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The Making of A Gendered Working Class

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The Making of A Gendered Working Class

Mariana Valverde

Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf 1986).

NOT SO LONG AGO IT WAS a novelty to state that there have been women in history, and that their lives have differed significantly from those of their male counterparts. Now that these ideas are no longer shocking, feminist scholars are undertaking increasingly sophisticated analyses of how particular groups or networks of women were — and are — constituted not only through their socially ascribed gender but also through their class, race, and ethnicity. This involves more than adding bits on women of colour or poor women — just as integrating a gender analysis into labour history involves much more than merely adding a few paragraphs on women workers.[1] In the United States as elsewhere, feminist historiography has begun to focus on the ways in which femininity, far from being a homogeneous category, has always been fundamentally shaped and differentiated by class and race. Indeed, one could now say that there is no longer *one* history of women but rather diverse histories whose unity, or lowest common denominator of gender oppression, appears increasingly elusive.

Most of the new works have been about middle-class women, who were literate and leisured enough to leave behind substantial written records; they have highlighted the class-specific character of what had been previously regarded as a general culture of femininity.[2] Stansell's imaginative use of sources to shed light on women who left no diaries, memoirs, or organizational papers has taken American women's history a step further. To describe

[1]For a recent evaluation of the integration of class and gender perspectives in Canadian historiography, see Bettina Bradbury, "Women's History and Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 19 (1987), 23-43.

[2]See Nancy Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, N.Y., 1822-1872* (Ithaca 1984); and Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County 1790-1865* (Cambridge 1981).

Mariana Valverde, "The Making of A Gendered Working Class," *Labour/Le Travail*, 22 (Fall 1988), 247-257.

the emergence of the leading city of the most powerful nation on earth from the point of view of its laundresses, poor widows, young milliners, and waterfront prostitutes is an enlightening and even revolutionary project: fortunately, Stansell's skills as a historian and as a writer ensure that *City of Women* will do for the working-class women of New York City what E.P. Thompson did for English working-class men. It may even radically alter the general understanding of North American history.[3]

In spite of Stansell's sophisticated understanding of the mutual determination of gender and class, capitalism and patriarchy, her book is not likely to be used by many non-feminist labour and socialist historians. This is due partly to the usual reluctance of the 'male Left' to spend much time reading and assimilating feminist scholarship: but it is also due to the fact that Stansell — like most U.S. feminist historians — situates her work solely in relation to other feminist scholarship, with little reference to labour or socialist historiography. This is understandable because of the absence of a solid, continuous socialist tradition in the U.S. and the consequent undeveloped state of labour history (as compared to Britain). It is nevertheless unfortunate that someone who is as much a historian of class relations as of 'women' would choose a title and a set of opening and closing remarks which may mislead readers into thinking that this work falls squarely in the young but already established U.S. tradition of studying women's social networks and separate-sphere politics.[4] Granted that Stansell, like all feminist historians in the 1980s, owes a great deal to Smith-Rosenberg and others who pioneered the study of women as a relatively autonomous groups: to lay bare the ways in which women have relied on each other and built female worlds while officially dependent on men was a radical and lasting contribution to the discipline of history as well as to Women's Studies. The women studied by Stansell, however, did not really constitute a separate city: they were too deeply involved in the material realities of poverty also affecting men and children of their class, and there was little they had in common with their upper-class sisters. They did have gender-specific jobs, concerns, leisure pursuits, and so on: but Stansell's study does as much to shatter the idea of nineteenth-century separate spheres as it does to uphold it, if only by

[3]The comparison with E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1968) is an appropriate one in several ways: one is that both historians frankly describe the world as it looks from the working class. Neither of them hides political and ethical passions under the bushel of objectivism.

[4]C. Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Oxford 1985). For more class-conscious studies of 'female worlds', see Ellen Ross, "Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I," *History Workshop*, 15 (1983), 4-27, and Martha Vicinus's superb study of single, middle-class career women, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (Chicago 1985).

demonstrating that gender cannot be regarded as *the* dividing line in society.

Stansell's difficulties in situating her own work by reference to a feminist historiography built largely upon studies of middle-class women are not 'defects' in her work; they are creative tensions in the field within which she works. Stansell is part of a second generation of feminist historians, who, rather than presuppose an ahistorical category — womanhood — and proceed to document its victories and defeats,[5] begin from a truly historical sense of the variables involved in the making of gender. Their work is thus keenly aware of the class- and race-differentiated character of gender oppression. But to Canadian scholars familiar with British and comparative labour history, the new U.S. feminist historians appear to be somewhat deaf in one ear: they seldom hear, and hence do not converse with, Marxist and labour historians. For instance, Stansell's fascinating analysis of philanthropic practices does not take into account the important work of non-feminist writers such as Gareth Stedman Jones,[6] who have examined the role of philanthropy in class formation albeit without seeing its importance as a practice constitutive of middle-class womanhood.

The partial deafness of Stansell and her co-workers ought not, however, to be used as an excuse for labour historians to consign the book under review to the ghetto women's history. I will endeavour to show that *City of Women* makes important contributions to both the history and the theory of working-class formation, and is therefore very relevant to the work of labour and socialist historians everywhere.

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THE FIRST PART OF *City of Women*, entitled "Precarious Dependencies: Women in the Republican City," explores the material difficulties caused by contradictions in late eighteenth-century liberal democracy. The leading commercial city of the new republic valued individualism and independence in its citizens — but women (like blacks) were neither independent nor citizens. The social construction of their gender as *dependent*, of women as beings defined through relationships to men/citizens, created uneasy tensions. If women sought mobility and independence they were accused of vanity, frivolity, and unchaste intentions: these were not only moral flaws but also a kind of female treason against family and state. If they followed the norms of femininity, however, they gave up all participation in city life for the sake of often precarious male support and respect. Independence and dependence were thus *both* dangerous and precarious.

[5]There are, however, some historians who utilize abstract and ahistorical concepts of both gender and feminism, such as Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies* (London 1985).
[6]Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (Harmondsworth 1976), and also "Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870-1900," *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), 460-503.

The feminist philosophical critique of liberal democracy[7] is given historical flesh and blood through Stansell's intelligent use of documents about the acquittal of a gentleman accused of the rape of a young seamstress. The rape trial and subsequent debates shows that working-class women were not credible witnesses because republican ideas about the light of reason inhering in individuals did not extend to them. The gentleman rapist's lawyers complained of the unfairness of "putting the life of a citizen in the hands of a woman" — and a working class woman at that.

Lack of access to citizenship was therefore not a purely political injustice felt by intellectual women. Women's susceptibility to sexual violence and restricted employment opportunities were both parts of a system which constructed them as 'dependents' of rational male citizens, regardless of whether or not they had male breadwinners or whether or not these men actually protected (as opposed to beating or harassing) them. The political exclusion of women from the city/republic was furthermore mirrored in the physical arrangements of urban space:

> [Men were the] drunken brawlers and street loungers and the most noticeable workers, as they trudged to and from the docks or labored at the open doors of the craft shops that dotted the streets. Another, less noticeable round of female activity, however, went on around this masculine sphere, a cycle of pinching and saving, of cleaning and borrowing and lending, of taking — and of being taken. With unremitting labor, wives, mothers and female neighbors kept the 'tenement classes' going from day to day.(42)

Throughout this period, working-class women did not stay home in the wainscoted parlors of Victorian lore: they had no parlours, and the one or two rooms they had, opening onto busy streets, witnessed a constant traffic of kin, neighbours, and strangers. Using domestic-violence trial records and other sources giving glimpses of everyday life, Stansell carefully draws a picture of neighbourhoods in which women wandered in and out of each other's rooms to borrow things, mind children, or chat: women also went out into the streets together, for instance when the Monday pawning of Sunday clothes brought them a bit of cash for a drink at the pub. This reality of neighbourhood sociability was denied by a familial ideology of privacy and domesticity that became increasingly noticeable during the period under study.

One of the changes in the urban geography of gender (and class) was that whereas eighteenth-century poor New Yorkers had gone to get outdoor relief from the public Almshouse, by the 1820s the poor were being visited, or rather inspected, in their homes by evangelical and charity visitors intent on giving more advice than aid. As Stansell points out, even if the husband

[7]See for instance Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: Male and Female in Western Philosophy* (London 1984), chapters 3-5; and Zilla Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (New York 1981), part II.

answered the door, he would usually expect his wife to deal with these visitors: the important work of either accommodating their moral, political, and sanitary expectations or resisting them in a doorstep class struggle thus devolved onto the wife.[8] It is clear — though Stansell does not emphasize this — that a woman's thoughts and decisions about these interactions were significant for the class as a whole as well as for her family.

This brings us to what I believe to be the most original and insightful aspect of Stansell's book: her analysis of the central role played by charity and philanthropy in constructing the humble poor at one pole and the civic-minded wealthy at the other, both classes being clearly gendered. Previous working-class historians have neglected or underestimated the role played by philanthropy in both cultural and economic class formation, partly because of a fetishism of workplace relations and partly because of a masculinist disregard for such womanly activities as circulating the middle-class's used clothing among the working class.[9] Indeed, from Stansell's work we can see that 'workerism' and masculinism are one and the same: overvaluing masculine pursuits leads to underestimating the importance of family, housework, childrearing, sex, leisure pursuits, and culture in the formation of the working class.[10] And yet, Stansell does not throw out the historical materialist baby with the workerist bathwater: while sharply aware of the power of words and images, she does not fall into the one-sided view that discourse is all-powerful. In this way she avoids the culturalism common in work on philanthropy.

Charity work has often been mistakenly seen as part of the leisure (that is non-work) of middle-class ladies, as primarily helping to constitute the culture of the ruling classes.[11] It is true that both individual charity and

[8]This interaction among women of different classes has been analyzed by Jane Lewis's studies of motherhood training and health visitors in working-class London. See her *The Politics of Motherhood* (London 1980).

[9]For instance, Michael Piva, *The Condition of the Working Class in Toronto 1900-1921* (Ottawa 1979). Piva defends his narrow focus stating that "most social welfare agencies, such as the Children's Aid Society, by definition dealt with unusual problems .... Unemployment, meanwhile, was endemic to the working-class experience." The adult-male bias of this statement is reinforced by his explicit definition of 'working-class' as excluding white-collar women's work. (x-xi)

[10]Bryan Palmer tries to rectify the production-relations bias of Canadian labour history by using the insights of British studies of cultural aspects of working-class formation; see his *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstruction of Canadian Labour 1800-1980* (Toronto 1983). In spite of his refreshing interest in culture and family, however, he tends to treat the family as a black box: sexism and struggles within the family are not mentioned.

[11]Joey Noble's pioneering article on Ontario philanthropy highlights the ideological function of charity: "Class-ifying the Poor: Toronto Charities 1850-1880," *Studies in Political* Economy, I (1979), 109-28. Several articles in a special issue of the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 14, (Spring 1979), pay more attention to economic function of relief in the early

organized philanthropy have played a major role in generating moral and cultural categories for bourgeois society ('the deserving poor,' 'the thriftless family,' 'the solitary widow'). The system of philanthropy, however, was not merely 'superstructural' or discursive. Whether the amounts of relief actually distributed were large or small, the very existence of philanthropy influenced the making of the working class — and its gender differentiation — in important ways, which I will attempt to briefly sketch.

In the nineteenth century, both male and female workers were faced with a dilemma seemingly written in stone: they could *either* be self-sufficient and thrifty *or* they could sink into the mass of the 'dependent' poor and hence be subject to moral regulation and physical inspection by private or public agencies. Thrift was rewarded by 'independence,' which was thought of as a prerequisite for citizenship (most especially in Britain with its disenfranchised paupers, but also elsewhere). The ubiquitous term 'thrift' ought not to be regarded as only a figment of the Victorian imagination, as a *logos* that created something out of nothing: it expressed certain economic realities, albeit in a moralistic way. Savings, however small, helped workers to survive the frequent periods of unemployment suffered in most trades. The absence of thrift, or the breakdown of the male breadwinner system by death or desertion, brought not only semiotic problems (that is being stigmatized) but real pangs of hunger, which could only be relieved by either family and neighbours or by the benevolent apparatus of the bourgeoisie.

The working-class was therefore trained to make demands not on the bourgeoisie as owners of unearned profits but on the bourgeoisie in its feminized, benevolent aspect: this blurred the cycle generating poverty for the many and wealth for the few. That the ladies who gave coal in the winter were married to the very men responsible for winter unemployment occurred to many workers, particularly socialists; but workers were powerless to change the practices of capitalists and their families. All they could do was insist that certain small amounts be diverted not from capital but from the state treasury for such purposes as Old Age Pensions. Few of the hard-won social benefits were universally given, however: to this day people have to prove that they are deserving, though in more bureaucratized ways than by picking oakum or breaking stones. Also evident in present-day society is a funnelling of public funds for redistribution to the poor and the disabled by privately-run bodies, a practice which tends to construct benefits as the luck or privilege of a few rather than the right of all.[12]

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twentieth century, but do not theorize the importance of private and/or public relief to class formation.

[12]Whereas in Britain the Poor Law drew sharper boundaries between charity and state relief, the central Canadian reluctance to import the Poor Law led to a peculiar situation in which the government freely gave out funds not as public relief but as charity, by giving grants to privately-run bodies. This can be seen in Susan Houston's important dissertation, "The

That charity practices shaped workers' relation to capital and to the state is thus clear from many sources. These complex relations beg study by historians open to both historical materialism and discourse theory. Stansell herself does not develop the implications of her work for theories of state formation and of class struggle; but she makes an important contribution in showing how charity practices had a crucial effect on the gendering of the working class.

She shows that the people who were the 'ideal' recipients of charity — widows, children, invalids — were the ones least able to wage any kind of class struggle. This was not due to any inherent weakness but to the fact that even the working class itself did not consider them as full-fledged members on a par with married and employed men. Stansell states that while the Tailoresses' Union of 1831 had used a language of independent, feminist feistiness, in the 1850s the male-dominated trade union movement thought of the work of organizing women workers as a type of charity work, performed because of "sympathy with the downtrodden."(151) By turning women's right to a decent wage into a sentimental tale of starving seamstresses grateful for a crust, well-meaning men unwittingly undermined the claims of the working class a whole against capital. (One legacy of this view of women workers as victims and not as active members of the working class was the recurring debate on protective legislation. This debate lies beyond the scope of Stansell's book, but it was important in that both unions and the state took on the role of paternal protector of supposedly helpless women-and-children.)[13] She further points out that the charity model came to govern the archetypal female class struggle of the nineteenth century, that between mistress and servant. Among other things she notes that while the lady employers made much of the 'primitiveness' of both black and Irish servants, they were simultaneously appalled by any evidence of upward mobility on the part of their maids. Maids were regarded not as workers but as girls to be taught morals and manners, to be evaluated not so much on the work they performed but on their very being. Their clothes, their heterosexual interests, and their speech were scrutinized and judged. Here again, Stansell's eye for the texture of gendered class allows her to draw a memorable picture of class formation at the micro level.

Having described the republic/city in part I, neighbourhood and family in part II and wage work in part III, Stansell closes her book with a somewhat unwieldy but interesting part IV entitled "The Politics of the Streets." This

Impetus to Reform: Urban Crime, Poverty and Ignorance in Ontario 1850-1875," Ph.D., University of Toronto, 1974, and in Richard Splane, *Social Welfare in Ontario 1792-1963* (Toronto 1965).

[13]See Mariana Valverde, "'Giving the Female a Domestic Turn': The Social, Legal and Moral Regulation of Women's Work in British Cotton Mills 1820-1850," *Journal of Social History*, 21, 4 (June 1988), 619-634.

consists of two chapters, one on prostitution and one on the 'moral panic' about children running loose in the streets. Among the independent women of the city, prostitutes occupied a special place: morally stigmatized by their trade, they were *ex officio* excluded from honour and male protection. Once again weaving together empirical detail and critical accounts of dominant discourses, Stansell reconstructs the lives of the young women who lived by prostitution, avoiding the dual pitfalls of seeing them either as helpless victims of capitalist patriarchy or as rebellious heroines. Her conclusion is this:

> To us now, and to commentators then, selling one's body for a shilling might seem an act imbued with hopelessness and pathos. Such an understanding, however, neglects the fact that this was a society in which many men still saw coerced sex as their prerogative. In this context, the prostitute's price was not a surrender to male sexual exploitation but a way of turning a unilateral relationship into a reciprocal one. If this education in self-reliance was grim, the lessons in the consequences of heterosexual dependency were often on less so.(185)

Some original insights into prostitution as both an institution and an experience are found in a short, tantalizing section entitled "Going to Ruin." In it Stansell analyzes both the bourgeois sense of the limits of propriety and the working class' own sense of moral and economic 'ruin'. She remarks that "while bourgeois men and women viewed run as the consequence of prostitution, working-class people reversed the terms." This is somewhat misleading, for the bourgeoisie agonized at length over the causes of prostitution; what is true, however, is that the bourgeoisie tended to see economic realities as having a moral cause. In bourgeois eyes, poverty was perhaps a predisposing condition, but a good Methodist education was seen as guaranteeing virtue even amidst poverty and the temptations of glitter and finery. The analysis of 'ruin' is all too brief: for instance there is no attempt to compare the female road to ruin — which was always sexual — with the road to male ruin, namely drink. The gendering of 'vice' within the working class is an unexplored topic to which Stansell may perhaps turn her attention in the future.

The last chapter, on the perceived social and moral dangers of 'street arabs,' fits uneasily in the book, since it deals not with gender but with the new ideas about childhood promoted by such philanthropists as Charles Loring Brace, founder of New York's Children's Aid Society (in 1853). These ideas were later popularized in Canada by such figures as Ontario's J.J. Kelso. The new approach to childhood was part of a more general shift in ideas about the causes of poverty — "the medicalization of poverty," as Stansell accurately puts it. Religious language was replaced by seemingly scientific terms in an argument about poor parenting as cause of the new phenomenon of juvenile delinquency. Stansell shows that this form of 'crime' was invented by criminalizing activities which had hitherto been normal for working-class children: scavenging, peddling, and playing in the streets.

Even if it is not about gender, this chapter is in some ways a fitting ending to the book: it shows that once one starts to unravel the tangled webs of gender, sex, and class one cannot stop at the presumed boundary of women's experience. 'Crime,' 'public health,' and 'youth' are some of the categories which begin to come apart once the historical relationship between gender and class is thoroughly analyzed.

In the brilliant analysis of the complex relation between capitalism and patriarchy — which Stansell never assumes is a functional one — there is a kind of gap or absence: race and racism are mentioned, and mentioned frequently, but are not granted the status of analytical categories on a par with capitalism and patriarchy. It is true that there were relatively few blacks in New York City, but that does not make a race analysis irrelevant, any more than the scarcity of women in the army makes a feminist analysis of militarism irrelevant. The republican ideals discussed in part I of the book were (and continue to be) not only intrinsically patriarchal but also inherently racist, not only towards blacks but towards any other ethnic group that happened to fulfill 'menial' functions. At the symbolic level, moreover, New England factory workers of the 1840s and 1850s often made references to black workers and slaves as an important reference point. And, in the middle-class feminist movement which began in the 1840s, the metaphor of slavery was probably the central one. A discussion, however tentative, of working-class attitudes toward slavery and blacks might have given useful glimpses into the whiteness of white America.

Similarly, not much is said about the specific *national* consciousness of New York women workers. These women were obviously not in a position to benefit directly from the genocide of Native peoples and other proto-imperialist ventures in this period, but they must have had some sense, however contradictory, of being American. Stansell's work does not take up these questions, possibly because she limits herself to one city. Nevertheless, I believe that her method and her political perspective could help others to not only continue her work on the relationship between gender and class but to also add the dimensions of race and nationality. One can only hope that *City of Women* will be as carefully read as it was written.

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LET US NOW RETURN TO THE comparison made at the outset between Stansell and Edward Thompson. Something shared by both historians is a fine and all too rare sense of the writing of history as a writer's task, and of history books as texts, not mere stories. This literary awareness (dismissed by some as a trendy bias) does not only help the reader to *understand* people long dead instead of merely knowing about them; it also makes for better history, because it helps to decode the myths and symbols contained in the documents from which history is written. Stansell

often uses records — for example, charity agency reports — not so much to tell readers what the organization intended to communicate, but rather to lay bare the implicit mythologies. This type of analysis may cause concern among those trained in the empiricist tradition (although few historians, however empiricist, could find fault with Stansell's research). For others, however — and here I will reveal my own presuppositions — the use of both literary and ethnomethodological tools does not detract from empirical research but, on the contrary, helps to make sense out of our 'data.' Even if it were possible — and at this point in history the myth of objectivity has been severely shaken — it would not be useful or desirable for the historian to see her task as that of official photographer of another era. The crucial task is to explain the *limits* of particular groups and cultures, not only telling us what they said and thought but, more importantly, making it clear why they could not say or think something different. As Hegel wisely said, it is the limits of consciousness that determine it, that make it what it is. To analyze a dominant discourse (such as philanthropic discourse) is precisely to outline the limits of that culture. Stansell avoids programmatic methodological statements, but her work demonstrates that, important as textual analysis is, the texts are themselves situated in concrete settings which give them whatever force over people they have — which brings us to the question of discourse analysis.

Joan Scott has recently argued, in an article in *International Labor and Working Class History*, that the same reductionism that makes labour history suspicious about discourse analysis also makes it blind to gender struggle, and that any historian interested in feminism has to use the tools of discourse theory. In a response to Scott, Stansell argues (in the same issue of the journal) that Scott is overly influenced by Gareth Stedman Jones's enthusiasm for discourse theory, and she correctly points out that "in many of its incarnations, 'language theory' is simply the flip side of crude materialism. Language is still separated from the social, but the causality is reversed." I would concur that the debate about materialism vs. discourse theory has been posed as a struggle between two reductionisms, and that anyone who (unlike Stedman Jones) begins with a pluralistic sense of social organization, in which gender and race are as constitutive of social relations as class, will not be tempted to simply invert Engels's materialist framework and pronounce that everything is determined by discourse in the last instance.

Stansell goes on to point out what many scholars are now saying in regard to Foucault's work, namely that discourse reductionism (just like class reductionism) ignores or downplays the role of historical agency, of people's conscious activity in shaping both their own lives and wider social relations. Unfortunately, her comments are primarily a critique of Scott, and they do not amount to the kind of 'new methodological synthesis' that feminist historians, and social historians generally, are currently desiring. Socialist and feminist social historians (and social theorists) are still awaiting the philosopher of the post-Foucault era.

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