

Tenth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women

Lisa W. Phillips

Rutgers University

Barbara Weinstein and Alejandra Vassallo

State University of New York at Stony Brook

The Tenth Annual Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, held in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in June 1996, offered labor historians a wide variety of panels in which gender and labor demonstrated their complex interconnections. From babysitters' unions to African-American women's activism, historians of US women's labor showed that their work was moving the field in new and exciting directions. A substantial portion of the panels on Latin America also dealt specifically with working-class women. By contrast, most of the panels on Europe emphasized women as middle-class professionals, as part of bourgeois culture, or as members of feminist movements not directly concerned with class or the workplace.

Several panels dealt with American labor since World War Two. Miriam Formanek-Brunell and Sonya Michel addressed child care. Formanek-Brunell demonstrated that the babysitting profession provides a wealth of information on gender and work in the postwar United States. "Little mothers," Formanek-Brunell showed, organized sitters' unions through which they set pay rates and conditions of work. Interestingly, teens separated child care from housework, demanding higher wages, plenty to eat, and telephone privileges in return for watching children, and charging extra if asked to wash dishes or iron. In fact, sitters' organizations were so successful that parents sometimes sought a cheaper and more tractable labor source: teenaged boys. In her paper, Sonya Michel investigated why the United States did not legislate postwar child-care provisions. She focused on the postwar use of domesticity as a bulwark against communism; liberal feminism's advocacy of individualized solutions to child-care dilemmas; psychological theories that stressed the importance of the mother-child bond; and the reluctance of the US Children's Bureau and the US Women's Bureau to advocate work for women as a legitimate career choice.

Papers delivered by Millicent Ellison Brown and Christina Greene underscored the importance of research on alliance building among African-American women, especially for understanding civil rights activism. Greene's work on the Black Solidarity Committee (BSC) in Durham, North Carolina, reveals that women were largely responsible for shaping the direction of the civil rights movement in Durham. It was women,

Greene argued, who brought class and economic issues into the movement and exposed its class-based faultlines. Brown detailed the experiences of black women strikers from 1940 to 1970, showing how change, accommodation, and placation are all parts of the story of the labor and civil rights movements.

“Sensible Shoes: Female Activism and the Politics of Representation” was a crowded session. Ardis Cameron and Elizabeth Faue discussed the uses of imagery in labor history and invited the audience to make use of their visual sense to understand working-class politics. Cameron linked “peeping” with social power and argued that much can be learned about the nature of class-based politics by observing the act of observing. While middle-class tourists cast a voyeuristic and empowered gaze upon immigrants and workers in Paterson, New Jersey, and on Ellis Island, these objects of their curiosity used images to their benefit by purposefully manipulating them, as in the Lawrence and Paterson strikes, for their visual and political impact—thus inverting the hierarchy of the gaze. Pictures also played a role in determining alliances, conflicts, and courses of political action among the working class. Women joined picture clubs which enabled them, Cameron found, to identify neighbors as strikebreakers—as well as to judge people’s trustworthiness. Could the shifty-eyed, powder-faced, big-hatted woman in the picture be relied upon? Elizabeth Faue discussed the visual impact of working-class clothing and, in agreement with Cameron, argued that dress conveyed degrees of respectability. Faue introduced the audience to “dudes” and “dudesses,” the aliases of clerks and bookkeepers at a working-class clothing store. When working-class women accused dudes of ogling, dudes questioned the legitimacy of the claim by casting doubt upon the women’s respectability. How, dudes asked, did these women dress so well on the low wages they received? The accusers and their claims, dudes implied, were not in reality as respectable as their clothing made them appear.

The panels on Latin American working-class women stressed processes of identity formation, either engaged by workers themselves or by other observers who played an active role in constructing images of laboring women. Several papers explored the tensions between waged labor and domesticity; others examined ways in which categories of work and the spaces they organized became gendered and how such gender associations were manipulated to protect men’s and women’s positions in the work force. A paper presented by María Fernandez Aceves, “Class, Gender, and Power: The Tortilla and Textile Industries in Guadalajara, Mexico,” explored these issues in detail. Aceves discussed the process of mechanization in both industries and how modernization became associated with masculinization. The rationalization of textile production pushed many women out of the factory and into homework—like tortilla-making. As tortilla-making was mechanized, women producers asserted the superiority of homemade tortillas and insisted that tortilla-making was properly

“women’s work.” Male union leaders, meanwhile, pressed for the “modernization” of the industry. By the 1930s, women were being displaced by men both in the factories and in the unions.

Aceves’s paper was part of a panel entitled “Demystifying Traditional Identities: Mexican Working Women and Class Struggle, 1900–1940.” This included a presentation by Elizabeth Norvell on the militancy of working-class women in Veracruz during the revolution in which she emphasized the ways that housing arrangements and the broader political climate erased distinctions between public and private for many working-class women. As an outcome of their militancy during a dramatic rent strike, women became major actors in the port city’s anarchist movement; their appeals to working women extended to prostitutes and domestic servants, who were urged to unionize. For a brief period in the 1920s a revolutionary code of behavior reversed the usual direction of “judgment” so that it was the exploitative landlord or antirevolutionary bourgeois who was morally flawed. With the consolidation of the new postrevolutionary order, however, these radical working-class movements encountered increasing repression from the central government.

Verene Shepherd’s paper, “Asian Migrant Women in 19th- and 20th-Century Jamaica,” was one of several that addressed the impact of labor market globalization on women’s roles and livelihoods. According to Shepherd, fewer than fifteen percent of Indian migrants prior to 1947 were women; planters preferred to contract men, whether as indentured servants or formally free laborers. British authorities eventually encouraged the immigration of Indian women, but they expected them to remain in the domestic sphere; most could not afford to do so, however, and ended up performing the most poorly paid agricultural jobs on the island. Though subjected to British norms about “proper roles for women,” Indians in Jamaica had little means to adhere to them.

A panel on Italian immigration and women’s organizing attempted to challenge traditional labor and migration history by redefining agency and incorporating notions of national and familial identity. Papers on Italian immigration to Australia, Argentina, and the United States showed that women’s activism was not confined to the exceptional efforts of a few militant women but was expressed through a network of community organizing where women took the lead in collective action and were key recruiters within their neighborhoods. *La famiglia* and *il paese* were powerful symbols fundamental to reproducing a sense of identity and of loyalty to the union as an ultimate family; women renegotiated their relationships to patriarchal structures, recognizing in unionism a powerful tool of entitlement. But a comparison between Jennifer Guglielmo’s study of Italian workers in East Harlem and Carina Silberstein’s “Becoming Visible: Italian Immigrant Women in the Garment and Textile Industries in Argentina, 1890–1930” indicates ways in which the reproduction of patriarchal structures could affect gender-specific organizing. Thus, in Argentina, where

fifty percent of textile employers were Italian, owners could deploy *la italianità* as a deterrent to collective action. Meanwhile, Ros Pesman's work on "Italian Born Women in Australia, 1945–1995," which explored how knowledge about Italian immigrant women was constructed, helped explain and challenge the ways in which Italian immigrant women have been analyzed by labor historians. The construction of women as passive and helpless obscured the fact that in the history of their own diaspora, Italian women have performed waged work in large numbers and have been very active in organizing (though not exclusively at the point of production). In sum, these three studies attempt to understand how gender, nationality, and class constructed a particular experience of work, organization, and entitlement for Italian immigrant women.

A panel on "Sexuality, Work, and National Identity: The Construction of Women's Experiences in World War II Britain" dealt in innovative ways with the issue of gender identity. Sonya Rose's paper on the "re-invention" of citizenship explored public fears of "moral laxity" among young women due to the presence of US soldiers during the war. Since the soldiers themselves were insulated from malediction by their status as heroes, the weight of public criticism fell on young women who did not exercise proper personal control. While this "moral laxity" campaign did not focus exclusively on working-class women, Rose argued that the "good-timers" it targeted tended to be signified as working class. At the same time, some working-class women used the "moral purity" rhetoric to condemn the behavior of leisured women who were not contributing to the war effort.

In the other paper in the session, "'You Were Just One of the Boys': Women's Constructions of Disruption of Gender Divisions at Work in World War II Britain," Penny Summerfield argued that the wartime work experience, far from blurring gender lines, actually reinforced them. Some of the women she interviewed, and dubbed "heroes," eagerly adopted a more masculine attitude on entering factory work; others, whom she calls "stoics," did "men's work" more reluctantly and carefully maintained feminine attire and demeanor (including one woman welder who always wore a dress on the job). Despite regarding themselves as better at wartime work than men, these women were not in a position to redefine men's and women's work roles once the war came to an end.

Much other work presented at the Berkshire conference was of interest to scholars of labor and class; more often than not it was difficult to choose which panel to attend. Most of these presenters remained true to the "complicated categories" theme of the conference. By blurring traditional definitions of work, class, gender, and activism, they invigorated the traditional in many ways.