960s and 1970s.

By closely identifying the Enlightenment of Jefferson and Madison with anti-radical politics, Koch inadvertently facilitated the relative neglect of her scholarship in the immediately following decades. Later studies often failed to acknowledge how ambitious and well-argued an interpretation of the American Enlightenment Koch had produced. At the time of her death, however, she was embarked on a project which, had she lived, almost certainly would have improved her standing among self-consciously progressive historians. She had begun a study of Sarah and Angelina Grimke, important ante-bellum abolitionists and feminists. The Grimke sisters later became a highly popular topic when the history of women became a recognized field. One can only speculate how Koch's reputation might have flourished were she to have been recognized as a student of the history of women as well as of the larger American Enlightenment, in which Koch believed correctly the Grimke sisters were creative and courageous participants.

Part of Koch's distinction as a historian was the philosophical sophistication she brought into the field of American intellectual history. She earned her Ph.D. in philosophy at Columbia University, and had been a Guggenheim Fellow as a philosopher based on her study of Jefferson's political ideas. "She could teach Charles Peirce with an expertise that the rest of us could not," remarked one of the colleagues who recruited her into the Berkeley Department of History.

Koch kept her birth name professionally, but was also known as Mrs. Lawrence Kegan. Both Kegans had grown up in Jewish families in New York City, but had decided-- in keeping the anti-particularist ideology then popular on the liberal-left-- not to identify as Jews. They presented themselves as Americans, full stop. Koch's parents emigrated from Hungary shortly before her birth in 1912. Koch's brother, Sigmund Koch, became a prominent psychologist and University Professor at Boston University. Her sister Vivienne Koch was a literary critic distinguished enough to have an article devoted to her-- like Adrienne Koch-- in *American National Biography*.

Koch and her husband lived in a spacious, Spanish-style home on Grizzly Peak Boulevard. The Kegans were the parents of twins who were in elementary and middle school during the family's Berkeley years. Koch and her husband were regulars on an active dinner party circuit within and beyond the Department. Koch had a vivacious, vibrant personality. She dyed her hair blond and dressed impeccably in the fashionable styles of that era, wearing high heels and flaring circle skirts. There was nothing unusual about this cluster of traits other than being found in a distinguished professor of history.

In the early 1960s, Berkeley was the only major history department with a woman at the rank of Professor in the field of United States history. Yet it would be a mistake to suppose that Koch had an easy time of it with the Berkeley historians. Her no-nonsense manner made some colleagues uncomfortable. Her photographs show a woman unafraid to look you in the eye without a smile. She could be intimidating. Although she developed warm, collegial relationships with several of the junior men in the department, these individuals now recall that the senior men kept her at a greater distance and may have been frightened by her. Koch was always at the margins of governance decisions. She was not encouraged to supervise doctoral dissertations. Some of the senior faculty wives—then a social force of real consequence in the departmental community--- always remained cool to her.

That Koch broke the gender line at Berkeley says much about her, but it also says something about Berkeley. Despite widespread reluctance and amid plenty of grouching, the Berkeley historians actually did it. They did what their counterparts at Princeton, Yale, Harvard, and other leading departments did not do until some years later. They hired and promoted to Professor a highly qualified, creative, independent woman in the field of American history.

What did Koch herself think about this? How did she feel about gender and its effect on her and on other women? Fortunately for us, we have a speech of 1963, “Two Cheers for Equality,” she delivered at a UC-wide forum on “The Potential of Woman” held in San Francisco. It was a ringing demand for the full equality of women in academia and beyond. Written three years before the founding the National Organization of Women and in the very year of Betty Friedan’s epoch-making *The Feminine Mystique*, this lecture mocked as wrongheaded the still popular notion that women were only “civilizers,” the guardians of “life, morality, and human compassion,” and not also able to “administer” and “solve practical public problems.” Invoking Simone de Beauvoir, Margaret Fuller, and the Grimke sisters, Koch declared that there should be “no prior restraint on seeing what, with proper training, women actually make themselves competent to do.” She complained that the nepotism rules then widely in effect in academia greatly limited the opportunities for women to be hired where their husbands were employed. At a time when pregnancy and motherhood were often treated as disqualifications, Koch called on campuses to provide maternity leaves and security of employment. Although she voiced a measure of confidence that things were getting better for women, she expected it to be a long haul. “The ideal of equal rights is heavily compromised,” she said, and warned that women are often welcomed with so many strings attached—you can join our club if you never get pregnant, e.g.-- that many women find it hard to proceed. The invitation that women too often receive is of the kind she quoted R. H. Tawney as describing in a different context: “the impertinent courtesy of an invitation offered to unwelcome guests, in the certainty that circumstances will prevent them from accepting it.”

Adrienne Koch was proud to a member of the Berkeley faculty, and she seems to have done her best to get along with her male colleagues. But she was not afraid to say what was wrong with the gendered system those men kept largely in place.

This sketch of Adrienne Koch is based on a number of sources. These include the oral histories (all in UC Berkeley’s Regional Oral History Office) of Delmer Brown, Beverly Bouwsma, Richard Herr, Henry May, and Kenneth Stampp. Important, too, have been conversations with Koch’s daughter, Nancy Kegan Smith, and with several of Koch’s former colleagues at Berkeley, especially Robert Middlekauff and Sheldon Rothblatt. Others who knew her and have been helpful to me are James Gilbert, Daniel Howe, and Thomas Leonard. The Spring 1972 issue of Maryland Historian contains appreciations of Koch on the occasion of her death by philosopher Sidney Hook, historian Julian Boyd (a former president of the American Historical Association) and several others. The New York Times published an informative obituary, April 23, 1971. I, myself, have vivid memories of her as a presence in Dwinelle Hall when I was a graduate student. I did not really know her, but I did read her books. I still appreciate their analytic power.

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