

REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

Eighth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women: “Crossing Boundaries”

The Eighth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, held at Douglass College of Rutgers University on June 8–10, 1990, was organized around the theme “Crossing Boundaries.” More than 150 different panels were presented. *ILWCH* asked three participants to report on some of the presentations—concerning the United States, Europe, and the “Third World,” respectively—of greatest interest to historians of labor and the working class.

Panels and Presentations on the United States

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The dozen or so sessions focused explicitly on U.S. labor and working-class history shared with the conference as a whole a concern with certain key issues in women’s history today, particularly the recognition of “difference” and its implications. The working-class history panels thus examined the social construction of race, class, and sexuality, and their relationship to material conditions.

“From Immigrant Daughters to Working Class Feminists: The History and Ethnography of Second-Generation American Women’s Opportunities for Self-Organization” offered a fascinating comparison of cross-class understandings and misunderstandings in the 1890s and the 1970s. A paper by Priscilla Murolo (Sarah Lawrence College) on the working girls’ clubs in the Gilded Age described some of the ways in which young wage-earning women and bourgeois women came together in attempting to construct a working-class version of “true womanhood” in the 1880s and 1890s. Examining federally funded programs set up by feminists for “ethnic” (largely Italian-American) women in the 1970s, Francine Moccio (Empire State College) described the ways in which middle-class feminists’ initial assumptions about the women served by the programs affected their ideological and practical efficacy. As commentator Joyce Freedman-Apsel (Sarah Lawrence College) pointed out, the papers illustrated how “each generation repeats the same mistakes” as well as how divisions among women remain on the agenda for feminist scholars and activists.

“Race, Gender, and Wartime Work: Federal Initiatives, Local Responses” compared the experiences of black women workers in World Wars I and II in Cincinnati

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and Cleveland, respectively. The papers by Diane Meisenhelter (University of Michigan) and Kimberly L. Phillips (Cleveland State University) provided case studies of the historical implications of the phrase, “all the women are white, all the blacks are men.” Both papers demonstrated the narrow perspectives of government agencies set up to aid blacks or women as well as the importance of local grassroots organizations for any broadening of efforts to include black women.

A panel on “Race, Class, and Sexuality in the U.S. Nineteenth-Century South” took on the ambitious task of beginning to unravel the class variations in white women’s reactions to blacks’ experiences of interracial sex in the antebellum South. LeeAnn White (University of Missouri) described the responses and politics of southern white farm wives to white males’ adultery with slave women. Nell Irvin Painter (Princeton University), presenting part of her larger project on sexuality in the southern United States, argued that we need to move away from seeing black/white and slave/mistress women’s interactions as dominated either by vertical relationships of oppression or by horizontal relationships of victimization. Martha Hodes (Princeton University) provided new insights into questions of southern race and sexuality by examining relationships rarely mentioned: those between white women and black men. Hodes argued that such relationships highlight the ways in which categories of race are themselves socially constructed.

“Texts and Pretexts of Women’s Work” included papers on two very different sets of writings about work by middle-class women. Alice Fahs (New York University) offered a literary analysis of women’s writings about their experiences as Civil War nurses and how their views of work were shaped by the war. Jacqueline K. Dirks (Yale University) took a more historical approach to the various narratives produced and disseminated by members of the National Consumers’ League in the early twentieth century. Dirks argued that the NCL attempted to forge links between the productive activity of middle-class and working-class women, to imbue the work of consumption with moral meaning, and to set themselves up as “experts” in a world increasingly taken with expertise. Commenting on these papers, Alan Dawley (Trenton State University) urged us to confront “the part of reality that is fiction” and to think further about the ways class distinctions might have been reinforced even as they were thought to be transcended.

Finally, the panel devoted to “Dorothy Smith’s Institutional Ethnography: Applications to Sources on Rural Women’s Work in the Nineteenth-Century United States” sought to begin an exchange between Smith’s vision of feminist sociology and historians’ work. With a strong grounding in historical materialism, Smith’s main emphasis is on individuals’ actual experiences of their everyday lives and how those experiences construct not only people’s consciousness about their world but also their experiences of that world. As a sociologist, Smith’s methodology of “institutional ethnography” relies on a particular way of thinking about the interviewee as the agent and expert in the interview situation. The initial problem this presents for historians is the applicability to situations where the interviewee is no longer present. Two papers offered attempts to resolve this apparent quandary.

Susan Armitage (Washington State University) described her attempt to go back to oral history interviews conducted in 1976 and reexamine them in the light of Smith's insights. E. Ann Neel (University of Puget Sound) took on an even more difficult task: how can we listen to a subject if she was a black slave and therefore "exists" historically only in public records?

Panels and Presentations on Europe

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The majority of papers of interest to historians of European working-class women dealt with three broad subjects: first, whether, when, and how women were excluded from production; second, company welfare policies or the social rationalization measures adopted by firms in the twentieth century to shape women's lives in and outside the workplace; and third, the ways in which varied constructions of masculinity and femininity shaped workers' protests and politics. Overall, the concern was less with how working-class women made their own history than with the complex conditions, not of their own choosing, under which it was made.

The changing relationship of women to production was discussed in two panels, the first of which dealt with early modern Europe. Four scholars from Europe—Katharina Simon-Muscheid, Christina Vanja, Dorothee Rippmann, and Giovanna Benadusi—took diverse approaches to the problems of property holding, market production, and the life cycle. Each paper addressed a central debate in late medieval/early modern women's history—whether the onset of capitalism led to a degradation in working women's position. The answers were mixed, with Rippmann arguing for a sharp decline in the sixteenth century, Simon-Muscheid positing a continuation of unsatisfactory conditions, and Benadusi showing that women of the rural elite in Tuscany actually improved their position. As Robert DuPlessis noted in his commentary, these diverse conclusions point up the inadequacies of general theories and suggest the necessity of seeing work as a phenomenon "traversed by differences rooted in class, economic sector, age, marital status, geographic location, and so forth."

Deborah Valenze and Harold Benenson tackled the problem of women's exclusion from production in England. Valenze examined the changing eighteenth-century discourse on women and production in a paper whose title revealed the thrust of its argument, "Disarming the Productive Woman." Benenson, whose work looks at the 1914–1947 period, explored not only discourse but also state economic and social policy and women's responses. He argued that the idea of the family wage and married women's dependence structured state policy after World War I—just as it did British sociological analysis after World War II.

Among the most interesting papers were two that dealt with company welfare policies and strategies of social rationalization in interwar France and Germany. Both Laura Lee Downs's study of women factory supervisors (*surintendente d'usine*) in French metalworking factories and Carola Sachse's analysis of factory family policy at the Siemens electrotechnical complex in Berlin illustrated the emergence of deliberate, gender-specific company interventions aimed at rationalizing private life. They suggested the importance of looking not only at state policy but also at private business initiatives in order to understand the forces seeking to reconstruct class and gender relationships in the interwar period.

A final theme addressed politics and protest. Sandra Holton, Pamela Graves, and Jonathan Schneer looked at the Labour party and gender issues in Britain in a panel on "Feminism, Socialism and the 'Average Woman.'" Their detailed case studies were followed by Susan Kent's commentary, which raised questions about the definition of feminism and the potential uses of deconstruction. Sonja Rose and Mary Blewett put constructions of masculinity at the center of their efforts to reassess male protest and women's relationship to it. Rose looked at the strike activity and rhetoric of male power-loom weavers in Lancashire in the 1870s. Central to their rhetoric were appeals to "manliness," defined in terms of the family wage and respectability. This goal was often unattainable but nonetheless appealing to men. Women's economic needs and protest potential, by contrast, were not addressed. They were invited to meetings but could not speak, and were urged to quit work and care for their children. Mary Blewett's paper explored what happened to these same Lancashire textile workers when they emigrated to Fall River, Massachusetts. Older conceptions of masculinity, tinged as they were with deference and respectability, proved ineffective, and male weavers, urged on by women textile workers, developed more unruly conceptions of manliness. This provided women with an opportunity to assert alternative gender definitions and participate more actively in protests. But it proved only temporary, for the more prosperous and conservative male spinners reasserted older definitions of masculinity, centering on deference, the family wage, and the need for male reason to subdue female passion.

Panels and Presentations on the "Third World"

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The number of panels and papers about women in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East far exceeded those of previous Berkshire conferences. Sessions on the Third World included panels on women's suffrage movements in 1920s Puerto Rico and Bengal, the "woman question" in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

India and Jamaica, women's education in late-nineteenth-century Japan, women's culture in late imperial China, women and work in early twentieth-century China, African women's literature, women traders in African history, women and work in southern Africa, gender ideologies and military rule in Latin America, and women's work, family, and political participation in twentieth-century Brazil.

Moreover, taking seriously the conference theme "Crossing Boundaries," a number of presentations about third-world women were part of panels that addressed issues of women's history from a cross-cultural perspective. These included panels on women's autobiographies in India and Britain; women and modernity in the United States and Japan; and revolution and gender reform in the Soviet Union and China.

Finally, three roundtable discussions concerned women in the Third World: "Problems in the Scholarly Study of Middle Eastern Women," "Crossing the Bounds of Discipline and Gender: Anthropology and History in Middle East Scholarship," and "Redefining Feminist History." In the latter, Sharon Sievers, Margot Badran, and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla discussed how women's historical experiences in Japan, the Middle East, and Latin America (respectively) challenge what have become "traditional" notions of "feminist history."

Of the panels concerning the Third World, only a few dealt specifically with working-class women or women's labor history. In a paper entitled "Economic Growth, Peasant Marginalization, and the Sexual Division of Labor in Early Twentieth Century China," Kathy Le Mons Walker examined the negative consequences of increasing market participation for rural women in Nantong County, a cotton-producing district near Shanghai. Confirming the findings of scholars who have studied the development process in a multitude of third-world contexts, Walker concluded that "although women's subsistence production came to form the base upon which market relations could be built up . . . that production did not bring marked improvement in their position." Focusing on women's participation in the silk industry in Wuxi, Lynda Bell reached similar conclusions: that peasant women's increased role in sericulture did not lead "to more freedom for women or to higher levels of female social status," even though it was female labor that kept families above subsistence level. Discussion of the papers elicited questions about the cultural context that made women's contribution to the household economy so insignificant as well as about how work was defined. Were women's tasks construed as "work," or rather as yet another extension of their household chores?

Similar questions about the meaning of work in a Chinese context were addressed in the panel "Women's Culture in Late Imperial China." In her paper "Women's Work and the Household Economy," Susan Mann analyzed how elite constructions of female virtue incorporated changing work patterns of women during the Qing dynasty. Dorothy Ko's paper on the communities formed by elite women writers raised questions about female networks formed during the Qing era that were based on women's work.

All of these papers reflected a new level of sophistication in the historical study of Chinese women. They integrated questions posed by feminist scholars

studying women in Europe and the United States with ones that challenged the validity of those questions for the study of women in the Third World.

Society for French Historical Studies

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Labor history was alive and well at a conference of the Society for French Historical Studies held at Ohio State University on March 29–31, 1990. In two panels and one plenary session—a total of nine papers—French labor historians examined a variety of issues ranging from representations of labor and workers in socialist thinking, the labor press, and labor congresses, to workers' reactions to the portrayal of work and labor in the Paris Exhibition of 1889, women in unions, and managerial strategies in controlling women workers in the Paris metal trades.

Recently, French labor historians have examined the disjuncture between representations of work in France on the one hand, and workers' own vision and experience of work and labor organization on the other. (See, for example, essays in the excellent collection edited by Steven Laurence Kaplan and Cynthia J. Koepp, *Work in France: Representations, Meaning, Organization, and Practice* [Ithaca and London, 1986]). Two papers at the conference focused on this theme. Joy Hall (Auburn University), in "Worker and Socialist Responses to the Social Economy Exhibit at the Paris Exposition of 1889," argued that the exhibit, designed to further solidarist ideals of social peace between workers and employers and to promote mutualism for its moral as well as its economic benefits, proved to be a disappointment for workers. Their voices were lost in reformers' efforts to promote management-oriented reform; no place was given to demonstrating the realities of workers' experience. K. Steven Vincent (North Carolina State University), in "Representations of Labor and Workers in Nineteenth-Century French Socialist Thought," traced the ambiguity of French socialist thinking on work from Lafargue's defense of "the right to be lazy" to Fourier's argument that work could be liberating if not fulfilling and Proudhon's idea that a committed, creative labor force, conscious of its moral obligation, could save society from decadence. Vincent argued that socialists idealized the worker-as-hero even when reality suggested differently—although it is true that, as Steven Zdatny (Rice University) pointed out in his comments, the socialists' overidealizing of workers' potential for action was not unusual or unique: all political parties did this. This moralizing tendency spilled over into discussions of women, where the socialists praised the virtues of the *femme au foyer*. They were less concerned with the exploitation of women in the workplace than they were with the problem of the demise of the home.