

## **Sixth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women**

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The Sixth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, held from June 1-3, 1984, at Smith College, proved once again that conferences can be both congenial and stimulating. Panels ranged from "Wive and Widows in Medieval England" to "Sexual Disorder as Political Metaphor," and 19 of the 141 sessions (13.5%) dealt with women's work or working-class women. One panel even looked at, to use Marion Kaplan's term, "the labor of leisure" (bourgeois women have work too, in maintaining the costs of representation: arranging and conducting ten-course and multi-guest dinner parties, helping solidify business contacts at German spas, etc.) And Kathy Peiss, noting the gender bias in most studies of working-class leisure—saloon life, male fraternal clubs, etc.—called for more study of the sexual division of leisure.

For the most part, however, panels on women and work addressed themselves to the lives and work of working-class women and to the unresolved questions concerning the persistence of occupational segregation over time. Women's wage work has been found in a variety of locations, and different sessions studied it accordingly: in the women's own homes (homework), in others' (service work from housecleaning to wetnursing), in offices, or in factories. One session compared white textile workers and black tobacco workers in the south, another looked at rural women's work in antebellum America, and yet another examined the special tasks of women in seaport communities. Black women's clubs and the world of work were the subject of one panel, sales girls and elevator boys the object of another paper looking at gender and ethnicity in the labor market.

The feminization of certain white collar jobs was examined by Susan Bachrach in her work on post office employees in France and the United States at the turn of the century and by Sharon Strom in a study of bookkeeping in the 1930s. In both cases women largely took on new jobs in expanding fields. (Clerical work was growing due to the introduction of the typewriter and telephone and a resultant enormous increase in mail). But where men's jobs were threatened, such as in bookkeeping, male roles were elevated to that of "accountants" while women often did bookkeeping tasks without the title or corresponding pay.

As for more recent developments in office automation, Mary Murphree discussed some of the interrelationships between technology, demographics and polit-

ics, citing as one example how female word processing pools, introduced with great confidence over state-of-the-art technology a decade ago, are now seen as “dangerous” and giving way to a certain amount of office decentralization as part of union-avoidance tactics.

While the concentration of the female labor force in word processing pools may be seen as dangerous, the new technology itself is not. In fact, as anthropologist Micaela Dileonardo pointed out, in her discussion of the “cultural gendering of technology,” while typewriters came to be considered women’s work and, conversely, women best suited to typewriters, current advertisements for electronic typewriters and personal computers have switched from an emphasis on their “idiot proof” nature (for secretarial use) to their becoming “user friendly” now that the male executive market is targeted.

More generally, Alice Kessler-Harris commented on the recent use of culture as a category of analysis with regard to occupational segregation. She urged that such studies be taken further still, in order to realize their dynamic potential, looking at the relationship between culture and ideology, ideology and consciousness and consciousness and action. At the same time Heidi Hartmann added that a cultural understanding of skill is important, for the definition of skill itself is subjective and political and has been at the core of countless labor struggles.

Indeed the definition of skill is a crucial one for understanding the sex structuring of the occupational division of labor. In a provocative analysis of the self-acting mule spinner, Mary Freifeld argued that it is a question of skill which determines gender segregation of the labor force (claiming that the introduction of the self-acting mule spinners did not cause deskilling, as Marx anticipated, which is why male spinners held onto those jobs). Mary Blewett, however, in her study of New England shoemaking, seconded by commentator William Lazonick, argued that it is patriarchy—in the case of shoemaking a particular artisanal form of patriarchy—which is more determinant. (Another panel looked at the “Geography of Gender: Patriarchy at Home and Work”.) The debate over patriarchy or capitalism as the cause of occupational segregation continues.

Three panels dealt directly or indirectly with that skill for which women are supposed to be so particularly endowed: sewing. A session chaired by Eileen Boris discussed the implications of homework and the changing location of women’s work, noting how technological change has both taken work out of the home (textiles) and also put it back there (garments). (Will a trend toward home computerized clerical work be the ultimate answer for the decentralization of the subversive secretarial pool?)

Textiles and garments were in fact the first affected by the protective laws in late-nineteenth century Germany and France studied by Jean Quataert and Marilyn Boxer. But as they both show, such laws tended to reinforce the division of labor by sex, defining which jobs were men’s and which were women’s. And, in the employers’ attempts to evade legislation, the laws had the boomerang effect of leading to more and more unregulated homework.

Karen Mason described the Kalamazoo Corset Makers' strike of 1912 in a paper appropriately entitled "Feeling the Pinch." Elizabeth Faue discussed the differences in attempts by the ILGWU (AFL) and the Textile Workers Organizing Committee (CIO) to organize female garment workers in Minneapolis in the 1930s, while in the same panel Nancy Gabin looked at women in an industry where their supposedly nimble fingers and fashion consciousness were not at issue: women in the UAW immediately after World War II. Ruth Milkman, in her comments on the three papers stressed the importance of looking at the potential and limits of trade unionism as an institution in promoting women's interest.

The family economy came under attack in a lively session entitled "Beyond the Family Economy" in which Joanne Meyerowitz discussed single working women's strategies for coping with their low wages (the economics of dating resulting in part from women's dependence on higher-paid men), Lois Rita Helmbold examined the increase of female desertions and separation during the Depression, and Nan Cinnater gave a fascinating look at women hoboes. Meyerowitz, Helmbold and Cinnater offered a new look at women outside of the family economy, where they were defined neither as wives, mothers or daughters and not turning over their meager paychecks accordingly. The panelists' critique of the family economy provoked in turn a critical response on the part of discussant Miriam Cohen who countered that the populations under study were not statistically significant in comparison to those women who were integrated into a family economy. In the end a synthesis was reached acknowledging that the study of women outside of the model of production and reproduction has its place within the panoply of options of women's strategies.

Finally, a review of "the Berks," as the conference is popularly called, would be incomplete without mentioning the as usual high quality "extracurricular" activities. This year they included a film on Chinese women in the village of Long Bow and a presentation of four women from the "Grandma Was an Activist" radio program. Both deserve a plug: the former can be rented or purchased through Long Bow Group, Inc., 4512 Springfield Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19143, and the "Grandma" series is available on cassette through Radio Arts, 838 West End Avenue, New York, NY 10025.