

WOMEN'S LABOR HISTORY, 1790–1945

Lois Rita Helmbold and Ann Schofield

Before 1968, books that dealt with the history of women and work in the U.S. barely occupied one library shelf.¹ Stimulated by the reemergence of feminism, the activism of the New Left, and the advent of the “new” social history in the 1960s and 1970s, not only have scholars created a new literature in women’s labor history, but their work has burgeoned in size and matured in conceptualization during the past twenty years. The concern of feminists and the New Left for issues of class, gender, and work inspired the growth of the field; its continued vitality reflects the central importance of its paradigms to women’s history. By contrast with traditional labor historians, feminist historians refused to accept descriptions of women’s secondary role in the labor force without inquiring how that subordinate position came to be and continued to be reinforced. They sought evidence as well that women were active agents in the creation of history and they valorized their activities in strikes and protest movements. Analytically they joined reproduction with production; understanding the intersection of home and workplace became a hallmark of women’s labor history.²

Yet the field’s gaps reflect the influence of white and male models in labor history. Scholars of women’s labor have accorded the most attention to industrial work although in no historical period was it the major employer of women; far less studied are agriculture and service occupations, not only the source of work for most women in the nineteenth century, but also the primary employers of black and Mexican women until the postwar era. More diversified in their analyses of organizations, women’s labor historians have not only examined women’s union militance, but analyzed uniquely female forms of protest in women’s auxiliaries and cross-class alliances. Relatively few monographs treat women of color, and only a tiny handful compare racial, gender, and class hierarchies as they were played out among differing groups of women.

The proliferation and complexity as well as the limitations of the field demand codification and a compass to chart the direction of further research. The following essay will review the terrain U.S. women’s labor history has mapped and will suggest fields for future exploration.

The Where and Why of Women's Work

A time-honored truism of the history of women's wage labor is that women's work left the home and women followed. Understanding the path from home to factory constructed by industrialization as well as the profound and persistent links between them has been a critical task for historians. In their quest to discover the history of working-class women, scholars were initially drawn to the study of female industrial workers, particularly the newness of factory work, its contrast with the work of the home, and its presumed liberating potential. Studies of nineteenth-century industrialization, however, illustrated a seemingly permanent feature of women's work lives: the sex segregation of women workers.

This emphasis on industrialization and sex-segregation, however, betrays the orientation to white women's experience as the norm. Black women had left their homes far earlier to labor in fields and houses, not as wage workers, but as slaves. The majority, who were field hands, were not segregated by sex; only the minority of household servants labored at "sex-appropriate" tasks. Yet this distinction of experience is usually relegated to the field of black women's history. Women's labor history is implicitly assumed to be white; it includes women of color when they held the same jobs as white women. This essay will trace these separate developments among historians, while cautioning of the liabilities inherent in segregated history.

For many historians of women's labor, the central question was how a sex-segregated labor market was constructed and maintained. Women are perceived and indeed frequently perceive themselves as inherently domestic creatures suited for marginal types of waged work which mirror the work of the home. No historian has done more than Alice Kessler-Harris (*Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*, 1982) in suggesting how social constructions of femininity determine the work women do and the value attached to it. She casts ideology in a central historical role in maintaining a segmented labor force, whose familiar outlines label many lower skilled, lower waged, less secure jobs "female." The strength of sex-typing is such that once an occupation is labeled "female" or "male," as Ruth Milkman writes, employers showed "surprisingly little interest in tampering with it even to enhance profitability."³ Sociologists have called into question the more sweeping claims of segmentation arguments⁴ and the controversial Sears case has raised the issue of its application, yet its impact on historiography is clear.⁵

Beginning with the conscious efforts of early textile mill entrepreneurs to legitimate wage work for women, employers eager to hire female workers demonstrated how work reinforced prevailing ideas about women.⁶ In shoe-making, retail sales, and clerical work, women's presumed tolerance for te-

dium and their nimble fingers suited them for the tasks at hand; their desire for marriage and family legitimated their low wages—why pay single women a decent wage when they would shortly leave the workplace to become dependent upon a working man?⁷ Prevailing ideas about women's weakness helped determine their place of work, their actual jobs, and their relations with employers.

Ideology about women affected as well relations between women and men within the working class; it deepened fissures in sexually divided workplaces and unions, creating unbridgable distances between male and female workers. Patricia Cooper writes of cigarmakers: "Unable to treat women as equals, male unionists often depicted them as needy, vulnerable and victimized;" competitors for jobs rather than comrades in union struggles.⁸ Male shoemakers also viewed unskilled women workers as a threat to wages and organization despite their proven capacity to organize in the Daughters of St. Crispin.⁹ Even Ava Baron's discovery of a high degree of cooperation between male and female printers during the nineteenth century revealed cooperation undermined by limiting cultural attitudes.¹⁰

Histories of feminized occupations all point to the role of ideology in structuring retail sales, clerical, and domestic work.¹¹ The time-honored imperative of women's role to serve made clerk, secretary, maid, and even prostitute natural extensions of women's position in the home. And, in contrast to rationalizing trends in industrial work, these jobs retained a preindustrial quality, that is, task-oriented and featuring a personal relationship with the employer thus making it more resistant to organization.

Like service sector work, prostitution also bears the strong imprint of ideology. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century attempts to redeem fallen women, end the "social evil" and uncover the machinations of the white slave trade open a fascinating window on social views of female sexuality.¹² Recent scholarship, however, has shifted focus to the prostitute herself to find her neither victim nor harlot, but frequently a working-class woman negotiating her way in a world of limited economic choices. Freed from the moral rhetoric of reform literature, scholars demonstrate how prostitution often formed an accepted part of a woman's life cycle in the world of the laboring poor.

Despite the hegemonic quality of ideas about women and their work, women workers never mindlessly internalized ideologically imposed constraints. Rather, through work cultures developed in shop floor relationships they subverted such restrictions. Writing about department store clerks, for example, Susan Porter Benson describes a complicated work culture that subverted hierarchy and work rules, imbued workers with a more positive sense of themselves and their work, and frequently formed a worker consciousness that set the clerk, operative, or clerical apart from the middle class. Setting

her argument in the context of a developing consumer culture, Benson concludes that saleswomen represent the "extreme case of the dilemma of all workers under consumer capitalism—driven by the social relations of the workplace to see themselves as members of the working class, cajoled by the rewards of mass consumption to see themselves as middle class."¹³

Benson's emphasis on culture reflects a major trend in social history. Kathy Peiss, Elizabeth Ewen, Christine Stansell, and Joanne Meyerowitz have described the world outside of work for working-class women. They conclude that life in the dance halls, theaters, and amusement parks of industrializing America distinguished the experience of working-class girls from that of their more genteel middle-class sisters and, indeed, that working-class women thus became standard bearers of modern values and behaviors. The relation between the family economy and women's wage labor, so strikingly demonstrated in the European case by Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, frequently plays a role in these studies as well.¹⁴

Despite the long-standing importance of ideology and the present concern with culture in the historical analysis of women and work, economic elements continue to play a prominent role in explaining why, how, and in what circumstances women are found in certain occupations. Studies of textile workers have been exemplary in reminding us that neither ideology nor economic change alone account for women's labor force behavior. Thomas Dublin, Lise Vogel, Anthony Wallace, Tamara Haraven, Louise Lamphere, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, and others, writing about textile workers at different points in time, all describe a complicated interaction of community, family, work culture, technology, and economic change. These sophisticated analyses point the direction for future work.

Historical studies of women during such cataclysmic national experiences as war and depression confirm the wisdom of a multidimensional approach. These studies address a critical question—did crises speed up or impede women's progress? Despite William Chafe's assertion that "within five years, World War II had radically transformed the economic outlook of women," evidence now seems more convincing that wars as well as other historical watersheds were superimposed on an underlying dynamic of women's increasing involvement in wage labor and their persistently marginal relationship to the labor market.¹⁵ World War I accentuated existing trends, and despite strong prejudice against the employment of women, particularly married women, during the Great Depression, the number of women in the labor force actually increased between 1929 and 1940.¹⁶

The film, *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*, conclusively shattered the myth that women war workers were happy homemakers who left suburban bridge tables to staff munitions plants for the duration of the war. Now the

revised explanation—that women, particularly black and working-class white women, significantly improved their labor market situation by participation in war work—has been challenged by Ruth Milkman (*Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II*, 1987). She found that in two key industries, auto and electrical, managerial strategies and other factors successfully maintained job segregation by sex, thus proving the persistence of sex segregation even “for the duration.” Milkman downplays ideological factors and highlights structural causes for women’s lack of advancement, e.g., women war workers were “indifferent” toward unionism because economic mobilization, not unions, caused their wartime mobility. Milkman’s approach has set the course for future study in this area. We must examine more meticulously variables of region, industry, union politics, and management to understand the impact of national crisis on women’s work.

Yet the industrial paradigm in women’s labor history, and by extension the limitations of male models of work, is challenged by the sheer numbers of women employed in other areas. Agriculture and domestic service occupied a far greater proportion of women in the nineteenth century than did manufacturing. Joan Jensen’s *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750–1850* (1986), analyzes the interconnections of household, marketplace, and public sphere and is one of the few books concerned with the agricultural labor of women.¹⁷ The sheer numbers of white, black, and Mexican women toiling in fields demand not only more scholarly attention but also the desegregation of women’s labor history through comparative analysis.

Changes in the economy have not been limited to the displacement of agriculture and home production by factory manufacture. By 1930 industry had slipped to third place as an employer of women, as the growth of clerical and service occupations provided increasing numbers of jobs for women. The clerical and service sectors have continued to employ the largest numbers of working-class women for almost seventy years. However, only Margery Davies, Elyce Rotella, Sharon Hartman Strom, and Cindy Sondik Aron have analyzed the rapid development and the feminization of clerical fields.¹⁸ Domestic work, the single largest employer of women for many decades, has inspired a number of historians, and at least one of them, David Katzman (*Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America*, 1978), has analyzed the racial differences among houseworkers. Scholars are only beginning to turn their attention toward commercial service occupations such as waitressing; other food service workers, laundry operatives, beauticians, and the various forms of public housekeeping have yet to receive historical scrutiny.¹⁹

The other side of women’s work is, of course, the work that has remained within the home and has remained sex-typed female. Susan Strasser, Ruth

Schwartz Cowan, Annegret Ogden, and Glenna Matthews have analyzed the technological, cultural, and emotional aspects of housework.²⁰ Social scientists have written far more about the double day, the demands which a full-time job as well as motherhood and marriage have placed upon women workers, than have historians, in part because mothers, with the major exception of black mothers, were relatively unlikely to work for wages prior to World War II.

Organizations

When Alice Kessler-Harris asked, "Where are the organized women workers?" she took on the task of countering the sexist assumption that women are impossible to organize because paid work is simply a brief interlude in a life devoted to marriage and mothering. Kessler-Harris pointed to two central facts: women *had* unionized but they had nevertheless remained invisible in the historical record. Although women established few lasting organizations, and no more than 15 percent of women workers were union members at any given time during the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, numbers are not the only significant fact. Vivid incidents of militance and organization highlight the history of women and work in the United States and attracted the attention of historians initially working in the field. Now, however, the historical picture has become more complicated. One scholar cautions researchers against developing "a feminist orthodoxy that [takes] all evidence of women's militancy as evidence of a virtually limitless potential for women's activism in the labor movement."²¹ Ultimately more meaningful are those works which widen their angle of vision to ask why and under what circumstances women mobilize.

Certainly in the great uprisings in the garment trades between 1909 and 1913, youthful enthusiasm and an East European socialist political tradition played important roles in encouraging walkouts.²² Available social and historical scripts, be they bread riots or consumer boycotts, also facilitated protest as did communities with strong labor ties or organizations.²³ Feminist groups such as the Women's Trade Union League encouraged organization and often supported the militant activity of women on strike, while trade unions displayed more ambivalence about women strikers.²⁴ In the 1930s, for example, the CIO rarely acknowledged the critical contributions women made to CIO victories as rank and file members, as organizers, and in auxiliaries. Few women were included in leadership positions and unions demeaned the militant activity of auxiliaries as simply an extension of women's domestic role.²⁵

Despite the importance of the 1930s to American labor history, most of the literature on women's labor organizations focuses on the period between 1880

and 1920. The turn-of-the-century era was not only the heyday of white male working-class organization (the Knights of Labor, the development of lasting unions among skilled workers, and the formative years of the AFL), but also a high point in middle-class women's organizations (the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the women's club movement, and the suffrage movement). Some female unionists had no direct contact with labor, reform, or feminist organizations, but others were influenced by long traditions of activism, either in the United States or in their native lands.²⁶

The needle trades in particular, the major industrial employer of women at the turn of the century, furnished early lessons on unionization. Alice Kessler-Harris and Meredith Tax situated garment workers' activism in the interlocking relations among organizations and in the interconnected context of class and gender.²⁷ Neither the male-dominated ILGWU nor the middle-class dominated Women's Trade Union League could offer adequate support to female union activists, according to Kessler-Harris. When class-consciousness and sex-consciousness conflicted, women activists threw their lot with the working class. Tax argues that women workers dealt with this tension between class and gender by allying in recurring waves with women in the socialist movement, the labor movement, the national liberation movements, and the feminist movement. Like sex segregation, this tension between the labor movement and the feminist movement has been a persistent feature of the history of women and work and, like sex segregation, the problems of sexism and classism that plagued women in the needle trades at the beginning of this century have endured.

Analyses of the great uprisings of the early twentieth century in the needle trades by Joan Jensen, N. Sue Weiler, Lois Scharf, and Ann Schofield, conclude that recognition as both workers and women was basic to the demands of strikers upon their employers, and to the various unions and organizations which sought their membership.²⁸ In a recent essay, Kessler-Harris develops this point by analyzing factors aiding and impeding coalitions between women and men in the union movement.²⁹ She concludes that conflicting cultural styles between the sexes meant that they would be at odds. While male unionists valued unity, discipline, and faithfulness to the union, women activists valued community, idealism, and spirit.

Working-class men's sexism, middle-class feminists' elitism, and the different lives of the two sexes do not adequately explain the history of women's labor activism. Scholars have also placed comparative failures and successes in the context of structural factors within the garment trade. "Run away shops," for example, inhibited unionization at the turn of the century as well as in the post World War II years. Roger Waldinger concludes that the structure of the industry was most conducive to organization in the decade 1910-

1920, the period of some of the ILGWU's greatest victories; following that, conditions became less favorable.³⁰

CIO-inspired organizing in the 1930s and 1940s frequently provided the first successful organizations to women in clerical and service occupations as well as some industrial jobs such as food processing and tobacco. Thus, Dolores Janiewski and Vicki Ruiz, historians of union activities in tobacco and food processing, which employed both women and men as well as workers of more than one race, address different questions than writers concerned with early twentieth-century garment workers. They add concerns of race, culture, and racism to the standard themes of motivation, successes, and failures with which all historians of labor militancy deal. Sharon Hartman Strom has argued that despite leftists' lumping of clericals with bourgeois professionals and failure to recognize the class nature of clerical work, the UOPWA (United Office and Professional Workers of America) had achieved some notable successes prior to its expulsion from the CIO in 1950 in the wake of the Taft-Hartley demand for anti-Communist affidavits.³¹

Far fewer historians have written about women's auxiliaries, but the small number of articles indicates broader areas for investigation: the community context of labor struggles as well as the relation between women and men within working-class families and communities. Two of the best portrayals of women's participation in strikes as auxiliaries are films: *Salt of the Earth*, directed by Herbert Biberman and Lorraine Grey's *With Babies and Banners: The Story of the Women's Emergency Brigade*. Sounding similar themes, Ardis Cameron, Priscilla Long, Marjorie Penn Lasky, and Ann Schofield each illuminate the ways in which women aided the progress of primarily male strikes and counter the assumption that participation in wage labor is necessary for women to become politicized.³²

What questions does the involvement of non-waged women in labor unrest raise about class, community, and consciousness? In Colorado, Kansas, and elsewhere women engaged in long, disruptive marches in support of striking husbands, fathers, sons, and lovers. Did their concerns for home and family motivate their actions more strongly than a shared awareness of class inequities? Or did the work culture of occupations such as mining so pervade communities that women as well as men shared a sense of class oppression? Women's anomalous role in these settings and its implications for class formation demands further study. Their activities call attention to the fact that there are multiple and often contradictory motives for women's collective action.

Two historians, reflecting the influence of French scholars Michelle Perrot and Michel Foucault, suggest directions for further research in the area of female militancy. Louise Tilly has written of French workers' propensity toward collective action. Comparing various industries and regions Tilly found

that "characteristics of the organization of production and household division of labor were critical variables in women's participation in collective action and that similar factors demanded rates of participation for men and women." She concluded, "No special psychological or gender attribute explanation is needed to understand women's proportionately lower participation rate."³³ A parallel synthetic study which evaluates participation rates and tests the validity of Tilly's hypothesis in the U.S. case would be a welcome step forward.

By contrast to Tilly's more general categories and social science model, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall draws our attention to what Foucault calls "local knowledge" in her study of a North Carolina mill village. Using concepts of language and culture in her analysis of the 1929 Elizabethton strike of textile workers, Hall concludes that the "women of Elizabethton were neither traditionalists acting on family values nor market-oriented individualists, neither peculiar mountaineers nor familiar modern women." She frames her analysis in the ecology of the Appalachian south, the "intricacies of working-class women's lives" and, like Tilly, in the need to evaluate factors other than gender.³⁴

The hostility of the labor movement and differences between the sexes pushed working women into organizations dominated by middle class women: summer schools, all-women locals, the Women's Bureau of the Labor Department, and the WTUL. In a narrow interpretation of labor history, there is no room for actors who were not also "workers." Yet the efforts of these middle-class allies secured major gains for women workers, including protective legislation.

Studies of organizations such as the Women's Trade Union League illustrate the contradictions of cross-class alliances. New York garment workers, for example, benefited from the well-to-do women who walked picket lines with them, thus garnering newspaper attention, as well as from the financial support the WTUL offered. At the same time, the WTUL's dependent relationship on the AFL and the patronizing attitudes of middle and upper-class women were often liabilities. Virtually any study of women's labor activism in major cities in the first two decades of this century deals with the role played by the WTUL. N. Sue Weiler, Lois Scharf, Colette Hyman, and Karen M. Mason address the role of the League in specific strikes. A new biography of Margaret Drier Robins and literally dozens of monographs dealing with middle-class reformers, the social feminists, have examined the League's activities.³⁵

Some of the same themes of cross-class cooperation and conflict are found in studies of the summer schools for women workers. Organized primarily by women reformers, and in more recent years in curtailed form by unions, these schools offered practical training in labor negotiations as well as broader

education in politics, economics, and the humanities. A recent film by Rita Heller, "The Women of Summer," uses documentary footage as well as contemporary interviews to depict the most famous summer school at Bryn Mawr College. Summer school alumni remembered the clean, cool campuses and sisterly highjinks as well as lessons in organizing and economics.³⁶

Feminists and women reformers were not the only non-union groups interested in aiding women workers. Left organizations ranging from the Socialist Party to the IWW to the Communist Party played a supportive or even a leadership role in various strikes and groups. Meredith Tax and Mari Jo Buhle document the now familiar tensions between the needs of a political party and the needs of women workers. Neither the Communist Party nor the IWW have been analyzed in much depth concerning their relation to women workers. Despite the enormous literature on the history of the Communist Party USA, no single work documents its role in a particular workplace struggle involving women.³⁷

Race and Ethnicity

Our decision to devote a separate section of this essay to issues of race and ethnicity reflects the typically separate treatment which white women and women of color have received at the hands of historians, to say nothing of racial segregation in the workplace. Consideration of the particular ethnicity and culture of European immigrants and their daughters sometimes appears in white women's labor history, and monographs and articles concerning women in specific ethnic groups—whether Euro-, Afro-, Asian-, or Latin American—often deal in part with work. Most historians, however, have failed to appreciate the very real connections that existed between the work of different groups of women; rare exceptions attempt to analyze the links between racial groups.

In the complex literature discussing slavery, only recently have historians begun to analyze the work life of women, particularly the unique oppression by which women's reproductive as well as their productive labor was expropriated by their so-called owners. An early article by Angela Davis initiated this analysis, which has been developed in more detail by Deborah Gray White and Jacqueline Jones. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has recently examined the complicated relationship between black and white women within the plantation household to suggest the importance of class as well as race and gender in the analysis of that antebellum world; her subject matter, the plantation household, however, limits her consideration to a minority of black women.³⁸ The general paucity of scholarship on women as agricultural workers includes black women. Following the abolition of slavery, the overwhelm-

ing majority of black women worked in agriculture and service jobs; participants in the Great Migration found themselves confined to service occupations in the urban north and midwest until the post-World War II years.³⁹ World War II did provide some opportunities to black women, but, as Karen Tucker Anderson has illustrated, prejudice ran deep. Black women made more progress in service and unskilled blue collar jobs than they did in clerical or sales positions; 40 percent remained in domestic service as late as 1950. The most significant fact about their wartime jobs is the extent to which previous barriers of race and sex remained intact.⁴⁰

The subject of domestic work has attracted many more scholars and has been most likely to examine relations between women across races. David Katzman and Elizabeth Clark-Lewis have traced the movement of domestic work from living-in to living out, from servant to employee, which they attribute to the desire of black women for self-determination and to live with their families. Their work provides a needed corrective to those who have difficulty in viewing black women as agents active on their own behalf. Phyllis Palmer, investigating efforts to improve the working conditions of domestic servants, focuses on the low status of housework, whether performed by white housewives or black domestics.⁴¹

Very little has been written about attempted unionization of black women in the years prior to 1945. Scattered references to fledgling unions in such works as Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984), and in published primary sources, however, offer tantalizing clues.⁴² Organizations that were marginal to the labor movement often offered the most support for survival and change for black women workers. Provision of services to working women by Phyllis Wheatley Associations, by protective associations which aided newly arrived southern migrants in northern cities, as well as numerous attempts at organizing unions of domestic workers, testify to a particular brand of activism within Afro-American communities. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn places these efforts in the context of African mutual-aid and collective survival strategies.⁴³ For both black and white working-class women, middle-class allies of their own race provided support for challenging and surviving difficult working conditions. These cross-class alliances, however, rarely traversed racial boundaries.

Unlike black women, Mexican women initially were exploited as conquered, rather than imported workers, their situations determined by developing capitalism and the conquest of Mexico by the United States in the Southwest. Pioneering scholars are beginning to correct the near invisibility of Chicanas; the literature concentrates on the twentieth century and on urban areas, leaving fertile fields for future research on the nineteenth century and on rural women. Because pre-industrial and agricultural labor has relied

upon the family unit, as compared with the individual labor of wage earners, the movement from agriculture to industry has particular importance for Chicana history.⁴⁴ A recent analysis by Sarah Deutsch (*No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880–1940*, 1987) examines migratory strategies of Chicanos from northern New Mexico to fields in Colorado and places community and gender change within this context.

Chicanas had the lowest labor force participation of any group enumerated by the U.S. census during the years discussed in this paper, and they were confined to marginal jobs in industries characterized by seasonal labor or to service occupations. These structural inequities, however, did not prevent them from actively organizing. Particularly in urban industries where Chicanas were a substantial proportion of the labor force, they struggled for better conditions: in an El Paso laundry strike in 1919, in the garment industry in Los Angeles in 1933, in pecan shelling in San Antonio during the 1930s, and in Los Angeles food processing plants in 1939. Recent analyses of these strikes and organizations put to rest the persistent myth of passive Chicanas.⁴⁵

Scholars from many disciplines commonly explain the histories of women of color by resorting to the device of culture. The low labor force participation rates of Chicanas, for example, are attributed to Mexican culture, specifically to machismo, without examination of the economic context. Two sociologists, Evelyn Nakano Glenn and Maxine Baca Zinn, call into question this over-emphasis on "culture." Analyzing changing strategies among Chinese-Americans in response to economic changes, Glenn invalidates a static view of family continuity. In the late nineteenth century households were split across two continents because of American exclusionary legislation; between 1920 and 1965, small family businesses in which no demarcation existed between work and family life were common in Chinese-American communities. More recently, complete segregation between work and family life has occurred when both adults participate in wage-earning. Glenn illustrates the uselessness of relying on a static concept of culture to analyze the history of women of color and instead roots her analysis in strategic responses to changes in the economic sphere. Zinn also argues against an over-reliance on culture. "Ethnic traditions should not be seen as responsible for subordination of women but rather as expressive of distinctive life-styles that can exist along with modern behaviors and orientations."⁴⁶ The warnings of Glenn and Zinn apply to white women as well as women of color: those analyses which take into account both culture and economics offer the best explanations.

Much of the scholarship on Asian and Latina women in the U.S. is written within a clearly Marxist framework; the search for theoretical analysis is as

important as the specific circumstances under discussion. The history of the earliest Chinese female immigrants, brought to this country as prostitutes; the demands for and exclusion of Asian immigrant workers; and the work experiences of Japanese-American women during the first half of the twentieth century have been subjects of recent analyses.⁴⁷ Most scholarship on the labor of women of color in the U.S. focuses on the post-World War II years, however, and often emanates from other disciplines—anthropology, sociology, economics—which are less likely to utilize a historical dimension. Yet these works frequently offer models for historians. In addition, current collections of oral histories and other primary sources from Black, Asian-American, and Latina workers will form the basis for future labor history.

The impact of racial segregation within a sex-segregated labor force cannot be adequately understood by singular analyses of women of specific racial or ethnic groups. White women have benefited from employers' discriminatory practices which insure that the worst jobs are filled by women of color. A few scholars have begun to write comparative studies which illustrate these complexities. Julia Kirk Blackwelder argues that occupational segregation by race, sex, and caste meant that white women increased their share of employment during the Depression, while Black and Mexican women were driven out of jobs because their occupations contracted dramatically. Lois Rita Helmbold has also pointed out the differential effects of the Depression according to race, but found that white women replaced black women in formerly "Negro jobs."⁴⁸ Dolores Janiewski, studying the tobacco industry, concluded that racial antagonisms between black and white women were sufficiently strong to stymie interracial attempts at organization, while Vicki L. Ruiz documented cooperation across racial and language barriers between Mexican, White Russian, and Russian Jewish women in food processing plants.⁴⁹

Recently Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Ruth Milkman, and Alice Kessler-Harris have broken ground in their attempts to construct new models and ask new questions about the history of women and work. Despite their innovations, however, the field still demands synthetic work that incorporates not only ideology and the economic context but also sexuality, life cycle, the culture of consumption, and the understanding that class has a different meaning for women than men.

It is critical that labor history begin to integrate the insights of women's history into the story of America's laboring past. As Joan Scott has pointed out, labor historians have made commendable efforts to include women as subject in recent writings but few if any are willing to rank gender along with class as an important category of analysis. Scott's call for historians to utilize post-structural theory and to focus on systems of meaning, on language, as a method for incorporating gender into labor history will doubtless be heeded

by some historians.⁵⁰ For others Scott's suggestion raises the specter of a history ungrounded in material reality.

Whatever the merits of post-structural theory for women's labor history, the notion of examining gendered systems must be applauded, at the same time as historians offer further attention to unique aspects of women's work lives, particularly the highly feminized clerical, service, and sales occupations which employ the majority of working class women. Finally, not only must there be more attention paid to the histories of women of color, but the development of comparative analyses which take race, class, and gender into account at the same time. The tasks of understanding the history of women and of integrating women into history must proceed in tandem. Then and only then will we have written a history of all the people.

Lois Rita Helmbold, coordinator of the Women's Studies Program, San Jose State University, is the author of Making Choices, Making Do: Survival Strategies of Black and White Working Class Women during the Great Depression (forthcoming from University of Illinois Press). Ann Schofield, Departments of American Studies and Women's Studies, University of Kansas, is writing a collective biography of female labor activists.

1. Hannah Josephson, *The Golden Threads: New England's Mill Girls and Magnates* (1949); Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (1938); Helen Sumner, *A History of Women in Industry*, vol. 9, *Report on Condition of Women and Child Wage-Earners in the United States*, Senate Doc. 645, 61st Cong. 2nd sess. (GPO, 1910; reprint: Arno Press, 1974); Lucy Maynard Salmon, *Domestic Service* (1911).

2. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-earning Women in the United States* (1982), is an excellent overview of the field. Pioneering but less analytic works are Barbara M. Wertheimer, *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America* (1977) and Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 2 vols. (1979).

3. Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (1987), p. 8.

4. Veronica Beechey, "Women and Production: A Critical Analysis of Some Sociological Theories of Women's Work," in Annette Kuhn and Ann Marie Wolpe, eds., *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

5. Ruth Milkman, "Women's History and the Sears Case," *Feminist Studies* 12, 2 (Summer 1986): 375-400; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., "Women's History Goes to Trial: EEOC v. Sears, Roebuck and Co.," *Signs* 11, 4 (Summer 1986): 751-79; Sandi E. Cooper, "EEOC v. Sears, Roebuck and Co.: A Bibliographical Note," *CCWHP Newsletter* 18, 1 (February 1987): 12-14.

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